



Daily Press Briefing
Sean McCormack, Spokesman
 Washington, DC
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TRANSCRIPT:

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11:33 a.m. EDT

MR. MCCORMACK: Good morning, everybody. Attention in class. (Laughter.)

Let me start off with by talking a little bit of what I understand to be the situation in Zimbabwe concerning our diplomats who were unjustly detained by Zimbabwean -- a combination of Zimbabwean army, intelligence, as well as retired military forces -- about a group of 40 people this morning, our time, stopped an Embassy vehicle that was about 40 kilometers outside Harare. We had informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that this vehicle was going to be making this trip, so any pretense that the Zimbabweans were surprised by this, I think, is really just a diversion on the part of the Zimbabweans.

The vehicle was detained. We sent out another vehicle to assist them. That vehicle was detained as well. At the end of the day, we had five people -- five American Embassy staff as well as two local employees that were detained and then have now been released. They are either on their way back to or already back at the Embassy. One of our drivers, locally employed staff, was beaten by the crowd of 40 people. And I should also mention that I believe there was a vehicle from the UK Embassy that was also detained in this incident.

It is outrageous. It is unacceptable. And while this immediate incident has been resolved, it will not be forgotten. We have protested vigorously to the Zimbabwean Government in Harare. Our delegation in Rome will seek out an appropriate member of the Zimbabwean delegation to the UN Conference on Food Security that's taking place in Rome. And we intend to raise this issue today in the Security Council. So it is an example of the fact that this government doesn't know any bounds. It flouted all international convention as well as protection accorded to diplomats accredited to their country. And it is absolutely outrageous behavior and it is a taste of the kind of oppression and violence that this government is willing to use against its own people.

While we are outraged by this incident, it is really nothing compared to what the Zimbabwean people suffer on a daily basis. So I think that's about all I have to start off with.

QUESTION: What were they doing?

MR. MCCORMACK: They were traveling outside the capital, really to do the job of diplomats, as Secretary Rice has charged them to understand what the situation is in the country. And it's also, you know, an example of what our diplomats do. They don't just sit behind their desks in the Embassy. They get out and they understand what's going on in the country.

QUESTION: Well, there was some suggestion from Zimbabwe officials that they had been at an opposition rally.

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't know and even if so, that would have been absolutely appropriate for them to do.

QUESTION: Oh, I'm not suggesting that it wasn't. I'm (inaudible) --

MR. MCCORMACK: No, I know you weren't --

QUESTION: (Inaudible) were they just driving around in the countryside like, you know, sightseeing or --

MR. MCCORMACK: No, no, no.

QUESTION: -- did they actually go to some event or --

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't know, Matt. I have not had a chance to speak with Ambassador McGee, but they are out doing their job. Again, they're out there charged with understanding what the situation is in Zimbabwe, the -- in the countryside, the political situation, economic situation. That's part of what they were doing.

QUESTION: And do you know when they were released?

MR. MCCORMACK: I got word of it about 20 minutes ago.

QUESTION: Sean, can you --

QUESTION: What's the condition of your driver who was beaten?

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't have a detailed medical description of his condition, but he was taken back in one of the vehicles. Again, I don't know. I don't know the extent of his injuries.

QUESTION: Could you take that for us, please?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, we will try, again, try to keep you up to date on this. We just haven't had a chance to get a detailed report from the Embassy.

QUESTION: One other thing. We heard -- there seemed to be a differing account, which is not unusual, about where exactly, you know, this transpired and how far away the place was. Our stories out of Harare, quoting the Embassy, say that it was about 50 miles or 80 kilometers. And so there are a couple things. One, if you can clear that up? You said about 40 kilometers. Two --

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah.

QUESTION: Are there restrictions? We had understood that there were restrictions on how far outside the capital U.S. diplomats can travel. Are there such restrictions and --

MR. MCCORMACK: I understand -- I understand that the -- right now and I'll check on this for you. I'm just looking at my notes here in terms of the information. And I do have 40 kilometers. We'll work to verify that for you. Also, we -- apparently, the Zimbabwean Government's mention of these restrictions, they invent -- apparently, these are fictitious restrictions. I'll check on that for you. Nonetheless, we had informed the government that our people were going out there. So any idea that somehow, the Zimbabwean forces were surprised by the presence of this vehicle and even, I think, at one point, they tried to use the excuse of they stopped the vehicles because they thought they might have been stolen is just absurd.

QUESTION: Well, one other one for me on this. Just, you know, could you address the question of a motive? The Ambassador earlier talked about regarding this as an effort to intimidate. And then the other thing is, you know, I don't expect you to get a crowd of 40 vigilantes to go, you know, beat up the driver of a Zimbabwean Embassy car here in Washington, but are you going to do anything toward --

QUESTION: It sounds like you're considering it.

