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UNTIL RELEASED BY THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF
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COMMANDER
US FORCES-AFGHANISTAN
BEFORE THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
ON
DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN
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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our operations in Afghanistan.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to all of you for the support you provide our men and women in uniform. That they are well-equipped, well-trained, and well-led is a great testament to the efforts of this Committee and to the work of this Congress. On behalf of those troops and their families, I thank you for that.

In the past eight months, I have walked the ground of Afghanistan with many of those troops. Along with my friend and partner, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and my NATO compatriot, Senior Civilian Representative Ambassador Sir Simon Gass, I have met with leaders of most of the 49 other nations serving alongside us. And all through this, I have been in close consultation with Afghan civilian and military leadership, most of whom have been enmeshed in their country's conflict for over three decades.

From all of this, I can tell you, unequivocally, three things: First, we remain on track to ensure that Afghanistan will no longer be a safe haven for Al Qaeda and will no longer be terrorized by the Taliban. Second, as a Coalition - the largest in recent history - we are well along in our progress to meet our 2010 Lisbon commitments, to Transition security lead to the Afghan National Security Forces by December 2014. Third, our troops know the difference they are making and the enemy feels it every day.

To be sure, the last couple months have been trying. In the wake of the revelations that American troops had mishandled religious texts, to include the Quran, protests - some of them violent - occurred in several, but only a few, regions across Afghanistan. Thirty-two Afghans lost their lives in those riots; even more were hurt. Just since the first of January, the Coalition has lost sixty brave troops in action, from six different nations. Thirteen of them were killed at

the hands of what appear to have been Afghan security forces, some of whom who were motivated, we believe, in part by the mishandling of religious materials. Just as tragic, we are now investigating what appears to be the murder of sixteen innocent Afghan civilians at the hands of a US service member. Each of these events is heart wrenching, and my thoughts and prayers go out to all those affected by the violence - Coalition and Afghan alike.

But I assure you, the relationship between the Coalition and the Afghan security forces remains strong. Just two weeks ago, I was down in Helmand Province, visiting with Marines and with local Afghan commanders – in the wake of the Quran burning incident when violence was at its peak. A young Marine near Marjeh said he and his unit were told about the demonstrations by their Afghan counterparts. The Afghan troops told them, “Let us patrol outside the wire for a couple days. We’ve got this for you.” Understanding the gravity of the risk the Afghans had assumed for them, the Marine continued, “Our Afghan brothers were trying to protect us.” This one statement, spoken by a young Marine, conveys the power of this brotherhood-in-arms forged in battle. It speaks to the trust we have built with the Afghans and to the shock absorbency in this relationship.

We know there is much hard and deadly work to do. But the progress is real, and, importantly, it’s sustainable. We have severely degraded the insurgency. As one Afghan commander told me in the South in the latter part of 2011, “This time around, the Taliban was the away team.” On top of that success, as a result of our recent winter operations, we have seriously degraded the Taliban’s ability to mount a major spring offensive of their own. This spring, they will come back to find many of their caches empty, their former strongholds untenable, and a good many of their foot soldiers absent or unwilling to join the fight.

In Kandahar, back in December, fifty former Talibs decided to formally reintegrate back into Afghan society. When asked why they lay down their arms, they complained of the

unrelenting pressure they were under. They said they found themselves up against capable Afghan forces in greater numbers and with greater frequency. And while they were willing to fight foreigners, they were unwilling to fight their Afghan brothers - especially Afghans who fought back with courage and skill, because of the training we had provided to them. And the training we provide to them is a critical part of our mission.

Throughout history, insurgencies have seldom been defeated by foreign forces. Instead, they have been ultimately beaten by indigenous forces. In the long run, our goals can only be achieved and then secured by Afghan forces. Transition, then, is the linchpin of our strategy, not merely the “way out.”

During the last twelve months, the Afghan security forces have expanded from 276,000 to 330,000. They will reach their full surge strength ahead of scheduled deadline in October. The expansion and professionalization of Afghan security forces allow us to recover the remaining 23,000 US surge troops by this fall, enable us to continue to pressure the Taliban to reconcile, and make possible security Transition to the Afghans in accordance with our Lisbon commitments and on time.

Security conditions remain very good in areas that have transitioned thus far from Kabul in the east to Herat in the west; from Mazar-e Sharif in the north to Lashkar Gah in the south; and later this year, Afghan security forces are expected to assume the security lead for two-thirds, or possibly more, of the Afghan people. As the potential unifying influence in Afghanistan, the Afghan forces are better than we thought, and they’re better than they thought they would be. As they move to the fore, they are gaining more and more confidence, and they are gaining more and more capability. In the past five months, 89 percent of the total conventional operations were partnered with both Coalition and Afghan forces, and 42 percent

were Afghan-led. Over the next two years, Coalition forces will remain combat-ready, but increasingly focused on Security Force Assistance missions.

Afghan leadership simply is key. I can tell you the Afghans want this responsibility. In fact, for the very first time, our joint Coalition-Afghan operational campaign plan for January 2012 through June 2013 was conceived, developed, and planned with Afghans in the lead. They are truly emerging as the real defeat mechanism of this insurgency and increasingly as an emblem of national unity and this is essential for the long term security of Afghanistan.

None of us harbor illusions. We know that we face long-term challenges as well. We know that Al Qaeda and other extremist networks - the very same networks that kill Afghan and Coalition troops every day - still operate with impunity across the border in Pakistan. We know the Taliban remain a resilient and determined enemy, and that many of them will try to regain their lost ground this spring, through assassination, intimidation, high-profile attacks, and the emplacement of IEDs. We know that Iran continues to support the insurgency and fuels the flames of violence. We know that corruption still robs Afghan citizens of their faith in their government and that poor governance itself often advances insurgent messages.

This campaign has been long. It has been difficult, and it has been costly. There have been setbacks, to be sure, we're experiencing them now, and there will be more setbacks ahead.

I wish I could tell you that this war was simple, and that progress could be easily measured. But that's not the way of counterinsurgencies. They are fraught with success and setbacks, which can exist in the same space and time, but each must be seen in the larger context of the overall campaign. And I believe that the campaign is on track. We are making a difference. I know this, and our troops know this.

I'd like to take just another moment of your time today, Mr. Chairman, to end where I began this morning, with our troops, the thousands of Americans and Coalition partners that are

bearing the weight of this conflict, and those that will never return to their families. Know this, they weigh on my every decision and my every word to this Committee.

One of them, a young Marine, was laid to rest last Tuesday in Arlington Cemetery. He was a hero, he knew what he stood for, and he knew his mission. And he knew the risks. He knew he might have to give his life for this cause for which we fight – so Sergeant William Stacey prepared a letter for his family – to be read in the event of his death. In it, he said:

....there will be a child who will live because men left the security they enjoyed in their home country to come to his. And this child will learn in the new schools that have been built. He will walk his streets not worried about whether or not his leader's henchmen are going to come and kidnap him. He will grow into a fine man who will pursue every opportunity his heart could desire. He will have the gift of freedom, which I have enjoyed for so long. If my life buys the safety of a child who will one day change this world, then I know that it was all worth it....

Mr. Chairman, I can only add that I am confident that Americans are safer because of servicemembers like Sgt Stacey, and I am confident that we will prevail in this endeavor. Thank you, again, for this opportunity today ... and for the extraordinary support you and the Committee provide every day to the young men and women I am so privileged to lead.