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House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Afghanistan

Submitted Statement For The Record by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Capitol Hill, Washington, DC, Tuesday, December 11, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Representative Hunter, members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. I have just returned from Afghanistan, where I met with Afghan officials, U.S. commanders, our civilian colleagues, and our European allies. This is an opportune time to discuss our endeavors in that country.

It is important to make clear to this committee and to the American people that, notwithstanding the news they sometimes hear out of Afghanistan, the efforts of the United States, our allies, and the Afghan government and people have been producing solid results. If I had to sum up the current situation in Afghanistan, I would say that there is reason for optimism tempered by caution.

Under the Taliban, few Afghans had access to health care. Today, most do. More than 670 clinics and hospitals have been built or refurbished, and nearly 11,000 doctors, nurses, and midwives have been trained.

Afghan citizens have much more access to education now than they did during the rule of the Taliban. Fewer than a million children were in school in 2001. Now more than five million students – at least one and a half million of them girls – are enrolled in school.

The country's central bank has been rebuilt and supported with more than \$2.5 billion in reserves. It now operates branches throughout the country – remarkable considering that there was no commercial banking under the Taliban. There is now a single currency, the Afghani, which is actively traded and remains a stable measure of value.

More than four million Afghan citizens have returned to their country since 2002, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Projects that will have a real impact on the lives of the citizens are underway, with the construction of utilities, roads, and schools. The U.S. Congress appropriated about \$10 billion in security and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan for Fiscal Year 2007, almost three times the previous year's appropriation. I thank you, the members of Congress, for your strong support of this effort. Admiral Mullen is going to speak in more detail about some of the activities made possible by this funding increase – with regard to Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Afghan security forces.

We have just passed the first anniversary of NATO's taking overall nationwide responsibility for helping Afghans to secure their young democracy. Through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), NATO is now leading some 40,000 troops, from 37 nations, and 25 U.S. and partner nation-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams – the first sustained ground deployment that NATO has ever conducted outside of Europe. Additionally, we have nearly 11,000 U.S. forces deployed as part of Operation

Enduring Freedom, assisting with the training of Afghan security forces and with special operations.

In the first half of 2007, NATO and the Operation Enduring Freedom coalition took the initiative away from the Taliban. This was due to the work of the brave troops of allies and partner nations. Key contributions from our civilian colleagues helped secure these military gains. Afghan soldiers played a key role – demonstrating their improved capability in the last year. We hope and expect that their progress will continue in the future.

The Afghan National Police are beginning to show progress as well, with the benefit of training assistance from the United States and the EU. Some \$7.4 billion was appropriated by the U.S. government in Fiscal Year 2007 to accelerate and expand the training and equipping of the Afghan National Army and Police. Efforts to reduce absenteeism and improve vetting of recruits in the Afghan national security forces are necessary, and are being addressed. Afghan soldiers and police have fought courageously alongside international forces and are winning the respect of Afghan civilians.

Significant problems in the mission do persist, however.

Let me start with the Afghan National Police. Despite showing significant improvement over the past twelve months, the police force continues to struggle due to corruption and illiteracy.

Also hindering the government from extending its authority and influence across the country are the insurgent and Al Qaeda sanctuaries in Pakistan, and weapons and financing coming from Iran. Cross-border insurgency contributes to the continuing violence.

As you know, in 2007 the number of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan increased. The insurgents have resorted more and more to suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices similar to those found in Iraq. As I learned during my visit, some of the uptick can be attributed to increased Afghan and ISAF operations. It should be clear that the Taliban and their former guests, Al Qaeda, do not have the ability to re-impose their rule. But only in a truly secure environment can reconstruction projects take root and the rule of law be consolidated. That environment has not yet been fully achieved, but we are working toward it.

The drug trade in Afghanistan threatens the foundations of this young government. Poppy cultivation has been rising overall, despite an internationally backed counter-narcotics effort. The growing of poppies is centered in the south, where the Taliban and Al Qaeda are most active and the population is most vulnerable to their intimidation and influence.