QUESTION: (Laughter.) Are you going to do anything toward the Zimbabwean diplomats, you know, here in terms of restricting their access or travel or anything?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, as a matter of fact, the Zimbabwean diplomats are absolutely free to travel wherever they should want to go, as it should be in a democracy. In terms of --

QUESTION: Intimidation?

MR. MCCORMACK: Intimidation -- yeah. That's -- it is. Let's remember, this isn't the first time they've done this sort of thing. About a month ago, I think, Ambassador McGee's car was detained for -- the -- yeah, they were leaving the hospital. After visiting the hospital, they were detained trying to leave the hospital, then they were -- outside the gates of the hospital, they were further detained. This is -- I think our Ambassador and the UK Ambassador and some others as well. So this isn't the first time. This isn't a new tactic. They're just taking it to new levels, I guess you could say.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Sean, was it the Ambassador that secured the release of the Americans, how did the diplomacy go?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, the -- the Ambassador was working it hard on the ground. They got in contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And I understand their Ministry of Foreign Affairs went out to the site where this was happening and then -- where they were talking to the security forces. I can't -- I'll see if I can obtain more information as to exactly what went on to get the release. But I suspect the fact that all the attention instantly focused on this incident probably had something to do with the Zimbabwean Government's decision-making process.

QUESTION: These were clearly marked embassy cars.

MR. MCCORMACK: Yes, they were.

QUESTION: And the license plate --

MR. MCCORMACK: They were.

QUESTION: -- they had CD --

MR. MCCORMACK: Yes, they were clearly marked.

QUESTION: Anyone at gunpoint?

MR. MCCORMACK: The group was armed. Yeah. I don't know how extensively and -- or what kinds of arms, but apparently they were armed, yeah.

QUESTION: Sean --

QUESTION: But in terms of your response outside of Zimbabwe, who is the appropriate member of the presidential --

MR. MCCORMACK: We're trying to --

QUESTION: -- delegation in Rome that you'll --

MR. MCCORMACK: -- trying to determine that. We're trying to find out --

QUESTION: Is that a foreign minister? Does that mean --

MR. MCCORMACK: We're working on that.

QUESTION: And --

MR. MCCORMACK: And it is in -- as I said, we are going to bring this up in the Security Council today.

QUESTION: So -- what do you mean you're going to bring it up?

MR. MCCORMACK: As a matter for discussion, this has previously not been a subject, Zimbabwe, that has gotten very far, in terms of Security Council discussion. Now, I don't expect a presidential statement or anything of the sort. But it's -- it is a -- signifies our deep distress at what happened today. Also it signals our intention that we are going to continue to press --

QUESTION: Why not have a presidential statement -- aren't you guys the -- you heard (inaudible) --

MR. MCCORMACK: We are. We are.

QUESTION: So --

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't know --

QUESTION: -- (inaudible) by the South Africans? Is that (inaudible)?

MR. MCCORMACK: I will leave it to the South African Government to describe their views on the matter.

QUESTION: Well, you know, you -- as you said, this hasn't been a matter that the Security Council has raised very often. Why not? I mean, yesterday you had the opposition leader being detained.

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm. We're ready.

QUESTION: Well, why didn't you bring it up?

MR. MCCORMACK: We're ready, Matt. I think you can do your own poll (inaudible) members of the Security Council to see where they stand on that.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Sean, this is like the third time or something. I mean, I know that there was a couple of other incidents, including the one that you mentioned with the Ambassador, right? If there is such problems for the U.S. working in Zimbabwe, relations with the government are not very good you're having problems with restrictions, why are you continuing to operate in Zimbabwe right now?

MR. MCCORMACK: Because, for the very reasons I think you heard from Ambassador McGee. I know he is doing some interviews. And he said we are not going to be intimidated. And we are not going to abandon those people who are speaking out for a real functioning democracy in Zimbabwe. We think that the presence of our diplomats there not only allows us to be better informed as to the situation on the ground, but allows us to work with other likeminded countries on the ground. And also I suspect that it is our -- also reassuring for those who are speaking out for democracy and freedom and getting Zimbabwe back on the right track, that you have an international presence in Zimbabwe that stands for similar kinds of values that they are advocating for.

Yeah, Kirit. Yeah, we'll come back to you, Sue.

QUESTION: Can you please talk about the incident? I heard (inaudible) talk about who is responsible for it. Do you put this at the top leadership of the government? Do you think they were behind it, instigated it?

MR. MCCORMACK: It's clearly organized. You know, this wasn't just 40 people standing by the side of the road who decided to take -- you know, take this on themselves. So as we said, our reporting back indicates that there were members of the army, that there were members of the Zimbabwe intelligence organization, as well as a -- what I'd refer to as war veterans, I guess, these are retired -- "retired" military type. So you have an armed mob

that accosts, detains a convoy and beats one of the employees from our Embassy there. That is not a random occurrence.

