

Update on Afghanistan

Ambassador Ronald Neumann, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann. He's here to discuss with us some recent updates in Afghanistan.

I would appreciate if everyone would please silence your cell phones. After his remarks, we'll go ahead and take questions. Please state your name and affiliation before asking your question.

And I'd also like to welcome the Washington Foreign Press Center that's linking via DVC. Thank you.

Mr. Ambassador.



AMB. NEUMANN: Thank you very much. I want to get to questions pretty quickly, because I think that tends to be where the meat of things is. So let me just say a very few things to sort of set a stage.

I think we are in a period of transition in Afghanistan. Having had a series of notable successes in carrying out the political steps of the Bonn process, as it is often referred to - that is, the establishment of the constitution, the election for the president, the election for the parliament, all of which have gone reasonably well - I think we can be very pleased with what the Afghan people have accomplished in that period.

But it is also fair to say that there remains a great deal to accomplish. This is by no means a done deal. This is not a finished work. There is a very large process still to go in moving from establishing a government in Kabul and the military defeat of the Taliban to establishing a broadly based government in the whole country of Afghanistan and building the infrastructure, not just the physical infrastructure, but the infrastructure of law and of habit of governance, which have to really be the support of long-term stability.

What you have now, if I were to use a military analogy, I would say that we have won several battles, but we have not finished the campaign, and that we have to remain engaged. And when I say "we," I mean not only the United States but the international community broadly.

And I think one of the important hallmarks of Afghanistan is that there is such broad international support. The EU is there. NATO is there. NATO is expanding.

The next challenge, I think, will be the conference in London, probably at the end of January, which - at some point we have to transition also from saying a "post-Bonn process" to calling it either a "London process" or a "Kabul agenda," giving it some new name.

But in any event, we need now, between the government of Afghanistan and the international community, to regroup. Having finished the benchmarks and milestones, whatever you want to call them, of the Bonn process, we need to regroup in what I think one might call reciprocal commitment.

That is, the international community needs to rededicate itself to what it is going to do for and with Afghanistan in the next few years. And the government of Afghanistan needs also to, I think, sign up to some parallel commitments in terms of the steps that are now necessary for the establishment of governance and the promises for the establishment - the real establishment of a judicial system. These are hard, hard things. They're going to take a lot of time. They're not going to be done in two or three years. But in order to keep all of us on focus, I think we need to come together, and I think we will be doing that at the end of the year.

Let me just stop with that very broad brush sort of introduction and let you see where you want to go on questions.

You want to pick a question? You're in charge.

MODERATOR: I -

AMB. NEUMANN: Go ahead.

MODERATOR: Okay. Well, why don't we go ahead and start out. And please remember to state your name and affiliation.

Right here?

Q Hi. I'm Anil Padmanabhan from India Today. Ambassador, I was there at the Asia Society where Ambassador Burns just given an address last - this week, and he mentioned during the address the contributions that he expects of the neighboring countries along Afghanistan, which includes India. So what are your expectations from India in the rebuilding - in the road to rebuild Afghanistan?

AMB. NEUMANN: Well, India has made some fairly generous contributions already. It is a major player in the construction of the power transmission line from Pul-e

Khumri to Kabul, although part of that's being done by us, and there's a little bit that I think the U.N. has, but the big hunk of that is being done by India.

I think more broadly, just as I think there is a fairly broad recognition on a theoretical basis that what happens in Afghanistan is important to the stability of the surrounding area because the immediate neighbors, and more broadly in Central Asia and India - I mean, this, I think, is well understood and generally accepted by the neighboring states. But now there is a need to try to move from a theoretical understanding to make - to make some more concrete progress. And there is going to be a conference in Afghanistan in early December, hosted by the government of Afghanistan, but I believe the German and British governments are cooperating in that. We'll be there, various powers. But it is focused on the - on improving regional relations.

