



## U.S. Commitment to Afghan Women

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Remarks at the Afghan Women Members of Parliament Conference: "A Day Devoted to Afghan Women Parliamentarians"

Paris, France

June 13, 2006

I want to thank the organizers of this important conference, the Franco-Afghan Chamber of Commerce -- and its president, Shoukour Koord -- and the MEWA Association -- and its founder and president, Patricia Lalonde, whose vision made this conference possible.

Patricia came to Washington a few months ago to talk specifically about organizing a forum to bring together Afghan women parliamentarians and their French counterparts. Patricia has proved once again that when she sets out to do something truly important and humanitarian -- as she did in establishing the Lycee Francaise in Mazar-e- Sharif -- there is no stopping her.

I also want to acknowledge the enormous support given by the Regional Council, and especially Janine Haddad, the City of Paris and the French National Assembly.

I'd like to take a minute to mention France's role in the international effort to support a democratic Afghanistan. U.S.-French cooperation is strong in Afghanistan. France is one of the major partners of the United States in providing security -- both through NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission and through the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). French contributions include 1300 troops deployed to ISAF and to Operation Enduring Freedom, as well as training of the Afghan National Army. France has previously provided ISAF's overall commander and will soon co-command the Kabul region.

As evidenced here today, French citizens, NGO's and other private entities are also contributing resources and expertise to the citizens of Afghanistan. And, we hope Medecins sans Frontieres will return to Afghanistan as soon as possible to fill an urgent need for health care assistance.

For our part, the United States remains firmly committed to assisting Afghanistan in its remarkable journey toward a strong democracy where all citizens enjoy equal rights and can aspire to economic prosperity. With the help of the international community, Afghanistan has made considerable progress over the past four and half years. The economy is growing, children are returning to school, health care is improving, the infrastructure is being rebuilt, militias are being disbanded, and Afghan national forces are gradually taking control of security.

Just compare this progress to four and half years ago, when Afghanistan was suffering under the yoke of an oppressive regime that had no respect for freedom, human rights or human dignity. At the time, there were undoubtedly few Afghans who imagined they would ever have the right to choose their own leaders in open, fair elections.

Four and half years have indeed made a big difference. The Afghan people have adopted a democratic constitution and elected both a President and legislature. The successes of the Afghan people in rebuilding their country and their society have been impressive. And, one of the most impressive successes was the election of sixty-eight women to Parliament, many of whom are here today. I have to acknowledge that the percentage of women in your legislature is greater than the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress.

My country is fully aware that constitutional democracy cannot take hold in Afghanistan unless there is also security -- and the security situation in Afghanistan remains difficult. While, together, we are winning the peace in Afghanistan, there is still a long way to go.

During President Bush's March 1 visit to Afghanistan, he reiterated to President Karzai and the Afghan people the strong U.S. commitment, when he said: "One of the messages I want to say to the people of Afghanistan is it is our country's pleasure and honor to be involved with the future of this country. We like stories of young girls going to school for the first time so they can realize their potential. We appreciate a free press. We are enthralled when we see an entrepreneurial class grow up where people are able to work and realize their dreams. We understand the importance of having a well-trained military dedicated to the sovereignty of the country and to the peace of the people. We're impressed by the progress that your country is making..."

The United States is deeply committed to addressing issues that are important to American women and to women worldwide. Promoting women's political and economic participation has been an integral element of U.S. foreign policy for some time. But, events in recent years spurred President Bush to make empowering women an even higher priority component of his foreign policy agenda.

We believe that political freedom and economic freedom go hand in hand. Secretary Rice said last June, while she was in Cairo: "There are those who say that democracy is for men alone. In fact, the opposite is true: Half a democracy is not a democracy."

The economic empowerment of women is a key ingredient for democratic development. Today, societies cannot prosper or flourish when half the population is prevented from participating fully in the economic, political, and social sectors of society. Expanding economic opportunity for women benefits society as a whole.

Governments need to harness the potential of women, but it is also important for the private sector to realize the potential of women as engines for economic growth. When women are empowered economically, they make better decisions for themselves and their families, and they are likely to invest in improving health, education, and infrastructure. Countries that provide women with better education, access to health services, and opportunities for work enable their women to participate in trade and development. And, these countries are likely to be more prosperous.

Today, in the U.S., women-owned businesses are fueling our labor market and growing at twice the rate of all U.S. firms. Globally, we are helping other countries build public-private partnerships to give women the knowledge, skills, and resources to fully participate in the political and economic life of their countries.

For example, in March 2004, the U.S. Government launched a 10 million dollar Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative dedicated to empowering Iraqi women as leaders and as full participants in the democratic transformation of their country. We work in partnership with non-governmental organizations on the ground in providing leadership training in political, economic and media skills.