Yeah.

QUESTION: So is that yes?

QUESTION: Yeah. I mean, is that the leadership --

MR. MCCORMACK: I can't tell -- well, you mentioned leadership. I don't know from where the sort of order or idea for this came from, but clearly, this was an organized activity.

Yeah.

QUESTION: It happened the day after the arrest of Tsvangirai.

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah.

QUESTION: Did somebody from the Embassy met with Tsvangirai today or --

MR. MCCORMACK: I'll check. I don't --

QUESTION: -- spoke to him or --

MR. MCCORMACK: Let me check for you. I don't know. I can't --

QUESTION: Is it something that could have triggered this reaction from --

MR. MCCORMACK: You know, I don't know. You know, I don't know. But as you heard the Ambassador say, we are not going to be intimidated. We're going to continue to do what we think is right and do our job in Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Sean, if you're still looking for an appropriate member of Mugabe's delegation, well, who from the U.S. side is seeking that person out? The Ambassador or (inaudible) or the delegation --

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, we have a delegation on the ground there. Again, we're figuring that out.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) AID team?

MR. MCCORMACK: No, it's actually being led by the Secretary of Agriculture. And I don't anticipate the Secretary of Agriculture will participate in it at this point.

QUESTION: So who do you have?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, Henrietta Fore is on the ground, Director of AID. And we'll -- again, we'll find the right person and the appropriate contact. We're sorting this out. And we'll let you know as soon as -- either we are able to make contact --

QUESTION: Well, is Henrietta going to camp out in the hotel lobby and wait for the Zimbabweans to come back in or whatever?

MR. MCCORMACK: No, we're not -- no, no, of course not. No, we --

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MR. MCCORMACK: I can't tell you exactly (inaudible) going to politely knock on the door and say, hello, we're from the U.S. and we're really unhappy about this. But we will, obviously, organize an appropriate --

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. MCCORMACK: -- encounter to convey our views on the matter.

QUESTION: And then just back to the Security Council thing, if there isn't going to be a presidential statement or a resolution or -- what is the point of raising it for --

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, the point is, as I said, to register our deep concern, unhappiness, and distress about this particular incident.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MR. MCCORMACK: And also as a way of talking about, in the Security Council, the behavior of the Mugabe government, not only prior to the last election, but also to highlight the fact that the international system is watching events in Zimbabwe and that the actions by the Mugabe government will not go unremarked.

QUESTION: Sean, do you --

MR. MCCORMACK: Libby, go ahead.

QUESTION: I've got a UN question. Why don't you actually go for something and embarrass the countries that oppose it? I mean, you may not win, but you can at least expose the countries that opposed you on this.

MR. MCCORMACK: Again, this is -- you know, I'm not foreclosing the possibility of something down the road.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Sean, using one of your words -- granularity -- on what happened.

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah.

QUESTION: Can you just -- do you have a timeline of the attack and sort of what time of day?

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't. I don't right now. We'll try to get that for you.

QUESTION: There was word that some -- the tires were slashed on --

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, the tires were slashed on the vehicles, yeah. On one of the vehicles, yeah.

QUESTION: The Zimbabwean Government is saying that some -- the Embassy officials were involved in some kind of fight or scuffle before this roadblock incident. Do you have anything on that?

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't have anything that would support that assertion.

Lambros.

QUESTION: Another subject. On Turkey --

MR. MCCORMACK: What a surprise.

QUESTION: Mr. McCormack, Turkey and Iran have been carrying today air strikes against Kurdish rebels based in northern Iraq. Turkish General Ilker Basbug said that the two countries have been sharing intelligence and plan more attacks. Any comment on that?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, certainly, we will have a continuing discussion with the Turkish Foreign Minister today about our common concern; fighting the PKK, as well as Turkish cooperation with Iraq, which has been quite good of late in fighting the PKK. I can't speak to any possible exchanges or links between Turkey and Iran in cooperation against the PKK.

Yeah.

QUESTION: One more question?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah. Lambros, go ahead.

QUESTION: Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, speaking at the Atlantic Council day before yesterday, stated that democracy in Turkey is strong, answering to a question on the constitutional crisis created artificially by some unwise Turkish judges against the entire Erdogan government, the president of the republic Abdullah Gul, and above all, democracy in Turkey. Could you please clarify the U.S. position on this crucial matter?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, ultimately, this is an issue that the Turkish people -- in this case, Turkish courts -- need to wrestle with. We are strong supporters of democracy in Turkey and Turkish democracy, and we have faith in Turkish democracy. But ultimately, these questions about politics and religion and different social values are going to have to be ones that are resolved within the context of Turkish law, politics, and their constitution.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: This is on -- did the Secretary call Palestinian President Abbas today?

