

Transcript: General Stanley A. McChrystal, Commander, International Security Assistance Force – Afghanistan

Roundtable with Afghan print and radio media (Pajhwok News, Benawa News, Quqnoos News, Radio Azadi and BBC Dari/Pashtu)

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GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I just want to open by saying that I think the next six months, or probably to the end of 2010, are going to be very important – not just from a security standpoint but also politically. President Karzai is going to conduct a Consultative Jirga. President Karzai will travel to the United States, and I'll go with him. They will have the Kabul Conference in the summer, which will bring senior foreign ministers from all around the world here for what I think is a major event. There will be parliamentary elections.

So there are a number of events that I think are exceptionally important to the future of Afghanistan, politically and socially. And we are going to try to partner with Afghan security forces to help with the security, the backdrop for that. We're proud to do that, and sometimes I remind people that we're the International Security Assistance Force.

[Translation] Great, and with that I'll open it to your questions.

Q: Can I ask you a question about planned operations in Kandahar? Because we've been hearing about planned operations for three months, we've been seeing attacks in Kandahar on almost a daily basis ... When will it start? What kind of operation will it be? Will it be like Marjah, or is it different?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: The security in Kandahar has always been important to Afghanistan, historically and recently over the years as you know there's been pressure, and a number of suicide bombings, murders ... even before the most recent period.

[Translation] Several months ago, President Karzai approved a campaign plan that would include us improving the security in Kandahar as soon as we had the capability to do that, in forces and time. [Translation]

This will really be a process. Part of that process is political activity to improve the governance in Kandahar. President Karzai's shura that he conducted down there a few weeks ago that I was able to attend was part of that. [Translation] To support that process, we are working towards increased security by partnering with Afghan security forces inside the city, primarily the police, and then outside the city in the critical districts – like Arghandab, Zahray and Panjwa'i – we will work to create better security around the city. [Translation]

But like any operation like this, it will take a long time. It will take a number of months. It won't be a sudden operation that ends overnight. It will take months to improve security. [Translation] And as President Karzai has directed, we are going to try to do that with as little violence as possible, with as few instances of damage to property or accidental deaths, and we'll try to prevent the insurgents having access to the people to do suicide bombs like they've been doing. [Translation]

I suspect in some areas there will be some fighting, particularly in the districts outside, but I don't expect – and we don't want to have – big battles. What we want to do is what we call a “rising tide of security.” It just gets better and better. [Translation]

An important point is that we are not doing a traditional military operation to capture a piece of ground that's a city. The purpose of this operation is the people – and there are about a million people in Kandahar. So the intent is to try to create a better security situation to protect the people of Kandahar. [Translation]

Q: Asking the local elders and tribes, this is part of NATO's new strategy. When you start operations in Helmand you ask permission, and in Kandahar this time. Is this Karzai's political pressure or [inaudible]?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: Asking the people is part of the strategy. Before we went in to Marjah, we coordinated with the people for a number of months, with leaders. We asked leaders who were already outside the town to meet, and we asked leaders from inside the district of Marjah to meet as well, because we wanted their thoughts, we wanted their guidance, and we wanted them to ask us to do the operation. [Translation] We believe that if this effort is really being done on behalf of the Afghan people, then we need to ask the Afghan people what they want – and how they want the operation, if they want the operation, do they want better security, those things, and get a sense of that. [Translation]

Q: But still people think that this is Karzai's pressure, that he prevents you.

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: President Karzai is the commander. I work for President Karzai. So he can direct our operations, but this is not his pressure, this is his coordination and my complete agreement that we need to work with the people. Security at the end of the day is for the people, but it's also by the people. They will help provide that security. So I think that that engagement is critical. [Translation]

Q: There are some reports from the ground in Kandahar that the current conflict is between two big tribes. The one is Popalzai of President Karzai, and the other is Barakzai tribe. So the Barakzai say, “We will fight to our end.” So how do you think you will achieve your influence on the ground?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think the situation in Kandahar is even more complex than one tribe against another, but it's very complex. I think that it is critical that we do the political engagement by the government of Afghanistan so that all of the different groups that live in Kandahar – all of the many tribes that live there, and different elements – have a chance to participate and be represented. That's why it's so important when a shura is conducted or a body is formed, that all of the elements get a chance to be a part of that. Because anyone that's left out can feel as though they may have been put in a disadvantaged position, and that's the kind of situation we've historically seen insurgents have leveraged. They move on to people who are dissatisfied and use them. [Translation]

Q: Many people of Kandahar don't want the "King of Kandahar" to be here in the city anymore. So what is the position of NATO against the "King of Kandahar" – you know the name of the person.