And so I think now one needs to start keeping the focus on the broad issues of cooperation, but one also needs to find specific ways to move forward, and that is something which the - I mean, I don't want to get ahead of the conference chair - the government of Afghanistan and the governments of Britain and Germany - but I know that they are working together to try to elaborate an agenda for that conference to put some meat on those bones.

One in the back.

Q Mr. Ambassador, Neeme Raud, Estonian Television.

We read yesterday in The New York Times the report of how U.S. soldiers burned, allegedly, Taliban fighters. What do you make of this report? And how serious could be the backlash to the U.S. and - (off mike) - in Afghanistan because of this kind of action? Thank you.

AMB. NEUMANN: Of course, I've seen the report. I do not at this point know absolutely whether it is true, but it may well be. If it is true, it is both disgusting and contrary to our values and to our laws. I know that the - my military colleagues are taking it extremely seriously, and I expect there to be a very full and complete investigation.

I think so far - well, knock on wood - so far there has not been a great outcry. We talked to the embassy in Kabul this morning shortly after the noon prayers, and it was not out of hand. I think President Karzai and the government have accepted our determination to do a thorough investigation and to see what has happened.

I would also say that there are other images that I think are also very potent going on. You know, there's a very large relief effort in Pakistan right now. While you may have some people doing incredibly criminal and stupid things, you also have a great many American military who are flying the relief helicopters in Pakistan. And in fact, you have the deployment of four Afghan helicopters, which is almost all the helicopters they have at the moment that are cooperating and coordinating with our helicopters in the relief effort, in a joint effort. I think that is far more symbolic in photographic terms of what we are about as a nation.

But I can assure you that if this report proves to be true, we intend to pursue it fully and seriously within our judicial process, which is, after all, part of the message that we are carrying in Afghanistan, is the need to build a process of laws that follows rules, and we will demonstrate that ourselves with our own follow-up.

MODERATOR: Mr. Ambassador, I'm not sure if you can see the monitor in the back for the cameras or off to the left.

AMB. NEUMANN: I can.

MODERATOR: We have a question from Washington. Go ahead.

AMB. NEUMANN: Yes?

Q Yes. Good afternoon. I am Najiba Khalil with Voice of America, Washington, Afghanistan Service.

Mr. Neumann, with regards to the election, what do you think, how fair and free it was? And what was the biggest challenge?

AMB. NEUMANN: Thank you. Well, the first challenge, of course, was security. That, I think, went quite well. There were a number of incidents, but nothing which really disturbed the polling or prevented people from voting. I think the turnout was quite good for an election that did not involve the presidency. It compared quite favorably with similar elections elsewhere.

There were some accounts of fraud and misbehavior. That's too bad. But I think the good news is that the system has worked; that the Afghan Electoral Monitoring Board and the Complaints Commission are taking action. The numbers are not huge, but there are some problems, but they have resulted in ballot boxes being impounded and a refusal to count certain ballots. So in that sense, I'm quite pleased that the system has worked well.

The impression I have so far is that while there was a certain amount of grumbling by some candidates - and there are, after all, over 5,600 loser - basically what I can see, and what we're seeing in our reports from all our people in the field - and we have people in a lot of provinces - is that by and large, the Afghan people have accepted the election as a valid and credible election. And I said before the election, and I think it remains true, that the only standard that is really important is whether the Afghan people themselves accept this election as being a reasonable and credible process, and so far, the indications are that they do.

So it certainly had some problems, but I am very pleased with the way it went. I think when you think that it is less than four years since people were being - men and women were being executed, stoned to death and shot in the sports stadium in Kabul at the half-time, to the second election in Afghanistan, this is really quite remarkable progress.

MODERATOR: I think we have another question from Washington.

AMB. NEUMANN: I'm not quite sure whether I should look - there are two monitors, and I'm not sure whether I'm looking forward or backwards.

MODERATOR: (Off mike) - straight ahead.

AMB. NEUMANN: I see you. Go ahead.

