

## **Opening Statement by Senator Robert R. Bennett**

**December 17, 2009**

### **Subcommittee on Contracting Oversight**

#### **U.S. Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee**

##### **“Afghanistan Contracting: An Overview”**

There have been several hearings in recent weeks where cabinet and military leaders have presented their new goals in Afghanistan. This, however, is the first hearing that will examine the actual ground-level implementation of the plan. A lot of attention has been given to additional deployments of troops to Afghanistan – and there should be – but lost in this discussion is that behind those troops are an equal number of contractors who are helping to fulfill this mission.

There are over one-hundred-thousand contractors currently performing important services in Afghanistan, and with the intensification of our efforts there, their performance is essential. I am not citing this number to alarm anyone – in fact; I believe that contracting is a good thing. When contractors can relieve our troops from doing support work, they can concentrate on the mission they were trained and deployed to do – war-fighting. When used by our civilian reconstruction agencies, contractors enable a broader extension of our building and development expertise. Finally, when we use local contractors, we bolster the delicate and growing Afghan economy by funding their private sector.

We have also witnessed a sea-change in the way our military mission and our reconstruction efforts are linked. The war in Afghanistan is now described as a counter-insurgency operation, which means that the real battleground against our enemy is fought not only on the front lines, but in the village schools and marketplaces. That means our victory in Afghanistan relies of the deployment of the sword and the ploughshare at the same time – first to anchor our military achievements, and over time, to develop a lasting partnership with the Afghan people.

I am encouraged by initiatives like the Commanders Emergency Response Program, or CERP. This novel idea allows an Army or Marine officer to identify local development projects right in their area of operations. When our troops can contract this way, they are able to bring our reconstruction efforts right up to the front lines.

We need contractors, but we also need to be meticulous stewards of our spending in Afghanistan – where every taxpayer dollar we spend goes towards supporting our war mission or stabilizing a dangerous and hostile region. Our recent experience in Iraq, however, proves that

this ideal is difficult to attain. The stories of waste, fraud and abuse in Iraq are well known, and we must strive to make sure we do not repeat those mistakes in Afghanistan.

When I consider the contracting shortfalls in Iraq, I am concerned that too often, when our government agencies outsource their work they also outsource the results. This is poor business practice, whether in the marketplace here at home, or on the front lines of Afghanistan. In either case, poor management and oversight can lead to sub-standard performance on a contract, if not outright failures.

In such a volatile environment as war-torn Afghanistan, it is more important than ever that we are mindful of contractor performance, and that contractors are an extension of our forces abroad. We must be sure that the command, control and communication of contractors in theater is no less than we would expect of that within our own military units or civilian agencies. Also, we must recognize that contractors, often as much as our troops or civilian government employees represent the ethics and values of our nation to the Afghan people, and great care must be taken that we are represented well.

My final concern is to ensure that the local accomplishments we achieve are coordinated through a clear and comprehensive strategy. The current efforts in the reconstruction of Afghanistan are too often poorly linked and ill-defined. CERP and other such programs need to be given the same level of coordination and strategic thinking that other aspects of our military operations receive, harnessing their reconstructive potential into solid, long-lasting results.

Our military and civilian reconstruction agencies must overcome the traditional divide that once led them to work independently, and often at cross-purposes. Each must recognize the advantages the other brings, and leverage those strengths for success. A good, comprehensive strategy will lead to better execution on the ground, and from that will come more informed contracting decisions.

Let me finish with this admonition – what we are discussing today is a broad subject, but we should not fall into the trap of considering these issues in the abstract. Every improvement we can find in our contracting practices is a dollar saved not only for the American taxpayer, but in furtherance of our vital efforts overseas. I look forward to hearing the insights our witnesses have on these issues, as we work toward strengthening our security through stabilizing Afghanistan, and supporting our troops and civilians as they fulfill this mission.