

[Gordon Dritschilo, Rutland Herald](#)

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said Monday that Vermonters serving in Afghanistan are doing their state proud, but he worries that the task before them may not be realistic.

Welch, who is on his way back from Afghanistan along with five other members of Congress, spoke to reporters on a conference call from Tbilisi, Georgia, early Monday afternoon. He said he was scheduled to return to the United States today.

Welch admitted that he only got a limited view on the situation during the brief congressional visit, which also took him to Pakistan and Beirut, but that it was still more perspective than he would get sitting in his office in Washington.

"It was quite hard for me to assess how things were going," he said. "What was easy for me to assess was how committed our troops are to the effort."

Welch said the 1,400 Vermonters serving in Afghanistan had made a good impression up and down the chain of command, describing a meeting with ranking officers including Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"Those military leaders singled out the Vermonters and said: A, they did a great job and, B, they came with tremendous training," he said. "I was sitting with four members of Congress and the only troop delegation mentioned was the Vermonters."

While he was in Afghanistan, Welch said a particular Vermonter, Rutland nurse Wendi FitzGerald, was recognized for leading a group that used their free time to clean up a Kabul hospital that Welch described as overgrown with vegetation and infested with rodents.

Welch said he also spoke with Franklin County Judge Howard Van Benthuisen, who has been assigned to help Afghans develop a "rule of law approach" to government.

"It's an uphill climb, but he's doing it and doing it with great skill and dedication," Welch said.

Welch also talked about visiting two villages and seeing the work special forces groups called A-teams and civilian aid workers were doing there. He said Americans were doing good work in Afghanistan, but the job seemed too big.

"There are thousands and thousands of villages in Afghanistan," he said. "My question is, do we have the resources to deploy these A-teams everywhere they have to go?"

The task is doubly-hard, Welch said, because the accomplishments in the villages are often undermined by local governmental corruption, something Welch said will require political action on the part of the Afghanis to fix.

Welch said he had just dined with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, and described how Saakashvili inherited a notoriously corrupt police force, remnants of the old Soviet system in which police were paid so little they had to live off bribes.

Saakashvili fired the entire force, Welch said, raised wages and hired people serious about the job. Welch said Georgia went from a country where bribery was almost universal to one where it was rare. Welch said he saw no evidence Afghan President Hamid Karzai was willing to undertake any such drastic reforms.