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Joint Chiefs Chairman Discusses Vision for Future

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WASHINGTON, April 9, 2008 – The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stressed the need for more troops in Afghanistan, reduced deployment lengths, improved care for the wounded and a transition from “peacetime” to “wartime” processes.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen discussed his outlook on a variety of issues in a Pentagon Channel podcast interview April 7.

“The Afghan mission is really critical, and one that we are very dedicated to and that we know we need to get right, and we need to win in Afghanistan in the long run,” he said. “[But] we have not been able to resource it with a significant number of additional troops in the last year or two because of the troops that we have committed to Iraq.”

The continued commitment in Iraq, he said, has made Afghanistan an “economy-of-force” operation, and he added that Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan would be aided by additional military trainers and combat troops.

“We really need trainers more than anything else to help us continue to develop the Afghan national army and the Afghan national police,” he said, noting that the U.S. military is trying to balance the requirements of the operation in Iraq with needs in Afghanistan, even as it works to balance the health of the force. The chairman noted that President Bush last week committed additional U.S. forces to Afghanistan for next year.

On deployment lengths, the admiral last week said that although the force is not in imminent danger of breaking, there is a need for greater balance. He told soldiers and airmen at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., that his goal is to scale back 15-month Army deployments “as rapidly as we can.”

“Probably the single biggest thing that is on [soldiers’ minds] is the length of their deployments,” Mullen told the Pentagon Channel. Mullen said he and other military officials meet with troops frequently to get a feel for the mood on the field and at home. He said his wife, Deborah, spoke with military spouses on his most recent trip.

“We really need to build longer times in between deployments,” the chairman said, noting that families also sacrifice during deployments. “We recognize that families are a very important, literally, critical part of carrying out our mission, and so we want to be in touch with the pressures that they are under.”

Speaking about military health, Mullen said that while medical care itself is top-notch for wounded warriors, access to that care is often hampered with long delays and confusing procedures. He said troops need assistance in navigating the complex system. And some troops, he acknowledged, have expressed displeasure at the quality of mental health care. “And we need to move out as rapidly as we can to fill those needs,” he said.

“Our system has a way of focusing on the disability side,” Mullen said. “I am very [eager] to put the emphasis on the ability side, to put them in a position to be all they can be for the rest of their lives. That is what they want to do, and we need to assist them in every way possible in doing just that.”

Finally, the chairman said troop deployment cycles and administrative processes appear to be functioning at a level normally associated during times of peace. The system should be modified to better assist current wartime operations, he said.

“We haven’t changed the processes to represent the fact that we are a nation at war, and certainly a military at war,” he said. Mullen identified career progression and promotion opportunities as examples of processes that could use an overhaul.

“We might be better off by starting in some cases with a clean sheet of paper, recognizing we are at war and, in fact, writing a process that is more responsive, more agile, [and] gets to the target more quickly,” he said.

This entails innovation and creativity, he said, and “not just taking the process that existed in the past.”

“That kind of emphasis is what I would like to see,” he said, “... to create the kind of outcomes that we need for those who are serving so nobly in such a challenging time.”