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May 5, 2010

Congressional Committees

Subject: *Afghanistan's Security Environment*

In December 2009, recognizing that the situation in Afghanistan had become more grave since the March 2009 announcement of the U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the administration concluded a 10-week review of the strategy's goals and the methods needed to achieve them. In announcing the results of this review, the President reaffirmed the core strategic goal of disrupting, dismantling, and eventually defeating extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan and preventing them from threatening the United States and its allies in the future. To meet this goal, the President announced his decision to rapidly deploy an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. In addition, he pledged a "surge" of civilian experts to help enhance the capacity of Afghan government institutions and assist in the rehabilitation of key economic sectors.

Since the President's December 2009 announcement, about 16,000 of the additional U.S. troops have gradually deployed to Afghanistan—including about 10,000 as of March 2010 and approximately another 6,000 since that time—and the number of U.S. government civilians present in country has grown by about 200. In February 2010, in what senior Department of Defense (DOD) officials have described as the first step in a prolonged effort to break the momentum of the insurgency where it has been the strongest—southern Afghanistan—U.S., coalition, and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)<sup>1</sup> launched a campaign to clear insurgent safe havens in the central Helmand river valley. According to DOD officials, the intent of these operations was to pave the way for reconstitution of the Afghan government in Helmand province, and Defense has indicated that similar operations will follow in Kandahar province.

We previously reported on security conditions in Afghanistan in November 2009.<sup>2</sup> This report provides updated information on (1) the security situation as gauged by trends in enemy-initiated attacks; (2) challenges for U.S. reconstruction efforts posed by security conditions; and (3) recent increases in U.S., coalition, and Afghan troops and U.S. civilian presence. To address these objectives, we incorporated information from our past and continuing work and analyzed updated data on attacks. According to Defense Intelligence Agency officials, the data they report on enemy-initiated attacks represent a reliable and consistent source of information that can be used to identify trends in enemy activity and the overall security situation in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup>The ANSF consists of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

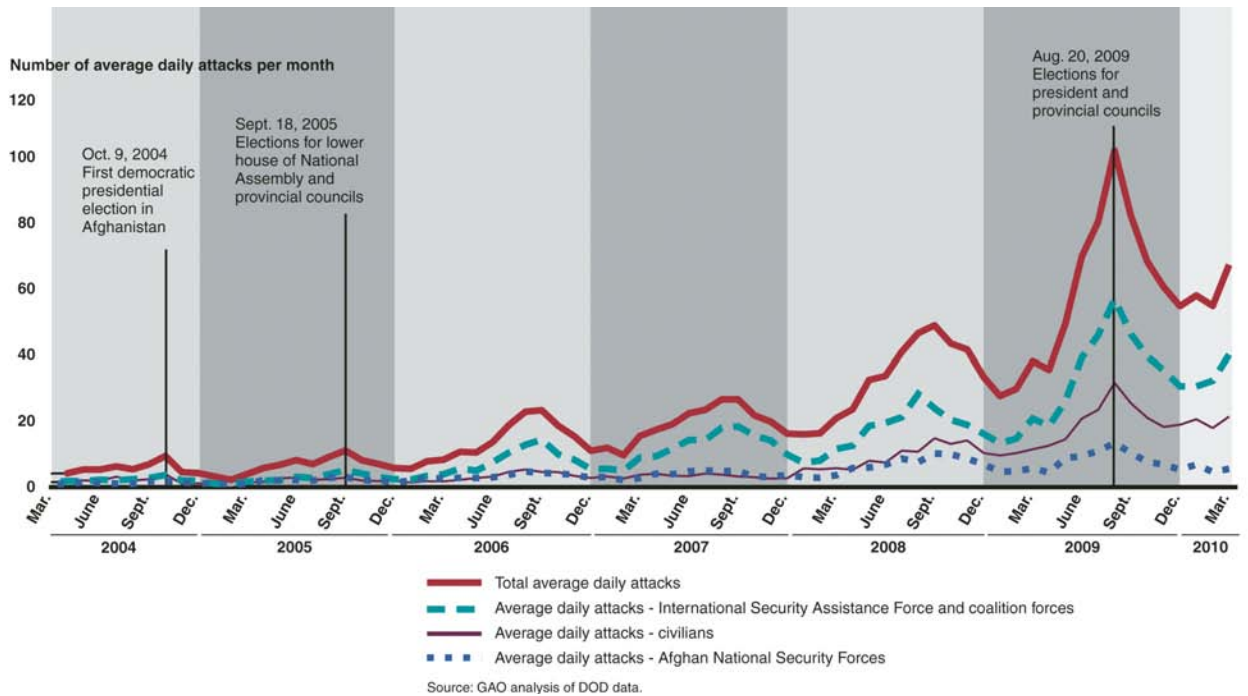
<sup>2</sup>GAO, *Afghanistan's Security Environment*, GAO-10-178R (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 5, 2009).

