



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE



## Ask the Ambassador

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Welcome to "Ask the Ambassador" -- an online interactive forum where you can submit questions to U.S. Ambassadors around the world.

The U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan discussed progress made in Afghanistan on the war on terror and reconstruction efforts.

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**Ronald E. Neumann**  
U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan  
[Biography](#)

**Event Date:** 09/12/2006

**Jay** from Wisconsin writes:

I am a junior Foreign Service officer candidate who is considering the pros and cons of volunteering for a post such as Afghanistan. Could you please enlighten us with a description of life in your embassy? How frequently are your staff allowed to leave and how restricted are their movements due to security concerns? What are the most popular recreational activities?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

Life in Kabul is often what you make it. The main pro is that success or failure in Afghanistan matters deeply to America's future: your work counts. We have nearly 400 Americans working and living here, but there is always more work to do than there are bodies to do it and the result is you will have significant responsibility. As a community, we work hard to keep each other's morale up. For instance, we've set up a beach volleyball court amongst the various construction sites on our compound, and we have been known to challenge our international counterparts to friendly volleyball matches on our days off. In Kabul, officers go to most appointments and official social occasions, including private homes, with a car and driver. The security situation is fluid and differs in many parts of the country. We have to stay aware of the situation on the ground and make decisions accordingly. At the same time, we also have to be sure that we do get out and interact with our Afghan and international colleagues here in Afghanistan.

**Jonathan** from Nebraska writes:

Ambassador Neumann: I'm trying to better understand State's role in what has been described by the Defense Department as U.S. "stability operations" in Afghanistan, especially early on following U.S. intervention there. For example, how did State personnel work with DoD in the first 6-12 months or so in achieving short-term goals of providing the local Afghan populace with security, restoring essential services, and meeting their humanitarian needs?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

State Department personnel are very much engaged in working with our Department of Defense colleagues in Afghanistan. In the early stages here in Afghanistan, State Department personnel were directly involved with the military and the international community in humanitarian relief, as well as in building Afghan institutions. For instance, State Department officers were directly engaged in the process of putting together the first Loya Jirga that led to the Bonn Agreement that paved the way for the election of the Afghan President and Parliament. Today, we have State Department officers working with our military colleagues (both with U.S. military and with NATO/ISAF Allies) in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) around the country.

**Khalil** from Zabul Province, Afghanistan writes:

Why the American people are not trying to bring piece and security in Afghanistan? They are investing a lot of money on buildings. Why they do not help the ANA and ANP completely?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

The United States and our NATO/ISAF Allies are deeply engaged in bringing stability and security to Afghanistan. The United States has provided and continues to provide significant assistance to both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police throughout Afghanistan. Today, the ANA, at about 30,000 men, is well on its way to becoming an effective security force of 70,000. The ANP is behind but the international community is committed to ensuring the ANP will be potent force. Building institutions like the ANA and the ANP takes time, but we have already come a long way. For instance, the ANA has fought well in many battles, most recently in Kandahar with the U.S. and ISAF military forces. Our efforts have also focused on a number of projects, from large scale infrastructure, like rebuilding the Ring Road and connecting provincial capitals to the road network, to building school and clinics.

**Justin** from Vancouver, Canada writes:

Dear Mr. Ambassador: Recently I read an article about Afghanistan's opium drug trade. What steps are being taken to curtail drug production and prevent drug money from funding terrorism?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

Fighting the narcotics trade in Afghanistan is one of our number one priorities. To confront this challenge, the U.S. Government has a five-pillar strategy designed to provide both deterrents and positive and negative incentives to reduce Afghan involvement in the narcotics trade. The Public Information pillar focuses on convincing Afghans to reject opium poppy cultivation and trade. The Alternative Livelihoods pillar, spearheaded by USAID, establishes economic alternatives to poppy cultivation. Our Eradication pillar discourages poppy planting and eradicates those fields when prevention is unsuccessful. Our Interdiction pillar builds Afghan capacity to disrupt and dismantle the drug trafficking organizations through the arrest and prosecution of the command and control elements of these organizations. The Law Enforcement/Justice Reform pillar assists the Afghan Government in building its capacity to arrest, prosecute, and punish traffickers and corrupt officials. Poppy is a huge problem in Afghanistan. We have learned much in the last few years and have resolved with President Karzai to increase our efforts. But it is also true that this will be an effort needing many years.

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**Ashish** from Washington, DC writes:

Warlords continue to hold sway in Afghanistan and the Taliban has regrouped since it was removed from power in 2001. Do you believe these groups are undermining President Hamid Karzai's presidency and influence in the country?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

While the biggest of the warlords have been disarmed, many illegal armed groups remain. The Taliban has lost ground in eastern Afghanistan, but launched a major offensive in the south. NATO, including the US, and Afghan troops have pushed the offensive back. While there is criticism, President Karzai remains an effective leader who has our full support.

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**Barbara** from Washington, DC writes:

How would you explain the record hit by the opium cultivation in Afghanistan (exposed in a recent UN survey) despite the anti-narcotic strategy in the country carried on by the USA?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

Although Afghanistan's opium poppy cultivation dropped by 21 percent in 2005, cultivation has rebounded dramatically in 2006. We are particularly concerned by developments in Helmand province, which accounted for a full 42 percent of Afghanistan's opium poppy crop. Increasing violence in this southern province hindered efforts to suppress poppy cultivation and we have seen increased reporting suggesting a relationship between narco-traffickers, Taliban, and other anti-government forces.

This year's increase in cultivation represents planting decisions made by farmers last fall following disappointing eradication efforts in the spring and summer of 2005 that failed to introduce sufficient threat to deter planting for the new season. We have had more success in eradication efforts this year, both in Helmand province and nationwide, although it is too early to tell how much impact this will have on this coming fall's planting decisions. Nevertheless, despite the overall increase in the size of this year's poppy crop, we can already see signs of progress in some regions of Afghanistan. The vast majority of the increase in this year's crop was concentrated in a few provinces where higher security threats and weak governance limited the central government's ability to suppress poppy cultivation. In other areas, including provinces in the east that were once among Afghanistan's largest poppy cultivators, better governance and economic development (assisted by U.S.-supported alternative livelihoods programs) are among several factors that could have helped hold down poppy cultivation.

We must and will continue to evaluate and refine our counternarcotics strategy to learn from both our successes and our failures. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet or simple solution to the pervasive threat that the narcotics trade poses to Afghanistan's security and stability. We are continuing to work closely with the Government of Afghanistan to improve our counternarcotics efforts, especially in regions that saw sharp cultivation increases in 2006. We believe that, with a sustained commitment and your continued support we can achieve the goals you entrusted to us - to build a strong Afghan democracy that is not a supplier of illicit narcotics to the United States or the rest of the world, and denies drug profits to those financing terrorism.

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**Kris** from Minnesota writes:

Do you believe the United States of America is committed to Afghanistan with the same intensity and duration as it is - since the end of WW2 - with Germany, Japan, and Israel since 1948?

**Ambassador Neumann:**

I believe the United States is and must remain committed to Afghanistan. In the past five years, the United States has committed more than \$11 billion to help in the efforts to rebuild Afghanistan and provide security. The United States has more than 20,000 U.S. servicemen and women in Afghanistan, not to mention diplomats and contractors working together with the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to build the institutions and structures necessary for Afghans to have a secure future. We learned in September, 2001, what can happen if the United States and the international community do not engage in Afghanistan, and I am sure we will not make that mistake again.

