

**RELEASE IN FULL**

SENATOR MCCAIN: Hi, I'm Senator John McCain, from Arizona. I'm joined by my colleagues from the Senate, Senator Jeff Sessions from Alabama, Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, and Senator John Hoeven of North Dakota. And -- excuse me, Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut.

We've had a very extensive briefing from General Allen on the state of operations and we had a good meeting with President Karzai this morning, and we also have had a number of meetings including with human rights activists and members of the opposition. We're here at a very crucial time. We're encouraged at the military successes we've achieved as a result of the surge, and it's clear that ISAF forces have great control and have certainly achieved significant advances on the ground. We are here to discuss at some length the issue of the strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan and the United States. We think it's very important to make progress on that, we discussed the two obstacles to progress on that issue -- the detainee issue and the night raid issue.

As far as the night raid are concerned, and I'd like Senator Sessions and Senator Graham and Senator Blumenthal, who are all lawyers and former attorneys general, to discuss that -- on the issue of night raids, we believe that US participation can be reduced over time, that the responsibility can be taken over by Afghan Security Forces. We do believe however, strongly, that night raids are a very vital interest in carrying out the military missions and to doing -- and are very important in ensuring the maximum safety and security of the men and women who are doing the fighting. So, we emphasized to President Karzai that we believe this issue can be resolved, but we are strongly opposed to any termination of night raids, because of the added risk it would put the men and women of our military, which is not something that we would ever agree to.

The meeting in Chicago is obviously going to be one of the seminal events in the long relationship between NATO, our allies and Afghanistan, so we believe that it's very important to go into the Chicago gathering with a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan. Otherwise, the chances of significant success in Chicago would be jeopardized. Senator Sessions.

SENATOR SESSIONS: I'll just say a couple of things. This is my 7th visit to Afghanistan. I've been to Afghanistan more than Mexico or Canada or France or any other country in the world, I guess, outside the United States. We do appreciate the people of Afghanistan, and we have high hopes for the future. Nothing that we do is designed to do anything other than advance our mutual interest of a healthy, independent, strong and prosperous Afghanistan. Senator McCain and Senator Lindsay Graham, members of the Armed Services Committee, have been heroic advocates for the people of Afghanistan. I've been pleased to support them over the years, but they've been here far more than I have, and they've been leaders in the United States Congress. I just want to say, it's an idealistic vision for a great future of this country, is what it's all about. I would share with Senator McCain's view about the night raids -- these are military activities, not law enforcement, and when your nation itself is under attack, it is important that your military be able to defend itself from those who would bomb, kill, murder the innocent civilians of this country, and to protect themselves from injury. We have an obligation to our military and the people we've committed that they are able to conduct themselves in a way that allows them to defend themselves. It's been a great visit, we've had a good delegation, and I'll let others speak.

SENATOR GRAHAM: Critical time for the future of Afghanistan and the region. The progress on the ground is real and I think sustainable only if we have a strategic partnership agreement that will allow the United States and the international community to have a political, economic and military tie to the people of Afghanistan. The good news is that the people of Afghanistan, President Karzai all see this as

mutually beneficial. Here's what I would outline as the most positive result for both countries -- that in 2014 we're able to transition to Afghan led operations, that the American military and international forces are here in a training function, providing intelligence, logistic support, airlift capability, and that we would have a military footprint in 2014 that would allow us to have a couple of airbases with special forces units that would always provide the edge to the Afghan security forces against future insurgent attacks. In other words, if we can have an agreement that looks past 2014 where the world knows that America is not going to leave the Afghan people, then we will win this thing. And my hope is to have a military configuration at the request of the Afghan people that will allow the Taliban to be defeated in perpetuity and they will lay down their arms and come back to the negotiating table from a position of weakness, not strength.

To the region as a whole -- people are watching what happens here. Pakistan is unsure about our intentions. Iraq has not been a success lately, because we left too soon. So if we could solidify a strategic partnership that deals with the long term relationship, political, economically and military, I think everything is possible.

The issue of night raids and detention -- I've been coming here for several years in a variety of capacities, and I've been very impressed with the progress on the Afghan front on the issue of night raids. General Allen has put more Afghans in the lead in the last ninety days than I ever could've imagined. Most of the night raids are being led by Afghans with our support. And more progress in that area is to be expected.