Q Good afternoon. Marco Bardazzi with the Italian News Agency, ANSA. Back to the episode of the burning corpse. According to the Australian reporter that shot those images, the American soldiers were acting like that out of frustration because they were trying to have the Taliban coming out from the caves. I would like to know what are your thoughts about this frustration of the American soldiers in the fight against the Taliban.

AMB. NEUMANN: Well, the bottom line - there are some soldiers who are going to get frustrated, but frustration does not permit or allow one to violate laws and international norms and our own code of conduct. And if it proves to be the way the reporting has covered it - and I say that only because in war, first stories are almost always slightly wrong - but if it is as it is reported, then this is a serious violation of our own laws and of our own code of conduct, and it is - having been myself a soldier in a war many years ago - it violates fundamental principles of how a soldier and a warrior acts.

And we will take it seriously, and we will investigate it, and we will pursue it.

Q Ambassador?

AMB. NEUMANN: Okay. One from Washington. Go ahead.

Q Ambassador – Ponnudurai Parameswaran from Agence France Presse. Just to follow up on the earlier question, U.S. soldiers have been accused previously in Afghanistan for abuse of detainees - Afghan detainees in Afghanistan. So the fact that this burning of the Taliban corpses coming just after that, how will the U.S. military be affected by this?

AMB. NEUMANN: Well, obviously, it is not a good thing for the U.S. image. I don't think that is a revolutionary insight. Now, I would say to you a few things. First of all, I know of no war and no conflict which has not given rise to abuse, whether it is the Algerian revolt against France or the current fighting that has gone on there, or the conduct of troops in our current wars, and I think every country in every war has faced the issue of incidents which violate rules and laws.

But I also think that it is important to understand that, at least in our case, we will investigate. We will investigate promptly. We will take action. There will be no concealing of the issue, and there will be no concealing of the outcome. And I think that fundamentally that validates the image of America as a nation of laws, and I'm very comfortable standing on that validation, not comfortable because of this disgusting incident, but comfortable that we will investigate; we will prosecute; and we will honor our own laws. And I think that that is a great deal more than our opponents in the field will be doing.

Q Hi, Ambassador. Anton Krilov, RTVI. The New York Times quoted U.S. military general - General Jones, who said that poppy production is the number one that Afghanistan has to face for its future, not resurgence of Taliban or al Qaeda. If you agree with this statement, why is that number one problem for the future?

AMB. NEUMANN: Well, why - in case not all of you could hear the question - was why is poppy said - the illegal production of opium said to be a larger problem than the Taliban? I think the answer to that's pretty simple. The Taliban is managing to keep up a low level of fighting. It is not able to stop a single step in the forward movement of Afghanistan. It could not stop the loya jirga, the constitutional debate, the referendum, the election for the president, or the election for the parliament.

Afghanistan faces a much larger problem in weak government in not having yet developed strong institutions, particularly outside Kabul, and when you look at the narcotics issue, quite apart from narcotics going to Europe or the West, the biggest problem in Afghanistan is you cannot build a stable government on a massive narco economy. It simply will rot the foundations faster than you can erect the structure on top of them. You're just not going to be able to have honest justice and honest governance if you are corrupting it by massive flows of illegal money.

And I think that this is not simply our point of view. This is completely understood by President Karzai. He has spoken out very strongly against this. He is now leading a new campaign, the first stage of which is being addressed by governors in the provinces holding meetings to both tell people not to cultivate and to warn them of actions against them if they do cultivate. That will be followed up by the government of Afghanistan itself with a variety of measures, both in the provinces and later national-level eradication if they have to.

We are working in the international community. The support is very strong and needs to be even larger to develop the agricultural economy, so that people have another livelihood. That's a complicated subject that I could not go into if anyone wants to because it's much more complicated and fundamental than crop substitution. There is also the building of a national court, a law which passed a few months ago, giving one court in Kabul the ability to reach down and try offenders from anywhere in the country, and they have begun holding some cases. Several people have gotten 15 and 16-year sentences, so it's more serious. They're also building a national interdiction unit to go after larger offenders. That's beginning to work.

