



Briefing on Their Recent Travel to Africa

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Jendayi Frazer, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs
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MR. MCCORMACK: Good afternoon, everybody. We have down for you this afternoon a special guest briefer, Deputy Secretary Negroponte. He will give a brief opening statement talking a bit about his recent trip to Africa in which he visited Sudan, Libya and Chad as well as Mauritania, and then he'll be open to take a few questions about his trip. So I'll turn it over to the Deputy Secretary.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Thank you, Sean. Good morning -- good afternoon, everybody. I'm accompanied this morning by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer, who was with me on this four-nation swing that we took through Africa. I thought perhaps I'd read you a brief statement and then take whatever questions you might wish to direct to me.

But to briefly recap my travels, in Sudan I met in Khartoum with President Bashir and his leadership team. I also had the opportunity to travel to Juba, which is in Southern Sudan, and Darfur, where I reviewed humanitarian and peacekeeping issues with the United Nations and African Union officials as well as meeting with internally displaced people.

In Chad, I had a series of meetings in N'Djamena with President Deby, members of Chadian civil society and non-signatories to the Darfur Peace Agreement. I also visited refugee and internally displaced person camps in Eastern Chad.

In Libya, I met with several of leader Qadhafi's top advisors in Tripoli. The Libyan Government shares our resolve to find a solution to the Darfur crisis and I encouraged my Libyan counterparts to continue to work with the United States, the United Nations and the African Union on this matter.

And in Mauritania, I headed the United States delegation to the inauguration of President Abdallahi, a historic event and a true celebration of an ongoing democratic transition in Africa. Alongside the inauguration, I also had bilateral discussions on Darfur with the President of Senegal, the President of Mali and a Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister.

The principal purpose of my trip was to -- throughout was to convey the United States' commitment to ending the crisis in Darfur. There is widespread agreement that the Darfur crisis has three main elements: humanitarian, security and political. All of these elements deserve the immediate attention of the Sudanese Government and the international community.

The United States is convinced that the violence in Darfur and neighboring Chad is increasingly linked and that instability in each of these states contributes directly to instability in others and that we need to urgently move forward on each of these three fronts.

In the humanitarian area, the United States has done a great deal to support the victims of this instability. We are the largest single donor to both Sudan and Eastern Chad, where we provide basic assistance and emergency food aid to refugees and internally displaced persons. Visiting the refugee and IDP camps in Darfur and Chad, I was able to see firsthand how important it is that civilians have full access to humanitarian aid.

Yet when it comes to humanitarian access, the Government of Sudan's record is not encouraging. The denial of visas, the harassment of aid workers and other measures have created the impression that the Government of Sudan is engaged in a deliberate campaign of intimidation. Sudan's recent agreement with the United Nations to facilitate humanitarian operations is an encouraging sign, but we will be watching carefully and expect prompt implementation.

With respect to the security situation, our focus is on supporting the ongoing AU and UN efforts to contribute to peace and stability in Darfur. The AU -- the African Union -- and the United Nations are on the ground and working hard, but they face serious challenges. In fact, there are more internally displaced persons in Darfur today than when the Darfur Peace Agreement was signed in May of 2006.

At each stop along the way in Africa I urged my interlocutors to support the deployment of a hybrid United Nations/African Union peacekeeping force for Darfur with a single unified chain of command that conforms to United Nations' standards and practices. These robust international forces are required to improve the security of affected populations.

Last week at the Holocaust Memorial museum, President Bush announced the steps that we are prepared to take if Sudanese President Bashir does not meet his commitments in a short period of time. We have made the decision to allow the Secretary General of the United Nations Mr. Ban Ki-moon more time to pursue diplomatic efforts to pressure President Bashir. But time is running out. The Government of Sudan must disarm the Janjaweed militias, the Arab militias, that we all know could not exist without the Sudanese Government's active support. And all non-signatory rebel groups must cease their attacks, put down their arms and come to the negotiating table.

Turning to the political situation, I found widespread agreement that more must be done to bring non-signatory groups into the Darfur Peace Agreement. The United States supports the work of United Nations Special Envoy Eliasson and African Union Special Envoy Salem. I was also encouraged by Sudanese First Vice President Salva Kiir's efforts to convene a conference of the non-signatory groups.

