



Afghanistan Update

23 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:

- U.S. Marines in Helmand have said they are taking cautious aim at the drug trade, with a **new program designed to pay poppy farmers to destroy their own crops**. The goal of a new U.S. Marine program is to tackle the drugs trade that fuels the insurgency — without alienating farmers whose livelihoods depend on a poppy crop they planted last year. ([Reuters](#))
- Hundreds of tribesmen from Pakistan's semiautonomous regions near the Afghan border ended a tribal council meeting Saturday with a **declaration calling for the Pakistani army to crush the Taliban** by escalating its attack against the network of Islamist militants across the tribal regions. ([AP](#))
- Taliban fighters have told a UK newspaper that they received a **three month training course at a camp in the south-east of Iran** on how to ambush and bomb US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Senior officials in the West have previously dismissed Iranian support for the Taliban in Afghanistan as mostly limited and insignificant. ([The Times](#))
- Afghan celebrations of the **traditional Persian New Year (Nowruz)** that marks the Spring Equinox passed without major incident over the weekend. Despite fears of Taliban attacks on population centers, an estimated 500,000 people traveled to the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif, the main destination for Nowruz festivities. The Taliban outlawed this celebration during their rule of Afghanistan. ([AFP](#))

In Quotes:

"We do support the Afghan government's interest in reaching out to members of these insurgent groups... These are primarily issues, you know, between Afghanistan and... insurgent groups, as part of the reintegration and reconciliation process." **P.J. Crowley**, State Department spokesman.

In Quotes:

"I don't think a peace deal [with Hizb-i-Islami] would make a difference either on the insurgency or on peace in different areas of Afghanistan... It's the Taliban who are the main drivers of insurgency in Afghanistan and they have some specific preconditions, Hizb-e-Islami." **Waliullah Rahmani**, Head of the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies.

Senate Subcommittee on Contracting Oversight:

Contracts for Afghan National Police Training

Wednesday, March 24, 2010
02:30 PM.

The hearing will examine Defense Department and State Department contracts for police training in Afghanistan. The hearing will review the recently released joint audit of this contract by the Defense Department and State Department Inspectors General and explore concerns related to management and oversight of the contract.

Who's Who:

Vygaudas Usackas, former Lithuanian Foreign Minister, has been named European Union Special Representative in Kabul. His main task will be to lead the EU Action Plan that continues to provide long-term assistance to Afghanistan in institution building and civilian capacity programs, including at sub-national level.

Key Issue: Talking to Insurgents

- President Karzai has met a senior delegation from the insurgent group Hezb-i-Islami in Kabul. His spokesman confirmed the direct talks with one of the three main groups fighting his government and Western troops.
- Hizb-i-Islami is run by Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who is on US and United Nations blacklists as an international terrorist. A spokesman for the group said it had brought a 15-point peace plan to the talks that includes a call for foreign troops to withdraw from Afghanistan within six months, starting in July.
- Hezb-i-Islami has shared some of the aims of the Taliban, but has led a separate insurgency. In recent months, Taliban fighters have pushed into Hezb-i-Islami strongholds. Afghan officials said scores of Hezb-i-Islami fighters joined the government after clashes with the Taliban two weeks ago.
- The US State Department cautiously welcomed the talks though it stressed the U.S. position that any groups involved in talks must renounce violence and support for the insurgency, live in accordance with the Afghan constitution, and sever any ties with Al Qaeda or other extremist organizations.
- The Taliban have stated that they are not involved in the talks and had not altered their position: that no talks could be held until all foreign troops withdraw.

Key Issue: Pakistan Talks in Washington

- Pakistani government and military officials are in town for a week-long strategic dialogue. Pakistan Army chief Gen Ashfaq Kayani has held talks with Defense Secretary Gates and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen, and with Gen Petraeus at CENTCOM in Tampa.
- US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is to meet Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi on Wednesday.
- Talks are expected to focus on security cooperation between the two countries. Analysts believe that Pakistan will seek guarantees of US economic and military support in exchange for Pakistan's ongoing clamp down against the Taliban.

Key Issue: Afghan Electoral Oversight

- President Hamid Karzai has told the United Nations he will overhaul Afghanistan's election commission next month, ahead of parliamentary elections in September.
- The international community is keen to avoid a repeat of the political crisis triggered by the presidential vote in 2009. Staffan de Mistura, the UN's new top official in the country, said that election preparations would start in May.
- The UN previously appointed three of the five-member complaints body that has the power to overrule election verdicts. In a compromise, de Mistura will now name two of the five members.

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