USDA chief plans for Afghanistan trip
By Jerry Hagstrom | CongressDaily | January 8, 2010

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is planning a trip to Afghanistan as USDA ramps up efforts to promote agricultural development in the country.

At a news conference Thursday with U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator Rajiv Shah and Richard Holbrooke, the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Vilsack said agriculture development is the Obama administration's top nonmilitary priority in Afghanistan, with local officials leading the effort. He declined to give details on timing of the trip, but said it would be "soon."

"We will align our assistance and our help with the agricultural framework that has been recently announced by the Afghan government," Vilsack said.

Holbrooke emphasized that Afghanistan is dangerous for Vilsack and for civilians working there. "Civilians are not in the same environment as the military," he added. "They have to get out [of the protected zone] to do their work."

Vilsack said USDA has 54 people in Afghanistan, with 10 more on the way, and a budget of $300 million per year. Many of them are paired with Afghan Agriculture Ministry officials, while others are working on projects ranging from improving crop productivity and export systems to saving watersheds and planting trees, he added.

Holbrooke noted the Obama administration has shifted strategy from poppy eradication to agricultural development. One hectare could generate $2,500 in opium sales for an Afghan farmer, but the same land could bring $3,000 to $4,000 from apples and $18,000 from table grapes, Vilsack said.

Vilsack, Shah and Holbrooke did not discuss whether USDA might be usurping USAID's traditional development role and undertaking the Afghan reconstruction effort at the expense of the USDA Foreign Agriculture Service's traditional mandate to sell U.S. products abroad.

FAS Administrator Michael Michener had been in charge of the U.S. effort, but after longtime agency officials criticized him for neglecting the agency's traditional work, he was reassigned in December to the U.S. embassy to the United Nations food agencies in Rome.
Vilsack, Shah and Holbrooke emphasized that even though three civilian agencies -- State, USAID and USDA -- and the military are involved in the agriculture effort, they are taking a "one team, one mission" approach.

Holbrooke said USDA and USAID personnel in Afghanistan have been asked to keep their agency identification under wraps in part for that purpose. Both USDA and USAID leaders report to Ambassador Tony Wayne, who is "the senior director of operations," Holbrooke said.

At a separate event Friday, Holbrooke told the Women's Foreign Policy Group that the Obama administration plans to begin removing troops from Afghanistan in July 2011 as part of "a responsible transition" and that agricultural development will be a key determinant in whether Afghanistan can handle its security on its own.
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WASHINGTON (AFP) — The US pointman on Afghanistan on Friday played down tensions with President Hamid Karzai, saying that the problems in the war-torn nation involved more than one man.

Richard Holbrooke, the special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, said he wanted to “get us away from the idea that there’s this one-stop solution for an immensely complicated country.”

“Let’s not expect one man to solve the problems for the country. Historically Afghanistan, even in peacetime conditions, was not governed centrally,” Holbrooke told a luncheon in Washington.

Holbrooke and other members of President Barack Obama’s administration have had tense relations with Karzai and pressed him when he won a disputed election last year to crack down on what US officials saw as rampant corruption.

Holbrooke said Karzai pledged to do better but added that the leader could not “personally end corruption” in Afghanistan.

“What other leader in the world is held to the standard, including our own, of eliminating corruption because you’re the head of the government? Corruption is a huge problem in Afghanistan,” Holbrooke said.

“I understand why all of us focus on Hamid Karzai -- he speaks excellent English, he’s charismatic, he’s been in full American view now for eight years,” he said. “But the government is a lot more than Hamid Karzai.”

Holbrooke insisted he had a solid working relationship with Karzai, saying he had “great respect” for him and believed he was the legitimately elected president of Afghanistan.

But Holbrooke acknowledged the relationship was soured by opinion articles the veteran US diplomat wrote before Obama’s election criticizing Karzai’s record.

Karzai and Holbrooke had a widely recounted altercation during last year’s election over US concerns about ballot-stuffing.

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Team Obama scuttles the term "APak"

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Team Obama has scuttled the term "APak." The Obama administration is no longer using the term to refer to a possible war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The term was coined in 2008 when the US administration was preparing for an assault on Pakistan's tribal areas. "It's just an effort to avoid the image of Pakistan being used as America's proxy in Afghanistan," former US ambassador to Pakistan Richard Holbrooke said at the time.

But a senior US official said the Obama administration has decided to stop using the term. "We're not going to use APak any more. We're going to use Afghanistan/Pakistan," the official said.

The decision was reportedly made after the US government decided not to use the term in its official statements or documents. "We don't want to give the impression that we're using Pakistan as a proxy in Afghanistan," the official said.

The move was seen as a sign of the Obama administration's commitment to building a long-term relationship with Pakistan. "We want to have a stable and reliable partnership with Pakistan," the official said.

However, some analysts said the move could be seen as a way to avoid the image of the US government using Pakistan as a proxy in Afghanistan.

The decision was reportedly made after a meeting between US officials and Pakistani leaders. "We want to show Pakistan that we're committed to a long-term relationship," the official said.

The move was also seen as a way to avoid the image of the US government using Pakistan as a proxy in Afghanistan. "We don't want to give the impression that we're using Pakistan as a proxy in Afghanistan," the official said.

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US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke speaks during an address to the Women's Foreign Policy Group's Luncheon at a hotel in Washington. Holbrooke on Friday played down tensions with President Hamid Karzai, saying that the problems in the war-torn nation involved more than one man.

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