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Congress Reviews U.S. Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Senior U.S. officials assured members of Congress that effective measures are being taken to ensure that U.S. civilian assistance to the Afghanistan government is being spent as intended.

At a U.S. House subcommittee oversight hearing July 28, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who is the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told representatives that since the Obama administration began 18 months ago, efforts have been made to address issues of corruption and the spending of U.S. assistance in Afghanistan.

“We knew that if corruption isn’t dealt with, other things won’t succeed,” Holbrooke testified. “We had stated that it was a malignancy that could destroy everything else we were doing.”

House Appropriation Subcommittee Chairwoman Nita Lowey has recommended that the full committee reduce spending in appropriation measures because of concern about corruption in Afghanistan and has held up consideration of a budget request for the next fiscal year, which begins October 1.

“Funding appropriated by this subcommittee for diplomacy, development and humanitarian programs plays a vital role in supporting our national security,” Lowey said. “Despite efforts by our government and reformers within the government of Afghanistan, corruption is endemic ... and undermines our mission in the country.”

Lowey said that it must be clear that U.S. taxpayer-funded investments in Afghanistan are producing tangible results based on measurable outcomes.

President Obama has sought \$3.4 billion for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for civilian economic and health programs in Afghanistan in fiscal year 2011.

“This is needed to complement the military surge and to ensure that our civilian experts have the resources available to accelerate our programs, especially in areas where our troops have deployed,” USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah said in prepared testimony. Supplemental funds during fiscal year 2010 will enable USAID to begin to increase current activities and initiate new ones, especially in the agriculture sector in southern Afghanistan, he added.

Shah said that over the past 18 months USAID has worked to achieve greater strategic clarity for every program begun that the United States supports. U.S. civilian assistance in Afghanistan is focused on the immediate need for stabilization and the longer-term expansion of economic development in sectors such as energy, agriculture, water management and health care, including programs for mother and child care, Shah added.

USAID has about 420 personnel working in Afghanistan on assistance projects, and about 55 percent of the American staff is located outside the capital city, Kabul, he said. The staff works with Afghans on provincial reconstruction teams, on district support teams and in regional platforms. The staff has expertise in financial management, auditing, democracy, governance and the rule of law.

“We’ve put in place a number of efforts to improve accountability, including taking on a more aggressive approach to doing monitoring, evaluation and oversight,” Shah testified. He added that this is not specific to Afghanistan, but applies throughout the world where USAID has programs.

“No system is foolproof, but these systems are fairly robust in their ability to allow us to track the flow of funds,” Shah said.

Shah told the representatives in his prepared testimony that, as of July, the USAID Afghanistan Office of Financial Management has identified three Afghan ministries — public health, finance, and communication and information technology — for direct receipt of funds for specific purposes. It has also designated the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and some other entities for direct receipt of funds for specific programs, he said. USAID also has the right to conduct audits over the use of USAID funds, he added.

Housing Is Top Priority for Haiti

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — In 35 seconds on January 12, much of Haiti’s center of government, commerce and culture was destroyed or paralyzed by a magnitude 7 earthquake and its aftermath.

What followed was a massive international emergency relief effort. Now, with recovery under way, comes the beginning of reconstruction that is expected to take many years to complete, says Rajiv Shah, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Within 24 hours of the earthquake, the United States and the international community launched a massive relief effort to save lives and sustain the people of Haiti until conditions could be stabilized, Shah said at a July 29 congressional hearing. USAID has primary responsibility for U.S. recovery and reconstruction efforts in the Caribbean nation.

“One of our main priorities is housing for Haitians who remain displaced,” Shah said in prepared testimony. The House Foreign Affairs Committee’s Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere is evaluating the U.S. disaster response and whether efforts are moving quickly enough for the hemisphere’s poorest nation. It has been more than six months since the devastating earthquake struck the Port-au-Prince area, displacing more than 2 million Haitians and killing approximately 230,000.

Shah said Haitian President René Préval has made it the highest priority to move displaced Haitians living in relief camps into more permanent shelters where they can live for three to five years before moving into long-term, sustainable housing.

“Rebuilding efforts must be led by Haitians, build Haitian capacity, and stimulate Haiti’s economy if they are to be sustainable,” Shah said in prepared remarks.

“For this reason, we are identifying and helping to train Haitian masons and Haitian construction workers in improved techniques, including the use of rebar [reinforced steel bars] and better cement mixing, so that structures are better able to withstand future shocks,” Shah added. And electricians and other construction workers are working in reconstruction efforts already begun, he said.

