



Afghanistan: Remarks to the Press

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs

Kabul, Afghanistan

January 11, 2007

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Let me say first of all, it's good to be back in Afghanistan, a beautiful country with the mountains and the snow this time of year. I'm glad to be back. I think I've pretty regularly been here every three months or so since I started the new job.

The United States has a strong and continuing commitment to Afghanistan, and my visit is a reflection of that. We and our friends, Afghans, and Afghanistan's friends around the world, are here for the long term; we're here in a comprehensive way to help with security, to help build national institutions, national government, and to help provide the Afghan people with economic opportunity. During my visit here, I have had a chance to visit with Afghan leaders: President Karzai, Dr. Rasoul, Dr. Spanta in the Foreign Ministry, I'll see the Finance Minister a little later today; had a chance to talk to NATO commanders, U.S. commanders, as well as my colleagues at the U.S. Embassy here. So I've come first and foremost to get an update on the reality on the ground here, on the actual situation and what we're facing, but also to look with them at how we can push forward in all the areas of our involvement in the coming year.

We've seen in Afghanistan that a comprehensive approach of establishing security, pushing out with government and the benefits of government, building roads, providing electricity, schools, these things can help stabilize areas in Afghanistan and can give the Afghan people a new chance to develop themselves.

I had the opportunity to go Panjshir yesterday and visit with the governor there, and visit with the people in the Provincial Reconstruction Team and a lot of the Afghans that they're working with. And that area is an example; it's a good example of what we can do when there's security there. The government has a good team up there, including liaison officers from the ministries in Kabul. And, in fact, when I was up there, part of what I did was to drop in on a meeting at the Provincial Development Council where representatives from the Ministry of Education, Rural Development, and Agriculture were talking to local people about how to spend money on projects that are important to people there. We're also finishing a major road building project that will open up this area to economic opportunity in a way that really offers them a chance at development, offers them a chance at a new economy that they have not had in previous times.

So what we want to do is take these elements, take the strategy of an integrated approach and be able to do it more in more places, bring it to more people in Afghanistan and to make sure that we do it even better than before in terms of the integration and the comprehensiveness of our activities. The Afghan government, the people on the ground here, NATO, ISAF, the U.S., the UN, the donors, I think are all committed to carrying this out fully in Afghanistan.

My job is to see that we're providing the support and the assistance that we need from capitals so that they can do the job here. So, we're coming up on a series of meetings with people from capitals, NATO meetings, Foreign and Defense Ministers in late January and early February; meetings of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board in Berlin at the end of the month; meetings of the G8 and other groups, to make sure that we are putting the money, the resources, and the attention behind this effort. And I'm confident that we'll be able to carry it out in a more thorough way and a better way throughout the country in 2007.

So, with that, I will be glad to take your questions.

QUESTION (in Dari): What is the position of the United States regarding the recent decision that was made by the Pakistani government to fence and mine the border? What is the position, because it's not clear yet?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: The issue to us is control of the border and control of the border areas. Pakistan doesn't want to see Al-Qaeda and the Taliban operating in Pakistan, and they're taking a series of steps militarily, in terms of governance, and in terms of economic development to try to control those areas better, and we are supporting that. On the specific issue of fencing or mining, that is something that, I think despite the announcements the other day, does seem to be under continuing discussion in Pakistan and I will be able to go to Pakistan, meetings this afternoon, and talk to them more about it there, about this issue, sort of, extending government control and authority to the border areas and controlling any activity that harms both Pakistan and Afghanistan from that area, how that can be done. And so I really will be discussing these things more with them; where they are. There seems to be considerable discussion of these things in Pakistan itself.

QUESTION: Again on Pakistan more broadly, has the administration assessment of Pakistan's commitment on this issue of getting control of the border areas, stopping cross-border infiltration by the insurgents, has your assessment of their willingness and their sincerity on this issue changed at all? The administration has been, you know, quite generous to Pakistan because of its broader support for anti-terrorist policy, been quite generous in terms of giving it time and help in getting control of the border areas and the Taliban, a problem, but there has been an enormous amount of criticism within Pakistan and especially here by Afghan officials who simply do not believe them. Do you believe them?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: First of all, Pakistan is a very important ally in the fight against terrorism. More broadly in terms of what they do in Pakistan, some of the steps they've taken more generally, the ships in the Arabian Gulf, taken charge of the Task Force there. So they've been a very important ally in the fight against terrorism and they are committed to this not just because we're all concerned about terrorism but because of the commitment that they have, that President Musharraf has, to orienting Pakistan in a different direction, of creating a more moderate society, more modern society that is free from the kind of extremism, terrorism that has beset Pakistan and some of its neighbors in the past.

