



Afghanistan Update

16 March
2010

A twice-weekly, one-page situation report from the [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) on the latest developments affecting U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

In the News:

- Reports that the Afghan government was holding secret "peace talks" with the Taliban's No. 2, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, when he was captured in Pakistan, and that President Karzai "was very angry" when he heard of the arrest, have consequently been denied by Afghan officials.
- The top NATO military spokesman in Afghanistan says a major restructuring is under way to bring virtually all American forces in the country under NATO command. Vice Adm. Greg Smith said that Gen. Stanley McChrystal wants to bring "unity of command" to the international military effort.
- President Karzai's spokesman has confirmed the Afghan government has enacted into law a blanket pardon for war crimes and human rights abuse carried out before 2001, with the bill having been passed by a two-thirds majority of the Afghan parliament.
- United Nations agencies and the Afghan health ministry are conducting a three-day campaign aimed at vaccinating an estimated 7.7 million children under the age of five against polio. Meanwhile, the World Health Organization is boosting its stock of medical supplies in Kandahar, in anticipation of a deteriorating security situation and possible population displacement.

In Quotes:

"The Taliban have totally changed... They've totally put behind them their international agenda [of spreading Islamist revolution] and now are just focused on Afghanistan... There's a new generation. They are familiar with computers. They communicate with text messages. They're in favor of education. They are no longer all illiterates." **Vahid Mojdeh**, former Taliban foreign ministry official. ([McClatchy](#))

In Quotes:

"Instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan poses the most urgent problem set in the CENTCOM Area Of Responsibility and requires complementary and integrated civil-military, whole of government approaches." **Gen. Petraeus** in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 16 March 2010

Testimony Summary:

Senate Armed Services Committee

General David H. Petraeus gave testimony Tuesday on U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2011 and the Future Years Defense Program.

Gen. Petraeus said that the fighting in Afghanistan will "likely get harder before it gets easier" and predicts 2010 will be a difficult year. He said he expects U.S. forces will be able to reverse the momentum gained by Taliban militants in Afghanistan, but also said he envisions "tough fighting and periodic setbacks."

Listing CENTCOM's priorities for 2010, Gen. Petraeus told the Committee that the top task was "reversing the momentum of the insurgency in Afghanistan and training Afghan security forces to regain the initiative against militants and to increase public confidence in the government"

Key Issue: The Role of Private Contractors

- The use and role of private contractors in security operations remains under the spot light, with the latest report that a U.S. Defense Department official is under investigation for using private contractors to track and kill suspected militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan ([NYT](#)).
- On Monday, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) blocked US Army plans to transfer a \$15 billion Afghan National Police (ANP) training contract to become part of an existing Defense contract without "full and open competition". The case is indicative of the delays associated with federal contracts servicing operations that are time-sensitive and deemed critical to the success of the US effort in Afghanistan.
- The struggle over the training contract also points to a dilemma of the need to dramatically increase the capacity of the ANP, whose basic training schedule has been cut to just six weeks, versus the necessity of outsourcing those training services that US and coalition forces are unable to provide themselves.
- Last month, Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) introduced the Stop Outsourcing Security Act, a bill that would heavily reduce the use of private contractors in war zones, and would require Congressional oversight for contracts worth more than \$5 million.

Key Issue: Taliban Retaliation - Bombing Campaign

- Taliban militants have stepped up their use of coordinated suicide attacks in their campaign against the Afghan government and NATO forces protecting it.
- The Taliban claimed responsibility for multiple suicide bombings on Saturday that killed 35 people and wounded 57 in the southern city of Kandahar. A spokesman said the attacks were a "warning" response to NATO's plan to launch a major anti-Taliban offensive in Kandahar province later this year.
- Similar bomb blasts also blamed on the Taliban have killed three civilians in Ghazni Province, in the south of the country.
- Afghan officials on Monday said that government forces killed five would-be suicide bombers on Monday before the militants could reach their targets in a bazaar in Paktika province in eastern Afghanistan, thwarting an apparent repeat of the Kandahar-style attack.
- A similar wave of suicide bombings in Pakistan's Swat district and city of Lahore has also taken place in recent days.

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