

"Reconstructing Afghanistan: Freedom In Crisis": Felice D. Gaer Opening Remarks

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CHAIRPERSON GAER: Thank you very much.

I've been asked to offer some opening remarks on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

We are all aware of the dramatic changes that have taken place in Afghanistan since September 11, 2001. The Taliban movement has been forced from power. It was a brutal regime that abused the most basic human rights of all Afghans: men, women, and children, Muslims of every persuasion, and members of the country's dwindling non-Muslim communities.

The Taliban and their terrorist collaborators have been replaced by a new Afghan administration, some of whose most important officials have joined us today. This current Afghan government, although properly termed "transitional," has been selected by a loya jirga whose members were broadly representative of the Afghan people. This government has also received the support and recognition of the international community, including the U.S. government. In accordance with the December 2001 Bonn Agreement, and under the leadership of President Hamid Karzai, Afghan officials are now preparing a new Afghan constitution.

With these developments, Afghanistan is now poised to begin a new chapter in its long and sometimes tragic history. The Taliban rejected the rich Afghan heritage, a heritage enriched by people of diverse cultures and faiths. This rejection was demonstrated not least by their destruction of many of Afghanistan's cultural treasures, most notably the magnificent statues of Buddha at Bamiyan. The Taliban also rejected the rich diversity of the Islamic faith and Afghanistan's own tradition of tolerance by forcing conformity of belief and imposing a harsh religious practice that particularly targeted and restricted the lives and rights of Afghan women.

Today, there is an opportunity for a new beginning, a new era in which Afghans can enjoy the blessings of peace and freedom so long denied by war and repression.

Those of you who are joining us today are at the center of an international effort to bring to Afghanistan security, freedom, justice, the rule of law, and the foundations of a representative government that respects democratic rule and human rights. Among us this morning are experts from government agencies, foundations, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions who can contribute - and in some cases, already are contributing - to this effort in substantial and specific ways. We extend a warm welcome to specialists on such issues as religious freedom, human rights, Islamic law, judicial reform, and the rule of law.

We have come together today to discuss a top priority issue that is central to the reconstruction of the new, free Afghanistan: how the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, can be incorporated into Afghanistan's new constitution, judicial system, and its laws; how tolerance can be instilled in a society that has known enmity and war for the past 30 years; and what the United States can do to assist Afghanistan in this potentially historic transformation.

Much has been said about the past misdeeds of the Taliban. Regrettably, the need for human rights protections in Afghanistan remains of grave concern even today. The Commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency advising the Administration and the Congress, are concerned by reports of continued human rights abuses. These have included:

-- torture and other maltreatment of prisoners, including reports of incidents resulting in mass deaths, about which there have been no credible investigations;

-- abuses against women and girls, sometimes with the apparently active support of the police and the courts, and continuing use of charges of blasphemy, even against one of Afghanistan's leading human rights officials - which was later found baseless;

-- mistreatment of returning refugees and internally displaced persons, including reports of forced repatriation; and

-- the establishment and re-emergence of official agencies that require that Afghans follow specific religious practices and, in some cases, that use coercive measure against those who do not conform.

Mindful of these and other troubling developments, the Commissioners have made several recommendations to the U.S. government.

First, the United States should play a lead role in support of expanding the international security presence beyond Kabul. This is absolutely essential to safeguard the process of political reconstruction and protect the human rights of all Afghans.

Second, the American government should vigorously and publicly support efforts to strengthen adherence to the rule of law and the protection of religious freedom and other human rights in Afghanistan's new constitution and political and judicial institutions.

Third, the Commission has recommended that the United States government appoint a high-ranking official to serve in Kabul, at the American Embassy, with the sole responsibility to promote, coordinate, monitor, and report on the implementation of international standards of human rights, including religious freedom, particularly in connection with the reconstruction and recovery programs and the establishment of the new constitution, judiciary, and legal system.

Fourth, the United States government should promote a culture of tolerance and democracy in Afghanistan through the support of programs of public education, broadcasting, and educational and cultural exchanges.

Human rights, including religious freedom, are essential to the reconstruction of Afghanistan as they are to the war against terrorism. Some may argue that food, jobs, and "stability" are higher priorities. We at the Commission believe, however, that human rights, including religious freedom, are core concerns. A future Afghanistan that respects human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, will become a more stable, responsible member of the international community and will be less likely to become a haven for terrorists or the cause for renewed regional instability and conflict. Governments that respect their citizens' rights are more likely to live in peace with their own people and with other nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins by reminding us that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

Human rights are guaranteed in international treaties to which Afghanistan is already a party, notably the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Encouraging Afghanistan to honor these commitments - fully, freely, and fiercely - is part of welcoming Afghanistan back into the international community.

Although international assistance is vitally important, we must never lose sight of the fact that the ultimate responsibility to ensure rights rests with the Afghan people themselves. If Afghans are not able to create a civil and just society that guarantees human rights, including religious freedom, then their history will continue to be a tragic one. Repression, intolerance, and injustice will again sow the seeds of radicalism. Afghanistan, the region, and international security will once again be at the mercy of warlords, extremists, and terrorists. The question before us today is how the United States can assist the Afghans in preventing that painfully familiar outcome and instead help them create a government that will bring them into the community of nations.

President Bush stated last evening that "freedom is the future of every nation." We believe Afghans share that longing as much as any people do. But freedom does not come by wishing for it. It requires conviction, hard work, and constant follow-up. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has convened this Forum to explore who can do what and when - to advance the protection of human rights in Afghanistan.

Before we begin our deliberations, let me say a few words about the format of today's Forum. At two points in the day, you will hear from distinguished speakers: immediately following these words of introduction and just after lunch. During each of the three panels, the participants will not give prepared remarks as such; instead they will respond to questions posed by the Commissioners. In this way, we hope to provoke lively and frank interaction among the panelists. Regrettably, there will be only very limited time during discussions for questions from the audience.

We have entitled this Forum "Freedom in Crisis" because we have seen that opportunities have been missed. We do not want Afghanistan to slip back to the shockingly abusive practices of the past. The Commission convened this Forum to ensure that someone - ideally, a high level U.S. official in Kabul - is watching this situation, someone is speaking out, someone is advising the U.S. government and the international community with a clear human rights lens. On the weekend news shows, a senior U.S. government official commented on how well things are going in Afghanistan, pointing to it as an example of positive outcomes of regime change. Last night, President Bush said, "As we and our coalition partners are doing in Afghanistan, we will bring to the Iraqi people food and medicines and supplies - and freedom." The Commission is concerned, however, that there has been inadequate attention to the actual direction of events in Afghanistan and inadequate support of freedom. This Forum is designed to focus precisely on that.

Now, I would like to introduce our keynote speaker, Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad. Mr. Khalilzad serves as the Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan and the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Southwest Asia and Islamic Strategy Initiatives at the National Security Council.

On December 2nd, 2002, he was appointed by the President to also serve as the Special Ambassador and Envoy for Free Iraqis.

Prior to his White House appointment, Dr. Khalilzad held the Corporate Chair for International Security at the Rand Corporation. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the United States Institute of Peace and also headed the defense team for the Bush-Cheney transition and served as counselor to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld.

In addition, Dr. Khalilzad has held a number of other positions, including serving as Assistant Deputy under Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning, Associate Professor at the University of California at San Diego, and Special Adviser to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

He is a senior Administration official who is here today to present us with a view of the administration's position with regard to the current situation in Afghanistan.

Welcome, Dr. Khalilzad.