But the simple answer to your question is that the opium poppy will rot the fabric of the country if they don't get on top of it. That is a much, much more serious challenge than what the Taliban can muster.

MODERATOR: Okay. We have another question in Washington, and then we're going to come back to the front row and New York.

AMB. NEUMANN: We're not hearing you.

Q I'm sorry.

AMB. NEUMANN: Now, we hear you.

Q Can you hear now?

AMB. NEUMANN: Yup. Now, I can hear.

Q With regard to reconstruction, three years have been passed, and we still hear of problems from various parts of Afghanistan, that people simply don't have clean water to drink, women still - a lot of - there are a lot women mortality during childbirth.

Now speaking with the Afghan government officials, it seems that they do have plans, but they haven't been able to implement most of them. Do you think that's the lack of resources, or is it lack of security?

AMB. NEUMANN: Security is a problem, but I think it is not the major problem in reconstruction. It is a problem in some areas of the country.

I think one has to start with a realistic understanding of what you're dealing with. I mean, we didn't do the Marshall Plan and the rebuilding of Europe in three or four years. And Europe had an educated populace. It had a bureaucratic infrastructure. Its physical infrastructure was damaged. It had enormous resources, physical resources, and intellectual resources, to build on.

Afghanistan is a country that was barely out of the Middle Ages before the war started. I mean, I drove around a lot of Afghanistan 38 years ago, when I was a younger man, and I can tell you the roads were rotten then. You know, when I came out of Badakhshan in the far north, it took me three days to drive back to Kabul, and I was living out of village tea shops. And you wanted to be very careful what you ate. There was one paved road once you got out to it.

So there wasn't a lot there. There was a lot of development in Kabul. It was some development of roads. But it was just beginning to get off its knees when it went into 25 years of combat.

You have a generation that has lost education because of the war. You have a lack of skilled people in the ministries, so that they've had to bring in more foreigners than or we would like to move their capacity. You have a country where the road network never really existed very well, and what was there was ruined. It does not have a power generation system.

I think there were some unrealistic expectations, but I think we are moving. But this is a project that is going to take years, and not just the United States. But the international community as a whole, if they want to succeed in Afghanistan, are going to have to stay engaged with people and with money, because this is not something that can be done in a year or two, and you can move on and check the box and move to the next problem. I know of no country in similar state of destruction which has

been rebuilt in three or four years.

So yes, there are all those problems, and yes, it's going to take a lot of work. And I find that a fairly natural phenomenon.

Q Thank you, Ambassador Neumann. Carissa Gonzalez from Princeton University. This is actually a follow-up question to the opium production problem. Considering that the economic of the region is unequipped to offer many of the rural farmers more lucrative options, and the high level of control that these local drug lords still retain, what is the U.S. equipped to do?

And I'm specifically referring to this question, is it true that the U.S. has offered to spray herbicides over the poppy fields, but yet President Karzai has refused to let them do so for fear of economic instability and upheaval?

AMB. NEUMANN: That was one option that was looked at at one point, and we all decided this was not the way to go. This is a country that has had too many things of evil delivered from the air for 25 years to want to go around spraying people.

President Karzai argued, and we accepted, that this needed an Afghan solution. And last year, he had enough success in a few provinces to say that there is some reason to go with the Afghan government's approach - there's not enough success to say this is going to work. But in Nangarhar, which is the province where Jalalabad is located, close to the Pakistani border, which is an historical area of opium poppy, they had 96 percent reduction in the land under cultivation. And there were a couple of other provinces with similarly large declines. There were others where the poppy production exploded. What that told us was not that - you know, there's no guarantee - but it told us that it could work, but it needs a lot of effort on the ground, and it needs, clearly, an effort to provide alternative livelihoods.

