United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 23, 2009

Senator Patrick Leahy
Chairman
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations,
and Related Programs
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Judd Gregg
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign
Operations, and Related Programs
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Leahy and Gregg:

As you analyze the President's supplemental funding request for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we write to urge a significant increase in foreign assistance funding for Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP), a proven and highly successful program for countering insurgency, promoting local governance, and raising Afghans out of poverty.

The NSP was established as a multilateral partnership between the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the World Bank, through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). The NSP empowers Afghan communities by providing block grants of up to $60,000 for infrastructure projects that the Afghan villagers themselves select, plan, and implement. In total, the program has reached more than 22,000 villages in 359 districts across all 34 provinces of the country.

The NSP is effective because it puts Afghans at the local level in charge of how the funding is used, rather than imposing designs on them from the top-down. Before receiving any funds, Afghan villagers choose the leaders—both men and women—of Community Development Councils (CDCs) in local elections. These councils then identify priorities and prepare development plans, using the NSP block grant funds to implement them.

In this way, NSP achieves several key objectives. First, it empowers Afghans to rebuild, at a grassroots level, community structures that are seen as legitimate, accountable, and effective—precisely the kind of local governance necessary to defeat extremism and insurgency. Moreover, the village-level councils created under NSP are also now federating upwards to form district-level councils, thereby helping to connect Afghans from the bottom-up to their national government. The NSP also minimizes the waste that has undermined far too much of our foreign aid to Afghanistan, as pre-established milestones must be met for NSP funds to be delivered, and the Afghan communities themselves have a strong sense of local ownership over what they are building for themselves. Afghan community leaders have said that they are prepared to defend these NSP projects against insurgents with their lives, if necessary.

General David Petraeus, commander of CENTCOM, has endorsed the NSP, while Under Secretary of Defense Michele Flournoy, in recent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, has called it an example of "the kind of bottom-up approach that we need to be doing more of in the Afghan context." Brigadier General Mick Nicholson, deputy commander of Regional Command South, describes the NSP as "one of the most effective ways to create an immediate positive connection between the Afghan people and their government."

Through April 2009, the NSP has disbursed more than $593 million in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development has plans for expanding the NSP throughout Afghanistan, including two areas in the east and south where security is not sufficient for international aid agencies to operate. Thus far, however, the U.S. government has only contributed a small percentage of that funding.

The President's supplemental request includes $839 million for Afghanistan assistance, of which only $170 million in supplemental funds would be to support Afghanistan's economic development. Half of this funding - $85 million - is to be earmarked for the ARTF, from which the National Solidarity Program will receive an even smaller portion.

Brigadier General Nicholson reports a backlog of approximately $300 million of unfunded first round NSP projects and no remaining funds for second round projects. As a result, many Community Development Councils in southern Afghanistan—the epicenter of our counterinsurgency effort—have fallen dormant.

For this reason, we request that your Subcommittee specify at least $300 million for the National Solidarity Program through the ARTF, in light of the significant number of NSP projects that are "shovel-ready" but lack funding, and the NSP's proven track record in delivering assistance and building governance.

President Obama has spoken eloquently about the previous Administration's failure to provide the Afghanistan mission with the resources it needs. We completely agree. The United States has a vital national interest in defeating the extremist insurgent groups in Afghanistan, and a proven instrument for doing so in the NSP. We hope you will provide appropriately robust funding for this innovative and important program.

Sincerely,

Joseph I. Lieberman
US SENATOR

John F. Kerry
US SENATOR

Carl Levin
US SENATOR