



## On-the-Record Briefing on Afghanistan

**Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs**

Washington, DC

August 2, 2007

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**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Good afternoon. It's good to see you all. As has been mentioned, I was down here a couple weeks ago to talk about Pakistan with you -- President of Afghanistan visiting over the weekend, coming to Camp David to meet with the President on Sunday and Monday. I thought it was a good time to come in and talk a little bit about Afghanistan and what's going on there. So if you'll bear with me, let me make a few comments at the beginning and then I'll be able to take your questions about Afghanistan or anything else in the region.

President Karzai is coming to the United States as a partner in the war on terror and a partner in stabilizing a very strategic region for the United States. I think it's important to remember how much has been accomplished already. Every time you talk about Afghanistan, we have to remember that in five years we've built roads and highways, brought down infant mortality rates, put five million kids in school. Enormous strides have been made. The economy, the legitimate economy has achieved very healthy growth rates and Afghanistan is in a much better position now than it ever was before as a nation.

In addition, the Government of Afghanistan is in a much better position as a government. In terms of facing the enemy this year, whether it's the Taliban or the narcotics traffickers, there are more police, more NATO troops, more soldiers in the Afghan army, more governors, more police chiefs, more government generally, as well as more aid projects going on throughout the country and that's an enormous project.

Together we're building security and governance for the people of Afghanistan throughout the country of Afghanistan. The Taliban, in turn, are under pressure from all sides, including from the Pakistan side and that's an important development. Unfortunately, they have turned more and more to pure terror tactics, tactics of bombings, tactics of kidnappings as we have seen. They've been unable to take towns and territory. They have been in this year unable to concentrate forces to -- even to the extent they did last year and to try to achieve military objectives and they're just turning more and more into blowing things up and killing people and kidnapping people and that's very unfortunate for those involved. But it represents a real, I think, shift on their part into what is increasingly I think, alienating a local population. And they find it more and more difficult to work with people who live in Afghanistan because in the end, those people want stability and they want safety and they want justice and they want opportunity. So the issue is as much fighting the enemy as it is providing the safety and justice and opportunity to the people throughout the country. We're helping obviously in a big way. We have about over \$10 billion for Afghanistan this year. We have another request for 4.7 billion for next year. That's both the regular request and the global war on terrorism supplemental that we've talked about. The Afghan Government is pushing out with governance, with roads, with electricity, counter-narcotics efforts, law, governors, police chiefs.

The session that we'll have with President Karzai and his team over the weekend is a strategy session. It's a high-level discussion of strategy with-- and accomplishments and goals between the two leaders of partner nations, nations that are strategically linked and that work very closely together. And as you've seen, the President and President Karzai get together periodically. This is one of those occasions where they can go and talk about how things are going and what we have to do together, what we are doing together, and a chance for us, I think, to make clear once again that U.S. support for Afghanistan is strong. It is strategic and it is steadfast. And with that, I'd be glad to take your questions.

Sir.

**QUESTION:** Strong, strategic and steadfast? Was that your own alliteration?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Yeah. How's that?

**QUESTION:** Well done. Can I ask about the money? You said 10 billion this year, but -- you're going to cut in by more than half next year? Is that -- I understand it?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** The surge this year, the big increase this year was in the supplemental and that was intentionally designed to step up the effort and just push really forward; make the funds available for a major increase, particularly in training of police and military. So having gotten that big -- large amount of money in the supplemental, next year's budgets, including the supplemental for next year, go down a bit in terms of an ongoing effort and a push for years to come.

**QUESTION:** Well, go down a bit?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Go down another level.

**QUESTION:** I mean, that's more than a half that's going down.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Yeah, but that's -- I mean, the amount in 2006 was about 3.3 billion, and then in 2007, because of the supplemental, we're up to 10.1. So even when we drop back in 2008 to 4.7, we're still 50 percent higher, if we get all the money from Congress, than we were in 2006 and previous years.

**QUESTION:** Well, I'm no mathematician, Richard, but that sounds a bit bizarre. Is there going to be another supplemental that would --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** It's a jumpstart.