Now, I think it is very clear from the international experience in many places you're never going to have a dollar-for-dollar trade-off with other crops, first of all. So you're always going to have to have a balance between alternatives so people can live and survive, and a certain measure of coercion and threat. You're not going to out-compete the drug lords for the farm gate price for opium without some pressure mechanism as well. That is coming now from the governors - first of all, from the Afghan national government, with our assistance and the British - the British has taken the lead in building an eradication force with the Afghans; we've taken the lead in the development of the narcotics court system and the investigatory body.

But the thrust that President Karzai has decided on is, first of all, to have the governors try to persuade people not to plant, and to tell them bad things will happen to them if they do. Individual governors in particularly the most important provinces are holding meetings now with local notables. The second phase of that - and there's a lot of education campaign going on with that. The second phase of that will be what we call early eradication, that is plowing up crops when they just begin to come up, when the farmer still has time to plant another crop; is not having his livelihood destroyed for the year.

On the alternative livelihoods part, what we have realized is this is not a matter of just crop substitution.

First of all, there's a large population that is landless, that makes money by working on the land. They don't make anything because somebody else grows a different crop. They have to have work.

Secondly, this has to mean to revitalization of the agricultural economy as a whole. It's just not a matter of just swapping of pomegranates or grapes for poppies. And that means you have to build roads. You can't do alternate crops if you can't get them to market, just as you can't really do security and governance if you can't get around in the country. So roads are going to be a big piece of this.

Another piece of this is probably power generation; that you have to be able to get electricity. And it's not just a matter of growing. Right now, Afghanistan imports an enormous amount. It imports from Pakistan, for instance, 17 times what it exports. A lot of what it imports is processed agricultural goods; it's flour - and Afghanistan grows wheat. It's tomato paste - and it grows lots of wonderful tomatoes. It's jams and jellies - and it grows magnificent vegetables. So you need the ability to start an agricultural economy that isn't just subsistence farming. And this is hard, and it's long, but I think we're making some solid efforts on it. I've probably answered a little more than you asked here.

We got time for about three or four more. I'm sorry, but it's just kind of a rushed scheduled today. But why don't we take - maybe we could take, like, a couple of questions and I could try to answer them both together?

Q Yeah, Mr. Ambassador, my name is Mohsin Zaheer, Khabrian newspaper (Pakistan). Can you tell us for how long U.S. troops intend to stay in Afghanistan? And can you give us some update on the could-be whereabouts of bin Laden, whether he is in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, or is it true that there is a search going on to look for bin Laden in the rubble of the earthquake?

AMB. NEUMANN: We will stay as long as our presence is needed and acceptable to the people of Afghanistan. There is an elected government now, a parliament as well as an executive branch. I have detected no very strong sentiment from them except that we should stay for a while to build the army, and when that is done, they will - either they or we or both of us will know when it's time to go, and we will go. There is certainly an impatience in America not to spend money much longer than they have to. But I think we will be there for some years still.

You know, people often say, what is our - I'm going to borrow your question for a second to add something that occurred to me the other day - people often say, what is your exit strategy? And it occurred to me that, you know, when we began the Marshall Plan and rebuilt Europe and built an alliance there, it was not to have an exit strategy, it was to transition from the initial reconstruction and relief into NATO, into a relationship which allowed the growth of both parties. It was certainly not one of domination - and I think, looking at some of my European friends, it's quite clear that we don't dominate them - but it was to build a strong transatlantic relationship.

And so I think it is not always the purpose of a relationship to leave it, but it is also not the purpose of our relationship in Afghanistan to dominate it. Afghanistan has the right and the capacity to grow into a fully independent nation, and we will help them do that and not stand in their way.

Now, to come back to your question, I don't know where bin Laden is. If I knew or if my military colleagues knew, I think we would have him someplace under closer watch and we would go get him. I don't know. I have not heard the story that he is somehow sneaking around the earthquake area. I don't know why he would. But that's a new one to me.

And I'll try to give shorter answers.

Q Mr. Ambassador, Safie Eldin Deyab, Egyptian TV. I'd like to ask about is there any evidence to prove that there is a relation between bin Laden and al Zarqawi group in Iraq or not?

