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One Hundred and Twelfth Congress

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing on “Women in Afghanistan”

345 Cannon HOB –Tuesday, May 3, 2011 – 10 AM – 12:00 PM

Good morning. I want to thank everyone for being here this morning at the start of a very busy week in Congress. I especially want to thank our witnesses, some of whom have traveled great distances to participate in today’s hearing.

Also, before we begin, I would like to thank Ari Levin, Lars de Gier and Mike McVicker, who staff the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, for all their work in coordinating this hearing. They have invested a great deal of time and care into pulling this hearing together.

It would be an understatement to say that the world’s attention has focused to the east of Afghanistan during the last 36 hours.

Today’s hearing, however, “Women in Afghanistan,” – addressing women’s rights, aspirations, and challenges to participate freely and fully in shaping the future of their

lives and the life of their nation – will help bring all of us back to the reality of life for millions of people on the ground inside Afghanistan.

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 – a regime that harshly repressed women and restricted their rights in so many ways, big and small – the situation of women has changed dramatically. Afghan women participate in politics. There are around 200 female judges, one of whom, the Honorable Marzia Basel, will be testifying before the Commission today. There are women who work in the police force and as teachers in schools.

In 2003, Afghanistan ratified the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The 2004 Afghan Constitution contains a provision that guarantees equality of men and women before the law, established an Independent Human Rights Commission, and established the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which is tasked with the advancement of women in private and public life.

Women can vote and they can run for office. The Constitution provides for the representation of women in both the upper and lower houses of the national legislature.

Also in 2009, the national congress passed the “Elimination of Violence against Women Act.” This law criminalizes horrendous acts against women, including battery, rape, forced marriage, forced child marriage, forced prostitution, abuse, and disfigurement. The debate over this law spotlighted the extremes under which many

women in Afghanistan suffer and struggle to survive – but these very women were among its strongest advocates and helped assure its passage.

But let us not fool ourselves. In spite of these very significant steps, the situation of women in Afghanistan is still far from meeting the hopes and aspirations of Afghan women – and new challenges emerge daily, such as what role Afghan women will play in political reconciliation talks with Taliban leaders.

Women in Afghanistan face enormous obstacles in claiming their rights – or even learning that they have rights. They are challenged in their search for work that will allow them to take their rightful place as productive members of a new Afghan society.

They seek education for themselves and their children, yet schools are often targets of attacks. They need to address the basic needs of their families, yet education officials are talking about scaling down school feeding programs in impoverished rural areas of Afghanistan.

I very much look forward to hearing from today's witnesses – from the State Department, USAID, the United Nations, a US NGO, and most importantly, a prominent representative of Afghan women themselves.

I now wish to include statements for the Record from Members who are unable to attend this hearing – and I submit a statement from Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers.

I also would like to submit for the Record the testimony of Massouda Jalal, former Minister of Women for the Afghanistan government, who was invited to testify at today's hearing but was unable to leave Afghanistan at this time.

And I'd like to ask any of my colleagues if they would like to make opening remarks –