**QUESTION:** The 10.1?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** It's a jolt. The 10.1, yeah -- the 10.1 this year is a jumpstart to get a bunch of -- a number of very important and big programs, particularly police and military training started, to get the equipment in the pipeline we need to get and to really increase the output on these programs.

**QUESTION:** But is -- so this reduction is a reflection of what; progress that they have made --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Dropping back to more normal but higher levels of sustainable support.

**QUESTION:** And what -- okay, so what are you -- what can you -- what have you gotten for the taxpayer's money in Afghanistan?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** We've got kids in school. We've got a ring road. We've got highways throughout the country. We've got electricity grids north and south that are up -- that are being constructed right now. We've got a decline -- a major decline in infant mortality. We've got 85 percent of the population with access to health care, compared to very, very small numbers, previously. I think we've got a lot in Afghanistan to be proud of. We've got a democratically elected government that's up and running and serving the needs of the Afghan people throughout the country.

**QUESTION:** Okay, and then just my last one on this. But at the same time, you have 21 South Koreans who are being held hostage. You have -- I don't know what the drug figures or the opium production figures are like, but they're not good.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** They're bad.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. So, how much of this 4 point -- how much of the reduced -- I won't say reduced -- 4.7 billion, goes for -- how much money has been put into the opium? And then, last -- absolute last one, what's being done about the South Koreans?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Okay, two different things. Let me talk about the poppy problem first of all. I think if you look carefully at the experience of other countries -- take Thailand, take Turkey, take even Pakistan -- you look at their experience in fighting drugs, it took time. It took years, it took determination from the government in a variety of forms, and it took a development of an alternate economy of other things for people to grow, too, and earn their living from. That's the pattern we're following in Afghanistan and that's what we do with a very broad-based program to try to fight drugs.

The number last year was in the, sort of, \$600 million range specifically devoted to the narcotics problem, including alternate livelihoods. But obviously, any funds for roads and electricity and economic development contribute to that broader economy. And, for example, Helmand Province, where much of the production is, receives a very large portion of assistance, a very large amount of assistance, and we can get you some of those numbers if you need them.

The poppy issue this year is: There is going to be a lot of production in Afghanistan. It's probably going to be on the same level as last year. I think the UN's already made that clear in their numbers. What we're seeing, though, is it's more and more concentrated in the areas of the insurgency. It's more and more concentrated in the areas of insecurity. The tie between insecurity and poppy production is more and more clear. Where the government has established governing mechanisms and been in control, in fact, poppy production is going down.

So you'll probably go this year from six poppy-free provinces to at least double that number: a dozen or more poppy-free provinces. And more and more of the concentration of production is in the south, now the production is enormous, but it's more and more associated with the insurgency. And as government, it's controlled more generally, I think, we can look to start really beating back the poppy problem and not just containing it.

On the question of the South Koreans, we feel very deeply for these people who are being held hostage. We very much want to see their release. We're working very closely with the Government of South Korea. We're working very closely with the Government of Afghanistan to try to see these people released. This is, as I mentioned, something the Taliban is unfortunately doing. It's a horrible act on their part to take these innocent people hostage. I think 18 of these people are women and that, too, is a very unusual and disreputable, I would say, activity on their part, to take these people hostage. And we think they should all be released. I'll leave it at that for the moment.

Okay.

**QUESTION:** I have a couple questions. First of all, just --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** -- on the South Koreans, are there going to be any meetings between -- this weekend, there were some South Korean officials in town. Are you going to do any kind of trilateral meetings or --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** We're not doing any trilateral meetings. The South Korean legislators -- I'm not sure how long they're here -- but they're meeting this afternoon with Under Secretary Burns.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, yeah, I was just wondering if that would be --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** When you talk about the insurgency, are you limiting it to the Taliban, or is there a wider insurgency that you see? And on one hand, you say that the Taliban is kind of resorting to just pure terror tactics. It's a little bit more than that if they're also controlling the drug --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** They're not controlling the drugs. They're profiting from the drugs, they're sucking the sustenance from drugs. We did see, in the springtime, that Taliban in some areas gave their fighters a month off to go harvest poppy. So the link is very clear. But I would say that there are drug networks that control the drugs; that have various sorts of links with the Taliban. The Taliban makes money off of it; either taxes or extortion or, you know, fighters profiting from wages or growing it.

