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From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
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See McConnell's comments on AfPak.

From: Lundeberg, Greta J
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FYI

From: Lundeberg, Greta J
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Mitch McConnell Praises Obama For Progress In Afghanistan
By James R. Carroll

WASHINGTON — During an unannounced trip to Afghanistan, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell praised the Obama administration Monday for its handling of the war and predicted “an overwhelming likelihood of success” in the nearly decade-long conflict.

“I think we're doing it right. We're making substantial headway,” the Kentucky Republican told reporters during a call from Kabul, the Afghan capital, before flying back to Washington after a weekend trip with other Senate Republicans.

He said the Taliban insurgency is facing increasing difficulties holding parts of the nation.

McConnell said he would define success as returning Afghanistan to conditions that existed there about 30 years ago, when the nation was exporting agricultural products and “they had a relatively normal life here.”

“I think that's an achievable goal,” McConnell said.

He said Allied forces are significantly degrading the insurgent Taliban's strength, he said. “They've had a very bad year, and I expect they will have an even worse year in 2011,” said McConnell, who was making his fourth visit to Afghanistan.

But McConnell's view of America's prospects for success in Afghanistan is unjustifiably optimistic, said Michael Desch, chairman of the political science department and co-director of the University of Notre Dame's International Security Program.

"I suppose you can go there and go on a dog-and-pony show and see some things that looked better than they looked a year ago," said Desch, formerly director of the University of Kentucky's Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce.

Allied forces are killing more Taliban and forcing them out of some areas, but the insurgents are moving into new areas of operations, Desch said.

Further, the key to winning against the Taliban is building an effective government and convincing Afghans to buy into it, he said.

"The Karzai government remains deeply corrupt and deeply ineffective," Desch said. McConnell was part of a group of GOP senators who made the trip to Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan over the weekend.

The others were Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Richard Burr of North Carolina, Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, Marco Rubio of Florida and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania.

The group met with the American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, as well as with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

In Pakistan, they talked with Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir and Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, chief of staff of the Pakistan Army.

Desch said Pakistan's mounting problems are closely linked to what happens in Afghanistan.

The United States went to war in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaida, was sheltered in Afghanistan by the nation's Taliban government while planning the attacks.

When U.S. forces ousted the Taliban, bin Laden fled to Pakistan, and U.S. officials have said they don't know his whereabouts today.

McConnell's visit follows last week's trip by Vice President Joe Biden, who made clear that the United States would begin drawing down forces in July, depending on conditions, and handing over lead responsibility for security to Afghan forces in 2014.

While Afghanistan will be charged with securing its own country, "we are not leaving, if you don't want us to leave," Biden said in a joint appearance with Karzai on Jan. 11.

A December White House review of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, where there are about 97,000 American troops, and Pakistan cited notable gains in the region, but cautioned that they "remain fragile and reversible."

"The challenge remains to make our gains durable and sustainable," the report said.

McConnell said, based on Biden's remarks, "there is no artificial timetable for withdrawal, and the Taliban needs to understand that."

"It's clear that 2011 is a critical year for us here in Afghanistan," McConnell said. "It is the year in which Afghanistan security forces are going to have to step up and play a bigger role."

McConnell and the other senators also met with American soldiers, including members of the 101st Airborne based at Fort Campbell, Ky. He said morale among the troops was high.

Rubio said he and the other senators “are heartened by the some of the early success that we've seen.”

But after watching U.S., British and Jordanian troops conduct a training exercise with Afghan troops, Rubio said much more needs to be accomplished. He noted that some trainees who will have to use a Humvee to sweep for mines had never driven any vehicle before joining the military.

“They are certainly a world away from where they were,” Rubio said. “There are real challenges. What we learned is that for a significant period of time, there was no serious training effort. It will take time to ramp up.”

The group toured a market in Nawa and Camp Leatherneck, a Marine Corps base, in southern Afghanistan. The open-air market was evidence the local police force is doing better keeping the area secure, Rubio said.

McConnell said the country's southern region had been controlled by the Taliban, but thanks to the Marines the area has “come back to life.”

“There is some rudimentary evidence of commerce there — there (are) little shops springing back up,” the Kentuckian said. “There is no question the momentum of the Taliban in the south, which has been their stronghold in Afghanistan for quite a while, has been completely reversed. Our military has performed just as we knew they would, with valor and professionalism.

“Now the test in the future is whether the partnership with the Afghan government can bring about the security that the country needs to kind of spring back to life,” McConnell said.

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