



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 9, 2008

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Opening Statement of Chairman Silvestre Reyes
House Intelligence Committee hearing “Assessing the Fight Against al Qaeda”

Washington, D.C. – *Congressman Silvestre Reyes, D-TX, Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, delivered the following opening statement at the House Intelligence Committee’s open hearing entitled “Assessing the Fight Against al Qaeda”:*

“The committee will come to order.

“Good morning. Today, we will focus on an issue at the top of this committee’s agenda, the threat from al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We believe that Osama bin Laden and his most senior deputies use the largely ungoverned border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a safe haven to plan terrorist attacks against the United States and our allies. I think that today’s open session is an important companion to the committee’s classified work on this subject. This is one of the biggest threats we face, and the American people deserve to know about it. The committee plans to hold additional hearings on al Qaeda, both open and closed, in the coming months in order to focus on this threat and our progress in countering it.

“Today, we will receive testimony from three experts on al Qaeda. First is Mr. Peter Bergen, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington D.C., an Adjunct Lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, a research fellow at New York University's Center on Law and Security, and author of numerous books on the subject. Mr. Bergen is a both a widely recognized expert on al Qaeda and one of the few Westerners to have met and interviewed Osama bin Laden.

“Second, we will hear from Mr. Robert Grenier, who, during his 27-year career at CIA, served as the Chief of the Counterterrorism Center, the Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia on the National Intelligence Council, and as a Special Assistant for Near East and South Asia to the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs. Mr. Grenier is as accomplished as an intelligence officer can be. We are fortunate to have him here today to offer his insights to the committee.

“Finally, we will receive testimony from Steven Emerson, the Executive Director of the Investigative Project on Terrorism. Mr. Emerson is a well-known commentator on terrorism-related matters and we look forward to his testimony.

“Thank you all, again, for joining us today.

“On September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda attacked this nation. Immediately following the attacks, we knew Osama bin Laden was responsible; we knew where he was; and we had the support of the entire civilized world in our efforts to pursue him and his organization. Yet, seven years later, bin Laden remains free and al Qaeda remains a threat.

“Most disturbing to me is that while bin Laden continues to plot and inspire extremism and hatred for the United States, the bulk of our troops are bogged down in Iraq, pursuing a war of choice against an enemy that did not attack us on 9/11. While over 4,000 Americans have been killed in Iraq, and hundreds more in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden remains alive, apparently comfortable enough to continue issuing statements from, of all places, what is believed to be a safe haven in Pakistan.

“As Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, I am anxious to hear from these experts how we got here and what we should do about it.

“In 2003, President Bush told the American people that al Qaeda was ‘not a problem anymore.’ He was wrong.

“As the National Intelligence Estimate released last summer states, al Qaeda ‘has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas, operational lieutenants, and its top leadership.’

“In other words, al Qaeda has the freedom to recruit, the freedom to train, and the freedom to plot new attacks against the United States. Clearly, the threat from al Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region is real, and frankly, I’m not confident that the Administration has a winning plan to defeat the al Qaeda threat, despite the efforts of our men and women in the intelligence community, as well as those in our military and diplomatic corps.

“I look forward to hearing the panel’s expert views on why we have not eliminated this threat. Further, the committee appreciates the panel’s assistance in helping us understand the operational relationship between al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the effect that the war in Iraq has had on our efforts to neutralize al Qaeda, and a reevaluation of our strategy in our conflict with al Qaeda.

“Thank you all again for joining us today. I would now like to recognize the Ranking Member of the Intelligence Committee, Mr. Hoekstra.”