**QUESTION:** So, if you see the Taliban is not able to make, kind of, gains in controlling territory and kind of resorting to terror and insurgent-type tactics -- do you see dealing with the Taliban in kind of ending their influence as purely a kind of law enforcement, and as you train the police, you'll be able to get rid of them that way? And then lastly --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** -- you talked about that you would -- this would be a strategy session and you'd talk about some of your goals. Could you expand on that; what you mean by the goals and what beyond the training of the police what --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think you have to look at the challenge in Afghanistan as a bit more than just Taliban per se. First of all, there are different groups of Taliban fighting in different ways; some of them aligned with tribal leaders, some of them not, some of them more tied into al-Qaida. And so you face different groups, or different clusters, of Taliban in different places. And that's something our military, I think, deals with in different places.

Second of all, what we're really dealing with is challenges to government authority. And the issue is sort of the government pushing out to extend itself into all parts of the country. And that -- as the government pushes out, you encounter a variety of challenges. One is Taliban, many of whom have been entrenched there. Sometimes there are local potentates, militias, warlords, others, who have to accept government authority. Sometimes it's drug smugglers and criminal groups. And so the issue is pushing the government out and asserting government authority.

That -- would that that were just the police and law enforcement function, but these are in many cases some very nasty people with sources of supply and weapons, that we've talked about and we've seen, who are occasionally able to mount more than a suicide bombing, although that in itself is dangerous. And so it needs to be done with proper military force. And I think you've seen in the first half of this year, a very effective use of military force by NATO, by the Afghan army, together, to push them out of areas and to bring in government and bring in government control in those areas.

So you need to train the military forces to be able to do that, to push them out. You need to train the security forces, more generally, the police, to be able to hold and provide stability and safety for the inhabitants and you need to bring in the assistance. And that's why -- that's -- those are the things that this big supplemental this year is jumpstarting; is really doing the big push on.

**QUESTION:** Just one quick follow-up. Some of the people at NATO are complaining that the missions between Operation Enduring Freedom and -- am I saying the right mission operation?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** And --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** And the NATO mission.

**QUESTION:** -- and what the NATO mission of training and law enforcement, things like that, are kind of intercepting and it's causing some conflicts between the dueling missions and -- that there's -- that's one of the problems you see with the hesitancy of European countries to add troops and things like that. And there was just a lot of --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I don't think I would interpret it that way. Certainly, no -- I can't remember any Europeans ever telling me that they couldn't have troops because there were two other missions going on.

**QUESTION:** Well, that you have -- but that you do things a different way. You have different mandates, you have different missions, and there's not --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** There's an effort, I think, to coordinate this. And there are different missions. You have to deal with the hare-core bad guys -- well, the hard core of al-Qaida and the Taliban -- in an anti-terrorist way, in a different sort of way than you deal with the sort of sweeps in the establishing government control in areas. And so, yeah, NATO and the Enduring Freedom folks do have different missions with a lot of coordination on the ground. I think it's an ongoing effort, it's a continuous effort, and it's something I think where all the commanders out there are certainly aware of.

Okay, let's go -- Michelle.

**QUESTION:** Regarding South Korean hostages --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** South Koreans would like to see the United States to play a bigger role, a more active role in solving this problem. And after yesterday, the State Department said that the United States wants to do everything that it can do to solve this problem. And at the same time, you're saying that there will be no concessions to terrorists. What are the things that the United States can do?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think it probably wouldn't be good for me to go through a list of things that we might do. What's important is that we're working very closely with the people, South Korean Government, and with the Afghan Government. Now let's remember, this place -- is taking place on Afghan territory and they are working hard to deal with the problem and the difficulties that these unfortunate people are facing.

Let's also remember the problem is not one of -- Afghan, the United States, or South Korea are making; this is something the Taliban have done and that all pressures need to be applied to the Taliban to get them to release these hostages. And we hope that that pressure can be effective in a variety of ways, but the goal is to get these people released unharmed, to get them released peacefully and safely, and we'll all make efforts together to try to encourage that and try to make that happen.

Yeah, Michelle.

