

**APRIL 11, 2002**

**BACK-TO-SCHOOL DAY IN AFGHANISTAN**

**WASHINGTON, D.C. -- I applaud the children, families, and teachers of Afghanistan for celebrating their first back-to-school day and wish to welcome both girls and boys since the fall of the Taliban regime. I would especially like to honor the women and girls and teachers and students of Afghanistan who were not allowed to teach or go to school for the past five years, and the many who continued to do so despite the risk to their own lives.**

**In our mission to eradicate terrorism, the U.S. has recognized the importance of supporting education in Afghanistan. In addition to \$2 million pledged to UNICEF for their Back-to-School campaign, \$6.5 million of the \$296 million we designated for reconstruction has gone to printing textbooks.**

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**I commend the UNICEF-sponsored Back-to-School campaign for working hard on the ground to get over 1.5 million children into a learning environment by March 21, the first day of school across the country. Their logistical efforts included delivering kits of over 50 separate teaching and learning tools to schools, teachers, and students, providing 40,000 stationery kits, 10,000 School-in-a-Box kits, 7.8 million textbooks, and 18,000 chalkboards to schools across the country; having all Afghan children vaccinated for the measles; combating malnutrition among Afghan children; and communicating the positive message of the campaign to all parents in the country.**

**I praise the Afghan Interim Government for playing a critical role in this campaign and making education a priority. It has been heartbreaking to hear about so many girls having to take tremendous risks to sneak to school while their country was under Taliban rule and the horrific punishments they endured if caught. I was in awe of the courage of so many female teachers who ran underground schools because of their commitment to educating children. It has been so inspiring to hear stories of Afghan girls so eager to learn that they weathered harsh conditions to return to school as soon as the Taliban left town, well before the official first day of school.**

**As the children and teachers in Afghanistan embrace this renewed opportunity for education, we must realize that this is just the beginning and view our continued support as critical. I urge this body and this government to continue to enhance our efforts to ensure that each year all children in Afghanistan can celebrate back-to-school day with joy and anticipation, without fear.**