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## Pakistan envoy supports U.S. economic initiative

**By Haley Edwards**

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Pakistan's ambassador to the U.S. on Wednesday endorsed U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell's proposal to jump-start the economy in the war-ravaged border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Ambassador Mahmud Ali Durrani, speaking at a news conference in Seattle, called the bill sponsored by Cantwell "an effective weapon against extremism and poverty."

The bill, which Cantwell and four other senators introduced earlier this month, proposes to create special zones where Pakistani and Afghan citizens could trade certain products — such as textiles, gemstones and handicrafts — duty-free with the U.S.

These Reconstruction Opportunity Zones, or ROZs, would provide a chance for people in the region, most of whom are impoverished tribal members, to start their own businesses and begin to make money, Cantwell said.

"The idea is increase entrepreneurial opportunities so [local people] don't have to turn to illegal activities to put food on the table," she said.

The border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been a hotbed of Taliban violence and recruitment since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001. It also is a thoroughfare for illegal drug trafficking between the two countries.

Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah; Kit Bond, R-Mo.; Joe Lieberman, I-Conn.; and Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., have signed on to the bill. Leaders from the Washington Council on International Trade and the Initiative for Global Development also announced their support on Wednesday.

Both Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington, and Durrani stressed that economic development must come hand-in-hand with improved security and infrastructure in the region.

Durrani called the ROZ bill a "key first step."

"You can't wait for stability to begin development. Neither one comes first. It's a chicken-and-egg thing," Durrani said. "Even when there are security challenges, you have to invest in infrastructure and job development."

The entire nation of Afghanistan and certain parts of Pakistan's border region would be eligible for ROZ designation if the bill passes. Each region would have to demonstrate efforts to establish a market-based economy, eliminate poverty and increase the availability of schools and hospitals, among other criteria, in order to qualify.

The Afghan ambassador to the U.S., Said T. Jawad, expressed "full support" of the bill in a statement issued earlier this month.

Durrani dismissed suggestions that Yousaf Raza Gilani, who was sworn in as prime minister of Pakistan on Tuesday, would be less committed to the plan than his predecessor. Gilani is considered less accommodating of American interests than the current president, Pervez Musharraf.

"Musharraf is still the president. Gilani is a good leader with a lot of experience," Durrani said.

"Americans care too much about the personality of leaders. Personality doesn't matter. What matters is that Pakistan and the U.S. are friends, and this would be good for both countries."

The ROZ bill is loosely modeled after the existing Qualified Industrial Zones plan that was established in Jordan in 1996 and in Egypt in 2004. Cantwell called both programs a "success."

Cantwell said she hopes Congress will approve the bill quickly and have it "waiting on the president's desk by the end of the year."