When it comes to detentions, we're trying to create a legal system that will allow the insurgents who are in our custody to be turned over to the Afghans and be dealt with fairly and firmly and not go back to the fight. So we're working with our Afghan partners to create some legal capacity on their side, and I'm optimistic we can get there. So these two issues should not stand in the way of a strategic relationship. And I want to echoes what Senators McCain and Sessions have said. We all have an obligation to our soldiers. But we cannot in good faith go back to South Carolina and say that the legal system in Afghanistan is developed and mature enough to turn over every person in our custody by March 7. I cannot go back home and say that the night raids if stopped would be a good thing. They need to continue, Afghan led, and the people who want them stopped the most is the Taliban. And I'm here to tell you, if we keep the momentum that's come under General Allen's leadership, and we keep working on corruption and we get a strategic partnership agreement that binds these two countries together, all things are possible.

And the opposition that we met with today is growing, and I look forward to the election in Afghanistan in 2014 where you have a competition of ideas, that we'll have a robust democracy developing in Afghanistan, and on the American front, we need to do more to help opposition parties come about, because for Afghanistan to survive as a democracy, you have to allow voices to be heard, and one of my goals for Afghanistan and the United States relationship in the future is to empower political parties and groups across the country so the Afghan people can be heard in way they never been heard before.

SENATOR HOEVEN: I'm Senator John Hoeven; I want to thank both Senator McCain and Senator Graham for leading our delegation here. We've had excellent, excellent meetings here. First I want to start out by thanking our men and women in uniform. our soldiers have done an incredible job, we've been here over a decade, the Afghan military forces continue to get stronger, I'm impressed with the training and what they're doing, but I want to thank all the men and women in uniform, both the Americans and the Afghans [sic], for what they're doing on behalf of our respective peoples. The meeting with General

Allen was outstanding. Clearly we're making -- together -- we're making incredible progress that has to continue. Also a very good meeting with President Karzai. What I would like to emphasize is exactly what Senator McCain and Senator Graham and Senator Sessions have said, and that is that we need a strategic partnership agreement.

I first came to Afghanistan -- I was a governor at the time -- in 2006. We measure things in terms of milestones. The milestone we need right now is a strategic partnership agreement. That's not just important for Afghanistan and the region; that is important for the United States as well because it really lays out this partnership in the long term, and it lays out the expectations on both sides. I'm on the Appropriations Committee in the Senate -- deal in foreign operations, military aid, financial aid. We need to understand what our obligations are, we need to communicate that with the American people. And for the region, not just for Afghanistan, but for the region it's incredibly important as well. So this is a milestone, and it's time for us to accomplish that strategic partnership agreement.

SENATOR BLUMENTHAL: Just real quickly, Richard Blumenthal from Connecticut, my second trip to Afghanistan in less than a year, but I really want to thank Senator Graham and most particularly Senator McCain and my colleagues, but particularly Senator McCain and Graham for their leadership over many, many years in this area.

This trip has been a very bipartisan one, and I am in complete agreement as to the strategic partnership agreement, which has to be the focus of American leadership in this area. I want to join in thanking our troops who are here, most especially General Allen, for the absolutely stunning progress that has been made in the use of special operations forces. Some of the information we've been given, which is still classified, I think is a very powerful story that the American people deserve to know.

And I think a lot of the work in this area, increasingly, is being done by the Afghans themselves, and that kind of ramping up or transition is part of the work that needs to continue in progress towards the strategic partnership and that partnership is all the more important because there will be elections in 2014. There will be increasing transition in the military area. Corruption remains a problem, and it has to be combated.

So do IEDs, which have inflicted more and more as a percentage of our casualties. The use of IEDs is up by about 15 percent, and one of my priorities has been to stem and stop the flow of ammonium calcium nitrate and other components of roadside bombs and IEDs that kill and maim our troops. In that regard, I remain highly dissatisfied and troubled by the role of Pakistan in stopping the flow of that kind of fertilizer. And finally I just want to say that special operations forces are the tip of the spear. They conduct five, ten, fifteen raids every day, of very high quality and danger, but behind them are the countless other men and women in uniform that provide critical support in a war that has lasted a long time, and that I think will be historic in the turning point that we've reached in the last year.

