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Chairman Menendez Opening Remarks at “Transition in Afghanistan” Hearing

WASHINGTON, DC – U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, delivered the below statement, as prepared for delivery, at today’s hearing on the transition in Afghanistan. The remarks follow:

“Good afternoon everyone. And thank you to our witnesses – Ambassador Dobbins and Acting Assistant Administrator Donald Sampler.

In July, this Committee met to assess the transition in Afghanistan. Mr. Ambassador, you had been on the job only two months at the time. In looking over the transcript from that hearing, I was struck by how the issues remain virtually the same 5 months later.

I look forward to hearing what both of you believe we should expect in the coming months as well as your perspective on some broader concerns I have with respect to the State Department and USAID’s planning for a post-2014 presence.

Clearly, this is a critical time in the transition process. President Karzai has – in my view -- unwisely decided to gamble with the lives of millions of his citizens with the delay in signing the Bilateral Security Agreement, testing our patience and threatening the progress made by so many Afghans in partnership with the international community since 2001.

This brinksmanship is unwarranted and – frankly – insulting to the sacrifices made by the United States military and taxpayers, and is not in Afghanistan’s best interest.

Don’t take my word for it. Ask the thousands of Afghans who participated in the Loya Jirga last month and overwhelmingly called for Afghanistan to sign the BSA. Ask leaders in the region who have called upon Afghanistan to sign. Ask Afghan civil society leaders who – without a smooth and stable transition – stand to lose ground gained over

the past decade. And ask the women of Afghanistan who stand to lose the most if Afghanistan falls victim to the kind of violence we saw in the 90's.

Any further delay will have real implications on the ground. First, every day that passes makes it more difficult to plan militarily.

Second, the longer the delay – the more players in Afghanistan and across the region hedge their bets – leading good people to leave Afghanistan and take needed capital with them.

Simply put: at some point, the U.S. has to ask if we should let our long term interests and our substantial investments in Afghanistan be determined by a lame duck president?

If we are not able to finalize the BSA, the results are clear. All U.S. troops would have to leave the country. Support in Congress for appropriations for the Afghan military and development efforts will diminish and we will not be able to support the Afghan military in any significant way or be able to provide development assistance at the same levels.

Afghans seem to understand this – it's unfortunate that President Karzai doesn't.

Let me reiterate that the U.S. will not interfere in the election process. The choice of president and provincial officials will rest with the Afghan people. But the future of international assistance will depend on the integrity of the process.

We've seen some progress with respect to the election preparations, but I'm still concerned about the security situation. We know that hundreds of polling places will not be able to open. Many are in areas too dangerous for domestic and international observation.

I'm also deeply concerned about the disenfranchisement of women, especially in rural areas where it has been difficult to recruit Afghan women to serve in security roles at polling stations.

It's also clear that President Karzai's behavior makes it difficult to plan our diplomatic and development efforts and I look forward to our witnesses providing the Committee with a better understanding of the administration's planning for the State Department and USAID's footprint post-2014.

Having laid out those broad parameters let me thank you both for being here. I look forward to our discussion.”

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