During my meetings in Tripoli, I encouraged Libyan efforts to organize a Darfur conference on the subject of dealing with the non-signatory groups, a conference scheduled to take place at the end of this month and which will bring together the United Nations, the African Union, affected neighboring countries and ourselves. It is critical that the international community deal with these groups in a coordinated way. The UN /AU peacekeepers are essential to security, but it is difficult to see a satisfactory long-term outcome unless these political efforts bear fruit.

In closing, let me say that we believe that the Darfur Peace Agreement offers great promise and opportunity to the people of Sudan, but it can only be realized through the active cooperation of the Sudanese Government. A quick transition to a United Nations/African Union hybrid force and full access for humanitarian workers would improve the situation in Darfur. But if these improvements do not take place, President Bush has made it clear that the alternative for Sudan is even further international

isolation.

Thank you very much, and I'd be pleased to answer any questions you might have along with Assistant Secretary Frazer.

Sir. Let me get to George after you. Go ahead.

QUESTION: I was just wondering if you could express in your own words your meeting with President Bashir. And the reports we got here back in Washington was that he was not very forthcoming and so, do you give -- did you get any inkling in that conversation that there's any willingness on his end to make these improvements that you're seeking before the sanctions are imposed?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, I didn't find it a particularly encouraging meeting. They have, in the past, at times, agreed to proposals from -- with respect to Darfur, either through the negotiations of the Darfur peace accord or with respect to the heavy support package for the forces on the ground there. But my sense is always that this -- these agreements tend to be grudging and they tend to leave a lot of questions open as to whether they will follow through with implementation.

So rather than trying to actually second-guess the outcome of my meeting, I think that the feeling I had after I left is, "Well, whatever they say, we just better wait and see if they actually implement what it is they agreed to." We are, after all -- it's been since August of last year that the UN Security Council resolution was passed mandating additional forces to the Darfur region. And here we are, eight months later, still talking about the various modalities.

So I came away from that meeting with a healthy sense of -- a strong sense of skepticism as to whether they might fulfill their commitments. I also was struck by the degree to which they seem to wish to attribute their problems to factors external to Sudan, whether it be the international aid workers or Chad or other external, exogenous factors rather than a willingness on their part to accept responsibility for what had happened there, which I think would be a good starting point.

I'm sorry, George. Did I violate the pecking order here? Am I supposed to take the people in the first row first? Is that what I did?

QUESTION: Yeah, because of George.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: The body language was very, very --

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'll get over it in a few weeks.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Okay.

QUESTION: Could you tell us about the humanitarian situation in Darfur, whether the number of displaced continues to go up and -- you know, things like the mortality rate, et cetera?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yeah. First of all, the number of displaced people does continue to go up, notwithstanding the fact that an agreement was signed in May of last year. We visited an IDP camp that -- in the -- since the time of signing last year, had doubled in size. It was one of the smaller camps, but still, it had gone from something like 25,000 to 50,000 IDPs. And apparently, that has happened in other areas as well.

As far as the health and nutritional conditions of people in the camps, I think it would be fair to say that that situation has stabilized somewhat, that the nutrition -- the incidences of malnutrition in the camps has been substantially reduced and so have the mortality rates. But given the fact that there's no political settlement and given the fact that there's still great insecurity in the area, it's a very precarious and unpredictable situation and it would not take much for conditions to deteriorate fairly dramatically unless, as we are advocating and others are advocating, the peacekeeper presence in Darfur is increased. And that's one of the reasons we're advocating that.

QUESTION: When you said that you saw that the violence in Darfur and in eastern Chad be -- increasingly linked, are you suggesting that -- as the Chadians have claimed, that the Sudanese Government are actively supporting these rebels who are opposed to Deby and trying to overthrow him and to kind of export the instability?

And then secondly, I'm curious to know what your impression is of the prospect for the North-South peace deal in Sudan. You met with both Bashir and Kiir. I think the impression on the ground at least is that three years on it's heading back to war well before the six-year period was up.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: On your first question, I do think that the violence on each side of the border, it tends to -- they tend to feed on each other, in think in part because there are refugee groups that cross from one side to the other. That's one point. And I think that it's fairly widely believed that in the instances of both countries there are examples of them having supported groups that are carrying out acts of violence in the other.

