



Prepared Remarks of
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Thank you for that kind introduction and the invitation to speak today. I especially wish to thank Ikram Afzali, who has been a great partner of SIGAR's. As many of you probably know, I was invited on my last trip here to Kabul to give the keynote address at another conference hosted by His Excellency, President Ghani, and the European Union. Its focus, like today's, was on combating corruption. I was greatly honored to be asked to speak then, just as I am today, because without the participation and bravery of the volunteers of Integrity Watch Afghanistan and other Afghan civil society organizations, corruption will never be vanquished in this country. You are the reformers who want to improve Afghanistan, but also are the conscience of your country that reminds all of us that we work for the common good and not personal gain.

Many of you may not know how important Integrity Watch Afghanistan's partnership with SIGAR has been over the past several years. Since 2014, Integrity Watch Afghanistan has conducted work for SIGAR in areas across Afghanistan. Over the past three years, Integrity Watch Afghanistan has assisted with 46 SIGAR inspections of U.S.-funded projects to determine if they are being used and maintained and whether they were constructed according to the contract. SIGAR has notified U.S. and Afghan government agencies, as well as the U.S. Congress, of the numerous construction deficiencies, safety issues, poorly maintained facilities, and the waste of U.S. funds identified by those inspections. We

at SIGAR like to say we're the "eyes and ears" of the U.S. taxpayer in Afghanistan. But our ability to fulfill that mission would be diminished without the eyes and ears of the brave men and women of Integrity Watch and other Afghans who assist us.

But before I say anything more, I want to take this opportunity to introduce someone all of you are going to soon become very familiar with. I have recently selected Lindy Savelle to run my office here as my senior representative in Afghanistan. Lindy, as some of you may know, is a former senior SIGAR investigator who served tours both in Kandahar and Kabul. Lindy has over 30 years of law enforcement experience, including with the FBI, but also brings great diplomatic skills to her new posting. I know she's excited to be back in Kabul and we're excited to have her back with SIGAR.

I was asked to speak today about integrity – or the lack thereof -- in the Afghan reconstruction effort. It's a subject I've spent a lot of time discussing in Kabul, in Washington, and in many other places around the world over the past six years. Some have suggested I might be a broken record on the subject, and frankly, sometimes it's hard to know what more to say on the subject. But that's never stopped me from trying.

As I was thinking about what I would say today, a quote from the novel, "*A Tale of Two Cities*," by the famous 19th Century English author, Charles Dickens came into my head – "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." And with all due respect to the late Mr. Dickens, in many ways I feel Afghanistan is a tale of two countries.

After decades of war and strife, there can be no downplaying the amount of human pain and suffering that has taken place. There is also no avoiding the fact that Afghanistan remains plagued by corruption and a burgeoning narcotics trade. Those are truths we face every day.

But there are also many positive facts. It is unfortunate that in many minds, including many in the United States, Afghanistan is seen as a lost and hopeless cause. But in the 20 trips I've made to Afghanistan since becoming the SIGAR, for every nugget of bad news I receive, I also see signs of a bright future for Afghanistan.

The very fact that this conference is being held is one of them. Afghanistan has an increasingly vibrant civil society which is allowed to meet and organize. Many countries around the world – including some of your neighbors – would never let today's conference take place; nor would they allow an organization like Integrity Watch to freely operate.

This is not to say that Integrity Watch does not face obstacles, but the freedom to organize and pressure the government gives us all hope that there is something worth fighting for here. While the future is never assured, after 17 years, there is increasing momentum towards ensuring that Afghanistan remains a free and open society. It has much further to go, of course, but Afghanistan, for all its challenges, is not a dictatorship and the people do have the opportunity to influence their government as evidenced by the upcoming parliamentary election.

Going hand in hand with a strong civil society is an independent and free media, which is another positive sign for Afghanistan. Critical to that diverse range of voices being heard in the media are some of the bravest journalists in the world, which we were tragically reminded of in April when Afghanistan suffered its deadliest attack on journalists since 2002. It was a terrible, tragic event, but one that was covered extensively by other Afghan journalists who stepped up to do their jobs just moments after their colleagues fell. But, as I noted at my speech at the Palace, how the government – and the foreign governments who support it – respond to fair criticism from the media will be the test of how bright this light of democracy will burn.

Afghanistan's economic potential is another tale of two countries. We all know of the natural resource wealth laying untapped under Afghan soil. Sadly, the majority of Afghan citizens have not benefited from Afghanistan's resource bounty. However, when looking at the future, there is great opportunity if development of Afghanistan's resource economy is done wisely and fairly. Too many countries have succumbed to the resource curse caused by economic addiction to resource exploitation and compounded by weak legal structures that encourage corruption.

Afghanistan will benefit from civil society organizations, such as Integrity Watch, and the lessons of cautionary tales from other countries to establish and enforce legal regimes that ensure Afghanistan avoids succumbing to the resource curse. Civil society organizations, the press, and the Afghan people will be critical to keeping pressure on government officials to ensure that the financial benefits derived from natural resources benefit the entire country and not just a corrupt group that grows rich at the expense of the Afghan people.

