



Prepared Remarks of
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***“Remarks at Fourth Annual European Union Anti-Corruption Conference:
‘Corruption in Recess, Peace in Progress’”***

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Thank you very much for that introduction. It is a great honor to be invited to speak at this important conference. I want to thank Ambassador Mayaudon for the invitation and for organizing today’s event, and I would be extremely remiss if I did not thank you, Mr. President, not only for hosting this conference, but also for your strong support of my agency’s work from the very first time we met, even before you were president. I also want to thank Chief Executive Abdullah for his longtime support of SIGAR’s work.

Fighting corruption is an issue that transcends politics and countries, and SIGAR has been fortunate to have strong partners in our own government and the donor community as well as throughout the National Unity Government.

This conference is an example of that cooperation and is focused on a critical issue at a critical time. Afghanistan has seen too much war, too much destruction, too much bloodshed. Afghan forces are bravely fighting determined foes who don’t play by humanity’s rules and who demonstrate their weakness by attacking civilians. But as determined as we all are to defeat these foes, we must not lose sight of the dangers of winning the war but losing the peace.

Corruption is the most insidious threat any government can face because it saps the support of citizens who are trying to go about their daily work, feed their families, and live free of fear and intimidation. The Afghan people have suffered too much for that to be their fate.

Corruption is a challenge that my country, the United States, has battled

throughout its history. So I applaud the National Unity Government for its determination and dedication to combat corruption. It is a task made infinitely more difficult by the fact that Afghanistan is at war. So while more can always be done -- something I am accused of continuing to harp on in meetings with my Afghan colleagues -- we cannot lose sight of the fact that important anti-corruption measures have already been taken by this government.

In one of our first meetings with President Ghani after he assumed office, my staff showed him evidence from a SIGAR criminal investigation that found several companies bidding on a multi-million dollar Ministry of Defense fuel contract had colluded to coordinate and inflate their bids and to prevent the submission of lower bids from other companies. The president's response was immediate. He fired those involved, cancelled the contract, and took steps to hold relevant individuals accountable. In the process, he saved the U.S. and Afghan taxpayers over \$200 million, allowing that money to be spent on other critical needs. I will note, however, that we continue to be troubled that no one has yet been prosecuted, though we hope that will change soon.

While we all know that procurement remains an area of concern, the establishment of the National Procurement Council signaled that contracts issued by the Afghan government would be scrutinized at the highest levels. The creation of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center was another step putting the powerful on notice that they can be held accountable for corrupt activity. While the ACJC has convicted some corrupt actors, I believe the full power of the ACJC has yet to be realized. Judicial and legal reforms have been put into place that will help the government fight corruption, and the National Strategy on Combatting Corruption will, I hope, better inform and coordinate new and ongoing anti-corruption efforts.

I want to say to my Afghan colleagues that you are not alone in this fight. Look around this room. Ambassadors from members of the European Union and many other countries support you. From my personal interactions with him, I can also tell you that our American Ambassador, John Bass, and his team at the Embassy are also committed to this effort. Likewise, when I meet with General Nicholson and his command team, they emphasize how determined they are to take steps to ensure that every dollar of U.S. military assistance supports the war effort and isn't pocketed by a corrupt official. And the U.S. Congress back in Washington cares deeply about anti-corruption activities here in Afghanistan, which is one of the reasons they have asked my agency to conduct an assessment of the implementation of the National Strategy on Combating Corruption -- an assessment not intended to embarrass, but rather to assist, the Afghan government.

But why is this all so important? For too many people, fighting corruption is an academic exercise. To others it is a profitable line of business. But the Afghan people, know there is nothing theoretical or profitable for them about corruption – it is a real-life scourge they deal with every day.

While I would never compare my own experience to that of a native Afghan, I do know from firsthand experience that fighting corruption takes blood, sweat, and tears. As a young attorney I investigated and prosecuted the deeply entrenched tentacles of organized crime in the U.S. state of Ohio. If opportunities for people to engage in corrupt activity exist in the heartland of the United States, then we know what a challenge it must be in a country like Afghanistan that has suffered through decades of war and economic instability.