I don't believe it's the fundamental cause of the Darfur problem, but it is an example of what can happen if these situations are not brought under control; there is the risk of then the violence spreading to other countries. And this is one of the concerns that we encountered when we met with the leaders of Chad. They used the phrase, "We're concerned about the 'Darfurization' of Eastern Chad."

On the question of the North-South Agreement, I think we found that the basic ceasefire is in place and the Government of the Southern Sudan is -- has assumed its responsibilities and is carrying them out. But there is still much that remains to be resolved. I don't know if I'd go as far as you that they're on the doorstep of renewed hostilities, but there are some major issues that need to be dealt with in the near future, one of which is the completion of the withdrawal of Sudanese troops from the South and the deadline for that is the 9th of July. Another is the resolution of this disputed area, the Abiye area, which is right on the border between the South and the North and which is a source of considerable controversy.

Yes.

QUESTION: You spoke a while ago about a deliberate campaign of intimidation by the government against humanitarian workers. Is that ongoing now and how did you see that --

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, we certainly haven't seen any improvement, notwithstanding the fact that they signed an agreement recently with the humanitarian organizations to facilitate their work. But we've heard some examples of them actually even creating additional complications for humanitarian workers since that time. For example, one regulation we heard about was that if a humanitarian worker wants to move from one international humanitarian agency to another, they wouldn't be allowed to do that without leaving the country for a prescribed period of time.

So notwithstanding the government's commitment embodied in this agreement they signed with the humanitarian organizations, I think our attitude is one of wait and see and we're just going to monitor that situation very carefully.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Did you issue a very formal ultimatum to President Bashir and tell him that if he didn't agree to -- fully to the UN/AU hybrid force that this package of sanctions and other measures would be put in place?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, it certainly was not a formal ultimatum. What I described was the kinds of things, principally, the deployment of the hybrid force and the improvement of the humanitarian situation. And by the way as well the disarming of the Arab militias, as the kind of steps that they could take to improve the situation in Darfur and that failing that we could -- we saw Sudan placing itself in a position of even greater international isolation.

QUESTION: Can you give us any sense of how much time you're willing to give them before you proceed to the sanctions and other steps? And on Libya, did you get any sense that the Libyan Government, although it is a judicial matter, is looking to find a solution that you would find acceptable on the Bulgarian nurses and that they are disposed or perhaps moving toward making the last 103 payments and finally laying the Lockerbie matter to rest?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, we raised all those issues in our discussions, the question of the importance of finding a satisfactory settlement to both the La Belle disco issue and the Lockerbie question, and I also raised the question of the Bulgarian medics. Whether any progress will be achieved as a result of my having raised them, they certainly can have no doubt as to the importance of those issues to us and I think they took those points aboard.

QUESTION: About the timing regarding Sudan -- the time is running out.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Weeks.

QUESTION: Weeks.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: But I wouldn't want to put a more precise estimate on that.

I'm looking to Sean. How much longer do you -- is my bondage? (Laughter.) All right. Okay. It seems like hours. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: You made mention of a meeting in Mauritania, I believe, with a Chinese official.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yeah.

QUESTION: Can you talk about China's role in solving or getting the Sudan crisis moving, whether it was with that meeting or in other meetings with officials?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, first of all, I think the Chinese and ourselves have a very good dialogue on the subject of Darfur and Sudan as we do on a number of other issues. But Assistant Secretary Frazer has had talks with the Chinese about this. I raised it when I went to Beijing a couple of months ago and met with my counterpart and I met again as mentioned in Mauritania. I think the Chinese have helped us and the international community generally by conveying to the Government of Sudan the importance of it complying with the wishes and the mandates of the international community. And I think the fact that China, which does have a multifaceted relationship with the country of Sudan, that it should convey that kind of message is a very constructive thing.

QUESTION: Just back on Libya, did you get a sense that the Libyans understand what the United States and the EU want in this, in the Bulgarian medics case? Do you think they're linking -- just to follow up on Arshad's question, are they linking Lockerbie with this case and did they give you a sense of a timeline --

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I'm not aware that they're doing that. They did say, which I believe is their stock reply, that this is a matter that's within their judicial process and that they're looking to find a solution. But I certainly didn't see any linkage.

