NEW YORK, Mar 13 (Pajhwok Afghan News): Political Counselor at Afghanistan embassy in the United States Ashraf Haidari has said that the US and other international security forces were working with the Afghan authorities to investigate the Jalalabad incident. In an exclusive interview with Pajhwok Afghan News, Haidari said the US government has reached out to the embassy of Afghanistan and regretted the loss of Afghan civilian lives. "The government is planning to assist families of the victims in Jalalabad." Following are excerpts from the interview:

PAN: Of late, there have been differences in opinion between Afghanistan and the US on how to solve the problem of poppy cultivation. What in your opinion could be done to arrive at a permanent solution to this menace?

Haidari: The US and Afghanistan are pursuing the same objectives in the fight against drugs. Our strategies focus on an effective mix of incentives and disincentives that include information campaign against drug cultivation and production, alternative assistance to poor farmers, arresting and prosecuting drug traffickers, building law enforcement institutional capacity, and targeted eradication of opium poppy fields.

In Afghanistan's traditional and Muslim society where Islam and culture shun the production and use of drugs, such targeted assistance with increased security will be far more effective than any other measure. We know from international experience in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar that this approach has worked and it can certainly work in Afghanistan where according to Director Costa "opium economy is becoming segmented, with farmer's attitudes, supply conditions and price trends moving in opposite directions in the north and the south of the country." So, if the potential for success is there and we have the right strategy and hopefully more resources, we should be able to eliminate drugs in Afghanistan overtime.
PAN: What in your opinion would be the best approach for the US and the international community to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan?

Haidari: Given the events of the past year in Afghanistan, there has emerged a broad consensus on the three interdependent sources of instability in Afghanistan. These are: Slow reconstruction and weak state institutions due to a lack of resources, the Taliban's cross-border terrorism and insurgency, and narcotics undermining governance and financing the terrorists. As I said earlier, the US government has pledged $11.8 billion as part of its strategic recommitment to securing Afghanistan, while the European Union has considered providing $780 million in reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. We are optimistic that these funds will be used to implement the Afghan "Marshall Plan," by which I mean the Afghanistan National Development Strategy that outlines the short and long-term needs of rebuilding and developing Afghanistan.

We presented the strategy to the international community in February 2006 and signed with them the Afghanistan Compact with measurable metrics towards increased security, effective governance and prosperity that benefit the poor in Afghanistan. Under the Compact, we have established a Joint Coordination and Monitoring Body to ensure the effective use of international assistance to Afghanistan with a key focus on institutional capacity building and local ownership of the rebuilding process. Therefore, financing and implementing our strategy, the Afghan strategy, is about winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people who have overwhelmingly support the peace-building process in Afghanistan.

PAN: What is the role of Pakistan, as discussed in various Congressional hearings, in resurgence of the Taliban and how the Congressmen were agitated about it. At what level is the Embassy working with the Congressmen and their staff to bring to their notice that the problem in Afghanistan is coming from Pakistan?

Haidari: The US policy and lawmakers know from their intelligence sources and the US military forces deployed along the Afghan-Pakistani border about the Taliban's daily infiltration into Afghanistan. We know that the Taliban are a destabilising force in Pakistan too, and that Pakistan has vested interest in a stable Afghanistan that contributes to broader regional security and prosperity. We regret the loss of many Pakistani lives and continue to reach out to them for more effective cooperation in the fight against narco-terrorism that undermines our two countries' shared interests and common objectives. The recent arrest of the Talibans former Defense Minister Mullah Obaidullah Akhund in Pakistan is a very positive development, the continuation of which must be strongly supported by the alliance in the war against terror.

PAN: What is your opinion about the so called spring offensive of the Taliban and preparation of the US and international forces to handle threat?

Haidari: The Afghan national security forces have made every preparation to provide critical support to the US and NATO-ISAF forces in our common efforts to prevent the Taliban's spring offensive from materializing. We have no doubt that with the delivery of critical reconstruction assistance to people in the south and east of Afghanistan and strengthening district-level governance and interdicting major drug traffickers that partly fund terrorism, the threats made by the Taliban will diminish and disappear over time.

PAN: What in your opinion went wrong all these years which led to the reemergence of Taliban?

Haidari: A number of interdependent factors account for the resurgence of security threats to Afghanistan and the international community. First, while it took the Taliban seven years to establish its rule over much of Afghanistan, the coalition forces ousted them in 45 days. As we remember, the Taliban forces simply gave up and headed to their villages, or crossed the border. When this happened, the coalition forces shifted their focus on hunting down the leadership and remnants of al-Qaeda, leaving thousands of former Taliban combatants to their fate. This
effectively allowed the Taliban to regroup, find new sources of funding, and receive insurgency training in Pakistan. Five years on, they have reorganised in a well-coordinated insurgency, and are rapidly capitalising on Afghanistan's vulnerable human environment to prosecute a protracted war of harassment and terrorism.

Second, despite being the world's main front in the war against terrorism, we have so far received less per capita reconstruction and security assistance than all other recent post-conflict countries, including Iraq, Kosovo and Bosnia. Lack of resources has led to short-term planning, with most attention given to quick fixes at the cost of long-term development projects to address basic popular needs. Hence a lack of human security and economic development has left Afghanistan's war-torn society vulnerable to narco-terrorists who engage more than 2.3 million Afghan farmers in opium poppy cultivation. Our peasants remain extremely poor, however, as most of the drug revenues go to drug lords and corrupt police officers.

Third, between 2001 and 2005, the basic institutions of central government were established with the full participation of the Afghan people. But law enforcement institutions, which constitute the face of any government, have been neglected from the beginning. The implementation of judicial and police reforms that should have been the foundation on which other state institutions were built was shelved indefinitely due to a lack of resources.

Consequently, a security vacuum has widened in areas where state institutions are either absent or too weak to protect people, particularly in the south and east, areas which have seen little or no reconstruction assistance over the past five years. When left without a choice, people resort to whatever alternative is available for survival. Unfortunately, narco-terrorists have stepped in to provide that alternative by offering people protection in return for poppy cultivation and passive opposition to the government.

PAN: What, in your opinion, are the possible reasons for the sharp political differences over the issue of Iraq and consensus over Afghanistan among the Congressmen?

Haidari: The bi-partisan consensus for securing Afghanistan now and its future has been there from beginning. Afghanistan remains the original front of the war against terrorism. It was in Afghanistan where the Taliban and al-Qaeda masterminded the 9/11 tragic attacks on the United States five years ago, and it is still in Afghanistan where we fight the same terrorists five years on. Success in Afghanistan is a matter of national security for the US, NATO member states, and our region. We are happy to have the firm commitment of the American people and government to finish up the job in Afghanistan in the best national security interests of the US, Afghanistan and our common allies in the war against terrorism.