Of the more than 2 million people displaced by the earthquake and its aftershocks, approximately 1.5 million still remain in relief camps. By early July, about 5,000 transitional shelters had been built, Subcommittee Chairman Eliot Engel, a Democrat from New York, said in opening remarks. The international community has pledged to build 125,000 transitional shelters for about 600,000 people by July 2011, Engel said, which leaves about a million people without more permanent housing.

Shah said that as of July 14, U.S. and Haitian engineers had assessed more than 180,000 structures in the devastated areas and had found that 47 percent were habitable and another 27 percent required only modest repairs to make them structurally sound.

“USAID is working with the government of Haiti and partners to develop assistance packages that will help people return to safe homes and provide materials or financing to repair others,” Shah testified. Efforts began

months ago to prepare Haitians and the devastated areas for the coming hurricane season, “particularly those displaced and living in temporary settlements,” Shah added.

Engineering projects were begun to lessen the impact of the rainy and hurricane seasons, especially on those displaced.

EARLY SUCCESS

Shah said that while long-term efforts are being launched, there have been some early successes, beginning with Haiti’s medical capacity, which is greater now than before the earthquake.

“USAID and our partners have helped the government of Haiti to vaccinate 1 million people against highly communicable diseases, and a second round of vaccinations is currently under way,” Shah said. “No significant, widespread outbreak of infectious disease has occurred, despite the severity of the earthquake, the displacement of people and the initial disruptions within Haiti’s health system.”

USAID has supported the construction of a piped-water network in Port-au-Prince that can provide approximately 50 percent more water today than before the earthquake, he said.

Finally, USAID, working with partners, has coordinated and funded the removal of debris and sludge from critical canals to enable better water flow and prevent flooding in the city. Some of those canals had not been cleared in 15 years, he added.

Nations Advance on Climate Finance Outlined in Copenhagen Accord

U.S. official: \$100 billion will jump-start world on path to clean economy

By Cheryl Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — In the months since the international community negotiated the Copenhagen Accord at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Denmark in December, 136 countries have associated themselves with the brief document that outlines key elements of a long-term global climate change solution.

Critical among these elements is finance, and the accord includes provisions for new financial help for developing countries that cannot afford to reduce their rising greenhouse gas emissions or cope with the effects of a warming planet.

The accord includes short-term and long-term financial plans.

Developed nations committed to provide \$30 billion in short-term, fast-start financing until 2012 to support developing countries' mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Over the longer term, by 2020, they committed to making sure developing countries have access to \$100 billion a year in public and private funds.

"We know that a great many developing countries need assistance to change their development trajectories and to adapt to the unavoidable impacts of climate change," Jonathan Pershing, the State Department's deputy special envoy for climate change, said July 27 in testimony before the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment.

"The global community will need to rapidly and substantially ramp up financing, technical and technological assistance," he added. "Otherwise the world will not be able to minimize global emissions or adapt to the ever-increasing damages associated with climate change."

According to scientists, climate change will lead to population displacement from sea level rise; declines in global food supply, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia; massive losses in species diversity; and major shortages of water all over the world.

SIGNIFICANT STRIDES

Developed countries are working out the details of their financial commitments and, according to Pershing, have made "significant strides" in increasing their fast-start contributions. So that funds can be delivered quickly, they come from existing programs and institutions like the Climate Investment Funds, the Global Environment Facility and established bilateral programs.

In the United States, at the urging of President Obama, Pershing said, Congress appropriated \$1.3 billion for climate finance in 2010. Obama then asked for more than \$1.9 billion for fiscal year 2011 for U.S. fast-start activities. Congress has not yet approved the 2011 budget.

Now in preparation for fiscal year 2012 (October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2012), as part of the U.S. fast-start contribution, the administration has pledged to provide \$1 billion for the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program.

"It is vitally important for our overall climate diplomacy goals – and for the credibility of the Copenhagen Accord

– that the U.S. make a strong contribution to fast-start finance," Pershing told the House subcommittee.

"The president's 2011 request was designed to put us on track to meet our fair share of the fast-start commitment," he said, "and we strongly urge the members of this subcommittee to support this request in full."

In 2010, Pershing said, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development are delivering \$30 million for the Least Developed Countries Fund, \$20 million for the Special Climate Change Fund and \$10 million for the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. bilateral adaptation funding in 2010–2011 is focused on small-island developing states, least-developed countries and Africa.

MOVING TOWARD 2020

The international community has also begun tackling the issue of long-term public financing for climate change efforts, Pershing said.

In February, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon created a 21-member High-Level Advisory Group on Climate Change Financing to analyze financial resources that could help meet the \$100 billion goal. The group has met twice in London in March and in New York in July with a third meeting to be held in Ethiopia.

The group will present its report at the end of October, in time for the 16th conference of the parties (COP-16) of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, which begins November 29 in Cancun, Mexico.