So we think that commitment is real, we think that commitment comes down also to exerting government authority in the border areas and stopping the activity of Al-Qaeda, stopping the activity of Taliban, stopping the so-called Talibanization of areas inside Pakistan. And they have a real commitment to do that for the strength of their overall society and for the future of Pakistan. There are always questions with all of us about what more we need to do to make these policies effective, whether it's the activity that we and others in the Afghan government carry out inside Afghanistan or whether it's the activities that the Pakistani government needs to carry out in its border area. So we look at Pakistan as a country with a real commitment and a country with whom we need to work and support in order to make that commitment more effective.

QUESTION: All times Afghan officials are saying that Pakistan is not doing enough and should be doing more; you are saying that they are doing good and they are committed to do something. Are Afghan officials accusing them, or Afghan officials lying or what is the problem?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't like questions where I'm asked to choose "is it this or is it that," because it's usually something else. There are successes on both sides of the border. There is strong commitment on both sides of the border to deal with extremism, to deal with the people who are trying to hold back these societies and keep people from having opportunity on both sides of the border. There are also challenges on both sides of the border. And when I come to Afghanistan to

talk to the Afghan officials, to Afghan leadership here as well as the donors and military people about how we can better deal with the challenges on this side of the border. And I go to Pakistan to talk to the government there about how they're dealing with the challenges on the Pakistani side of the border and how we can help. It is clear to me that none of us will be safe unless we do deal with both sides of the border. People in Pakistan won't be safe and have the opportunities that they want. People in Afghanistan won't be safe and have the opportunities that they want and people in other parts of the world won't be safe from the threat of terrorism that can come out of these areas. So we're all in this together. But here on the Afghan side, let's deal with what works here and making it work better. And on the Pakistani side let's deal, when I go there, with what works there and making it better.

QUESTION: Is there just maybe a chance that the U.S. will deploy additional foreign troops in Afghanistan? Is this coming up in any of your discussions with the allies? I know you're not the military commander. I wonder if you need more troops here, whether you will be deploying additional troops here. I know there was some talk of deploying an additional battalion of marines here or something like that. Basically, do you need more troops come spring?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: As you point out, I am not the military commander, so, there's a limit to how far I can go on committing this or talking about this. But let me give you a general appreciation of the situation. First of all, it is very important to us that we provide the forces that are necessary to help stabilize Afghanistan and provide security for the people of Afghanistan. Indeed we are not yet at the full level that NATO said was required here and we'll continue to take up with NATO and other NATO members, the need to fill out the NATO force levels to the level that they should be at. We are not yet at the levels of Afghan army and Afghan police that we need to maintain security throughout the country and indeed we have been able step up the training, step up the deployments, and Afghan forces have done extremely well and shown their bravery and their capabilities in the field. So, indeed we're working hard to fill out the Afghan force levels over the next several years but more and more every day to reach the levels that are required there. I'm not in a position to go into more detail but I think I can say the United States is committed to providing the kind of forces and capabilities that are necessary to sustain our commitment, to sustain our responsibilities here.

I think it's important also to remember it's not just a question of force levels. U.S. forces, NATO forces, and the Afghan army are acting already to disrupt the ability of the Taliban to operate, to decrease their ability to launch their traditional spring offensive. You have seen in the last month or so several military operations designed to deny operational areas to the Taliban where they operated previously. For example, in the Taliban heartland around Kandahar they have been denied certain areas there in Panjwai. There have been operations in Helmand, and there are other operations around the country designed to deny them the capability to launch, to deny them the full capability to operate in some of these areas. There has also been an accelerated program of providing police, providing government to undertake economic reconstruction progress. So, I'd say NATO and the Afghan government and the assistance agencies are not just waiting to see what happens in the springtime. We're acting now to exert more control and provide more capability in the areas where it's going to be needed.

QUESTION: Mr. Aziz last week spoke about if there was any kind of cross-border activity where the people are seeking or where the insurgents are seeking refuge in Afghan refugee camps, and he renewed his call, and I think, perhaps more strongly than before for the refugees to return home to Afghanistan. I am wondering what is your position on that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think there is broad agreement that people need to return home to Afghanistan and that they need be able to return home to Afghanistan. We've been working with Pakistan and the UN; the UN has the High Commissioner for Refugees, and a variety of other friends have tried to set up the conditions so that these people could return home.