Moreover, senior DOD officials have used enemy-initiated attack levels as an indicator of the security situation in overseas contingency environments on several occasions. As such, while we acknowledge that these attack data are one measure of the security situation and are not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of the Afghan security environment or the factors that affect it, we include them in this report for broad comparative purposes to identify trends in enemy activity over time. In addition to analyzing attack data, we also analyzed updated data on troop numbers and civilian presence and reviewed relevant documents from DOD, the Department of State (State), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as the administration's Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additional details on our scope and methodology are provided later in this report.

### **Trends in Enemy-Initiated Attacks in Afghanistan**

DOD attack data as of March 2010 show that the pattern of enemy-initiated attacks in Afghanistan has remained seasonal in nature, generally peaking from June through September each year and then declining during the winter months (see fig. 1). As figure 1 indicates, while attacks have continued to fluctuate seasonally, the annual attack "peak" (high point) and "trough" (low point) for each year since September 2005 have surpassed the peak and trough, respectively, for the preceding year. Similarly, while attack levels have fallen since their August 2009 peak, they remain higher than comparable figures from prior years. For example, total attacks against coalition forces between September 2009 and March 2010 increased by about 83 percent in comparison to the same period last year, while attacks against civilians rose by about 72 percent. Total attacks against the ANSF increased by about 17 percent over the same period.

**Figure 1: Average Daily Enemy-Initiated Attacks Reported by Type in Afghanistan, March 2004 to March 2010**



**Notes:**

Data on attacks against civilians include attacks against Afghan nationals and other civilians, U.S. and non-U.S. contractors, nongovernmental organizations, and Afghan government personnel. Data on attacks against the International Security Assistance Force and coalition forces include attacks against U.S. and International Security Assistance Force military personnel.

Defense Intelligence Agency officials told us that, in October 2009, they transitioned to using a more comprehensive source database of security incidents from which to identify enemy-initiated attacks. As such, some of the specific attack levels shown in this figure may be slightly higher than the attack levels that we noted for the same months in our November 2009 report because these numbers have been updated. However, the general trend of attacks remains the same as what we previously reported.

DOD data indicate that, overall, more than 21,000 enemy-initiated attacks were recorded in 2009—an increase of about 75 percent over the total number of attacks in 2008. According to the commander of the U.S. Central Command, overall security incidents can be expected to continue their rise in the summer of 2010, as U.S. and coalition partners fight to retake enemy strongholds and, as a result, face an increased risk of enemy attacks. According to this same official, the resilience of the insurgency has been facilitated by several factors, including the porous nature of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, the ineffective nature of governance and services in various parts of Afghanistan, assistance from militant groups outside of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and continued financial support in the form of narcotics trafficking revenue and funds from outside of the region. In March 2010, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that the Taliban’s resurgence since 2005 had produced a widespread paramilitary, shadow government, and extrajudicial presence in a majority of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. He also noted that Taliban attacks had grown in sophistication and stated that the security situation in Afghanistan remained “serious.”

