

*Congressman Spent Thanksgiving Week Visiting Afghanistan, Met with General McChrystal, Ambassador Eikenberry, and U.S. Soldiers*

Washington, DC - Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today released the following statement regarding President Obama's new strategy for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Hinchey, who is a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, spent Thanksgiving week visiting Afghanistan as part of an official congressional trip. The congressman met with General Stanley McChrystal -- the lead U.S. commander in Afghanistan and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry. He also spent time with U.S. troops serving in Afghanistan.

"I was pleased to hear President Obama lay out a plan for U.S. operations in Afghanistan that will make that country more secure while also providing a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops so that we no longer have U.S. forces operating there indefinitely. The United States has been fighting in Afghanistan for more than eight years in what until now has been an operation lacking a real plan and timeline.

"Having visited Afghanistan just last week, it's clear to me that security there needs to be greatly improved so that the Taliban does not retake control of that country and again provide a safe haven for al Qaeda. I agree with President Obama that a U.S. presence is needed to stabilize the country and help train Afghan security forces so that they -- not U.S. forces -- can protect their own country for the long-term. The focus of our engagement in Afghanistan must be to quickly increase the number and quality of Afghani defense forces and I believe President Obama shares that focus.

"When I first travelled to Afghanistan in December of 2001, Hamid Karzai expressed to me that the most significant contribution that the United States could make in Afghanistan was improved security. With proper security, the nation could effectively focus on its internal needs and better address the threat posed by the Taliban and al Qaeda. Unfortunately, the Bush administration abandoned any effective strategy in Afghanistan and instead chose to invade and occupy Iraq, a nation that we know had nothing to do with the attacks of September 11. As a result of this failed strategy, we are now left to confront the festering problems of an insecure and volatile Afghanistan and the potential of it again falling into the hands of the Taliban.

"The U.S. didn't have to be in this position. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee released a report on Monday that details how U.S. forces had Osama bin Laden cornered in the mountains of Tora Bora in December 2001, but lost him because their plea for additional forces to seal the perimeter and close in on him was denied by senior Bush administration officials. This Senate report, a history of the events put together by the United States Special Operations Command, as well as my experiences on trips to Afghanistan and the information available to me as a member of Congress, has led me to understand that the previous administration knew it could capture bin Laden at Tora Bora, but failed to do so because it would have made it more difficult to justify its pre-determined plans to invade Iraq. The facts support this argument and it underscores how shifting attention to Iraq instead of remaining focused on Afghanistan has led us to the circumstances we are confronting today.

"If we were to walk away now, it would be a waste of the last eight years. Afghanistan is where the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks originated from and it is in our national security interest to ensure that the circumstances in Afghanistan that led to those attacks can never occur again."

Note: A copy of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee report reference in Hinchey's statement can be found here: [http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tora\\_Bora\\_Report.pdf](http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tora_Bora_Report.pdf)