As another example, in Africa we are supporting justice for women and their empowerment through a \$55 million initiative to assist four African countries -- Benin, Kenya, South Africa and Zambia -- to enact new laws on sexual offenses, enforce higher penalties for sexually violent crimes, and give women equality in property and inheritance matters. Working with our African partners, we are fostering the next generation of women leaders through scholarships from our government's Africa Education Initiative. By the end of this decade, we will have provided scholarships to 550,000 young women in Africa as part of this \$600 million multi-year program.

Turning to Afghanistan, I want to emphasize that advancing the rights of Afghan women and ensuring their active participation in government and economic life is a high priority for the United States. On the whole, conditions for Afghan women are improving. Over six million children are enrolled in school, approximately 40% of whom are

female. This is the highest percentage of female students in Afghanistan's history. Women are also entering the workplace, many of them combining forces with other entrepreneurs to establish small businesses. Last year, more than 1,000 women entrepreneurs joined the newly created Afghan Women's Business Federation. And, we know the impact women have made in the political arena by the election of sixty-eight women to the Afghan Parliament. This is a tremendous achievement, and we heartily congratulate you. And, we recognize that you now have responsibilities on a wide range of legislative issues, going well beyond the struggle for women's rights.

However, further improvements are needed. Maternal and infant mortality rates are among the highest worldwide, 80% of adult women are illiterate, and job-skills training for economic self-sufficiency is needed. Violence against women is widespread, and excludes them from equitable participation in political and economic life. To address these issues, the U.S. Government integrates the needs of women into virtually all its programs for Afghanistan.

The U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has supported the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs in a number of activities, and is providing \$2.5 million this year to support the Ministry's Initiative to Strengthen Policy and Advocacy. This two-year project is designed to strengthen the Ministry's project management and policy advocacy skills to maximize the ability of the provincial Departments of Women's Affairs to mobilize local community and civil society support, and to increase the management and programming capacity of the provincial Women's Resource Centers.

The U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, which is a public-private partnership established in 2002 by Presidents Bush and Karzai, has mobilized resources from the private sector to assist in empowering Afghan women. To date, there has been an investment of approximately \$4 million in private contributions and resources supporting over 200 projects on the ground. These projects support women's political, legal, educational, literacy and economic development programs in Afghanistan.

Here are some examples of projects carried out by public and private sector organizations under the auspices of the U.S./Afghan Women's Council:

- In October 2005, USAID signed a three-year cooperative agreement for \$6.3 million with the Center for International Private Enterprise, an affiliate of the American Chamber of Commerce, to create and build the capacity of the Afghan Women's Business Federation, a consortium of women's business associations engaging in economic development.
- The Women's Teacher Training Institute in Kabul has trained 384 village literacy teachers in 192 Afghan communities and has provided learning materials to approximately 10,000 youths and adults through its affiliated Literacy and Community Empowerment Program. This program piloted 672 Self-Help Savings Groups linked with literacy learning in three provinces. Mobilizing their own savings, these groups have begun to federate and thus far have formed 24 Community Banks. The Literacy and Community Empowerment Program will provide a \$1,000 grant to each of the 24 Community Banks to support micro-loans.
- Under the Alternative Livelihoods program, women in poppy-producing provinces of Afghanistan are taught skills such as tailoring, poultry and dairy production, value-added farming, business development and literacy. Under this program, micro-financing enables women to start home-based businesses that enable them to become independent of income from poppy cultivation.
- Since 2003, the midwifery training project, the Rural Expansion of Afghanistan's Community-based Health Care project, has graduated 723 midwives from the 18-month course, and awarded NGO recipients \$67 million in grants to increase access to quality health services for vulnerable women and children.
- And, both the U.S. government and several U.S. universities have sponsored political and legal training programs for newly-elected Afghan women parliamentarians and for women judges and lawyers.

What we have learned from Afghan participants in these and other programs is that they already have the fortitude, the drive and the willingness to be effective and wise players in the political and economic life of their country because so many of them -- of you -- were leaders in your families and in your communities long before the demise of the Taliban regime. Each time I meet with Afghan women leaders visiting the United States, I am humbled by the courage of these women who, in so many cases, persisted in educating children or providing basic health care to members of their community despite the massive restrictions placed on them by the ruthless Taliban regime. And, I am sure that each of the Afghan participants here today has a story of great personal courage to relate to us.

In closing, I want to emphasize that President Bush was right on the mark when he said that it is "our country's pleasure and honor to be involved with the future of your country." And, it is an honor to be here with all of you today. Thank you.

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