There is a nexus between the drug-traffickers and the Taliban. The insurgents rely on the Afghan drug trade for a part of their operating funds, and some laborers double as insurgents and farm workers harvesting poppy.

To attack this corrosive problem, a counter-narcotics strategy is being implemented that combines five pillars: alternative development, interdiction, eradication, public information, and reform of the justice sector. I believe the coming year will show results.

The final point I will turn to – and it is an extremely important one – is the willingness of the NATO allies to meet their commitments.

Since ISAF assumed responsibility for all of Afghanistan in October 2006, the number of non-U.S. troops has increased by about 3,500. That said, much more can and should be done. NATO still has shortfalls in meeting minimum requirements in troops, equipment, and other resources. I leave for Scotland tomorrow for a meeting of Defense Ministers of the countries involved in Regional Command South and I know this will be on the agenda.

The Afghanistan mission has exposed constraints associated with interoperability, organization,

critical equipment shortfalls, and national caveats. I believe the problem arises in large part due to the way various allies view the very nature of the Alliance in the 21st century – about facing threats that are quite different from those of the Cold War. NATO must adjust to the challenges associated with conducting operations in distant locations. And NATO needs to ensure that it has the resources and the organizational structure to counter terrorist networks and triumph over insurgencies that threaten to cause instability and failed states.

There also needs to be more effective coordination of assistance to the government of Afghanistan. Even with the devotion of U.S. resources that I've mentioned, there has not been sufficient follow-on reconstruction, development, or security by other allies, and this has put at risk areas that have been cleared of insurgents by the hard work and sacrifice of the men and women of ISAF. What is needed is a strong civilian representative to coordinate all nations and key international organizations on the ground. We and others have worked with the Karzai government to describe this need and identify a suitable candidate. I am hopeful this exhaustive search will be completed in the weeks to come.

Our progress in Afghanistan is real but fragile. That is what I tell my counterparts from allied countries at every opportunity, as I did in October at the NATO ministerial in the Netherlands and the Conference of European Armies in Germany. In Afghanistan last week, I heard the latest from American commanders on this subject.

I know, as do you, the members of this committee, that if the world's greatest democracies cannot summon the will to accomplish a mission that all agree is morally just and essential for our collective security, then the citizens of these democracies will begin to question the mission's worth – and perhaps even the worth of the Alliance itself. We must not allow this to happen.

I have been urging our allies to commit more troops and resources to the fight and to remove restrictions on the troops they already deploy. I know that several members of Congress have been doing the same thing. We in the administration will continue to work with NATO to fix these shortfalls. I would also like to stress the importance of American unity on this matter. If other governments are pressured by this body and the Senate, it may help push them to do the difficult work of persuading their own citizens that it is time to step up to this challenge.

Let me close on a positive and instructive note by telling you about a region I visited last week – a region that demonstrates why I am hopeful about the mission in Afghanistan. For years, and even decades, the Khowst region has been a hotbed of lawlessness and insurgent activity. Last year, it remained one of the most volatile areas in Afghanistan.

Things are very different today. Under the strong leadership of the governor, and with Afghans in the lead, there have been remarkable gains as security forces, local organizations, and the U.S.-led Provincial Reconstruction Team – with representatives from the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Agriculture – have worked in tandem to promote civic and economic development. Where last year there was one suicide bombing per week, now there is on average one per month.

As the governor said to me, through our combined efforts, “more has been accomplished in the past eight months than in the prior five years.”

Khowst is a model of a concerted counterinsurgency campaign – of the synergy that comes from the integration of hard and soft power. And it is an example of potential gains in other areas long considered ungovernable – gains made possible by honest and effective local leadership coupled with the skills and resources of the United States and our international partners.

A moderate, stable Afghanistan is crucial to the strategic security of the United States and its allies – and it is possible. The elected leaders of the countries that make up our alliance have said as much. Afghans have the will to keep their nation in the democratic fold, and we need to match their

determination with the necessary resolve and resources to get the job done.

Thank you.