



Press Conference at OSCE Ministerial Meeting

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UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be with you. I want to start by thanking the Spanish Government and in particular Foreign Minister Moratinos for having been such a great host to all of us here in Madrid. I think all of us who are visitors to this city really believe it is a beautiful city. Spain has shown incredible hospitality. It is a major undertaking to put on a conference with 53 or 54 countries and Spain has done it with great style and great warmth. And we really do want to thank Minister Moratinos and all of his counterparts, his colleagues in the Spanish Government, for the warm welcome we have received. Also for the way that Spain managed a very difficult meeting. There was a large degree of support for nearly every issue but there were some minority voices on most of the issues which made this a very challenging conference and a very difficult one. I think Spain did well as the Chairman in Office to try to bring us together as much as that was possible.

This conference for us reaffirmed the importance of the OSCE as an organization in Europe. We need an organization that represents the values of Europe and North America, that stands up for democracy, for human rights, for free elections, for the monitoring of free elections on an objective, fair, and truthful basis, that would stand for the support for the arms regime, one of the most important arms regimes of the last twenty years the CFE treaty. And the OSCE does all of that, and so as we talk about the fact that the OSCE is now going to go into Afghanistan with a mission that will help provide border security between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the OSCE will do that. We talked this week about the continuing need for the OSCE to stay in Kosovo, as Kosovo goes through a transitional period. We talked about the need for the OSCE to remain in those countries that are still defining their democracies, countries in the Caucasus, like Georgia, countries in the Balkans, countries in Central Asia. The OSCE is the only institution that can do this, that unites all the countries of Europe as well as Canada and the United States. And it was interesting, some of the people speaking now are observers from the Far East, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Korea, a representative of the Government of Thailand, and so there are countries in the East, democracies, that wish to look at what you in Europe and we in North America are doing to support democracy. So in that sense, I felt that this conference reaffirmed the centrality of this organization and the importance of these European and North American values. I would say this: I think we were very disappointed at the attack on ODIHR, the attack on the OSCE institution that is responsible for the monitoring of elections. We're disappointed in that but we defeated that attack. The resolution proposed by Russia, and Belarus, and Uzbekistan was defeated. And the great majority of countries at this conference said "we want the OSCE to remain a fair and objective organization. We don't want to see political interference in the work of this organization." I think that was by far the majority view point.

We were very sorry to see and disappointed to see the announcement by President Putin this morning. This is a mistake. It is Russia unilaterally walking out of one of the most important arms control regimes of the last twenty years. It was done without a lot of consultation. There were plenty of hours of conversation here, but no one knew that this decision would be taken this morning. That's a disappointment. But the greater disappointment is that the United States and our NATO allies had offered new ideas to Russia in the month of October. Russia has now put those aside. It has announced its intention to suspend its implementation of the CFE treaty and I think that the great, great majority of countries here are disappointed in this. This is the wrong decision. Countries should not walk out unilaterally from an organization like this. Countries should stay and talk and make a good compromise so that all of us can enjoy the benefits of an important treaty, what the CFE treaty did back in 1990, and in its adapted version a few years later, was to take the stark division of military forces in Europe from the Cold War and make it a normal and transparent arrangement so that all of us could have some confidence as to how these military forces would be deployed in all parts of Europe. This is a major disappointment. I think Russia, in this sense, on the question of CFE as well as ODIHR, was very much out of step with a majority of countries at this conference this week.

We're pleased that Minister Moratinos will announce in just an hour or so, I know, confirm, what has already been decided and that is that Greece will become Chairman in Office in 2009 of the OSCE, Kazakhstan in 2010, and Lithuania in 2011. The commitments given to us by Kazakhstan are particularly important. Minister Tazhin, the Kazakh Foreign Minister, announced here last night and you've probably seen his statement that Kazakhstan pledges to protect ODIHR. Kazakhstan pledges to protect the current mandate of ODIHR. Kazakhstan has pledged not to be party to any effort that would undermine the mandate or the operations of ODIHR. These are very important commitments by the Government of Kazakhstan. We intend to see that these commitments are implemented by the Government of Kazakhstan. We congratulate the Government of Kazakhstan on the work that's been done and on the very lengthy negotiations over the last several months and even years that allowed Kazakhstan to come forward with such a ringing endorsement of ODIHR last night. Such a clear commitment to ODIHR, I think it encouraged many countries around the table. So, it's been a good week, and a worthwhile week, and we again congratulate the Spanish Government for its leadership, and I'll be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: Has there been any progress on the issue of Kosovo?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: On Kosovo. I don't believe that there will be a formal decision here about the OSCE mission in Kosovo, and I regret that. There should have been. But the great majority of countries here want to keep the OSCE mission in Kosovo. As we talked about before, Kosovo, if the negotiations sponsored by the Troika, if those negotiations do not succeed by December 10th, well Kosovo will then enter a transitional period. It's during that period when the OSCE will be needed most in Kosovo. It's been of so much value to the people, to the Serb minority, as well as to the Albanian majority that we are determined to keep the OSCE involved in Kosovo. And of course there's no question NATO will stay. The European Union continues to work, and so there will be plenty of international institutional commitment to help the people of Kosovo go through what will be a very challenging transitional time.

