

American

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Vice President Biden Says Taliban Momentum Has Been Arrested

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States, its allies and Afghan security forces are breaking the momentum of the Taliban insurgents working to regain control over portions of Afghanistan, Vice President Biden says.

At a January 11 joint press conference in Kabul with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Biden said, "It's fair to say we have largely arrested the Taliban momentum here in some very important areas, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar." But he added that these gains since a troop surge was initiated by President Obama last year are "fragile and reversible."

"Sustaining them is going to require the Afghans to assume the responsibility for security and governance," Biden said. "And it's going to require more pressure on the Taliban."

Biden, who arrived in Afghanistan January 10, and Karzai held a working lunch in the presidential palace compound, spoke in a one-to-one meeting, and met with their supporting delegations through a large part of the day January 11. Karzai said the talks centered on the U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership, security issues in Afghanistan and the region, and the complexities of the security transition process.

"We had discussions, and I'm pleased of the conclusions and of the results of our meetings," Karzai told reporters.

Biden said that during 2011 the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force will begin to transfer responsibility for security in some provinces to the Afghan security forces, while the United States begins a "condition-based reduction" of forces starting in July. This is part of the U.S. and Afghan objective of having Afghan security in the lead throughout all of Afghanistan by 2014, he said.

It is not the intention of the United States to govern or to nation-build in Afghanistan, Biden told reporters. "As President Karzai often points out, this is the responsibility of the Afghan people, and they are fully capable of it."

The United States stands ready to help in the effort and will continue to help after 2014, he said. The United States will not leave Afghanistan if the government and the Afghan people want U.S. personnel to remain.

"We plan on continuing to work with you, and it's in the mutual self-interest of both our nations," Biden said.

To maintain the support of the Afghan people and the U.S. public, Biden said, essential elements include improving the provision of basic services, promoting transparency and accountability in government, strengthening governmental agencies, and advancing efforts of "reconciliation with the Taliban" who are willing to reject al-Qaida, renounce violence and embrace the Afghan Constitution.

Biden conceded that none of this will be easy, but working together and with allies will provide a viable path toward success.

Secretary Clinton Says U.S. Seeks to Broaden Relationship with Yemen

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says that the Obama administration is committed to providing Yemen with economic, social and political assistance as well as cooperation against violent extremists.

Clinton spoke to civil society leaders and met with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Sana'a January 11, where she said the United States is "focused not just on short-term threats but on long-term challenges" in Yemen and seeks "a broad relationship" with both Yemen's leadership and the Yemeni people.

The Obama administration supports "an inclusive political process that will in turn support a unified, prosperous, stable, democratic Yemen," she said in remarks with Saleh.

In remarks to reporters before her arrival, the secretary said it is "not enough" for the United States and Yemen to have military-to-military relations.

"We need to try to broaden the dialogue. We need to have this dialogue with the government," she said.

Yemen, Clinton said, recognizes the threat posed to it by the terror group al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and "has become increasingly committed to a broad-based counterterrorism strategy." Terrorist groups operating from Yemen constitute an urgent concern for that country and for the United States, she said.

"At the same time, we are committed to a balanced approach towards Yemen, which includes social, economic, and political assistance," she said.

Daniel Benjamin, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, reported in September 2010 that U.S.

assistance to Yemen during the 2010 fiscal year had risen to \$67.5 million and that President Obama has requested around \$106.6 million in "baseline assistance" for FY 2011. Those figures do not include counterterrorism or humanitarian assistance, which amounted to \$150.5 million and \$42.5 million, respectively, during the 2010 fiscal year.

Benjamin said the humanitarian assistance is being directed toward providing "food, water and sanitation, shelter, and health care to over 324,000 individuals displaced by the conflict in northern Yemen, as well as refugees in southern Yemen."

Clinton said the United States has "rebalanced our aid package so it is not so disproportionately consisting of the counterterrorism funding, but also includes these other priorities."

But she also told civil society activists that terrorist groups in Yemen such as AQAP, whose membership includes American and other non-Yemeni citizens, are "an urgent concern for both of us."

"They have sought to attack our country. ... So stopping these threats would be a priority for any nation, and it is for the United States," she said.