"According to a recent analysis by the International Energy Agency, the incremental cost to keep emissions at a level that would prevent global temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees Celsius is \$10 trillion between now and the year 2030," Pershing said, with the vast majority coming from countries' own public and private finances.

"The commitment to mobilize \$100 billion must therefore be seen for what it is," he said, "a catalytic effort to help jump-start the world on the pathway to a cleaner economy, but quite a small share of the total effort."

U.S. Icebreaker Completes Arctic Science Mission

NASA research project studies impact of climate change

By Domenick DiPasquale

Staff Writer

Washington – The U.S. Coast Guard cutter Healy docked in Seward, Alaska, July 21 after a five-week scientific expedition sponsored by the U.S. National Aeronautics

and Space Administration (NASA) amassed a wealth of data about the effects of climate change on Arctic seas and the polar ice cap.

The expedition was part of NASA's \$10 million, multiyear project formally known as Impacts of Climate Change on the Eco-systems and Chemistry of the Arctic Pacific Environment, or ICESCAPE for short. ICESCAPE is an interdisciplinary project that combines field-based observations of Arctic Ocean biology and biogeochemistry, such as those conducted aboard the Healy, with satellite sensing and numerical modeling to produce a better understanding of the ecosystem of the Arctic Ocean.

ICESCAPE's central mission is to determine the impact of climate change, caused by both human and natural factors, on the ecology and biogeochemistry of the Arctic Ocean.

Such research has gained increased importance with the retreat of the summer ice cap and the resulting decline of Arctic sea ice and an earlier, longer lasting melting season. These changes, already evident in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas that lie north of the Bering Strait, have consequences for the entire ecosystem of the Arctic Ocean.

"The Arctic Ocean has undergone some pretty big changes in recent decades," said Kevin Arrigo of Stanford University in an interview with America.gov. He was the chief scientist aboard Healy during its mission. "Biological productivity has ratcheted up, and the timing of many key events is shifting." That is significant, he said, because many animals key their migration to be in the Arctic when it is at its biologically most productive.

After departing from the Aleutian Islands port of Dutch Harbor June 15, the Healy crossed through the Bering Strait, traveled across the southern Chukchi Sea, and then headed into the Beaufort Sea along the ocean shelf of northern Alaska on an expedition that totaled 5,430 nautical miles, or slightly more than 10,000 kilometers.

During the Healy's five-week deployment, 50 scientists in disciplines as varied as oceanography, microbiology, chemistry and optical physics took samples both within and beneath the thick sea ice, captured more than 1.5 million digital images of phytoplankton cells living in the ocean, and analyzed water samples to measure temperature as well as biological and optical properties.

"I can't imagine things going better than they did for us during ICESCAPE," Arrigo said. "We managed to make physical, chemical and biological measurements at 140 stations, about twice the number we expected to be able to complete." The sampling stations covered an expanse from the coast of Alaska westward to the U.S.-Russian

border, and from the Bering Strait north to Barrow, Alaska.

In the Chukchi Sea, the expedition studied how the water's properties changed at various distances and depths – "the oceanographic equivalent of an MRI [magnetic resonance image]," Arrigo said. While taking such measurements, scientists conducted experiments to measure the effect of high light levels on seawater chemistry and to investigate how phytoplankton responds to changes in nutrients and light levels.

ICESCAPE researchers came from scientific institutions including NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Stanford University.

To foster international scientific cooperation, the ICESCAPE expedition included three young scientists from Canada's Malina Program, which is examining how changes in ice cover, permafrost and ultraviolet radiation are affecting biodiversity and biogeochemical fluxes in the Arctic Ocean.

A floating scientific research center as well as an icebreaker, the Healy was designed as an Arctic research vessel capable of extended polar operations. It is equipped with an array of built-in laboratories and support rooms for onboard research.

The Healy's research mission for 2010 is not yet over, because the icebreaker will embark on a joint mission with the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis S. St-Laurent to map the floor of the Arctic Ocean. This will be the third and final year of such collaboration to help create a more complete picture of the sea floor's topography.

In autumn 2011, the Healy will serve as the scientific platform for ICESCAPE's return to the Arctic. Because sea ice conditions vary greatly through the course of the year, the 2011 mission will permit researchers to measure what seasonal differences exist compared to this year's data.

Initial findings from the 2010 ICESCAPE expedition have led to some discoveries, such as how the slow, circuitous pathway of the Alaskan coastal current extends phytoplankton blooms by providing an early summer infusion of new nutrients that fuels additional growth.

"There undoubtedly will be many other discoveries to make, and many papers to write," Arrigo said. "By any measure, ICESCAPE 2010 was an unqualified success."

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