Some would say that we can ignore corruption because fighting insurgents and terrorists is a higher priority. But if corruption isn't resisted, and the state rots from the inside, then what have all these years of war been for? Fighting corruption cannot be a second-tier priority. It must be, as my military colleagues would say, "mission critical" to the war effort.

Why? Because corruption threatens the possibility of victory by not only eroding the people's faith in their government but also eroding the will of their security forces conducting the war.

Fighting corruption is also key to creating an economic environment conducive to private investment to grow Afghanistan's economy. Businesses will not invest if they cannot be assured that any grievances they have will be fairly addressed by legal and judicial systems that respect and enforce the rule of law. Laws are essential, but laws are mere words if they are not backed with even-handed and aggressive enforcement. Investors must also know that they won't be exploited by corrupt government bureaucrats who use their positions for personal financial gain.

Likewise, with elections on the horizon, Afghans must have confidence that elections will be credible and that their vote will count. Many will brave intimidation and violence to reach a polling place – their efforts will be in vain if the electoral system is corrupted.

For these reasons, it is imperative that the Afghan government and its supporters implement countermeasures against corruption that build on those already taken to ensure the long-term resiliency and viability of Afghanistan. Based upon our experience in the United States, as well as my six years as the SIGAR, I would like to offer the following observations:

First, I cannot stress enough the importance of having independent government oversight bodies similar to the over 70 Inspector General offices we have in the United States to serve as a check on waste, fraud, and abuse in government agencies. I am pleased to see the Afghan government setting up similar entities within certain ministries, but they must be supported and truly independent – like SIGAR is. Supported not only with resources, but also politically – for if independent oversight bodies' decisions can be overturned by corrupt politicians, or hidden from the public, then their oversight is hollow.

Second, independent oversight from outside the government is just as critical. Among the most positive developments I've seen in Afghanistan has been the establishment of a largely independent free press and dynamic civil society organizations. It is to Afghanistan's credit that many of these media and civil society entities have established themselves with minimal external support, demonstrating the innate desire and willingness of Afghans to hold their government to account and demand an end to corruption. It is one thing for donors to call for accountability – it is much more powerful when Afghans demand it.

Although a free press and independent civil society organizations may be, at times, inconvenient for those in power, they are absolutely necessary to expose waste, corruption, and abuse. Many brave Afghan journalists and researchers put their lives at risk to report from the far reaches of this country, and I want them to know what an important job they are doing – and how their work is setting an important standard for future generations of Afghans – maybe as important a job as their brothers and sisters are doing on the battlefield.

Speaking from experience, one often takes great risks when speaking truth to power, but, as in the United States, it is ultimately the people who must demand transparency and an end to corrupt behavior.

Civil society organizations and the press can lead that charge, but only if they maintain their independence and are not beholden to donors or other special interests who may jeopardize their ability to conduct impartial, independent oversight. This is a particularly sensitive issue when these organizations feel obligated to expose problems with donor-funded programs. How the Afghan government and the donor community respond to such criticism will demonstrate to the Afghan people how seriously they value truly independent Afghan oversight.

My third observation is that the Afghan legal system must be incorruptible. There must be confidence that any grievance will be heard before a fair and impartial court and verdicts will not be sold to the highest bidder. Independent oversight organizations

have an important role to play in monitoring courts and judges, and holding them accountable. To ensure integrity, every step of the legal process from arrest to trial, sentencing, and appeal, must be transparent. Take it from me, the adage that sunlight is the best disinfectant is especially true in the legal system where graft and corruption can flourish like bacteria in the dark shadows of the police station, jail, prosecutor's office, or courthouse.

Lastly, in our zeal for improvement, we must not forget that while corruption is our common enemy, the manner or the speed with which reforms are undertaken should not divide us. Friends may not always agree with each other, but friends must be honest with each other, even if the truth is sometimes inconvenient or unpleasant. I recall the wise statement of a former U.S. president who said that "the truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable."

Let me therefore leave you with this. When I assumed my current position I took the prerogative of changing SIGAR's motto to "strength through oversight." It is our guiding principle, and tells anyone who reads our reports what we do and why we do it. I humbly suggest that a similar maxim be considered as we discuss the future of Afghanistan's anti-corruption efforts which, through strong oversight, holds the promise of a bright future for the Afghan people.

Thank you very much.