AQAP has claimed responsibility for sending two parcel bombs to U.S. synagogues in October 2010, as well as attempting to bomb a Detroit-bound plane in December 2009.

Secretary Gates Thanks Chinese for Easing Korean Peninsula Tensions

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who is in China to strengthen military-to-military relations between the two nations, says the Chinese leadership has played a vital role in the last several months to dampen tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and the United States is appreciative.

"What I think we would like to see are some concrete actions by North Korea that show that they're serious about moving to a negotiation and an engagement track," Gates said at a January 11 press conference in Beijing.

Gates is visiting China, Japan and South Korea to broaden U.S. and Chinese military-to-military relations and address some of the significant security challenges in Northeast Asia. Recent provocations by the North Korean regime have done little, he said, to convince members of the Six-Party Talks that the North intends to end its

nuclear weapons ambitions.

The Six-Party Talks — which involve China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the United States — have been held for nearly eight years, though not continuously, in an attempt to find a peaceful means of convincing the North Korean regime to forgo development of nuclear weapons and the long-range missiles to deliver them. The participants have offered a number of political, diplomatic and economic incentives, but North Korea has continued to develop a weapons program in the face of substantive sanctions.

"With the North Koreans' continuing development of nuclear weapons and their development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, North Korea is becoming a direct threat to the United States, and we have to take that into account," Gates told reporters.

The combination of the two development programs — weapons and missiles — is worsening the situation and strengthening the threat, he added.

"We consider this a situation of real concern, and we think there is some urgency to proceeding down the track of negotiations and engagement, but we don't want to see the situation that we've seen so many times before, which is the North Koreans engage in a provocation and then everybody scrambles diplomatically to try and put [relations] back together again," Gates said.

In March 2010, North Korea fired on a South Korean naval vessel, killing 46 sailors, and in November 2010 fired on a disputed island between the two nations that killed two soldiers and two civilians.

Gates told reporters that talk by the North Korean regime by itself is not enough to restart full negotiations. First, steps toward convincing the other members of the Six-Party Talks of its desire to negotiate could include a moratorium on nuclear testing and missile testing.

Gates is in Beijing until January 12, and then travels to Tokyo to meet with senior Japanese officials January 13–14. Gates will make a brief stop in Seoul for talks with South Korean leaders January 14 before returning to Washington.

President Obama welcomes China's president, Hu Jintao, to Washington for an official state visit January 19. Gates' trip to Beijing is part of a week of activities that includes speeches by Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner in Washington on U.S.-China economic relations on January 12, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke on January 13 on U.S.-China business relations and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on January 14 on the broader scope of U.S.-China relations.

United States Encouraged by Progress of Sudan Referendum

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – Senior State Department officials say they are pleased with the progress of the referendum on southern Sudan's self-determination and praised leaders from both northern and southern Sudan for their cooperation in the process and for the high level of turnout thus far.

Speaking in Washington January 11, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson said the January 9–15 voting period marks the last major phase of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended two decades of civil war in which an estimated 2 million people died.

"We could now be at the very cusp of seeing the end of one of Africa's longest wars and longest tragedies," Carson said.

The assistant secretary said thus far there have been some disturbances in the Abyei region, but officials in both northern and southern Sudan "should be commended for their collaboration and handling of this monumental, challenging and historical task."

Carson said Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir's visit to the southern city of Juba ahead of the vote was "an act of enormous political courage." Carson welcomed Bashir's remarks that he would recognize the outcome of the referendum and would work with southern Sudan as "a brotherly state" if its people chose to separate from the north.

The assistant secretary attributed the relative absence of violence to the fact that leaders on both sides have separately concluded that "it is in their interests to see that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the referendum in the south go smoothly."

Many in the ruling National Congress Party in Khartoum have come to recognize that the referendum on southern self-determination "was inevitable, essential, and would in fact open a new door for them, as well as for the people of the south," Carson said.

"Critical work" remains to be done to ensure the final implementation of the CPA, including resolving the status of Abyei, citizenship, agreeing on possible boundaries and sharing oil revenues, Carson said. "But the Sudanese government and people of the south have defied all of their skeptics in coming this far," he said.

