

Oct. 15 - Supporting Democratic Institutions in Afghanistan

Mr. CASEY: Mr. President, I know the hour is late and many are ready to end the week. I wish to say a few words tonight about the challenge we have with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan and our strategy going forward.

I spent some time in the last couple of weeks talking about the obligation we have in the Senate to have a full debate on these issues and not simply to point down Pennsylvania Avenue and say the White House has to do this or that or the President has to do this or that.

It is important, I believe, that the President and his team have taken the kind of time they have to get the strategy right with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan. But I believe the Congress has a role to play. If we simply fall into partisan corners with regard to our strategy in Afghanistan and dust off and reintroduce talking points from the war in Iraq, we will not get it right; we will get it wrong.

I believe we have to listen to a lot of different points of view. The President has undertaken that kind of review, and we have to do that as well.

Part of that is doing what we have already begun to do, which is to have a series of hearings.

In the Foreign Relations Committee, we have had a number of hearings. I know the Presiding Officer, as a member of the Intelligence Committee and his work as a Senator, has engaged in this review as well. We are trying to get different points of view in front of us. I know Chairman Kerry and the Foreign Relations Committee have had too many hearings to count, and not just in the last couple of weeks but over many months.

Chairman Levin and the Armed Services Committee have outlined a strategy, or at least an approach to part of a strategy, to focus on building up the Afghan National Army and the police on an accelerated basis so we can begin to move the responsibility more to the Afghan people and the Afghan governing institutions as opposed to having the United States and other coalition partners bear this responsibility solely. Chairman Levin has spent a good deal of time trying to contribute to this debate.

We have heard both Democrats and Republicans contributing to this discussion. As much as we have heard about General McChrystal's report and his recommendations--and we have heard a good bit about that, and we should, and we have heard an awful lot about his recommendation with regard to troop levels, almost exclusively, General McChrystal's recommendations about troops.

If you read his report--the report that is now public--he talks at length in that report about every topic under that heading and does refer to troops, but he also talks about at least three areas. One, he talks about security. Obviously, as the commander, he should address that issue, and he does. But he also talks about governance and development. Those three areas are critically important. We can get the troop level right and get the whole strategy wrong. Even if we focus on security, which obviously involves troop levels and military determinations we have to make, we have to get it right with regard to development and also with regard to governance.

I note for the record an article from--I do not have it in front of me, but I will refer to it. The New York Times on October 2 had a story about General McChrystal's approach to the strategy, but he was quoted in that story talking about debate and deliberation.

I have been listening to some people who talked about what he is recommending. One would think all he did was put together a report, send it to Washington, and the report said ``add troops" and that is all he had to say. General McChrystal--I am paraphrasing--did refer to both debate and deliberation to get the strategy right. He also said we do not have the luxury of moving too fast. I think that is instructive of what he has been recommending.

I want to talk tonight briefly about one of those three areas, not security or development, but governance, and in particular talk for a moment about elections and other aspects of governance as well as the judiciary.

I know the Senator from Rhode Island, the Presiding Officer, is a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a former prosecutor and understands how important the judiciary is to a functioning democracy. We have a ways to go and the Afghan people have a ways to go between here and there, meaning here where they are today and where they must get to with regard to their judiciary.

In terms of the election, we heard a lot about the problems, and some of it bears repeating. As documented by the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Democracy International, and a host of other international observers, the elections in Afghanistan saw widespread fraud amid an atmosphere of escalated violence.

We saw many of these problems coming before the elections, and despite having years to prepare, there is still not a reliable voters list, which opened the possibility of wholesale fraud on Election Day. The ``single nontransferable vote system" for the provincial government elections has led to candidates gaining seats with only a few actual votes. On Election Day, many citizens were too scared to vote, citing Taliban threats to bomb polling stations or literally cut fingers off of voters. Afghanistan itself can and should take several concrete steps or measures to address these issues prior to the next election, including fixing the voters list, considering moving away from the single nontransferable voter system, and enhancing the security environment for voters in the pre-election period and on election day.

I would add to this that when I was in Afghanistan and Pakistan back in August with Senator Brown and Congressman Zack Space, we had several briefings and one of them was on the election. One point that was made we shouldn't lose sight of. This election, for all the fraud that we know is on the record now, for all the problems, the security environment was generally good. The fact that despite those threats by the Taliban an election took place in a time of war and under an adverse, difficult security environment shouldn't be glossed over. It was a significant challenge. So we had a lot of fraud, but in terms of security there is some good news on the security front.

Organized representation of any citizen's interests in Afghanistan also remains underdeveloped. The electoral system disincentivizes the development of vibrant party structures. This is problematic, because without political parties--it is hard for us to understand this is still a problem--without political parties that can help to organize and represent the policy concerns of the people, there is little hope that the Parliament's legislation can truly reflect the will of the Afghan people.