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm. She did.

QUESTION: What was the content, roughly, of the conversation? And did, specifically, the issue of the possibility of Abbas renewing contacts with Hamas come up, and what did she say to that?

MR. MCCORMACK: It was one of these calls where periodically she checks in with President Abbas to get his take on where the discussions between the Israelis and the Palestinians stand. Recently, there was a meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, prior to Prime Minister Olmert coming over here. So she wanted to touch base with him on that, talk about issues in the region. They did touch on President Abbas's speech. And I saw a lot of reporting that construed his speech -- his remarks as in some way deviating from his previous stance regarding dialogue with Hamas. And he quite clearly reiterated in his remarks, as well as during the conversation with the Secretary, is that his conditions for any discussion with Hamas have not changed. Those were clearly outlined in Yemen. And that -- you know, you can talk to the Palestinians about the extensive list that they have. But to sum it up, it is basically Hamas reverses the coup in Gaza, that they recognize Fatah as leading this Palestinian Government, and that they abide by the commitments of the PLO, and you know, contained within that are a number of conditions that are very similar to those you'll find in the Quartet statement -- the London Quartet statement.

QUESTION: Do you find even him -- I mean, I understand there are lots of conditions. And I understand the conditions are, in fact, presumably ones --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: -- that you would approve. But does it dismay you that he's even talking about talking to them even with, you know, conditions? I mean, it may be that he's moving toward talking to them without --

MR. MCCORMACK: No. No, we don't detect any movement at all. And I recall that -- I think it's been a month or a month and a half ago -- we were at sort of a similar cycle of news stories that came out, and really with the same flaw in them in that they did not pick up on that -- his points about the conditions. And I think that's kind of the same case we have here today.

QUESTION: Can I just give you our readout from Saeb Erekat, who said --

MR. MCCORMACK: Sure.

QUESTION: -- that Rice called Abbas and told him that Olmert had assured the United States the peace process would continue, President Abbas told her he was ready to continue the peace process; Abu Mazen complained about settlements, she told him U.S. officials discussed the issue with Olmert; Abbas told her he had launched an initiative to implement the Yemeni initiative and hopes that Hamas would respond, but she did not say anything about that. Does that all sound right to you?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, you know, again, I've explained it the way that I would put it from our side in terms of the dialogue with Hamas. They did talk about settlements, and the Secretary reiterated our views on that. They -- and the Palestinians understand that. And in terms of Prime Minister Olmert's commitment, I don't know that she underlined that for him, but I think he understands it well. And I'll reiterate our view that both sides, both Prime Minister Olmert as well as President Abbas, are committed to the process.

QUESTION: Yesterday, President Abbas had some pretty strong reaction to Senator Obama's speech saying that the capital of Jerusalem should remain undivided.

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: I was wondering if he brought that up with the Secretary and whether he was concerned that that was going to affect your current negotiations right now.

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't know if he brought it up or not. But as I said yesterday, our policy is well known. It's clear. It's consistent. We talk about it almost every single day in terms of the outlines of it. And we are going to continue to act in the best interests of the United States and furthering that policy without respect to the presidential politics that is clearly ongoing.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Can I go back to authoritarian governments?

QUESTION: (Inaudible)?

MR. MCCORMACK: Oh, yeah. We do have to put that out. I'll get that out today.

QUESTION: I realize Ky Luu is going to be here in a little bit, but I want to ask a political question about Burma. And that is: Any reaction to the arrest of this comedian, this well-known Burmese comedian who has apparently been active in the relief efforts, whose house was ransacked?

MR. MCCORMACK: I'll have to take the question, Matt. I don't have particulars. We'll get you an answer.

QUESTION: All right. And then just nearby, do you have anything on a big crackdown in Bangladesh that the opposition -- it's supposed to be an anti-crime crackdown, but the opposition says that it's directed at them?

MR. MCCORMACK: No.

QUESTION: No?

MR. MCCORMACK: No.

QUESTION: Sean, the Secretary is meeting the Dutch Foreign Minister this afternoon.

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: What is at the agenda?

MR. MCCORMACK: Basically, talking about transatlantic alliance, security issues, NATO's participation in Afghanistan, certainly the Dutch contribution to that effort.

QUESTION: What about that? She wants the Dutch to contribute more?

MR. MCCORMACK: No, I think we're going to talk about the situation in Afghanistan. And beyond that, Sylvie, I don't have much more for you. We'll try to -- if you're interested, then we'll be happy to try to get you something afterwards.

QUESTION: Yes, please.

MR. MCCORMACK: Charlie?

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, good.

(The briefing was concluded at 11:55 a.m.)

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