**QUESTION:** Some Afghans say they expect President Bush to give Karzai a yellow card of sorts, a warning to crack down on corrupt officials, get rid of corrupt officials in his government. Is that going to be part of this meeting?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** No yellow cards in here. We're partners with Afghanistan; we're partners with the democratically elected Government of Afghanistan. The issue of corruption is a very serious one; it's one that we take seriously, but I think it's also one that the Afghan Government is quite aware of.

And so if you look at what's happened over the last year or so, you've seen a variety of changes that President Karzai has made in the ministries, in the governors recently, in the police chiefs earlier this year. And I think it's an ongoing effort. It's something that we've tried to support both in terms of his ability to govern and the responsiveness of government to the democratically elected president and congress, the assembly.

We've supported anti-corruption efforts in the ministries, pay reform, civil service reform throughout the ministries. Some ministries are farther along than others. We've supported the efforts of the attorney general and we've supported the efforts of the supreme court in moving ahead. And we've done that in a variety of ways. There was just a big conference in Rome in early July where we pledged additional money, other governments pledged considerable sums to support rule of law in Afghanistan and to work on, sort of, three bases.

One is the prosecutors' in the attorney general's office, one is the court system, and the other is the legal system more generally. And so I think there's a lot of effort being put into all the different pieces of this that need to be -- that are necessary to improve governance and pride -- not just governance to all of Afghanistan, but good governance to the people of Afghanistan. I think that'll be one of the topics of discussion with President Karzai, how he intends to proceed in extending government and improving the quality of government and improving the quality of government services and then how we can help him in all those respects.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) this is -- any suggestion that the U.S. might go across the border after al-Qaida or Taliban targets. And you talk to Pakistani officials, they say the real problem lies across the border in Afghanistan where they either lack capacity or will or corruption to fight. And the Governor of Balujistan is in town this week and one of his messages is we catch Taliban -- wanted Taliban, turn them over to Kabul and they get released and they're back on the field. How do you finesse the differences between these two allies and might it be time for another one of those Bush-Karzai-Musharraf meetings?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** We do work with them both together as well as individually. I think we start from the premise that there are problems on both sides of the border. And in some ways they're essentially the same problem from both sides of the border. On the Pakistani side, many of these areas, the tribal areas in particular, not Balujistan so much, but the tribal areas, have been ungoverned spaces, have been places where the government doesn't -- the rule of government doesn't hold sway.

And so it's again a question of extending government, providing government apparatus, providing security, providing economic opportunity to the people who live there, but doing it under the authority of government. And so I think that is going on on both sides of the border. That's why I say the Taliban are under pressure from both sides. And you've seen a lot of activity. I mean, you guys read it in your own reports, in the wire stories and the newspapers -- fighting in Waziristan with the Uzbeks earlier this year, attacks on compounds, training centers, attacks on Taliban concentrations, al-Qaida groups, that have been holed up in the tribal areas. So there's a lot of activity on both sides of the border.

And I think our approach -- how do we finesse this -- one is we encourage cooperation as much as we can. And I think over the general trend, we've seen a rise in cooperation, although there are a lot more areas where we can encourage that and do encourage that. And the second is we work with Afghanistan on the problems inside Afghanistan and we'll work with Pakistan on the problems inside Pakistan. And we have major programs with Pakistan to bring economic development to the border areas, major programs to help them improve and transform the Frontier Corps to provide better security in that region and other programs to cooperate with the Government of Pakistan as it goes about its task of imposing government order and dealing with the extremists who are still holed up in those areas.

**QUESTION:** Back to the hostages briefly. Are you confident that Karzai is indeed doing everything he can and is there any prospect whatsoever of any kind of prisoner swap?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think you know U.S. policy on prisoner swaps and other concessions to hostage takers. We think that only invites further activity for the kidnappings or hostage taking. So I think our position on that's pretty clear. As far as President Karzai, I think he's very actively working this. We're in close touch with him and his government. So I think I'll just leave it at that for the moment.