QUESTION: They didn't? Because it's been going on, as you know, for many years. And they didn't give you at least some sense of a timeline when --

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, I pointed out this has been going on for, what, seven or eight years now and that it's no longer -- I mean, it's long past due for resolution. And the best I could do was to impress upon them the importance we attach to that question.

MR. MCCORMACK: Last question. Michelle.

QUESTION: Michele Keleman from NPR. I just -- given Bashir's poor record on keeping promises, as you even mentioned, I'm wondering what -- you know, what are the exact benchmarks that you're looking for him to meet in the next couple of weeks? What does Ban Ki-moon expect to get out of this diplomacy?

And then there was one other question about why you didn't meet with Qadhafi.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yeah. I mean, the benchmarks have got to be with respect to the rapid acceptance of an AU/United Nations hybrid force. That's one of them. But in the meanwhile, we want to see more forthcoming behavior on the ground. Namely, full-fledged access, the best possible access for humanitarian workers, steps towards disarming of the Janjaweed militia are two of the examples that I would cite for you. But --

QUESTION: So they're not just promises --

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Exactly. Exactly. Not just promises.

And on the other -- your other question --

QUESTION: Qadhafi. Why you didn't meet Qadhafi.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Well, I did see the people that I needed to see in order to talk about the Darfur situation. I met the Foreign Minister. I met the leading -- their leading expert on Africa, who is a former foreign minister himself, and of course their -- the team of officials who deal with the bilateral relationship. So I had a good set of meetings in Tripoli in a relatively short period of time.

QUESTION: Any chance Dr. Frazer can stay for a couple questions on Somalia?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Thank you very much.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: I think it's a couple of questions, right? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Well, I mean, the *New York Times* today talked about the diplomatic side of this really falling apart with Ethiopia -- with Eritrea pulling out of this Contact Group. How worried are you about where this is heading?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, I think it's important that we get back on to the political process. I think it's very clear that the key to solving the situation in Somalia and stabilizing it is to have this inclusive dialogue, and so trying to get the Transitional Federal Government to reach out to the various clans and sub-clans is a large part of our diplomacy.

The issue of Eritrea is one that I would say that the region needs to take some responsibility for -- the African Union, IGAD and the neighboring countries -- that Eritrea has not been playing a constructive role in Somalia because they continue to fund, arm, train and advise the insurgents, especially the al-Shabab militia. And so trying to get Isaias Afworki to work constructively I think is going to be extremely important for the region to try to achieve.

Yes.

QUESTION: Are you satisfied with the role Ethiopia is playing? I mean, they seem to be -- it's an awfully heavy-handed role, military role, that they're doing in these current battles in the capital. I mean, would you like to see that ease a bit?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, we definitely continue to urge all sides to have a ceasefire and we know that Ethiopia is very quietly working very closely with especially the Hawia clan and the Transitional Federal Government to negotiate a long-term ceasefire. So on the one hand, absolutely we're concerned about the loss of civilian life in a military conflict between the al-Shabab insurgents, the Transitional Federal Government and Ethiopian forces. No doubt about it. We're very concerned. We're pushing for the ceasefire and for those discussions to bear fruit so that they can end this violence.

QUESTION: Can I ask a Sudan question, actually? One thing I didn't -- I wanted to ask the Deputy Secretary. There were some accounts here that President Bush was ready to go forth with the sanctions package the day of the speech at the Holocaust memorial and that Ban Ki-moon came back at the last minute and said, "I need a few more weeks." Is that a true account, you know, that Bush was ready to go forward?

And also, one question he didn't answer was what does Ban Ki-moon think he can get done in the next couple of weeks. Are his intentions -- are Bashir's intentions -- does Ban Ki-moon see his intentions differently?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, I think that -- well, we were on the road, of course, when the discussions were taking place here, but it's clear that Ban Ki-moon asked for more time for his diplomacy to progress and that I think that it's -- the belief is that Ban Ki-moon is hoping that due to the negotiation process that he's had with the Government of Sudan, the AU and the UN that this heavy support package that was agreed to will actually be implemented. Now the next step, as the Deputy Secretary said, is to get the Government of Sudan to quickly also agree to the hybrid force itself.