[FOX NEWS: Senator Graham, you said that the night raids shouldn't be an impediment to the agreement, but the reality is that Karzai views night raids as a violation of Afghan security but the US military says they're crucial. What is the alternative? Where is an agreement? This has been holding up the agreement for months now.]

GRAHAM: We had a meeting today with human rights advocates, and the advocates say that the night raids have been reformed to such an extent that the people in the country understand their benefit. So, the opposition were in total understanding that the night raids have delivered a severe blow to the

enemy, and to respond to Karzai's concerns about having Afghans participate in a more robust fashion, we informed him that there's been major breakthrough in the last ninety days. But I guess our message is pretty clear: none of us as United States Senators are going to allow our military men and women to be left hanging for no good reason. There is no good reason to stop the night raids when they are working. They are really punishing the enemy and they've been reformed and we're sensitive to the civilian casualties -- regarding night raids, they're down to what, 1.35 percent? And we expect less and less American involvement. The night raids are now Afghans, they call people out of the homes, they engage the target. We're providing support. That has been a huge transition. But at the end of the day, 76 percent of civilian casualties in this country come from the Taliban, so night raids are militarily important. Our commander has told us in no uncertain terms that this is a tool that our military and the Afghan military believe to be beneficial. The human rights advocates for Afghanistan believe that the night raids are being conducted in a manner acceptable to Afghans and to ensure their long term security future. The Afghan military has been very supportive of night raids.

When it comes to detaining people, 80 percent of the people we're detaining come from night raids. We've taken over 3,000 people off the battle that were involved in IEDs. There are people in Parwan prison that were caught five and six times, only to be released. We're not going to allow American soldiers to be put in harm's way because we don't have a legal system that's mature enough to deal with reality. We're not going to allow an American soldier to be killed by someone who's been caught six times before. The goal is to allow the Afghans to control their sovereignty on all fronts in a way that's beneficial to all concerned. When it comes to night raids, there's been a huge breakthrough, in terms of Afghan capacity; when it comes to detention, I am deeply involved in a transition plan that will allow these prisons to go under Afghan control based on forthcoming changes to the Afghan legal system.

To President Karzai, you've told us directly that you think the strategic partnership is mutually beneficial. We agree. We can overcome the problems with night raids and we can overcome the problems with detentions, but we are not going to allow our soldiers, and quite frankly take off the table tools that are providing security for the Afghan people until we can get capacity to do so in a reasonable way. I am confident we can get there, but if I had to pick between agreeing to a strategic agreement -- signing on to an agreement that I know will lead to Americans being killed for no reason -- no, we won't do it. This is just me speaking.

I want a strategic partnership agreement for my country, the people of Afghanistan and the world at large, but not at any and all cost. It needs to be reasonable, it needs to be mutually beneficial, and it needs to reflect reality. And the reality is that the night raids are the number one fear of the enemy, they've been reformed drastically and the Afghans are more involved than ever. And the reality of detentions is, we're taking people off the battlefield, they're being well treated and the Afghan legal system is getting better by the day.

[NBCNEWS: A few things if we could touch on it -- is what's holding back the strategic partnership is night raids and detentions? Is that the big thing that's holding back the strategic partnership?]

McCain: You are correct, the issues of detainees and night raids. I have a significant amount of optimism, given our conversations with President Karzai, that we can reach agreement on these two issues, but I think it is important that we get it done before the Chicago gathering because it can affect the entire decision making process there.

[NBCNEWS: Secondly, if we can get your thoughts and if there was any discussion about Taliban talks, the office that's opening in Qatar, if President Karzai had any thoughts on it, if General Allen had any thoughts on it. Because many Americans for the last 10 years thought -- for years we've been fighting the Taliban, and now the Taliban are coming back to the negotiation table; they're going to be part of this government. Whatever strategic partnership agreement is signed is going to have to be with the Taliban, who are then going to be in the government.]

MCCAIN: President Karzai discussed this at some length, about the issue of discussions with the Taliban, and obviously we all want to see if possible some kind of agreement that would stop the bloodshed here in this very unhappy country. I would point out that a lot of us believe that that is not as possible as some, because we have signaled that we are leaving. This is why I think that the strategic partnership agreement would be very important in moving discussions along, so that there would be no doubt in the Taliban's mind that we are there for the long haul and when they think you're leaving, obviously, they won't be serious about negotiations.

