

## St. Petersburg Times | Bilirakis Finds Tough, Winnable Afghanistan War

Bilirakis finds tough, winnable Afghanistan war

By Alex Leary, Times Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON &mdash; The war wreckage littered the road to Kabul, and some of it was strikingly fresh &mdash; a reminder to U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis of the challenges in Afghanistan.

"It's going to be very, very difficult, tough. It's very serious," the Palm Harbor Republican said Wednesday after returning from a trip to the country.

In the early morning as Bilirakis arrived there last week, the Taliban had launched eight rockets into Kabul in an apparent attempt at unsettling the capital before the Aug. 20 presidential election.

"They create these spectacular events and it scares the heck out of the people," Bilirakis said.

But amid the fear, Bilirakis said he found signs that the renewed U.S. effort in Afghanistan is having some effect. He saw locals being trained and was impressed with the morale of U.S. troops.

Then there is the election, which he views as "critical" to the stability of the country.

"I think we have the right strategy in place and the right people in place," said Bilirakis. He met with Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who has called for a revamped strategy in Afghanistan that includes more U.S. troops.

Bilirakis said success hinges just as heavily on the Afghan people. "They have to be committed to winning this thing. I think we can, but it's going to be very difficult."

Traveling with a handful of other members of Congress as part of a mission arranged by the Air Force, Bilirakis also spent time in Iraq and Kuwait.

He arrived there in a time of unease as well. Authorities had just arrested six al-Qaida suspects planning to bomb Camp Arifjan, the main U.S. base in Kuwait.

It was Bilirakis' second trip to Iraq since being elected in 2006. Since his last visit in 2007, he said there have been great strides in security.

Throughout the week, Bilirakis visited with troops, including some from New Port Richey, Tarpon Springs and Hillsborough County. "They are very upbeat," he said. "But they are concerned when they come home that there are job opportunities available. I'm going to work on that."

Bilirakis also brought a glimmer of good news. A bill he and Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, sponsored would let more troops get care packages from back home for free.

The measure was approved in June as part of the House defense spending and now the Senate must go along.