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Submitted Statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee

As Submitted by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, September 23, 2008

Mr. Chairman, Senator Warner, members of the committee:

Thank you for inviting me to give you an update on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I would also express gratitude to the Congress for passing legislation to enhance the benefits of the GI Bill. The Department is very pleased with the outcome, and I can tell you that our men and women in uniform are deeply appreciative. Of course, this is just one example of the many ways in which you have supported our troops these past years. On behalf of all of them, I thank you.

I would also like to take this occasion to encourage this committee to act as soon as possible on the nominations of Mike Donley to be the Secretary of the Air Force, and General William Fraser III to be the service's vice chief of staff. As you know, the Air Force is undergoing a critical period of transition and renewal, and it is vitally important that the full leadership team is in place and confirmed. Earlier this month, General Petraeus made his recommendations on the way forward in Iraq. Separate recommendations were submitted by the commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, the commander of Central Command, the service chiefs, and the Chairman. Although each viewed the challenges from a different perspective, weighing different factors, all once again arrived at similar recommendations.

We have already withdrawn the five Army brigade combat teams, two Marine battalions, and the Marine expeditionary unit that were sent to Iraq as part of the surge. The President announced earlier this month that approximately 8,000 U.S. troops will be withdrawn from Iraq by February without being replaced. The withdrawal of approximately 3,400 non-combat forces – including aviation personnel, explosive ordnance teams, combat and construction engineers, military police, and logistics support teams – began this month, continues through the fall and winter, and finishes in January. In addition, a Marine battalion stationed in Anbar will return in November, and another Army BCT will return by early February. This continuing drawdown is possible because of the success achieved in reducing violence and building Iraqi security capacity. Even with fewer U.S. troops in Iraq, the positive trends of the last year have thus far held – and in some cases steadily continued in the right direction. U.S. troop casualties have been greatly reduced – though even one is still too many, and overall violence is down more than 80 percent. The recent turnover of Anbar province to Iraqi provincial control – the 11th of 18 provinces to be turned over – highlights how much the situation has improved.

There are other positive indicators:

- The Iraqi Army has planned and executed operations in Amarah, Baghdad, Basrah, Diyala, and Mosul – with encouraging results. Seventy percent of more than 160 Iraqi battalions are now in the lead. Their confidence level has grown with each passing month, as has ours in their ability to get the job done.
- Overall, political progress has been incremental but significant. The Iraqi parliament has passed key legislation this year. And the recent return of the Sunni Iraqi Accord Front party to ministerial positions was a welcome sign of reengagement by Sunnis at the national level.
- With the exception of Iran, we have seen an increasing willingness by neighboring countries to help engage with and stabilize Iraq. Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, the UAE and even Syria have announced that they will send ambassadors to Baghdad. Jordan's king and Lebanon's prime minister both visited Iraq last month.
- The International Monetary Fund estimates that the Iraqi economy will have 8 – 8 ½ percent real growth this year.

Despite all this, very serious challenges remain:

- Political progress remains too slow – as seen recently by the inability of the parliament to pass an election law. This means that provincial elections, which we believe will continue and enhance the process of reconciliation, will in all likelihood be pushed back until at least December. Elections also mean the possibility of increased violence.
- There have been some worrisome reports about sectarian efforts to either disrupt or slow the process of assimilation of the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi Security Forces. It is a reminder that sectarian tensions still exist and have the potential to undo recent progress at the local and national level.
- Despite Iran's pledges last year to stop providing weapons, training, and funding to armed militias, evidence suggests that this support continues.
- Iraqi security forces still lack many key capabilities. Many of their operations would simply not have been possible without Coalition enablers. That will remain the case for some time to come.
- The threat from Al Qaeda and other militant groups has receded, but is still very real. In the last few months, we have seen a number of suicide attacks – as well as tactical shifts, such as the increased use of women. This is a reminder that Al Qaeda still retains the ability to inflict mass casualties, the operational capacity to assess and change strategies, and is still trying to sow chaos and reassert itself.
- Similarly, there is the possibility that Jaish al-Mahdi could return.

On that note, I would like to make a few broader comments and put the successes of the last year and a half into some context.