Finally, I would just add that I am unalterably opposed to the release of five Taliban as some kind of quote confidence building measure. I think that would be a huge mistake. I think it would give some legitimacy to the Taliban that they have not so far done anything to deserve.

Anything else?

[NY TIMES: This is a question for both McCain and Graham, whom I've seen in many other war zones as well. Given the complexities here that we're struggling with, we're now looking at a very growing conflict in Syria. What are your thoughts given all your experience, about whether there should be aid given, or whether there should be humanitarian aid to the people fighting the government there. We've faced similar questions before, I know you're -- maybe everyone here is very well informed, what are your thoughts?]

MCCAIN: Well, the first thing I'd like to do is urge the President of the United States to emulate some of his predecessors, and that is to start standing up and speaking up, in international forums and to the world, of our support of these people who are being massacred by Bashar Assad. We have proven in the past -- President Reagan is a great example -- that it does matter to these people that we continue to show support and speak out on their behalf.

Second of all, I agree with the Secretary of State that we should form a contact group and find ways that we can be of assistance. The United States doesn't have to directly ship weapons to the opposition, but there are a whole lot of things that can be done, through third world countries, through the Arab league. They need help as far as medical assistance is concerned, as far as intelligence information that could be provided to them -- there's a broad variety of ways that we can be of assistance, and it doesn't mean that the United States intervenes militarily, unilaterally. We've shown in Libya that there are ways of assisting without direct United States involvement. I would also emphasize the role of Turkey as well as the Arab league. They could provide sanctuary areas, they could consider no fly or no movement zones, but in summary, the massacre goes on of thousand of Syrian people using artillery and every weapon of war, and when some people say that the United States shouldn't be involved directly -- tell that to the Iranians and the Russians, who are clearly assisting Bashar Assad continue this massacre, and I believe the United States can play a far more active and productive role, and it's almost shameful we have not.

GRAHAM: Breaking Syria apart from Iran could be as beneficial to our efforts to contain a nuclear armed Iran as sanctions. If the Syrian regime is replaced with another form of government that doesn't tie its future to the Iranians, the world is a better place. The contact group, the opposition, has to convince me that there's going to be a place in Syria for the Alloites -- is that right? This is about Assad, in my mind, not about the Alloite Shiite minority. The fact that the Arab league has embraced regime change is a sea change. I would like us to be more aggressive, bring more resolutions to the United Nations, and we're exposing Russia and China for what they are. Putin is not desirous at all of people having a strong voice, because it's probably not in his interests, and the Chinese dictatorship is always going to be reluctant to intervene when it comes to freeing people, so we have to form a tract outside of the United Nations, using the Arab league as a center of gravity. Put on the table the idea of economic and humanitarian assistance with also the possibility of arms being provided at a later date.

This is a moment in time to replace Assad with something new that would a crippling blow to Iran, and if you could this spring and summer bring about a regime change in Syria, push hard on sanctions regarding Iran, and have a strategic partnership agreement that tells the Taliban you will never take Afghanistan over again by force, let every women know in Afghanistan and this region, you'll never have to suffer again in soccer stadiums -- that could be one hell of a spring and summer. And it's going to take persistence, it's going to take being tough, but I think John is right, the President of the United States needs to speak up stronger personally about Syria.

And to the administration, I think they've done a very good job of trying to engage the Afghan government on the strategic partnership agreement. Eventually this in the hands of President Karzai. His country's fate is in his hands; I hope he chooses wisely.

MCCAIN: Could I just finally emphasize one thing? I believe that there are ways to get weapons to the oppositions without direct U.S. involvement. The Iranians and the Russians are providing Bashar Assad with weapons. People who are being massacred deserve to have the chance to defend themselves with weapons. So I am not only not opposed, but would be in favor of weapons being obtained by the opposition.

[WASHINGTON POST: In the wake of President Sarkozy's announcement to leave Afghanistan a year early, and the very public concerns about being able to fund the Afghan national security forces beyond 2104, do you have concerns about the future of the NATO alliance in Afghanistan?]

MCCAIN: I think so much of it depends on a strategic partnership agreement. I think if we can conclude that before Chicago, that that will send a signal to the world and our allies and other countries that may want to assist Afghanistan that we are there for the long haul. Absent that I could see the possibility of real fissures developing among the alliance.