

*Oct. 22 - International Development and the Role of Women in Afghanistan*

**Mr. CASEY:** Mr. President, I rise today with regard to the importance of international development efforts in Afghanistan, as well as the role of women in that same country. Much of the public debate around Afghanistan is focused on troop levels, especially in Washington. This is a critical decision on troops, but a focus only on troops ignores so many of the crucial elements that will contribute to our strategy in Afghanistan; namely, what should be done to help promote democratic institutions. That is one question we have to spend more time on. How can we accelerate the training of the Afghan security forces? What impact does Pakistan have on this conflict? I have spoken about these issues in depth. I want to directly address the formidable development challenges before the Afghan people and what this means for the security environment.

Let me be clear. We are not conducting development in Afghanistan for development's sake. Promoting development has a direct national security impact and, if done right, can result in a safer environment for coalition troops, as well as Afghan security forces, and it can ultimately contribute to stability in the region.

Before discussing these issues, I want to applaud the extraordinary efforts of Senator Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to seek a resolution to the Afghan election crisis. As we all saw from news reports, his tireless work over the past few days to support the democratic process in Afghanistan renewed the chance for much needed legitimacy in the electoral process. I hope the second round of the elections will be free from violence and the terrible fraud that was seen in August.

I also want to recognize the work of the Electoral Complaints Commission, which meticulously rooted out corruption in the election process. Those guardians of Afghan democracy should be commended for their work, and I trust they will perform equally well on November 7 and the days following.

The development changes facing Afghanistan are formidable. Destroyed by 30 years of war, Afghanistan is the third poorest country in the world. Large swaths of the country don't have access to roads, electricity, water, or prospects for jobs.

As I discussed on the floor last week, there are some positive aspects of the development process already in Afghanistan. There are now 6 million children in school, one-third of whom are girls. Basic health care now reaches more of the country than ever before. The public health care system has made strides in this regard to have organizations such as the Pennsylvania-based Cure International, which is working to train doctors. The economy has grown at 10 percent a year in aggregate terms, and mobile telephones are starting to connect more and more people across the country. When this process began in 2002, we started at zero. We should not be content with the pace of reform in Afghanistan, but we should acknowledge that some progress has been made.

While the debate in Washington revolves around the prospect of a troop surge, not much has been said about the civilian surge to assist in development and diplomatic efforts. I support this important initiative, but we must encourage the administration to match this international surge

with an Afghan surge. We must increase our efforts to build the skills and capacity of Afghans to develop Afghanistan. We must constantly work to instill the idea that Afghanistan's prospects lie not with the efforts of the international community--though we should do our part, and we have and we will--but with the talent and the will of the Afghan people. It is not only the best way to conduct development, it is in fact the only way it has ever been truly successful.

The strong roots of an Afghan-led development process have been years in the making. The Government's National Solidarity Program has worked to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, implement, and monitor their own development projects. This model of community-based development is essential to building civic ownership for the country's future. The World Bank reports that more than 20,000 communities now have local government consultative institutions or community development councils. Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development oversees this effort, which is financed by a consortium of international donors. It employs more than 4,000 Afghan nationals and has developed the skills of 600,000 Community Development Council members across the country in planning and supervising projects and managing finances transparently. More than 80 percent of the labor has been provided by communities themselves, generating wages for the poor and cutting in half the cost of their projects.

While substantial progress has been made, the National Solidarity Plan faces three main challenges: First, the security environment is the biggest hurdle to rapid development. Second, the international community can play a helpful role in supporting the government's efforts to ensure that these structural gains are sustainable. The democratic process has begun to take hold in these communities but will require years to grow strong roots. Finally, the Community Development Councils will need regular assistance in building capacity. As local communities start to work together on multivillage projects, they will need technical help to implement the projects.

Afghanistan's development infrastructure is important and represents an important effort to mesh traditional community-based decision making structures with the official governing structure. In order for these bodies to work properly, there must be an important focus on the provision of basic services, irrigation, access to transportation and the construction of roads, basic health care and education, and access to drinking water and electricity.

Much of the development work on Afghanistan must take place in an environment of extreme insecurity. USAID works in countries all over the world, but its impressive staff doesn't usually contend with the small arms fire, roadside bombs, and the militant attacks that they confront in Afghanistan. In the most crucial regions of Afghanistan, along the Pashtun belt in the east and south, USAID must operate alongside the U.S. military, the State Department, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in provincial reconstruction teams. The military forces provide protection for the aid workers and diplomats as they seek to implement their projects. This configuration is clearly not ideal but has allowed for some development progress and has also played a critical role in the overall counter insurgency effort.

While there has been significant funding provided for development efforts, not enough of the funding is actually reaching the Afghan people. Lately, international organizations have been

criticized for high consultant fees and overhead costs associated with doing business in Afghanistan. Some nongovernmental organizations, so-called NGOs, and contractors are performing excellent work in extraordinary circumstances in Afghanistan. While much of the cost associated with their efforts is understandable given the high price tag associated with security and paying quality staff to live in Afghanistan, I do believe that more of an effort should be made and must be made to work directly with the Afghan organizations where possible to implement development programs. This will likely mean an increase in USAID staff to oversee implementation of the programs and assure accountability. This would also serve in rebuilding USAID's capability to implement programs instead of relying upon contractors. Developing the capacity of USAID is long overdue. I want to acknowledge Ambassador Holbrooke's work in this regard and support his efforts to deliver more of our assistance directly to the Afghan people.

International development experts have highlighted the critical role played by women in the security, stability, and development of Afghanistan. We cannot expect progress on any of these fronts if half of the population is ignored. As I have said before, we have seen progress on women's and girls' political participation, education, and health since the fall of the Taliban. However, women are still largely excluded from public life and economic participation, and they remain targets of endemic violence.

We must support the Afghan Government's efforts to empower women and ensure their right to work in both public service and at community levels. Promoting the economic participation of women will pay long-term dividends in terms of education, health, GDP, and even the security and stability of their country.

International development experts in the region have noted that women are more likely than men to invest their extra savings and earnings in their families, specifically toward much needed education and health care, assisting women, whether through small grants, access to credit, or skills training as a potential to improve the lives of the entire household, including those susceptible to be drawn in by the Taliban.

Military strategists have focused on this important nexus of advancing development for women and security. In a society where young men are loathe to make decisions against their mother's wishes, convincing mothers that their children have future prospects beyond joining a militant group is a key part of our strategy. By working with women on a host of development issues, international and Afghan groups can have a clear and convincing impact on the security environment where our soldiers are operating today.

In closing, the security challenges in Afghanistan grow more acute by the day. We are rightly focused on the question of troop deployment and how to stem the tide of militancy across the country. But as we debate the merits of our presence in Afghanistan and our efforts to bring stability, we must fully account for the developmental shortcomings in the country. This, as well as the establishment of durable democratic institutions, will most likely be the ultimate determining factor in resolving this conflict.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.