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Speech of Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) on "Building an Afghan Air Force"

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Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, during the last week in December, I had the opportunity to travel to Afghanistan and see firsthand the situation on the ground. It goes without saying that I was most impressed with the hard work and courage displayed by our troops who are stationed over there. I am always in awe of our men women in the Armed Forces. Their bravery and professionalism is something that all Americans should be proud of.

One aspect of our mission there that does not receive much attention compared to other parts of the mission is the effort to build an Afghan air force. The work of the Combined Air Power Transition Force (CAPTF) Partnership and the Afghan National Army Air Corps (ANAAC) deserves to be commended. During our trip we had the opportunity to meet with and be briefed by CAPTF Commanding General, United States Air Force Brigadier General Michael Boera. General Boera and his people run an impressive operation.

The Combined Air Power Transition Force has a mission to set the conditions for a professional, fully independent and operationally capable Afghan air force that meets the security requirements of Afghanistan today and tomorrow. Furthermore, the Afghan National Army Air Corps provides trained and ready airmen and soliders to execute critical tasks from the air in support of the Afghan National Army, and when directed by the Ministry of Defense, to support by air the civil authorities of Afghanistan at all levels.

CAPTF air advisors have oversight responsibilities for both the Ministry of Defense Afghan National Army Air Corps and the Ministry of Interior aviation assets used for Counternarcotics and General Support. In short, their goal is to ensure that the Afghan people will be able to protect their own airspace.

As an embedded partnership, CAPTF operates along four lines of operation to accomplish their mission. The first line of operation is build the Afghan Air Corps aircraft capacity. Second, CAPTF works to build Afghan airmen's capacity and capability. The third step is to build ANAAC's infrastructure to support their force, and fourth, to perform operations in the current counterinsurgency effort.

Transcending all four of those lines of operation is CAPTF's effort for institutional development such as improving their command and control capability, improving their air base management capability, and building up

their ``Air University'' educational capability so critical to the foundation to a professional force.

The Afghan Air Corps currently has 46 aircraft and close to 3,000 personnel building to about 150 aircraft and over 8,000 personnel by 2016. Their mission sets include Presidential and other types of airlift, battlefield mobility, to include medical evacuation and casualty evacuation, and close air support.

The primary airframes flown by the Air Corps are Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters and C-27s, which is the first modern western aircraft introduced to the Afghans. CAPTF hopes to introduce additional aircraft into the Afghan inventory as they continue to grow in capability.

The ANAAC's Air Corps headquarters is in Kabul and they currently have two Air Wings, one at Kabul and one at Kandahar. A third is being built at Shindand airfield out to the west that will also be the home of their Training Center where the CAPTF will partner with them initially to train their pilots.

The Afghans also have Air Detachments at critical locations around the country to support the Afghan ground forces. It's important to note, the Afghan airmen are in the fight now even as we help them build capacity and capability. It's like flying the airplane while building it.

Much work remains, but General Boera and all the hardworking people of the Combined Air Power Transition Force are certainly moving in the right direction. All Americans should be proud!