

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement For Hearing on Marjah
May 6, 2010

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing On Marjah

WASHINGTON, D.C.--Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) today delivered the following opening statement at a hearing on Marjah:

Full text as prepared is below:

Thank you all for coming today. This morning's discussion is the latest in a series of hearings this committee has held on Afghanistan. Last year, as the administration weighed a series of difficult choices, we sought to explore the options in depth. Today, we hope to hear how those decisions are playing out on the ground.

This is the first congressional hearing on our mission in Marjah. Before our offensive began there in February, this village in southern Afghanistan was unknown to most of the outside world and even to most Afghans. Today, it has become the leading edge of the Administration's new strategy.

Marjah is the site of the largest coalition offensive since 2001 and the first major combat operation since the President unveiled our new strategy last December. That is why the meaning of our efforts there merits serious examination.

Today, Marjah does not appear to be a turning point in our overall mission. Although the outcome in military terms was not in doubt, our Marines and their NATO and Afghan partners performed heroically, and we honor them and their sacrifices.

Nor is Marjah a great Afghan city like Kabul, Herat, or Kandahar. But Marjah and neighboring Nad Ali do have strategic and symbolic importance. Marjah was the last Taliban stronghold in the central Helmand River Valley and the poppy production hub of Afghanistan and the world. Establishing long-term security and developing a legitimate economy in Helmand Province would significantly undercut our enemies and help our overall effort.

While our challenges in big cities like Kandahar will differ dramatically, what we faced in Marjah does represent a test case for the partnerships we hope to build. Better cooperation within our integrated civilian-military effort and between coalition forces and all levels of the Afghan government will be vital as the mission moves beyond Marjah. It is encouraging that Afghan security forces and Governor Gulab Mangal of Helmand Province were involved in the planning and execution of this offensive. Soon after major fighting ended, President Hamid Karzai visited Marjah and signaled his commitment to a new beginning there.

So what has this new start brought?

There are indications that we are making progress. US forces have embarked on a robust effort to help Afghans clear rubble from schools, clean canals, repair markets, build bridges and compensate families who lost members as a result of the combat. On the civilian side, we are starting to put locals to work and provide agriculture vouchers to wean farmers from poppy production. Though its officials face continuing threats from the Taliban that constrain their movement, with our help, a local Afghan government is in place in Marjah for the first time in years.

We are finally changing the way we do business. But unless these changes resonate with Afghans, they won't be enough. The ultimate measure of our success will be whether we can win the trust of the Afghan people and transfer security and governance to them. Our challenge was never only to clear territory, but to hold, build, and transfer that territory back to our Afghan partners.

Unfortunately, the initial word from hundreds of villagers of Marjah suggests the full measure of our challenge. A recent survey conducted by the International Council on Security and Development showed that a vast majority of villagers felt negatively about foreign troops and that more young Afghans had joined the Taliban over the last year. Worse still were the reasons they had signed up with the Taliban: they said they joined because they had no jobs, because they had no money to get married or buy land, because they had no other future. In short, the coalition and their own government have not provided promising alternatives.

These concerns carry weight. Addressing the discontent of the Afghan people will greatly improve our chances of defeating the Taliban and its affiliates. I look forward to discussing these and other issues with President Karzai during his visit to Washington next week.

It's clear that that we have a formidable task ahead of us in Afghanistan. We are fortunate to have with us two witnesses who can speak directly to what is happening in Marjah and to the significance of our mission there and in Afghanistan more broadly.

Frank Ruggiero is the top American civilian official in southern Afghanistan, where he coordinates our governance, development and reconstruction projects. Mr. Ruggiero, I especially want to thank you for traveling here from Afghanistan to testify today.

We are also pleased to welcome Brigadier General John Nicholson, the director of the Pakistan Afghanistan coordination cell for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Until just a few months ago, General Nicholson was helping lead the military campaign in southern Afghanistan. And I appreciated the insightful briefing he gave last year on our flight to Zabul and look forward to hearing his thoughts again today.

Joining them at the table is David Sedney, the deputy assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Before turning to Senator Lugar, I want to mention to my colleagues that, for obvious reasons, Mr. Ruggiero and General Nicholson won't be discussing the details of our upcoming campaign in Kandahar. Even so, we have two excellent witnesses and a great deal to discuss this morning.

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