QUESTION: Would the U.S. Administration be willing to make any compromises on any issues of concern to President Putin, to persuade him to stay in the CFE? I'm talking specifically about NATO enlargement or the missile shield in Eastern Europe. And also, if I may, how free do you think Sunday's elections will be in Russia, without ODIHR working properly there?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, on the first question, we're not going to link the issue of CFE to NATO enlargement. NATO makes its own decisions, independent of anybody else outside the Alliance. We're not going to link it to missile defense. Secretary Rice and Secretary Gates went to Moscow in the middle part of October, offered very reasonable, new ideas to the Russian leadership on CFE. Those ideas were supported by the NATO allies, who have a consensus in the NATO Alliance that we want to have a way to put into force the adapted CFE Treaty. But now we have this very abrupt, sudden unilateral decision by the Russian government to walk out and to leave all the countries of Europe and Canada and the United States in the position of having to wonder what the true intentions of the Russian government are. And so, I don't think the ball's in our court, to reassure the Russians. We gave the Russians new proposals. We did that in good faith. We were supported by all of our allies. Russia has made a mistake in this unilateral behavior of walking out of a major arms control treaty in Europe. And, it's for the Russians to answer the question, not for me, as to why they did this or what they intend to do. But there is a lot of criticism of them here for doing it. And they really set themselves apart and isolated themselves by this behavior this week. It's not the right way to work, and so we call upon the Russian Federation to reconsider this decision, not to suspend its implementation of the CFE Treaty on the 12th of December, and to come back to the negotiating table, which is the best way to resolve any kind of misunderstandings that may exist. But it really is quite disappointing to see this.

On the second question, it's not for the United States to judge the Russian elections. Many governments here spoke up to the fact that it was very unfortunate that ODIHR's request for a certain number of monitors was not honored by the Russian government; that the request to have visas issued quickly so that the monitors could be in place was also not honored. In all of the election monitoring that's done in the United States, in Canada and all across Europe, you can't have the election monitors arrive two or three days before the elections. This is a very laborious process. It requires a great number of people. It requires these monitors to set up shop weeks in advance, sometimes months in advance. And so, the idea that people could just walk in and spend a couple of days in Moscow or a major city and somehow find a way to determine the quality of the election, I don't think it can happen. So, the process is very important. But it's not for us to comment on Sunday's election. I won't attempt to do that. It wouldn't be appropriate. I will leave that to people who are professionals in this kind of work.

QUESTION: I've got two questions, actually. One regarding your last statement that so far, as it is now, there won't be any mission in Kosovo after 31 December. Is that what you said?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: No, I didn't say that. I just said that there was no specific decision taken on Kosovo at this Ministerial, but we fully intend to keep the OSCE operating in Kosovo.

QUESTION: So, what can we expect, that the Permanent Council reaches a decision ...?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: The Permanent Council will continue to work on this. And I can tell you, I sat upstairs for many, many hours in the Plenary Hall, the overwhelming majority of countries believe that the OSCE's place, as is the place of NATO and the EU, is to be with the people of Kosovo and not to walk out on them at a time when they will need to try to work with each other, to reduce the possibility of violence or disorder, to see that people talk to each other and work through any problems that may occur. It's very important that the OSCE be there. We certainly are not giving up on that prospect.

QUESTION: Another question, could you tell me if Kazakhstan would have had the presidency in 2010 hadn't it backed down on its support for the resolution by the Russians and the others to weaken ODIHR.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I wouldn't put it quite that way. You know, Kazakhstan is a very friendly government to the United States. We've had a long relationship. I remember Kazakhstan declared its independence, on December 25th, 1991. President George H.W. Bush, President Bush's father, who was president at the time, reached out to President Nazarbayev. Every American president since then, each of the three American presidents, has had a close relationship with him. We have great respect for the country. It's an important country. So, we worked on an amicable, friendly basis with the government of Kazakhstan.

