

**By Rep Ike Skelton, Chairman, US House Armed Services Committee**

In recent weeks, reports from Afghanistan have been largely negative. We hear that operations in Marjah are not going as expected and the Taliban has begun a campaign of murder and intimidation there; the Kandahar operation has been postponed while the Taliban have been assassinating local government officials; U.S. and coalition casualties are increasing; and in some cases the United States has been contracting with the very warlords who intimidate the people of Afghanistan and undermine our efforts there.

To some, these reports reflect what they have always suspected—that our efforts in Afghanistan are futile. I do not share this view. Last fall, I advocated for a counter-insurgency campaign as the course most likely to prevent al Qaeda from re-establishing a safe haven in Afghanistan, and I still believe this to be true. While we face many challenges in Afghanistan, the type of challenges we face now were largely expected—as we surged troops, there would be hard fighting and many setbacks. I believe that this is the dark before the dawn.

Let me be clear—we face serious challenges in Afghanistan. But after many years of neglect in Afghanistan, there are positive signs as well—General McChrystal has reported that security is no longer declining; local populations are increasingly pointing out improvised explosive devices; and while we desperately need more trainers from NATO, the recruiting of new personnel for the Afghan security forces is ahead of schedule.

Increased cooperation with key nations in the region during the past year has also shown signs of success. Our Pakistani allies have arrested senior members of the Taliban leadership, while the Afghan government and our forces have had great success targeting the local shadow governors. Further, we must remember that not all of our forces are deployed yet, which must happen before we rush to judgment.

"I do not doubt that we can face down the insurgency on the field of battle. While our troops are tired from many deployments, those same combat tours have made them into the best counterinsurgency force in history. What concerns me is the capacity of the Afghan government to sustain the military success provided by U.S. and Afghan troops. Ultimately, it is this ability that will convince the Afghan people to stand against al Qaeda and the Taliban.

"In recent weeks, we have seen mixed signals about this capacity. President Karzai forced out two of his most competent and highly regarded ministers. Media stories repeatedly bring home examples of corruption undermining our efforts. And yet, at the same time, the Afghan government has forced out and prosecuted a number of government officials for corruption, including the former Border Police Chief for Kandahar.

Further, data suggest that the Afghan people are showing increased confidence in their local governments and increased confidence that their national government is headed in the right

direction. While small and not irreversible, these significant signs give us some hope of progress.

This December, the President has promised to review the progress of his strategy in Afghanistan. We are seeking to understand what this review will entail and set some expectations for it. December is a reasonable time to review progress—all the surge troops will have arrived on the ground and been undertaking operations for several months. We also need to understand more about what we expect to see before December, particularly in Kandahar, which is so critical in the forthcoming months. What progress can we expect to see among the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government?

We all know Afghanistan will not become peaceful and successful overnight, but what signs are reasonable to expect and would represent enough progress to suggest we should continue on our present course?