Finally, for all the concerns about Afghanistan's future, your country does have an extensive group of friends that are looking to help build a brighter future for you and your children. I cannot stand here and say that America does not have its own self-interests in Afghanistan, nor can I stand here and say that my country has not contributed to some of the problems that Afghanistan faces – especially corruption.

Since 2001, the United States has spent roughly \$126 billion, or roughly 9 trillion Afghanis, on Afghanistan's reconstruction – a number that does not include the cost of fighting the war against terrorism. Even for the United States, that is an enormous sum of money. Other nations, including America's coalition partners, have contributed vast sums as well.

Yes, successive U.S. Presidents and the U.S. Congress have provided this funding in support of not only our nation's interests, but also

to help the Afghan people build a sustainable and peaceful society that outlasts the insurgency.

The mission of my agency, SIGAR, is first and foremost to protect the U.S. taxpayer by identifying and combating waste, fraud, and abuse of the \$126 billion I just referenced. And as part of that job, I'm required to report on, among other matters, corruption in Afghanistan. This doesn't make me the most popular person in Afghanistan – or the United States, for that matter.

But SIGAR's existence, and the U.S. Congress' ongoing support, does benefit Afghanistan. We have issued over 300 reports since I became the head of SIGAR in 2012. Every time we find a wasteful project, a corrupt U.S. government employee, or identify an unsafe facility that America has paid for – we're helping not only to correct past errors, but to ensure future U.S. spending benefits the Afghan people.

SIGAR has also looked at how effectively U.S. funds provided through the United Nations, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank for Afghanistan are handled and monitored. Our reports have identified problems with these programs, which also benefit Afghanistan by alerting officials in countries that contribute to those organizations that they may want to pay closer attention to how the money they're providing for the Afghan people is being spent.

The lessons learned initiative that SIGAR has established has also led to important lessons not just for the United States, but for other countries working in Afghanistan as well. To date, we've released five reports – three in the past three months alone – that have focused on anti-corruption efforts; U.S. and coalition assistance to the Afghan security forces; U.S. stabilization efforts; private sector development; and U.S. counternarcotics activities.

One of the common themes among all five reports is that decisions were made by U.S. officials that unintentionally exacerbated corruption in Afghanistan. That is not to absolve corrupt Afghans of their own misdeeds, but the U.S. government did not do as much as we should have to mitigate the problem. Hopefully, in light of our reports, these mistakes will be noted and corrected in the future.

As I mentioned, the U.S. Congress is one of Afghanistan's friends, though sometimes, much like some of my agency's work, it comes in the form of what we in the United States call "tough love." Last year, the spending committees of the U.S. Congress directed SIGAR to conduct an assessment of the implementation of the whole-of-government anti-corruption strategy that the Afghan government agreed to establish during the 2016 Brussels donors' conference.

The Afghan government had no real obligation to cooperate with our assignment, but to their credit, they did so. The U.S. Congress asked SIGAR to undertake this project to ensure your government was fulfilling the promises it made to international donors – promises that were requested by donors to benefit the Afghan people by reducing government corruption.

When SIGAR completed its initial work on our report, we found that only 2 of the required 20 benchmarks the Afghan government had agreed to in Brussels had been met. However, after we showed the draft report to the Afghan government, another 12 benchmarks were completed in the three months prior to the report's publication.

It is fair to ask whether this progress would have occurred had the U.S. Congress not directed SIGAR to undertake its assessment. But, they did and the Afghan government responded positively – all to the benefit of the Afghan people and the donor community. A result I like to say was, as we say in the United States, a "win-win" for everyone involved.

SIGAR's report further identified ongoing challenges and laid out a roadmap of problems that need to be addressed. Perhaps most important, the U.S. Congress has asked SIGAR to continue to regularly update its report, so we will continue to look into the government's compliance with the agreement it made in 2016 – compliance which hopefully will lead to reduced corruption within the government.

I can assure you that as long as I am the SIGAR, we will continue to aggressively investigate and uncover corruption and hold those responsible to account. But, our work is not enough. Likewise, pressure from international donors will not be sufficient in the long run either. Afghanistan will eventually be expected to stand on its own to fight terrorism and the corruption that feeds the insurgency.

I know most Afghans long for the day when that is feasible and achievable. When that day does come, there will be no SIGAR, and no international donors to pressure the government of Afghanistan to do the right thing. It will fall to the Afghan people – to you – to keep up the pressure on the government to protect your freedoms and deliver your economic, political, and social rights and opportunities.

That is why the work that Integrity Watch Afghanistan is doing to train Afghans to be the eyes, ears, and conscience of the Afghan people is so terribly important. And it is why I am as honored and humbled to be here today, as I was to speak to your President and many of his Ministers at the Palace in April. This could truly be the best of times in the tale of our two countries, and I am honored to play my small part in seeing you reach a successful conclusion.

Thank you very much.