

Monday December 28, 2009

Kabul Afghanistan

Our bipartisan delegation of Congressmen and staff left Washington, D.C., the day after Christmas to spend the better part of a week at the center of the war on terrorism: Afghanistan. We arrived in Kabul late morning December 27, 2009.

This is my third trip to Operation Enduring Freedom since the outset of the war and, while progress has been made in military and civil terms, after 30 years of war, Afghanistan remains a forbidding place with jagged mountains and a dusty landscape filled with some of the poorest but most resilient people in the world.

After a series of briefings on the status of operations, we made our way to the Afghan Parliament and a meeting with the Speaker of the Lower House, Mohammad Yunos Qanooni. Speaker Qanooni is an affable politician and has earned praise for moving this reconstituted parliament forward over the past five years.

Speaker Qanooni expressed concern about the recent announcement by President Obama of a July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawal of U.S. forces. He informed us that the Taliban were "using this announcement to rally their troops" and that the deadline was being used as evidence of growing success by the enemy. Different from what we hear Stateside, that the deadline was motivating Afghans to take action, I sensed that talk of an arbitrary deadline for beginning withdrawal was undermining the confidence of our allies within the Afghan government. It never makes sense to tell the enemy on a battlefield when you will stop fighting and it also never makes sense to tell your ally the same.

Entering the gallery of the Afghan Parliament, we were greeted with warm applause from the politically diverse legislators. Afghanistan has had a parliament, on and off, since the late 19th century and it was genuinely inspiring to witness the vigorous floor debate over cabinet appointments that was taking place. It felt like we were back on Capitol Hill, with a slightly different dress code.

From Parliament, we made our way through the crowded streets of Kabul to the highly fortified presidential palace, home to President Hamid Karzai.

I first met President Karzai shortly after he took office and was, at the time, something of a celebrity in the West, owed to his impeccable English and his keen understanding of American culture. His family had suffered violence at the hands of the Taliban and he seemed the perfect man to lead Afghanistan to a free and modern future.

After expressing reservations about the July 2011 deadline for withdrawal (he said "of that, I don't know") and offering a strong endorsement of General McChrystal and our new strategy, we moved on to domestic issues.

While President Karzai began his administration with great promise, the controversy surrounding the recent presidential elections has tarnished that image with his people and the world and he clearly knows it. The U.N. actually disqualified one-third of all the ballots cast, alleging widespread voter fraud and President Karzai was reelected only after his opponent conceded before a second vote could be taken.

For his part, President Karzai was adamant about a recount of the votes, insisting that the "perception in the world of voter fraud is much worse than the reality."

We told him that rather than looking backwards, he could do much to bolster his government and his reputation by delaying the planned parliamentary elections currently set for this spring.

I told President Karzai: "with great respect, Mr. President, rather than re-living the controversies of the past, you can do more to restore public confidence in you and your government by delaying the parliamentary elections and pushing for comprehensive election reforms."

We'll see if our message got through.

After spending the day among Afghan leaders, we ended the day with our commanders and our soldiers.

General Stanley McChrystal is commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and has, ever since I met him years ago in Iraq, always impressed me as a soldier's soldier.

He detailed for us the multi-layer counterinsurgency strategy recently approved by the President of the United States and answered many direct and specific questions about our strategy and tactics.



*Congressman Pence and General McChrystal after briefings at ISAF Headquarters*

From the briefings we received throughout the day, I am convinced that the President has given our soldiers the resources, personnel and strategy to be successful...if they are given enough time to do it.

We ended the day in a fitting manner, dining with the men and women who are fighting this war. It was my special joy to be able to visit with nearly a dozen Indiana soldiers who were deployed in a force protection unit based at Camp Eggers.



*Congressman Pence Dining with Hoosier troops*





*Congressman Pence and Major Hendricks*



McChrystal pins a medal on the chest of a soldier in a camouflage uniform. The soldier is looking down at the medal. In the background, several flags are visible, including the United States flag, the NATO flag, and the Afghan flag. Another soldier in camouflage is standing to the left.