Speaking with Carson, Ambassador Princeton Lyman,

who heads the State Department's Sudan Negotiating Support Unit, said polling places for southerners living in northern Sudan had been well-organized and voters had not encountered security problems or faced pressure on how to vote. In the south, he said, voting has "gone very well," and the mood in both regions "has been very positive."

Lyman said the United States has told the government in Khartoum that on completion of the referendum and the acceptance of its results, the Obama administration will begin the process of examining Sudan's removal from its list of terrorism sponsors.

The potential removal "involves certain reviews and certain consultations with Congress," he said.

Finalizing the removal and other steps toward normalized relations with the United States "would all come, we expect, around July, as the other elements of the CPA are fully achieved," such as an agreement on Abyei and other issues, Lyman said.

Carson said Sudan has enough time between now and July to comply with the criteria under the U.S. law that would remove the terrorism designation because the law stipulates that a government cannot have provided support to a terrorist group within the previous six months.

The assistant secretary said the United States remains committed to doing as much as it can to ensure full implementation of the CPA, and that the results of the process will lead to "an outcome in which the Sudanese people can prosper peacefully under a single [state] or under two separate states."

Haiti on Track to Rebuild One Year After Earthquake

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington – U.S. officials and charity leaders say progress to rebuild Haiti is on track one year after a magnitude 7.0 earthquake devastated the country, with international efforts contributing significantly to sustainable development.

"Getting Haiti headed in the right direction is not going to be fast or easy. Haiti presents unique challenges, but I think we have made a good start," Thomas Adams, the U.S. State Department's coordinator for Haiti, said in a conference call with reporters January 10.

January 12 marks the first anniversary of what Adams called "the most devastating earthquake that has ever hit an urban center." The disaster killed 230,000 people,

injured 300,000 and destroyed buildings and infrastructure across the capital city, Port-au-Prince.

Adams commended the international response, which he said produced "one of the best ... rescue operations that's ever been done."

Sam Worthington heads InterAction, which says it is the largest alliance of U.S.-based international charities. Worthington said disaster response efforts must not only meet the short-term needs of the Haitian people, but also should chart a course for the country's long-term stability.

"We have to recognize that building Haiti is in many ways building Haiti for the first time. It is not rebuilding Haiti. It is enabling a country, a people, to build a society — the society they want. And that will take a lot of time ... because we started from a very poor country with little infrastructure," Worthington said.

Award-winning American actor Sean Penn, founder of J/P Haitian Relief Organization, agrees that creating sustainable change is necessary for Haiti to achieve economic and political stability.

"The people of Haiti deserve a Haiti that is better than it was before, and it will take time, funding and resources," Penn said January 10 at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

"We cannot let the sense of optimism and belief that Haiti can recover and transform into a self-sustaining nation fade out of impatience, frustration or complacency. We can do this right, and we owe the people of Haiti to do so," Penn said.

In addition to the difficulties the country faces in recovering from the earthquake, Haiti is battling an ongoing cholera outbreak. Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, spoke during the phone briefing about Haiti's public health status.

While "it can seem no progress has been made," Frieden said, despite "enormous obstacles, there has been real progress in preventing, tracking and responding to public health threats" through immunizations, improved water and sanitation standards and through education. Most important, he said, has been "strengthening Haiti's ability" to lead these efforts.

Since the quake, the U.S. government has provided more than \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance to Haiti, helping to supply food for 3.5 million people, clearing more than 1.2 million cubic meters of rubble and treating more than 31,000 patients.

The earthquake destroyed 28 of the Haitian government's 29 buildings in Port-au-Prince. Partnering with Haiti's leaders, the U.S. government has worked to provide for Haiti's short-term needs as well as to lay the foundation for the country's long-term development.

Worthington said continuing this cooperation will be the key to creating lasting progress for Haiti.

"Hundreds of thousands of Haitians are in many ways trying to improve their lives, and ... we need to see this response as a partnership with them. It's slow; it's difficult; some individuals do better than others. But there's a clear momentum, even if it is a very slow momentum."

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