The President has called our reduction in troop numbers a “return on success.” I of course agree, but I might expand further. The changes on the ground and in our posture are reflective of a fundamental change in the nature of the conflict. In past testimony, I have cautioned that, no matter what you think about the origins of the war in Iraq, we must get the endgame there right. I believe we have now entered that endgame – and our decisions today and in the months ahead will be critical to regional stability and

our national security interests in the next few years.

When I entered office, the main concern was to halt and reverse the spiraling violence in order to prevent a strategic calamity for the United States and allow the Iraqis to make progress on the political, economic, and security fronts. Although we all have criticisms of the Iraqi government, there can be no doubt that the situation is much different – and far better – than it was in early 2007. The situation, however, remains fragile.

Disagreements in our country still exist over the speed of the drawdowns and whether we should adhere to hard-and-fast timelines or more flexible time horizons.

I worry that the great progress our troops and the Iraqis have made has the potential to over-ride a measure of caution born of uncertainty. Our military commanders do not yet believe our gains are necessarily enduring – and they believe that there are still many challenges and the potential for reversals in the future. The continuing but carefully modulated reductions the President has ordered represent, I believe, not only the right direction but also the right course of action – especially considering planned and unplanned redeployments by some of our coalition partners. The planned reductions are an acceptable risk today, but also provide for unforeseen circumstances in the future. The reductions also preserve a broad range of options for the next commander in chief, who will make his own assessment after taking office in January.

As we proceed deeper into the endgame, I would urge our nation's leaders to implement strategies that, while steadily reducing our presence in Iraq, are cautious and flexible and take into account the advice of our senior commanders and military leaders. I would also urge our leaders to keep in mind that we should expect to be involved in Iraq for many years to come, although in changing and increasingly limited ways.

Let me shift to Afghanistan. There we are working with the Afghans and coalition partners to counter a classic extremist insurgency fueled by ideology, poppy, poverty, crime, and corruption.

During my recent visit to Afghanistan, I reaffirmed our commitment to success in that country – a commitment that includes increasing the size of our forces in country as well as the size and capabilities of the Afghan security forces. I also expressed my regret, and the regret of the American people, for the civilians killed and injured in coalition and NATO airstrikes. While no other nation in history has done more to protect the innocent, I pledged that we must, and will do better.

First, some positive developments:

- The international coalition, led by NATO, is more committed than it has ever been. We see this in increased troop contributions from our partners, as well as efforts to reduce some of the caveats they place on their troops. There are also increased resources being devoted to non-military efforts. Our allies deserve credit, and I thank them for their sacrifices.
- At the Paris Donors Conference in June, the international community pledged more than \$20 billion in assistance to Afghanistan.
- The United Nations appointed Ambassador Kai Eide of Norway as the Special Representative of the Secretary General to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Ambassador Eide has been empowered to play a greater role in coordinating international assistance to ensure aid is distributed effectively and where it is most needed.
- The Afghan National Army is more than 65,000 strong and growing. Earlier this month, the President announced an initiative to double the size of the Afghan National Army over the next

five years.

- The Afghan National Police lag behind the army, but here, too, progress is being made. There are nearly 80,000 police assigned today. Our main challenge is increasing the competence and reliability of the force, and that requires large numbers of mentors and trainers. So far we have been unable to fill most of what is required. Nonetheless, an innovative program called Focused District Development is helping build police forces capable of serving local Afghan communities.

Before addressing the increase in violence, let me mention other problem areas:

- Despite increased NATO contributions, we are still short in several areas. More maneuver forces are required, as well as aviation assets, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and mentors for the Afghan army. Where Allies cannot provide more troops and equipment, they need to provide other types of support to build Afghan capacity.
- There remain questions about the efficacy of having two lines of command – one for a contingent of U.S. troops training and equipping Afghan forces as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, and one for the ISAF mission, which also includes nearly 14,000 American troops.
- Coordination between PRTs and ISAF needs to be improved. Civilians in PRTs report to their respective capitals – which makes it difficult to synchronize PRT activities with military actions. We are working with Allies and partners to stand up a civil-military planning cell in the south to help coordinate PRTs in a more holistic fashion – both locally and regionally.
- Afghanistan's government must improve its delivery of essential services and extend its reach by reducing corruption and promoting faster development and a stronger economy. Here we do run up against some hard realities: Afghanistan has always been a diffuse, tribal nation with few natural resources and little infrastructure. To give you some idea, total annual revenue for the government is approximately \$700 million versus tens of billions in Iraq.

