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2nd District Congressman says morale is high

By Dave Anderson

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PETERBOROUGH — U.S. Rep Charlie Bass, R-N.H., 2nd District, made a quick visit to Afghanistan last week, where he says he found morale among U.S. troops to be excellent, despite the significant problems he sees in working with the Afghan government.

"I think our soldiers are doing the best job they can," Bass said Wednesday during a conference call with reporters. "They're great guys; they really know what they're doing. The mutual respect between the troops and their commanders was evident."

Bass, who serves on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, went to Afghanistan with a bipartisan group — four Republicans and two Democrats.

Other members of the group were Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-N.J.), Jo Bonner (R-Ala.) and Ken Calvert (R-Calif.), who all serve on the House Defense Appropriations Committee, Adam Schiff, (D-Calif.), who serves on the House Appropriations/ Select Intelligence Committee, and Peter Welch (D- Vt.), who is on the Agriculture, Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

The trip was unpublicized for security reasons, Bass said.

The delegation visited Kabul, Kandahar and two U.S. military bases.

Bass said there are 92,000 U.S. troops there now and President Obama has proposed reducing that amount to 23,000 by the end of the year. The soldiers and their commanders are facing some significant problems, according to Bass.

"The first is Pakistan," he said. "The problem is that the border is very porous. The Taliban and others are running this war out of Pakistan. If we are ever to succeed, we need a different paradigm for Pakistan."

He said Afghans also need to make a greater commitment to taking charge of their own country.

"Afghans have to want to win this war," Bass said. "We have given them an element of security, done everything we can to promote civil society. At some point, they are going to have to be willing to take this over. We can't be there forever."

Bass said the mission in Afghanistan right now is "to turn the campaign from a counterinsurgency effort to a law enforcement effort." He said U.S. troops were working with Afghans to build up the local police forces. He said issuing a timetable for the withdrawal of the U.S. troops in the country has its pros and cons, because setting a firm deadline could

encourage the Taliban, but it has been made clear to the Afghan government that large numbers of U.S. military personnel will not be there forever.

The Congressional delegation did not meet with Afghani officials, Bass said during the conference call.

"I don't know if such meetings are possible," Bass said in response to a question. "President [Hamid] Karzai is basically confined to his palace. There isn't much confidence that he'll be able to continue."

He said some of the embassy people he talked to said they would never venture outside the most secure areas of Kabul, while others told him of the wonderful restaurants where they would dine regularly. "I got a lot of mixed messages about the dangers on the streets of Kabul," Bass said.

During the visit, Bass met with three soldiers from New Hampshire, one of whom was from Hooksett and one originally from Hudson. He gave each of them a small bottle of New Hampshire maple syrup, which he said was much appreciated as a reminder of home.