Governing institutions in Afghanistan have atrophied over decades of civil war and Taliban rule and have begun to develop other problems as well, but institutional reform is vitally necessary. We know that the idea of a strong central government in the history of Afghanistan is somewhat of a foreign concept. In recent years, the international community has placed an emphasis on the development of governing institutions in Kabul, capable of projecting its presence and influence across the country, but it has been a difficult challenge. Not enough attention has been paid to the development of proper financing of local governing institutions. Provincial government is underfunded, and that opens the door to local level corruption.

Local and international development nongovernmental organizations often take the lead in local development projects, which can serve to minimize the role of the provincial government at a time when we need their role to be strengthened in terms of what people see. So just at a time when you need strong evidence of local government, sometimes the NGOs are doing a lot of the work.

While the international community has not paid enough attention to the development of local governing structures, the Taliban, unfortunately, understands the importance of connecting with the people at the local level. Over the past few years, the Taliban has established shadow governments across the south which mete out their form of Sharia justice. They have ombudsmen who travel from district to district to gauge the work of the Taliban shadow government and their officials. And of course we know that Mullah Omar, the former head of the Taliban-led government, now runs the so-called Quetta Shura--QST as it is known by its acronym--and they have produced a 30-page manual, believe it or not, on how best to win the favor of the local population.

So the Taliban is not just thinking in military terms. They have already not just thought about but have begun to implement a governing strategy, and our government--our strategy--and also the Afghan people, as well as our coalition partners--have to think this through as well and get it right. It is important we get this right--the governing part of our challenge--as much as we get the military part of this right.

The Afghan Government should make every effort to devolve power and resources to the local level to bring good governance as close to the people as possible. The provincial reconstruction teams can help and play a supporting role, but this essential connection between the Afghan citizen and government must be an Afghan-led enterprise.

Let me conclude with this thought about the judiciary. The Taliban are threatened by a strong judiciary, as evidenced by its deadly attack on the Ministry of Justice in Kabul earlier this year. High levels of endemic corruption, insufficiently trained staff, and a complicated system of

western, customary, and Sharia law hinders the Afghan Government's ability to provide justice for its people. This is perhaps the biggest threat to the Afghan Government's viability, the Taliban's ability to provide quick, albeit brutal, justice, which sharply contrasts with the corrupt government officials who are unwilling or unable to take action. So in the absence of a strong effort by the government to provide the kind of judiciary that we would hope they could provide, the Taliban has filled the void. Thus a majority of legal disputes are settled outside of the state's formal justice system. With little trust in the government, the population can easily turn to the Taliban for a swift, brutal form of justice.

As we ramp up our efforts to train the Afghan National Police force, we must at the same time consider parallel reforms that must take place within the formal justice sector. We must support Afghan efforts toward institutional reform in the Ministry of Justice so that the local population will not rely only upon the informal justice sector, or worse, turn in fact to the Taliban for justice.

There has been noteworthy progress in some democratic institution building within the country. First, by way of example, the Ministries of Defense and Interior are often recognized for their positive efforts. And while considerable work remains to be done, each has made significant strides in recent years. I can say from somewhat of a firsthand observation that both Defense Minister Wardal and Interior Minister Akmar, two ministers we met with on our trip in August and sat down with, indicated to me they have a strong sense of where they have to go to develop the Afghan army and police force, the security for the country. But they still have to demonstrate that over time. No matter who ultimately wins the Presidential election, I hope that the Afghan Government will retain these important ministers, who have the institutional knowledge of success and of clear plans for continued development.

Second, the health sector, in particular, has seen impressive gains since the fall of the Taliban government. Today, in Afghanistan, 82 percent of the population lives in districts with access to a government-provided health care package, up from 9 percent in 2003. That is a bit of good news we don't often hear about, but I am sure there is progress yet to be made there as well in terms of health care.

Third, the education sector has seen improvements as well. In 2001, less than 1 million children--probably about 10 percent of the school-aged population--were enrolled in elementary or secondary education, and almost none of them were girls at that time. Today, more than 6 million children are enrolled, 2 million of whom are girls. So there has been measurable and significant progress in Afghanistan despite the recent deteriorating security environment.

Building on these fragile gains will rest in large part on the viability of the Afghan democratic institutions. The United States can help in this effort through the continued provision of development assistance and other forms of diplomatic and political support for Afghanistan's institutions. While the security situation is increasingly grave, between 79 and 91 percent of the population remains opposed to the Taliban and their brand of violent politics and their brand of justice. I hope we can consolidate on the gains made in Afghanistan and seriously begin to address the severe shortcomings that remain in the democratic development of the country.

In conclusion, I would say that despite all the bad news about the security environment, which is news we need to hear, we need to put it in the context of the two other challenges beyond security--governance and development. I have pointed out some real problems with the governance, especially as it relates to the judiciary, but we have had some progress on health and on education. We need to accelerate and develop that and incentivize it and get it right, but we have seen some good news.

So I think as we debate this strategy going forward, those of us in the Senate who have a role to play here and who feel the obligation to get this right have to focus on more than just security and troops and the military. We have to make sure that we get strategies in place to enhance and increase the governance priority as well as development. We will talk more at another time about development.

I thank the Chair and yield the floor.