AMB. NEUMANN: Is there evidence of a relationship between bin Laden and the Zarqawi group in Iraq?

Q Yes.

AMB. NEUMANN: Yes. I think, in a word, there is a clear relationship between those groups. But as to where he is, I don't know.

Q Larry Fine from Reuters. We seem to get reports of a rise in insurgent violence in Afghanistan and an onset of suicide bombing incidents, which seems to be something

new. Is this a concern to you? And do you think that this is linked to an appeal to more financing from al Qaeda sources?

AMB. NEUMANN: There is some greater violence. I think that gets a little exaggerated. That is, it really quieted down in the winter and people hoped it had quieted down to stay, but I think that was premature. On the other hand, when you look at a sort of month-to-month - August of this year compared to August of last year, July compared to July - you see something much closer to a straight line. In between, you see a dip and a rise again, but when you go month by month, you see a lot of consistency. When you compare the violence of the presidential election, the number of incidents, with the violence of the parliamentary election, the two lines lie almost on top of each other.

What we are seeing is somewhat greater lethality. Unfortunately, it's not only one side that learns in war. It still does not compare with something like Iraq. I think sometimes the language of rising violence, as I said, I think is a little exaggerated.

But the insurgency is going to go on, I am convinced, for quite some time, just as I'm convinced that it has no power to really thwart development if the Afghan people and government themselves can find their way to developing stronger institutions of government. I think that is far more of an opening for and a challenge to - opening for the Taliban and a challenge to Afghanistan than the violence itself. There have been few more suicide incidents. That's bothersome. But it is also minuscule compared to Iraq, where I spent my last 15 months before going to Kabul.

I think we've had 10 or something like that in the last five or six months, where, you know, we ran 100 or 200 a month in Iraq. So I think, yes, it is a problem; yes, it is worrisome; and also yes, when you're writing, if you use the first part of that quote, it would be good to put it in some kind of comparative perspective as well.

Q Susannah Price from BBC. The results in the elections are due out later this month, and it looks like some of the warlords will have won. I know a lot of Afghans are very concerned about this. They remember very well in the '90s the thousands of people who were killed. How concerned are you that getting these people into elected positions of power can contribute to the violence?

AMB. NEUMANN: I don't know if it would contribute to violence. I'm more concerned about how it contributes to the development of governance. But neither am I surprised by it. I mean, right now, rough calculations - and that's all we've got, because the final results aren't out - looks like we'll have somewhere around half of the parliament, possibly, that may be composed of old authority figures, warlords and others, and half of it composed of reformers, of women. I mean, it's a very mixed picture, just as Afghanistan is a very mixed society right now, coming out of 25 years of war.

There was a woman who became famous in the constitutional loya jirga for attacking one of the commanders. She won in Faryab province and was the largest vote-getter, outpolled all the men.

There are a couple of other women who - I mean, there are a lot of women because they had a set-aside of seats for them, but there are a number of women who won on an outright basis in their provinces. So you have these contradictory tendencies.

I don't find it surprising that after years of warfare, where society, in many cases, regrouped itself for protection around leaders with guns, that people would vote for those leaders. I think it would be rather strange if it didn't happen. The notion that somehow there is some power group of utter purity that has been lurking in shadows, with no ability to come forth at all, that would suddenly spring forth fully grown into the parliament is an absurdity. What you have in a parliament, logically enough, is a representation of the country in all its multifold problems.

But I think the good news is, they're in the parliament. I would much rather have them in the parliament than out in the street with guns. And parliament does not convey an absolute immunity on deputies. Under the Afghan laws, if they use their militias' strength, if they bring forth their guns, they can still be arrested for violations of the - this disarmament operation.

So this is going to be a slow process forward of moving from absolutely no law to a system of laws. It's going to be hard, and it's going to depend on the political will of Afghans to push it.

But you know what? These - if these people win, it's because others voted for them. And that too is part of democracy.

I got to run off and do the next thing, but thank you all very much. (Applause.)



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