But I would say this, the commitments they made, that Kazakhstan has made, are quite extraordinary. Specifically to say, "We will defend ODIHR from any attempt to subvert its mandate, or its operational authority. ODIHR must be free to determine how to do its job." These are very important commitments from a country in Central Asia. In addition to that, as you know, and Minister Tazhin's statement was quite extraordinary last evening, extraordinary in the positive sense. Kazakhstan has committed itself to a number of important reform initiatives. For instance, Kazakhstan committed to take measures to reform the law on elections, and by the end of 2008 to do so with the assistance of ODIHR, to work on its own law of elections. Kazakhstan agreed to take measures to liberalize the registration requirements for political parties by the end of 2008. Kazakhstan agreed to amend the media law, with a bill that would reflect OSCE standards, by the end of 2008. Kazakhstan agreed to liberalize procedures for media outlets --people like you, newspapers, television stations-- by 2008. Kazakhstan agreed to work on the ODIHR recommendations in the areas of elections and legislation. And, Kazakhstan agreed to work with the Representative Office on Freedom of the Media. Kazakhstan, I think, would be the first government to admit that there are reforms that need to be made. Many of the OSCE criticisms of Kazakhstan in the past have focused on the media and political party registration. Now the government of Kazakhstan has agreed to work on all of these with ODIHR.

So, we very encouraged by the statement that was made by the foreign minister of Kazakhstan. I think it impressed a lot of people around the table and it led to the decision that was made last evening actually at the dinner hosted by Minister Moratinos, that we should take this extraordinary step.

And I think it's a very highly symbolic step. You know, the OSCE is a collection of all the countries of western European, central Europe, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia, also of course, the two of us living in North America, Canada and the United States. And the fact that for the very first time now, a major international organization will be headed by a new democracy, by a new country, relatively new, a country that became independent just 16 years ago, is an extraordinary thing. And so, it's an opportunity for Kazakhstan to show the kind of leadership that many of us know that it's capable of, and it's a recognition by the rest of us that this organization is more than just about West Europeans and Americans. It's about the people who live in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans, as well. So, symbolically it's important. And Kazakhstan, we believe, rose to the occasion by making these very specific commitments publicly, last evening, at an important in the history of the OSCE, I believe.

QUESTION: Could you please be more specific about the operations in Afghanistan?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I'd be very happy to, just to say that we have felt for a long time, in addition to the NATO military presence, which seeks to help secure the country from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and to convey humanitarian and economic assistance, in addition to the efforts of the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, border security has been a major issue. There's an extraordinarily long border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, as well as Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. And across that border, we talked about this in the press conference last evening, you have drug smuggling, you have criminal elements, you have human trafficking going on, and the Afghan government needs help. The OSCE will now work with the government of Tajikistan, as well as the government of Afghanistan to see if we can increase the international cooperation on that border to stem these types of problems. It's a new initiative for the OSCE. It is a bold initiative for the OSCE, but it's one that's very much welcomed by many of us, including my own government. Thank you

QUESTION: What do you think is the situation or the shape of OSCE after this meeting? The Russians just a few minutes ago said that this meeting did not manage to overcome the serious crisis of the OSCE.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think there's a great consensus, there's a great majority opinion in the OSCE, that democracy is important, that press freedoms are important, freedom of the press, that human rights are important, and that the free and fair and objective monitoring of elections is important. There were more than 50 countries here, and about 50 of them said this. So, if there's any crisis, it's produced by those countries who want to disagree with the majority and somehow limit the operations of the OSCE, or question its mandate, or try to write a new charter that would make it a less effective organization. We came here to defend the OSCE, along with all of our allies in Europe and Canada, and we successfully defended the OSCE against this attempt to weaken it. And so, in that sense, diplomacy is sometimes ten giant steps forward and sometimes it's just holding your position. And I think those of use in Western and Central Europe and North America who wanted to hold the position and defend the integrity of this organization had a good week. And so, I'm not disappointed leaving here. I think there's been a great public call here for the OSCE to maintain its integrity and maintain its roots. And, I'm proud that we were part of that effort this week.

QUESTION: If I may, I'd like to ask you a non-OSCE-related question. I'd like to know if you could comment on a video released yesterday about Colombian television showing three American citizens that had been held by the FARC since 2003, thank you.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. I only saw a press report. I have not seen a report from our embassy in Bogota, so I cannot give you a specific comment on that press report. But I can say this: We very much appreciate the efforts of President Uribe of Colombia to try to end this horrible, horrible ordeal where thousands of Colombians have been taken hostage, hundreds are still held, and three Americans have been held now for four-and-a-half years in captivity, with no word to their families as to their health and welfare. It's uncivilized, it's inhumane, for the FARC terrorist group to do this to innocent people, to Colombians, to Americans, to a citizen of France, Ingrid Betancourt. And so we call upon the FARC to release these prisoners unconditionally and we congratulate the Colombian government for the great work that it is trying to do. But as to this specific report, since I haven't received a report from our embassy in Bogota, I want to do the responsible thing and not comment on it at the present time.

QUESTION: I would like to know if there is going to be a final declaration or not.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, that is the prerogative of the Chair, of Minister Moratinos, not of a humble member of the OSCE like the United States, and so I would leave that to Minister Moratinos to decide and to inform you about.

Thank you very much.

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