## Agencies Cite Security Challenges to Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan

State's January 2010 Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy cites reconstruction and development as key elements of the overall effort to stabilize Afghanistan and reduce the strength of the insurgency. However, the strategy acknowledges that the success of such civilian programs in Afghanistan is contingent on improved security. In November 2009, we reported that while U.S. and international development projects in Afghanistan had made some progress, deteriorating security complicated such efforts to stabilize and rebuild the country. Since that time, the lack of a secure environment has continued to challenge reconstruction and development efforts. For example, according to a March 2010 United Nations report,<sup>3</sup> direct attacks against the aid community have limited the accessibility of development program activities in 94 districts<sup>4</sup> considered very high risk and 81 districts assessed as high risk. The following list provides some specific effects of these security challenges as cited by U.S. agencies:

- *Delayed programs and increased costs.* According to USAID, security constraints in Afghanistan have led to longer implementation times and higher costs for projects in nonsecure areas. For example, USAID noted that militant activity has increased the cost of efforts to supply power generators to the Kandahar Industrial Park. Specifically, the August 2009 bombing of a warehouse facility resulted in \$250,000 in damage to the generators, which, as of March 2010, had yet to be installed. Similarly, USAID cited difficulty in accessing villages in nonsecure areas that are participating in an approximately \$40 million literacy program, leading to months of delay in the ability of the participating villages to complete the program. According to USAID, the implementing partner for the literacy program has requested more than \$600,000 in additional funding from USAID to upgrade security for the program.
- *Hampered progress of some counternarcotics operations.* As we reported in March 2010,<sup>5</sup> opium poppy eradication and public information efforts in Afghanistan have been constrained by poor security, particularly in insurgency-dominated provinces. According to State, as opium poppy cultivation becomes more concentrated in areas of poor security, opportunities for eradication have become more limited. In particular, U.S. officials note that adequate force protection is essential for eradication in the south. Similarly, security concerns largely dictate how often and how far Counternarcotics Advisory Teams can travel outside of their bases of operations. For example, in less secure southern areas, such as Kandahar, some advisory teams' movements have been limited, while other teams have been compelled to retreat to military bases for protection. The advisory team in the western Farah province reported that its main problem is the lack of security, which restricts it to daylight operations in the provincial capital.

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<sup>3</sup>United Nations, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security* (March 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Afghanistan consists of 365 districts in total.

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *Afghanistan Drug Control: Strategy Evolving and Progress Reported, but Interim Performance Targets and Evaluation of Justice Reform Efforts Needed*, GAO-10-291 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 9, 2010).

- *Limited ability to conduct oversight of ongoing programs.* USAID has cited the security environment in Afghanistan as a severe impediment to its ability to monitor projects. For example, USAID noted that solely traveling by road to visit alternative development, food assistance, and environmental projects in rural areas of northern and eastern Afghanistan is normally not allowed due to security constraints, and must consequently be combined with some air travel. However, air service in much of the north and east is limited during the winter months, which has complicated oversight efforts. Similarly, USAID officials are required to travel with armored vehicles and armed escorts to visit projects in much of the country. Consequently, as USAID officials stated, their ability to arrange project visits can become restricted if military forces cannot provide the necessary vehicles or escorts because of heightened fighting or other priorities. According to USAID, limited monitoring due to security concerns has heightened the risk of fraud, waste, and mismanagement of its resources.

### **Increased Troop and Civilian Presence Is Intended to Help Secure and Stabilize Afghanistan**

According to the U.S. Central Command, as of April 2010, there were reportedly almost 84,000 U.S. military personnel<sup>6</sup> in Afghanistan—a result of the gradual increase in U.S. force levels from the 68,000 present in country at the time of the President’s December 2009 commitment to deploy additional troops to target the insurgency, secure population centers, and train the ANSF. Overall, the number of U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan is expected to increase from 68,000 to about 98,000 once all 30,000 additional troops are deployed.

