

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Opening Reception,
Women in Global Security Conference
Copenhagen, Denmark
Friday, 29 October, 2010

Ambassador Fulton, thank you so much for jointly hosting this conference with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and for extending an invitation to me to speak. Minister Gitte Beck, thank you so much for your remarks and your efforts in supporting this Conference. I am deeply honored to be in Copenhagen representing the United States Department of Defense and the United States Navy and Marine Corps. Events like this conference illustrate the strength of not only our friendship, but also the strength of the broader relationship of all the nations and international institutions gathered here to discuss the role of women in either active conflict and its prevention, in foreign affairs, and in post-conflict reconstruction and development.

It is with the impact of our forces on this last point where I will begin. In Afghanistan, many of our nations are working together to help rebuild the country, fight against terrorism, and guard against the return of an oppressive regime. That commitment comes with a very human cost. Last Sunday, Denmark lost a soldier in Afghanistan, Konstabel Mikkel Jørgensen, killed while on patrol near Bridzar, in Helmand Province. He is the 32nd Dane killed in action in the war.

Minister Bech, on behalf of the United States, please accept my deepest sympathy and solemn appreciation for the sacrifice that both he and the entire nation of Denmark have made in Afghanistan. I understand that the soldier was returned to Denmark this morning; today our thoughts and prayers are with his family.

The village where the soldier was killed, Bridzar, is in the same province where almost 20,000 US Marines are serving. In Afghanistan, our nations serve together, live together, fight together, and as has been made clear – sacrifice together to bring stability and the promise of a better future to the people of Afghanistan. It is a war that, unlike those of the past, has seen women involved in every military function. In this war, women – as well as men – fly the planes, drive the vehicles, and walk the mountain passes on patrol. In Afghanistan, there are no front lines, and every day women serving there take the exact same risks as men. As a result,

dozens of women from a number of nations have made the ultimate sacrifice, including Konstale Sophia Bruun from Denmark in June of this year. Hundreds more have been wounded in service to their countries.

We have found over the course of nine years of war, that the role women play in Afghanistan is critically important, just as it is important in Africa, Southeast Asia, and wherever conflict occurs. As the speakers this morning so eloquently pointed out, although many women are trapped by the chaos of conflict, as a group they must not be characterized as victims. To do so belittles the active role women can and are playing, often at tremendous personal risk, in strengthening the rule of law and demanding improved access to education, economic opportunities, and health care. Fundamentally, that is what Resolution 1325 was all about, and why its successful implementation is so important to women in the developing world.

We have found in Afghanistan, at an operational level, that the impact of women on security and the resolution of conflict is extremely important. Both the Secretary-General and Ambassador Verveer mentioned the deployment of the United States Marine Corp's Female Engagement Teams. The idea for these teams was generated last year before the large-scale deployment of our Marines to Helmand Province – in order to address the inability of our combat units to talk to and work with Afghan women as a result of cultural norms present in deeply conservative parts of the country.

In advance of their work I do not think we could have envisaged just how successful their presence would be. Last night and again this morning, I had the opportunity to meet with the leaders of the United States Marine Corps' first Female Engagement Teams. Captain Emily Naslund, a 2005 graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, served as one of the unit's commanders and we talked about some of her personal experiences in Helmand Province.

The 38 Marines of her team were broken down into 16 elements embedded with individual companies all across the province. Every day, at the direction of the commanders of the areas where they worked, FET elements patrolled with their units and met with literally thousands of Afghan women. By talking to the women of a village, discussing education and development initiatives, and offering medical care, the teams were very successful in building relationships and establishing trust that otherwise would not have existed. In fact, the presence

of the Female Engagement Teams was often the driving force in getting village elders and powerful interests in the villages where they worked to sit down with our forces in shuras for development and security discussions.

Two examples of their operational success stand out in my mind. During the Battle of Marjah, as our Marines conducted aggressive combat operations and security sweeps in the District, the FETS conducted hundreds of visits with Afghan families. These visits not only directly benefited the safety and security of our troops, because as the FETS talked – tensions eased, but they gave our Marines a detailed understanding of the local population and who the right people to talk to were. At one point, an IED went off quite close to a Marine Forward Operating Base – and because of the FET, the operational commander knew who to talk to find out what happened and how to find those responsible.

The second example is cultural for the United States military. As the first deployment of the FET came to an end, one of the commanders of the relieving unit brought all the patrol leaders from the Marine Brigade with seven months of experience into a room and asked them what they needed to make the deployment more successful. He expected the answer to be more guns, more ammunition, or more logistical support – but the number one answer from these young infantry corporals and sergeants was instead – more female engagement teams. These young leaders grasped the importance of the teams, and understood that they gave greater access to Afghan families, de-escalated tensions in the areas where they worked, and allowed our forces to engage with the entire population, instead of only half.

The expansion of women's roles in Afghanistan mirrors a broader expansion of women's roles in the military and across society. One unique thing about the military is that you can absolutely guarantee equal pay for equal work. This has facilitated the service of extremely talented women, and the rise of some of them to the highest levels of command in the Navy. Admiral Michelle Howard was just relieved as the first woman to command an Expeditionary Strike Group and Admiral Nora Tyson is serving right now at sea as commander of Carrier Strike Group 2. They are at the leading edge of opportunities opening up for women across the military.

One of those is in our submarine force. Immediately after I assumed the office of Secretary, one of the things that both I and the US Chief of Naval Operations worked on was eliminating the ban on women serving in the US submarine force, because the nuclear reactors and weapons systems on our submarines don't care if their operators are men or women – service doesn't depend on gender. There are a few modifications necessary, but based on our experience with expanding service on our surface ships over the past two decades, and the lessons learned from other nations' forces that did so earlier, these challenges are being easily overcome. When we started accepting applications for women to serve, the quality and qualifications of the applicants was so high – it became clear that because of opening up the opportunity for women, we were actually improving the overall strength of candidates for submarine service.

The role of women is expanding at all levels of our militaries, our governments, and our societies. Some of those at the very apex are here today, and serve as an example to younger women who are striving to make an impact and change the world for the better. That expansion is, without qualification, good for all of us, because by using the skills and the talents of our entire society, we absolutely make our nations stronger – we absolutely make the world a better place in the present – and we absolutely provide the basis for a global future where a person's qualifications and ability matter more than gender. Thank you and Godspeed.