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The United States has reassured Afghanistan that it wants to help rebuild that beleaguered country and promote democratic reforms. It's exactly what America must do there - and in many other countries - to help identify and remove the causes of terrorism.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz delivered the most recent promises to Afghanistan as he toured military projects there. Rebuilding the country, he said, is an important way "to contribute to the stability of Afghanistan. There's no way to go too fast. The faster the better."

There must also be a well-conceived plan and reasonable expectations.

U.S. troops are training a national army in Afghanistan to replace the divisive militias of warlords. As Wolfowitz noted, it also is important to make good jobs available for people who are not in the army.

The Wolfowitz visit provided Afghanistan with further evidence that the U.S. remains committed to rebuilding and reforming the country now that our military has driven the brutal Taliban from power.

Another sign of that commitment: Even though the United States is mobilizing troops for a possible war with Iraq, it has no plans to reduce the force of 8,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan.

Their role is slowly changing from combat to reconstruction, although the fighting has not ended. U.S. special forces recently discovered large amounts of explosives hidden in feed sacks in eastern Afghanistan. U.S. forces find dozens of weapons caches every month, and enemy fighters attack U.S. bases frequently.

An upcoming Washington seminar offers another indication that our government is committed to a better future for Afghanistan. The **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** will sponsor the Jan. 29 event so Afghan and American officials can talk about religious freedom, human rights, judicial reform, the rule of law and other matters in post-war Afghanistan.

Rebuilding Afghanistan is an important part of America's global pledge to promote democratic reforms. The Bush administration has struggled with questions about where and how to push those reforms in light of the need for allies in the war on terrorism. Some of those allies are autocratic regimes whose repressive policies have bred Islamic extremism. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are prime examples.

In some ways the State Department has represented the desire to promote democratic reforms abroad while the Pentagon has been more interested in gaining military allies to fight the al-Qaida terrorist network.

Both are important goals. But in the long run, America must try to defang religious extremism by promoting democratic reforms and by adhering to democratic values in its dealings with other nations.

American support of tyrannical rulers because they're helping in the war on terrorism or because they are traditional friends may be a temporary necessity in some places. But ultimately the United States must side with democratic, economic and social reform.

Afghanistan provides an opportunity to show the world that a safe, secure nation, operating under democratic principles, can bring a better life to millions of people.

