

Boucher promotes U.S.-Afghan ties

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher said Afghanistan has made enormous strides since 2002, despite ongoing struggles with Taliban. At a news conference Thursday, ahead of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's weekend meeting with President Bush at Camp David, Boucher said the United States has built roads and highways, brought down infant mortality rates and put 5 million children in school. "Afghanistan is in a much better position now than it ever was before as a nation," Boucher said. Taliban violence and Afghanistan's illegal drug industry, however, are a continuing source of concern, he said. Boucher said poppy production is expected to continue at the same rate at last year, particularly in areas of the insurgency. "The tie between insecurity and poppy production is more and more clear," he said. "Where the government has established governing mechanisms and been in control, in fact, poppy production is going down. Boucher said the United States is working closely with Afghanistan and the South Korean government to secure the release of South Koreans being held hostage by Taliban insurgents. Two of the 23 hostages have been killed since they were seized July 19, the State Department said in a release.

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