As of April 2010, there were also reportedly about 40,000 military personnel from non-U.S. countries in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)<sup>7</sup>—an increase of about 1,000 from the reported December 2009 force level of 39,000. Additionally, ISAF reported nearly 113,000 Afghan National Army forces assigned to the ANSF as of April 2010—about 13,000 more than were reported as being assigned as of December 2009—and current ISAF planning calls for further growth of the Afghan National Army to 171,600 personnel by October 2011.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the ongoing expansion of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the United States has also significantly increased its civilian presence in Afghanistan. State’s Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy identifies additional civilian expertise as a key element of stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. Overall, the total U.S. government civilian presence grew from about 360 in January 2009 to approximately 1,000 as of March 2010, including an increase of about 200 civilians since December 2009. According to State’s Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy, the United States anticipates increasing civilian staffing by an additional 20 to 30 percent over the course of 2010. The strategy also identifies expanded civilian presence in Afghan ministries and outside of Kabul as a key

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<sup>6</sup>We did not assess the readiness of U.S. military personnel serving in Afghanistan as part of this review. GAO is currently performing a separate review of the availability of trained and ready forces for Afghanistan and Iraq.

<sup>7</sup>As of April 2010, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led ISAF consisted of troops from 46 countries engaged in efforts to secure and stabilize Afghanistan.

<sup>8</sup>GAO is currently performing a separate review of U.S. efforts to develop the Afghan National Army.

initiative, and states that several hundred personnel are being assigned to more than 50 locations outside of Kabul.<sup>9</sup>

### **Agency Comments**

We provided a draft of this report to DOD, USAID, and State. All three agencies provided technical comments, which we have incorporated throughout the draft as appropriate.

### **Scope and Methodology**

This report is an update to our prior work on security conditions in Afghanistan and is based on past and continuing work. To address our objectives, we incorporated updated attack data from the Defense Intelligence Agency, which we used to assess the level of enemy-initiated attacks on civilians and on U.S., Afghan, and coalition security forces. According to Defense Intelligence Agency officials, the data they report on enemy-initiated attacks do not include violent incidents that coalition or Afghan security forces initiated, but represent a reliable and consistent source of information that can be used to identify trends in enemy activity and the overall security situation. We have assessed the reliability of these attack data as part of our previous work and have determined that they are sufficiently reliable for our purposes. Given the Defense Intelligence Agency's October 2009 decision to transition to a different source database of security incidents from which to identify enemy-initiated attacks, we conducted additional reliability checks and determined that the attack data remain sufficiently reliable for our purposes. The report also incorporates updated data on troop numbers for the Afghan National Army, ISAF, and the United States, which we determined to be sufficiently reliable for broad comparative purposes to identify changes in troop numbers over time. In addition to incorporating updated data, we also reviewed relevant documents from DOD, State, and USAID as well as the administration's Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

We conducted our work from January 2010 to May 2010 in accordance with all sections of GAO's Quality Assurance Framework that are relevant to our objectives. The framework requires that we plan and perform the engagement to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to meet our stated objectives and to discuss any limitations in our work. We believe that the information and data obtained, and the analysis conducted, provide a reasonable basis for any findings and conclusions.

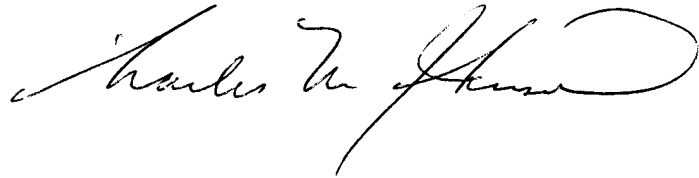
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We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on GAO's Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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<sup>9</sup>GAO is current performing a separate review of the U.S. civilian surge in Afghanistan.

If you or your staffs have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7331 or johnsoncm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in enclosure I.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles M. Johnson, Jr.", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Charles Michael Johnson, Jr.  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Enclosure

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## **Enclosure I: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments**

### **GAO Contact**

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### **Staff Acknowledgments**

In addition to the contact named above, Hynek Kalkus (Assistant Director), Aniruddha Dasgupta, Jonathan Mulcare, Arthur Lord, Karen Deans, Cindy Gilbert, and Mark Dowling made key contributions to this report. Victoria Green, Charlotte Moore, and Jena Sinkfeld provided technical assistance.

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