**QUESTION:** Wouldn't it be very embarrassing for him if he's here later this week and these people are still being held or anyone else is killed?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** No, this is not something he did. This is something the Taliban have done. It's something the Taliban -- a reprehensible act of an outlaw group and the government is trying to deal with it responsibly, with all due concerns for the safety of the individuals who are unfortunately caught in this. But the pressure needs to be on the Taliban and on the hostage takers who've captured innocent men, innocent women, held them hostage against their will. And the only real solution to this is for them to be released by the hostage takers and that's where all our effort and pressure has to go.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but that -- that's the second time you've mentioned pressure. What kind of pressure do you have, other than military, to get the Taliban? I mean, standing up here and as spokespeople have done for the -- since this began, calling for their release is not exactly pressure. So what --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think it's one of the many tools we have. We'll just leave it at that.

**QUESTION:** Well, what kind of pressure are you talking about?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think there are both the things that we say, things that others say, things that are done and said within Afghan society, as well as potential military pressures. But as I said before, I don't think it's useful for us to stand up here and list a whole list of tools that we might use. But I think it's important that we keep the focus in the right direction.

**QUESTION:** You believe that the people that are holding the South Koreans now are susceptible to what Afghan society might -- what elements of Afghan society might say?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I don't know. I'll have to see.

**QUESTION:** Are there any intermediaries talking to the Taliban or just --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I am not going to try to get into that. I'm 10,000 miles away and it's the wrong place to be talking about it.

**QUESTION:** According to Steve Coll in his book *Ghost Wars*, Pakistan was enormously instrumental in the rising of the Taliban. Surely they must still have some contacts that could be used, either directly or indirectly, to obtain the release of these people.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think that's very speculative. I think we all know the history of this region and the ties that Pakistan and others, including ourselves, had to various groups that were operating in this region in the anti-Soviet period, but a lot has changed since then. And when you have people shooting each other and fighting each other, it's not exactly the kind of contact that leads to the release of hostages.

**QUESTION:** There's nothing Pakistan can do? I mean --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I assume that everybody who can bring pressure on the Taliban to release these hostages would do so, but I wouldn't prescribe anything in particular for Pakistan in that regard.

Yeah. Sir.

**QUESTION:** Is there going to be any discussion on (inaudible) about Iran's role in Afghanistan?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I don't want to predict everything the President and President Karzai might discuss. They're free to discuss whatever they want, but that certainly has been an object of attention both from us and from the Government of Afghanistan. They've had to deal with difficulties created by Iran and the way that people have been pushed back across the border, refugees forced to return from Iran into Afghanistan. We've all had to deal with the growing signs that the-- that Iranian weapons are making their way to the Taliban. We've all had to deal with questions being raised in Afghanistan as to running interference in Afghan politics. So I think it is a subject that we were all -- been looking at over the last months, but how much they will deal with it, I can't predict at this point.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Is the U.S. talking to Iran about that? They used to have the Bonn conference -- I mean, the six-party contact. There was a way to talk to Iran about those things?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** The six-party contact was about narcotics. I mean, it's not active at this point. The Bonn process is something that, yes, indeed, Iran did cooperate with and support raises even more questions about why they're doing some of these other things now. At this point, I wouldn't say we have any active discussion with Iran. But we always have the option of discussing things in Kabul if we think that's appropriate.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you -- I've got just one more to ask. Is this pressure that you're talking about, is that being applied? Now?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I think there's a variety of pressures being applied now, yes.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** Let's -- why don't we make this the last one then.

**QUESTION:** The Korean Government had to show their hope for U.S. Government to adapt their principle that -- which is said that there's no negotiation, there's no concession to the terrorists to be more flexible. So what is your answer to the hope from the Korean Government? And was there any formal request from the Korean Government to adapting the principle more flexibly?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER:** I -- you'll have to ask the Korean Government what they're asking for. I'm not a spokesman for the Korean Government. On the U.S. Government side, I think our policies and principles are well known. I'm not going to spend too much time reiterating them here. I think what is very important is we're working closely with the South Korean Government. We're very concerned about the situation. We're very concerned about the fate of these people and their welfare. We're working very closely with the Korean Government and with the Afghan Government to try to make sure the pressure and the focus remain where they should be and that's on the Taliban who are the ones who've done this terrible thing.

Okay. Thank you.

**2007/663**

Released on August 2, 2007

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