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# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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### Opening Statement

**Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member**

### Hearing on "U.S. Foreign Assistance: What Oversight Mechanisms Are in Place to Ensure Accountability?"

**April 10, 2013**

Let me first welcome John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Since he was sworn in nine months ago, Mr. Sopko has drawn attention to critical issues affecting reconstruction in Afghanistan, leading to multiple appearances before our Subcommittee on National Security and improving the oversight and accountability of reconstruction funds. I commend President Obama for appointing him, and it is especially nice to welcome Mr. Sopko back given his previous service as the Chief Counsel for Oversight on the House Energy and Commerce Committee under then-Chairman John Dingell.

I would also like to welcome Paul Cooksey, the Deputy Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. Over the past decade, his office has overseen tens of billions of dollars in reconstruction assistance to Iraq. The Special Inspector General, Stuart Bowen, has testified many times before our Committee, including on his office's investigation during the previous administration, which identified approximately \$12 billion in reconstruction funding that was not properly accounted for.

I would also like to thank the other Inspectors General who are joining us today from the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. We appreciate the critical work you do, particularly in challenging environments like Iraq and Afghanistan. We thank you for your service.

I would be remiss if I did not mention our ongoing concern with the lack of Senate-confirmed IGs at these three agencies. At the State Department in particular, the Chairman and I have expressed our concerns to the President that he has never nominated an IG to fill that post in the five years he has been President. Obviously, this problem needs to be addressed.

Today we will hear about challenges to delivering foreign assistance efficiently and the lessons we need to learn in order to deliver that aid more effectively.

Over the past decade, there has been enormous waste and abuse in Iraq, where the United States provided nearly \$61 billion in reconstruction funding. For example, when the U.S. set out to repair an oil pipeline over the Tigris River, planners tried to bury the pipe under the river despite an engineering study concluding that the soil was too sandy. According to the IG, tens of millions of dollars were “wasted on churning sand.” The total cost of the project was \$100 million, more than 20 times the original estimate.

Last month, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction released a final report on the “Lessons Learned” from his many years conducting oversight of projects just like this. This report includes key recommendations to help our country avoid making the mistakes of the past. For example, it recommends increasing coordination and accountability of reconstruction operations, focusing on small and more manageable programs and projects to build host country capacity, and ensuring buy-in from the host country for reconstruction activities.

With respect to Afghanistan, there are special challenges with overseeing reconstruction funding provided through direct government-to-government assistance. High levels of corruption and concerns about the Afghan government’s capacity to manage its budget increase the risk of waste, fraud, and abuse. Although the purpose of this assistance is to help the Afghans learn how to improve their systems, they are not yet ready to handle the billions of dollars in assistance the United States provides without enhanced oversight mechanisms.

For example, concerns have been raised recently over plans to provide the Afghan national power utility \$70 million to install and manage a hydroelectric turbine at Kajaki Dam. This is especially concerning given reports by the Special Inspector General that the power utility lacks the capacity to properly manage aid funds.

In his most recent quarterly report, Mr. Sopko suggests seven key questions that decision-makers should consider before expending foreign aid funds. These questions cover a range of issues, including our nation’s strategic objectives, the host country’s needs, and the host country’s capacity to sustain the project once it is complete. As with the examples from Iraq, these are lessons that can improve all foreign assistance programs.

As I close, I want to express my strong support for the Food for Peace program, through which U.S.-grown agricultural products have been carried on U.S.-flagged vessels to provide humanitarian aid around the world since 1954. Together with Duncan Hunter and 28 colleagues from both sides of the aisle, I have written to the President urging that we continue to support U.S. farms and the domestic seafight capacity on which our military depends while ensuring we get food to those most in need by maintaining this vital program.

At today’s hearing, I hope we can focus on how to learn these lessons from the past and implement improvements to make our nation’s aid programs stronger and more effective. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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