QUESTION: But do you agree that, in fact, insurgents are taking refuge in Afghan refugee camps?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think we have seen a variety of activity from different areas, some including refugee camps, some other areas as well, and I think, yes, that is one of the reasons why these people need to return home and we need to close the camps. But also just on the general principle that people don't deserve to be refugees; they deserve to have a home and opportunity in their own country.

QUESTION: You mentioned the whole idea of Pakistan's commitment to Afghanistan, to anti-Talibanization, and I was wondering what your opinion is on the truce agreement of North Waziristan? There have been a lot of reports that cross-border incursion has increased since then. How does that fit into Pakistan's plan and what is the U.S. opinion on this?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: The issue, in a way, on both sides of the border is extending the authority of government and the benefits of government to the people, right up to the edges of the frontier. The governing arrangements on each side are different and indeed in the tribal areas of Pakistan they're even different than most of Pakistan. Some of these unusual arrangements go back to British days. So the government of Pakistan's tried to use these arrangements and indeed the Waziristan agreement falls within that scope to provide more effective control of the border areas.

I think they are committed to making that work; indeed, that is what they tell me, and indeed we are committed to helping them to make it work. We're going to provide a significant amount of support, for example, for the economic development plans for the areas. Cross-border activity has continued and it's continued at a fairly high level. There were some drops later in the year. Whether that was the weather or other activities or the agreement one can't say at this point. So, it's a question of making all these elements effective in Pakistan and I will look forward to hearing from the Pakistani government about how they intend to do that.

QUESTION (in Dari): On your visit last November, you were optimistic that the Security Tribal Jirga would soon be held between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and now that we see that it seems relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are not good, do you think that it will happen or not?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think, first of all, there are obviously some differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan on approaches to some of these issues, but I think there is also a desire on both sides to get together to work on these things, to hash it out, sometimes in fairly frank conversation but to work out these differences and work together on the problem. So, in fact, there is a lot more cross-border discussion, more coordination, than one would think from the rhetoric. There's trilateral military meetings, including, I think, one going on today; there have been meetings of Foreign Ministers; there have been a variety of other contacts; Presidents talking to each other; Shaukat Aziz, Prime Minister, coming here; and I think really some very frequent, more and more frequent and more and more serious conversations between Pakistan's government and the Afghan government.

So, we very much welcome that and support that. On the specific ideas of Jirgas we think that's a very useful idea and something that we're going to be helping promote and if we can, helping organize. So at this point Afghanistan and Pakistan have each set up a committee to try to organize the process and our view, I think, and their view is that the next step is to get these committees together to start more detailed planning. So, from my conversation with President Karzai and others here in Afghanistan, there's certainly willingness and desire to do that from the Afghan side, and I'm sure I will find the same willingness and desire on the Pakistani side when I go there to talk about it tomorrow. I'll also be visiting some of the border areas in Pakistan on Saturday and have a chance to see myself some of them, talk to some of the people out there, local leaders and government authorities out there, get their feel for the situation and how the Jirgas can contribute to the process.

QUESTION (in Dari): You know the Afghans oppose the Pakistani decision to plant land mines or build fences on the Durand Line, and Pakistan is saying that they will go ahead and put fences or mines. Do you support the position of Afghanistan, or do you support the position of Afghanistan?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No.

(Laughter).

Again, the United States is interested in providing security on both sides of the border. Afghans deserve to live in peace and develop their economy and Pakistanis deserve to live in peace and develop their economy. We're supporting the efforts of Afghanistan to provide that to their people and we're supporting the efforts of Pakistan to provide that to the Pakistani people.

It seems like I've answered a lot of questions about Pakistan, but I am in Afghanistan ; maybe you are, too. My effort here in Afghanistan is to work with the Afghan government and the international community to make sure that we are providing to the people of Afghanistan, including the people in the south and the border areas, the safety, the good government, and the economic opportunity that they deserve. And we're committed to doing more and better this year and for the long term. And when I go to Pakistan tomorrow I'll talk to Pakistani leaders about how we can help them provide safety, security, and economic opportunity to their people for the long term.

Thank you. It's good to see you again. See you again on my next trip.

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.