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: NATO's position is the government of Afghanistan, national, and the people of Kandahar have the right and the responsibility to determine the governance of Kandahar City and the provinces, and they should determine the role of each individual. And so I think that it's important that they craft that through a political process that represents everyone and lets them come out with the right relationships. [Translation]

Q [through translator]: The operation in Marjah, unfortunately because of the lack of the accounting system and also the set up of the government in Marjah, was not successful. And also we can see that the district manager who was appointed in Marjah has a criminal record in Germany. So in southern Afghanistan the problem is not the insurgent or Taliban. The problem is the lack of governance. They've heard the United States has the initiative to help the local people, so what is your initiative to do that? Civilian, military, or both of them?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I will start with the beginning of this question. Three months ago, you and I could not go to Marjah. [Translation] I've been to Marjah several times in the last few months, and I'll go again very soon. [Translation] I walk the bazaar, and I don't wear body armor. [Translation] So the operation has been a success. [Translation] But like you say, that success is not complete. That success won't be complete until the dissatisfaction with governance, which is justice, police ... until we get that right. [Translation] The people are frustrated because they have not been well treated in the past, and it will take a long time to prove to them through actions by the government and development help to really convince them. [Translation] But as we do that, and as we increase their opportunities – for education, for business, for agriculture – then the insurgents, when they attack and do bombings and what not, what they'll be doing is

they'll be attacking things that the people value. And the insurgents will become increasingly outsiders that the villagers will help us resist. [Translation]

To the second part of the question, what ISAF does to help with the governance and development is actually more important and more valuable than what we do with security. [Translation] If we can help the district center to reopen, if we can help a road to be built, if we can help crops get to market, then that makes society stronger. [Translation] We will fight when necessary to protect the population, but we would much prefer – it's much more effective for most of our effort – to be shaping a better existence for the people because that's what they will then look at. [Translation] I apologize for the long answer.

Q [through translator]: What do you think about this big operation we did in Marjah – it was all over the news around the world – when we support a criminal to become the district manager of Marjah? It's going to disappoint the people. How do you see this?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think all of the leaders in Afghanistan at every level have to establish their credibility based on their record, on their performance. This is a country where there's been 31 years of war, and a lot of people have a history, and I think that we need to be careful not to judge everybody too hard on their past and instead look at what they're doing for the nation. [Translation]

Q [through translator]: We know Ahmed Wali Karzai was accused of some things like narcotrafficking, insurgent relationships and all these things. What do you think? Are you going to decide to remove him from that area, or is he going to stay there? What is your assessment of the right thing to do?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think it's important that we go back to the idea of the sovereignty of Afghanistan. I think it's important that the government of Afghanistan be responsible for selecting or removing leaders anywhere in the country. [Translation]

Q [through translator]: If we compare Marjah to Kandahar, Marjah is a lot smaller, and as you said before the political [aspect] in Kandahar is also important. What do you think in terms of what kind of procedure is going to be done in Kandahar because it is larger and needs a lot more resources?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: Yes, Kandahar will be very different from Marjah, not just because of size but because of conditions. For example, the Taliban are not running Kandahar now. There is a society that's up and running. [Translation] But I think that it's important that the people of Kandahar – along with their governor, with their president – must craft a political environment that they believe is fair. [Translation] The key to security operations is providing an environment to do that. For example, if there were attacks ongoing here in Kabul, you would not be able to be here to talk. We would

not be able to have the Victory [Day] parade today. It's important that society be able to function so that all those other things can occur. [Translation] What insurgents try to do is disrupt society so that normal things won't occur: children won't be able to go to school, government won't be able to operate, electricity can't be generated. And when the insurgent does that, he makes it very difficult for the government and for the people to move forward, and we're trying to stop that. [Translation]

