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Prepared Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (Washington, D.C.)

As Submitted by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Washington, D.C., Thursday, April 10, 2008

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to be here to discuss the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. As always, I thank the members of the committee for your support of the Department of Defense, but, more importantly, your support of our men and women in uniform. While there have been – and will continue to be – debates over our strategy in these campaigns, I know we are all unified in our admiration for those who have volunteered to serve.

Let me begin with a few words about Afghanistan.

Last week, I attended the NATO summit in Bucharest with the President and the Secretary of State. As you know, progress was made in some key areas:

- First, NATO leaders unanimously reaffirmed the importance of success in Afghanistan and renewed their commitment to the ISAF mission. This alone is a very significant event when one considers that domestic opposition in Europe has hardened as operational demands have greatly increased in the 17 months since NATO leaders met at Riga. Despite the challenges, NATO partners are standing together and standing firm;
- Underlining this point, a strategic vision document was adopted that lays out the alliance's goals over the next three to five years;
- A senior U.N. representative was appointed to coordinate development and reconstruction efforts; and
- Several allies pledged additional forces, most notably France, who will deploy a battalion to the volatile eastern part of the country.

These elements made Bucharest a successful summit with regard to Afghanistan and demonstrated that members of the alliance take their obligations seriously. Members of Congress have expressed frustration to me over NATO's shortcomings in the Afghanistan campaign – from force levels to caveats. I have had a few sharp things to say on these subjects myself. And, we continue to face serious challenges on the ground in Afghanistan.

But it is important to remember the substantial, indeed heroic, contributions of many allies – in particular those operating in the southern part of the country. Before heading to Bucharest last week, I visited Denmark to meet with the Danish leadership and offer my thanks and appreciation for their efforts. Denmark – a country of about five-and-half million people and a total defense budget of \$4 billion – is truly “punching above its weight” in Afghanistan. Their troops are in the fight and taking casualties – including two in the days that preceded my visit. I had a chance to meet privately with some Danish soldiers who had served in Helmand Province – a long-time Taliban stronghold. The soldiers told me that their efforts made a real difference by pushing back the

enemy and by improving the lives of the local population. Senator Warner, I appreciated your kind words about Denmark last week.

We are grateful to Denmark and all of our allies – and in particular the British, the Canadians, the Australians, the Dutch, the Romanians, and the Estonians – who have stepped up over the past year to take on some of the most difficult and dangerous missions in Afghanistan. Their contributions are truly impressive.

Now to the main topic of this hearing – Iraq.

In the past two days, you have heard from Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus. Earlier today, the nation heard from the President. I welcome the opportunity to contribute my views – as well as answer any questions you may have.

Last year, when the President announced an increase in troops, an overhaul of our strategy, and a new leadership team, many were skeptical whether these changes could fundamentally alter the situation in Iraq.

I believe the record shows that the fundamentals have changed, and that the United States is in a very different place in Iraq today – a better place, but one with significant challenges still ahead.

We have always said that there is no purely military solution to the many problems facing Iraq. But a basic level of security for the Iraqi people is a necessary pre-condition for progress to take place on other fronts. And since the full surge forces became operational last June – just 10 months ago – we have seen security gains accompanied by movement in the political, economic, and governance arenas, both at the local and national level.

As you heard from Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus, violence has declined dramatically since this time last year. In addition to the drop in U.S. casualties, we have seen a dramatic – and encouraging – decline in the loss of Iraqi civilians: ethno-sectarian deaths are down approximately 90 percent, and overall civilian deaths 70 percent.

At the same time, Iraqi security forces have provided a “surge” of their own to complement U.S. and Coalition efforts. Though the recent operations in Basra revealed some shortcomings of Iraq’s security forces, it is important to remember that a year ago they would not have been capable of launching a mission of that scale. At this time, half of Iraq’s provinces have attained Provincial Iraqi Control. The next province we anticipate moving into that category is Anbar – a remarkable development considering the grim security situation in that province 18 months ago.

The Iraqi forces will shoulder more of the burden as we reduce our forces over time. And I would reiterate that the United States has no desire to keep a large number of troops in Iraq indefinitely or have permanent bases. The Status of Forces Agreement being negotiated will put us on a path to a more “normal” security relationship with Iraq – one that more closely resembles the arrangements we have with other allies and partners.

On the economic front, the IMF expects real GDP growth in Iraq to exceed seven percent this year. Oil exports are above pre-war levels and generated almost \$40 billion for Iraq in 2007. These numbers reflect improvements that are having a tangible impact on the lives of Iraqis. To cite one example, the Narhwan Brick Factory Complex has quadrupled its workforce since January to 15,000. Similar efforts to revive industry are moving forward – aided by increasing foreign investment. These economic gains also mean that Iraqis should shoulder ever greater responsibility for reconstruction and equipping their forces.

In recent months, we have seen the government of Iraq make meaningful progress in the legislative arena as well. Iraq’s political leaders have passed:

- A pension law;
- An amnesty law;
- A provincial powers law;
- A justice and accountability law; and

- Their 2008 budget.

These legislative measures are not perfect and certainly have their shortfalls. Clearly these laws must be implemented in a spirit of reconciliation, or at least accommodation. Still, we ought not ignore or dismiss what has been achieved.

Just as there is real progress to report, there are also substantial reasons to be cautious. Al Qaeda in Iraq, though on the defensive, remains a lethal force. It is trying to regenerate itself and will continue to launch gruesome terrorist attacks. There will be difficult days for Iraqis and Coalition forces alike in coming months.

Similarly, the presence of militias and criminal gangs remains troubling – as does the ongoing influence of Iran. The operation in Basra and its aftermath also raises a number of legitimate questions. Even so, there is still a great deal to be said for the government of Iraq's decision to confront the problem.

All of this – both the good and the bad, both progress and potential regression – was on our minds as we considered our options going forward. In order to advise the President, I again asked for individual assessments and recommendations from the commander in Iraq, Central Command, and the Joint Chiefs. The President received recommendations from General Petraeus, Admiral Fallon, Admiral Mullen, and each of the service chiefs. Though all bring different perspectives – from the institutional military to the operational military – all concur with the course the President has chosen in Iraq. Presently, two of the five surge brigades have left Iraq. The other three are scheduled to depart by July. At this point it is difficult to know what impact, if any, this reduction will have on the security situation. A brief pause for consolidation and evaluation following a return to pre-surge troop levels will allow us to analyze the process and its effects in a comprehensive way. I do not anticipate this period of review to be an extended one, and I would emphasize that the hope is conditions on the ground will allow us to reduce our presence further this fall. But we must be realistic. The security situation in Iraq remains fragile and gains can be reversed.

I believe the President's plan offers the best way to achieve our strategic goals:

- A unified, democratic and federal Iraq that can govern, defend, and sustain itself;
- An Iraq that is an ally against jihadist terrorism and a net contributor to security in the Gulf; and
- An Iraq that helps bridge the sectarian divides in the Middle East.

I believe our objectives are achievable. The gains that have been made over the past year – at no small cost in blood and treasure – should not be allowed to unravel through precipitous actions. The repercussions of getting it wrong now likely would haunt us in the future.

Whatever you think of how we got to this place, the consequences of failure – of getting the end game wrong – are enormous. Some have lamented what they believe was an unwillingness to listen to our military professionals at the beginning of this war. I hope that now people will not dismiss as irrelevant the unanimous views of the field commander, CENTCOM Commander, and Joint Chiefs. All of the nation's most senior military officers endorse this step by step path forward. I support these recommendations.