And so that's where we are in the negotiation process and I think that's probably what Ban Ki-moon is trying to work out right now.

QUESTION: Do you think Ban Ki-moon sees the intentions of President Bashir differently than the United States?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: No, I think that we all are in a situation where you've got to test the agreements that they make. I don't think that he sees the intentions differently. I think that he's in the position as the head of the UN to try to negotiate. He's one of the implementing partners; the UN, the AU need to negotiate with President Bashir.

QUESTION: What do you think the international community should be doing to resolve the situation in Somalia and to push the process along and to encourage reconciliation? And why do you think the conflict in Somalia has not attracted, for example, the same kind of attention as Darfur and other areas? What's behind that lack of action?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, there's not a lack of action on Somalia. I think that it's very clear what needs to happen to try to stabilize Somalia. First and foremost, as I said, there needs to be a political process in place and we're trying to get the Transitional Federal Government to reach out to the various clans and to have this national reconciliation congress that will lead to greater legitimacy within the Transitional Federal Government. As you know, the Transitional Federal Government was established in a 4.5 formula in Nairobi. There were all clans represented in the Transitional Federal Government, but there may need to be some greater process that through the congress, the dialogue, to have representatives that are now even more legitimate from their communities. And so that's clearly necessary.

At the same time that you have this political process, you have to stabilize the security front. And that's where trying to deploy African forces or UN forces is going to be essential, trying to get in some forces that could help stabilize. The challenge there is that there are these insurgents, these al-Shabab militia that are trying to undermine both the political dialogue as well as the security situation. They include -- that includes targeting Hawia leadership that are trying to reach out. They're actually trying to spoil this process of political dialogue and reconciliation.

And then finally, it's very clear that there is a humanitarian crisis coming out of the conflict that's taking place in Mogadishu and trying to get assistance to the people of Somalia as soon as possible, and we're working both with the Transitional Federal Government, with UN agencies and with the Ethiopians and the Ugandans who are there to try to make -- to facilitate access to get that assistance to the people.

QUESTION: Do you think that that humanitarian crisis is rising to a similar level as, say, the one in the mid-1990s? Are you concerned that you may be going down that road?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: I'm concerned that we need to get the political process on track and that that is the key. And until you can stabilize the security situation, it's very difficult to have this national dialogue. I think that most of the people who move out of the city I understand are on the outskirts of the city so can move home fairly quickly. So I think that it's a situation that's containable but there are committed spoilers who have to be dealt with so that those who are more moderate and are seeking dialogue will be able to come to the fore.

QUESTION: Can I just ask one brief thing about Eritrea? Is it your -- have you come to any conclusion about what Isaias' calculation is here? Is he just doing this to, you know -- I don't know the right word -- just to bother the Ethiopians, or is there something more nefarious at hand here? Have the Eritreans decided to become a supporter of extremism -- extremist Muslim groups?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: I haven't actually spoken to Eritrean officials and so I think that I can only assume what Eritrea's calculation is. It's not through direct dialogue with the Eritreans themselves. But very clearly, Eritrea has played a game of trying to oppose Ethiopia everywhere in the region and that probably fundamentally goes back to addressing the issue of the border. I do not believe that Eritrea has taken a position of supporting extremists as a sort of ideological orientation or a common interest with extremist elements across the region. I think that they're also supporting rebels in Darfur for the same reason, which is to try to block any Ethiopian action in Ethiopia rapprochement with the Government of Sudan. So I think it's about balancing Ethiopia's interests. But that said, that's an analysis not based on direct dialogue with the Eritreans.

QUESTION: Has any one suggested to them that this might -- while it may be they may see it in their short term, medium term interest as a buffer to Ethiopia that long term this is really going to get them in a whole lot of trouble or have you been completely blocked out from any talks with the senior Eritrean leadership?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Everybody has suggested it to them. Many of the countries that are in a regular dialogue with the Eritreans have definitely suggested it to them.

QUESTION: Who, the Sudanese?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: I'm not so sure about the Sudanese, but many of the neighboring countries have done so.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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