Q: As we've witnessed in the past several days, in Kandahar there are many terroristic attacks so the insurgents can show they are strong in Kandahar. Do you think this will take the same number of troops that attended the Marjah operation, or will it take more than that?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: You are exactly right: the insurgents are trying to scare the people and show that they are strong in Kandahar. [Translation] But I don't believe that going into a mosque and murdering a man shows that you're strong. [Translation] I believe that protecting a mosque so that people can pray in peace shows that you're strong. [Translation] And I believe the people know that. [Translation] I won't discuss the exact number of forces, but I will say that we will be able to have more Afghan National Police, particularly in the city, along with we expect Afghan National Civil Order Police helping them, partnered with the coalition, and then outside the city there will be more Afghan National Army and coalition helping. [Translation]

Q: As you know, a few weeks before the people of Kandahar, in a meeting with the president, they said no operation. If you want to start an operation, then again the people say "no operation," they don't need an operation. So what do you make of this?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I was at the meeting, and the people of Kandahar did not say no to the operation. [Translation] The people of Kandahar said that "We have many challenges here, Mr. President. We have a security problem," but they also said, "Mr. President, we have a governance problem, and you need to help us with that." [Translation] And they basically said, as I understood it, don't do the military operation unless you're also going to do governance. [Translation] And the president said that we would not do anything without consulting the leaders in the area, which I think is his plan and is the right course of action. [Translation]

Q [through translator]: What do you think about this discussion on changes to improve the governance in southern Afghanistan?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think there is much discussion about how to best craft governance across the country. I think it's complex, and I think it will be ongoing, and I'm not a politician, so that's not my thing. [Translation]

Q: There seems to be more focus on transferring responsibility to the Afghan National Army. Do you think they are ready to accept that responsibility? Because some people think that this decision is more focused on an exit strategy. So, is this the case or not?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: That's a good question, but I don't think – I know that I am not focused on an exit strategy. I know that Afghan National Security Forces are getting better every day. There are areas of the country that I am confident that they have the ability to provide good security already. But I think that we can continue to partner with them and allow them to grow larger and allow them to grow more mature, and I think that is important over the coming months – and years. I think a long-term strategic partnership is essential. [Translation]

Q: [inaudible]

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think wider than that, the ability and effectiveness of the government of Afghanistan at every level to provide fair governance to the people is essential to the future of the country. I think that way beyond any operation, that is critical to the nation's health. That should be, and I think it is, the focus of an awful lot of people.

Q: What is your expectation from the Karzai government?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think that as they move forward to provide just that for the Afghan people, my expectations are not that important. It's important that they meet the expectations of the Afghan people. [Translation]

Q: This is about alleged support of insurgents from neighboring countries. President Karzai has said this many times, that insurgents are not in the villages and towns of Afghanistan, that they are training essentially outside of Afghanistan. So what do you make of this, that they should be stopped at the border and they shouldn't be fighting in the cities and towns of Afghanistan? What are you planning to do?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I think both are true. There are insurgents in the villages of Afghanistan, that are from the villages of Afghanistan. There are also insurgents that go back and forth across international borders, and there are international terrorists that do that as well. So I think we need to do two things. I think we need to do the counterinsurgency strategy in every part of Afghanistan that is challenges – every village, every area – but we also need to have relationships with the neighboring countries that provide security both ways. I think it's important that neighbors have confidence that the country to which they have borders don't allow insurgents to operate or base inside to launch into their country, and we see allegations of this in multiple directions. I think it's important that all of the nations understand it's all in the interests

of stability to stop that movement in each direction. I think we see that here, and I think it's key. [Translation]

Q: [inaudible] ... Iran, because Iran has great relation with government of Afghanistan?

GEN MCCHRYSTAL: I didn't accuse the Iranian government of doing anything. What I said was we see some munitions and some training – some training occurring in Afghanistan and some munitions coming from outside. I'm not sure if it's the Iranian government, or who. But it's the kind of movement across borders that is a challenge to all the nations. So I think that all the nations have a strong reason to want to stop it. As we know, many drugs leave Afghanistan and go into Iran, and they have a terrible domestic drug problem. So I think that's a common cause between two neighboring countries that could be a strong basis for continuing to move forward. [Translation]

I want to thank all of you for coming today. I'm going to leave now and go to the south, I'm going to go to areas where a few months ago none of us could have gone, and visit Afghan forces and coalition forces, and listen to people. But thank you for what you're doing. I think we're all part of the process to try to let Afghanistan shape its future. [Translation]