

*Assessing the Transition in Afghanistan*

*Remarks by Chairman Robert Menendez*

*Senate Foreign Relations Committee – July 11, 2013*

Today's hearing on Afghanistan comes none too soon.

With 63,000 U.S. troops still based there and the upcoming political and security transitions in 2014 just around the corner, now is the time to take stock of our efforts and make any necessary changes.

Most importantly, given recent speculation about our intentions, this means the United States needs to make clear – once again – that we are committed to a long-term partnership with Afghanistan – Period.

Let me be clear -- because this is a fundamental point: As long as the Afghan people and their government want the United States as a partner, we will not leave Afghanistan.

Our goal – our clear intent -- is to stay committed with both security and civilian assistance post-2014.

I'm fully aware there is deep-seated anxiety in the region about what the U.S. troop presence will look like post-2014.

I heard it firsthand when I was in Afghanistan and Pakistan earlier this year, and I know Senator Corker heard it on his travels to the region last week.

As President Obama has said repeatedly, the U.S. is planning on leaving behind a U.S. force-presence to support the Afghan security forces if the Afghan government wants it.

But we need a workable Bilateral Security Agreement acceptable to both countries.

President Karzai must now decide whether his government is willing to support a longer-term U.S. troop presence by coming back to the negotiating table with acceptable terms.

The ball is in his court – but he and the Afghan people should understand that if we fail to reach an agreement, it will not be for lack of trying - on America's end.

For our part, President Obama should signal to Afghans and our allies what the post-2014 U.S. troop presence will look like, governed by a security agreement.

The lack of clarity on this point has led to too much hedging in the region.

Afghans – who may otherwise be interested in building a fledgling democracy – want to know they will not be abandoned by the United States, as the Taliban claims.

These are the very Afghan allies we need – those committed to democracy -- people like Lieutenant Islam Bibi, the most senior Afghan female police officer in Helmand province who survived three death attempts by her own brother for enlisting -- and who was tragically shot dead last week by assailants.

Afghans like her are counting on us to support a successful and inclusive political transition next year so that the country does not return to civil war.

The most important piece of this puzzle is getting the 2014 elections right because, ultimately, it's the political transition that will determine whether we have a successful security-and-economic transition. I am very pleased that Senate Resolution 151 -- that I sponsored with Senators Casey, and McCain -- passed this week urging the Afghan government to ensure transparent and credible elections.

Many of us here in Congress are concerned that the window for establishing a successful election framework for next April's vote is closing.

There is little time left to get a credible pre-election process off the ground.

Delays in approving new electoral laws and new appointments to the Independent Election Commission, complaints commission, and Supreme Court could undermine the entire process.

Afghan political stakeholders must come together and agree to fair rules governing the elections to ensure that the process and outcome is accepted by all parties.

Now is the time for the United States, the United Nations, and all our allies to speak with one unified voice about what's really at stake here.

We must convince the Afghan people that having credible and fair elections on April 5, 2014 is our number one priority in Afghanistan.

President Karzai should understand -- in clear terms -- that his legacy of leaving behind a stable Afghanistan that is supported by the international community will be in serious jeopardy with a flawed election outcome.

Already, the Obama administration has requested \$3.4 billion in civilian assistance for Afghanistan in 2014 – more than it has requested for any other nation – bringing total U.S. civilian aid to about \$20 billion.

Before Congress approves additional funding, we need to know that the Afghan government is serious about holding credible elections in April 2014 and upholding the reform commitments it made in Tokyo last year.

Congress also needs to hear from the Obama Administration about how it's addressing serious problems raised by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

Though many of our aid programs have helped raise the quality of life for many Afghans, some of them are ironically working against our collective interests. I'm baffled, for instance, that the Pentagon purchased about \$800 million worth of aircraft, including 30 Russian helicopters, when the Afghan air unit lacks basic capacity to operate them.

I'm also skeptical about some of our INL programs relating to counternarcotics and rule of law efforts in Afghanistan and have asked SIGAR to fully investigate if our multi-billion dollar investments in these areas make sense.

As we drawdown in Afghanistan and move to third-party monitoring of our civilian assistance programs, this Committee wants assurances from the State Department, USAID, and Defense Department that they are making real oversight reforms as laid out by SIGAR and others – and are making oversight a priority

during and after the transition. With billions of dollars at stake, we can't afford to keep doing business as usual.

There are many more areas I'd like to cover including Pakistan's role in the transition and whether we have made lasting security gains, but let me save these for the Q & A, and turn now to Senator Corker, who has just returned from the region, for his opening statement.