The persistent and increasing violence resulting from an organized insurgency is, of course, our greatest concern. With the flexibility provided by success in Iraq, the President has decided to send more troops to Afghanistan in response to resurgent extremism and violence reflecting greater ambition, sophistication, and coordination.

We did not get to this point overnight, so some historical context is useful. The mission in Afghanistan has evolved over the years – in both positive and negative ways. Reported insurgent activities and attacks have grown over the past 2 ½ years. In some cases, this is a result of safe havens in Pakistan and reduced military pressure on that side of the border. In others, it is the result of more international and Afghan troops on the battlefield – troops that are increasingly in contact with the enemy.

In response to increased violence and insurgent activity in 2006, in January of last year we extended the deployment of an Army brigade and added another brigade. This last spring, the United States deployed 3,500 Marines. In all, the number of American troops in the country increased from less than 21,000 two years ago to more than 31,000 today.

At the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April, ISAF Allies and Partners restated their commitment to Afghanistan. France added 700 troops in Eastern Afghanistan. This fall, Germany will seek to increase its troop ceiling from 3,500 to 4,500. Poland is also increasing its forces by 400 troops.

The number of Coalition troops – including NATO troops – increased from about 20,000 to nearly 31,000. It appears that this trend will continue – as other allies, such as the United Kingdom, add more

troops.

Thanks to success in Iraq, we will increase U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan by deploying a Marine battalion this November and in January 2009 an Army brigade combat team – units that had been slated for Iraq.

As in Iraq, however, additional forces alone will not solve the problem. Security is just one aspect of the campaign, alongside development and governance. We must maintain momentum, keep the international community engaged, and develop the capacity of the Afghan government. The entirety of the NATO alliance, the EU, NGOs, and other groups – our full military and civilian capabilities – must be on the same page and working toward the same goal with the Afghan government. I am still not satisfied with the level of coordination and collaboration among the numerous partners and many moving parts associated with civil reconstruction and development and building the capacity of the Afghan government. We do face committed enemies, which brings me to the challenge of the tribal areas of Pakistan. As in Iraq, until the insurgency is deprived of safe-havens, insecurity and violence will persist. We must continue to work with the Pakistani government to extend its authority in the tribal region and provide badly needed economic, medical, and educational assistance to Pakistani citizens there. At the same time, we continue to train and equip the paramilitary Frontier Corps and Pakistani military units so they can better secure the border area and carry out operations against militants.

We also continue to encourage the Afghans and Pakistanis to work together to secure their common border. This effort includes the establishment of more Border Coordination Centers jointly manned by ISAF, Afghan, and Pakistani troops; following up on the 2007 Joint Peace Jirga; and holding routine meetings of the Tripartite Commission.

I do believe Islamabad appreciates the magnitude of the threat from the tribal areas – particularly considering the uptick in suicide bombings directed at Pakistani targets, most recently the Marriott hotel in Islamabad. During this time of political turmoil in Pakistan, it is especially crucial that we maintain a strong and positive relationship with the government – since any deterioration would be a setback for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The War on Terror started in this region. It must end there.

One final point. Last year, Admiral Mullen noted that in Afghanistan we do what we can – while in Iraq, we do what we must. With the positive developments in Iraq, the strategic flexibility provided by ongoing troop reductions there, and the prospect of further reductions next year – I think it is possible in the months to come to do militarily what we must in both countries.

Let me close by again thanking all members of the committee – and the Congress as a whole – for their support of our men and women in uniform. I have noted on a number of occasions how positive the public response has been to those who have volunteered to serve. Our nation's leaders across the political spectrum have led the way in honoring our servicemen and women – not just by providing the funds they need for their mission, but also by publicly declaring their support and admiration of our troops. I share your sentiment. And I thank you all for your leadership during these challenging times.