



Press Availability by Deputy Secretary Negroponte in Azerbaijan

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DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Good afternoon. Thank you for coming.

I have come to Azerbaijan this week with a simple message: I am here to reaffirm the United States' commitment to strengthen relations between our two countries – in a spirit of friendship. As Vice President Cheney said when he came here a month ago, the United States has deep and abiding interests in the well-being and security of Azerbaijan and of its neighbors in the South Caucasus. We share important interests and cooperate closely on a range of crucial issues.



The U.S. and Azerbaijan are partners in working for regional and global stability. American and Azerbaijani soldiers stand side by side in Iraq and Afghanistan. The contributions of Azerbaijan to these security priorities are greatly appreciated by the American government and the American people. The United States will continue our security cooperation and assist the reform of Azerbaijan's defense establishment, including, under NATO's Partnership for Peace.

We have long been partners in major strategic energy projects that have built links between this region and Europe. Yesterday I had an opportunity to visit the Sangachal Terminal, where I saw firsthand how these Southern Corridor projects are strengthening energy security in Europe and beyond. From the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline to the South Caucasus Gas pipeline, our partnership is deepening as we pursue the Turkey-Greece-Italy and Nabucco natural gas pipelines, as well as expanded oil transit opportunities, thereby diversifying energy supplies in European and global markets.

My visit comes just two weeks before Azerbaijan's presidential election. We recognize the Government of Azerbaijan's commitment to hold free and fair elections. October 15th represents an opportunity, an important opportunity, for Azerbaijan to demonstrate its commitment to democratic reform by holding an election that is assessed by its own public and the international community to be free, fair and transparent.

Two months ago we saw that conflicts in this region are anything but frozen. Russia's invasion of sovereign Georgia was unjustified. We call on Russia to implement fully the ceasefire negotiated by President Sarkozy of France. We and our European partners have made clear that we support the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Georgia, as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In this new environment, now, more than ever, the United States wants to help find a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As one of the three Minsk Group co-chairs, the United States has worked for years to help resolve this situation. We are committed to achieving a negotiated solution to the conflict that starts with the principle of territorial integrity, and takes into account other international principles. A resolution to the conflict will enhance peace and stability in the region, and Azerbaijan's security, as well.

Thank you very much, and I would be pleased to take a few questions.

QUESTION: My question is on Russia. Would the United States of America be ready to provide security measures and provide security for Azerbaijan as well as Ukraine if Russia shows new aggression?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: As I said in my statement, we believe that the action in Georgia by Russia was unjustified, and we, together with Europe and others in the international community, have rallied behind Georgia. We have provided significant assistance to help Georgia recover from the situation that was created by Russia's invasion. And we believe that Russia has paid a very significant international cost for what it did in Georgia, and we would hope that as a result of that they would think twice before trying to create similar circumstances elsewhere.

QUESTION: My question is about the mass media and situation in Azerbaijan, and the three opposition newspaper journalists are still in prison. But the very fact of the imprisonment of the opposition journalists; what do you think? Does it actually undermine the conduct of truly democratic elections in Azerbaijan? Because as everybody knows, there are no democratic elections unless the opposition [inaudible].

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: As I said in my remarks, we certainly see the 15th of October as an opportunity for the conduct of elections that will be perceived by the people of Azerbaijan and by the international community as fair and free. I would also say that in the context of a country that only 17 years ago was ruled by a communist party dictatorship, that there has been considerable progress on the path towards democracy by this country. Now, also with the recent prosperity of the past two years, there are opportunities to improve the economic well-being of the Azerbaijani people, which is also a positive development.

But there are issues, such as the one you mentioned, that we believe need to be addressed, and these are the kinds of subjects that we raise in the quarterly human rights dialogue that we have with the government of Azerbaijan. We would hope that going forward there would be more progress on these kinds of issues. I would certainly agree with the thrust of your question – that this kind of detention does put a blemish on the democratic activity here.

QUESTION: Do you think this is the right time for Azerbaijan and the United States of America to begin cooperating militarily? And would the U.S. be ready to assist Azerbaijan if Azerbaijan becomes a victim of another Russian aggression, as in Georgia?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: As I said earlier, the United States supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, of Azerbaijan, and of Armenia. And certainly the kinds of activities that we carry out in our relationship, our bilateral relationship, are designed to both strengthen our partnership and help strengthen the country of Azerbaijan.

As I said earlier, we value the cooperation we have in the security area already, particularly in the matter of Azerbaijan troops that are fighting side by side with other coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. In my discussions with both the President and with the Foreign Minister, we did discuss the possibility of continued and possibly increased cooperation and contribution by Azerbaijan to the efforts in Afghanistan. We are certainly open to the possibility of other forms of cooperation with Azerbaijan in the security sphere.

QUESTION: Actually everybody has been witnessing political activities here in this region of the world after the Russian intrusion into Georgian territory. So the question would be again, if the same scenario happened here in Azerbaijan, if the Russian Federation [inaudible] towards Azerbaijan. Is the United States of America ready to stand together with Azerbaijan just in case of a military action?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Look, let me answer it again because several of you are coming back to this hypothetical question.

First of all, we would hope that this situation that you mentioned would not arise. That would be my first answer.

Secondly, as you saw from our response and the European response to the situation in Georgia, we did many things to show solidarity with that country, including after events occurred a significant program to help the reconstruction and the repair in that country.

But we have also in response to the situation that occurred in Georgia taken steps to send a message of solidarity with other countries in the region such as Azerbaijan. That was also the message that Vice President Cheney delivered when he visited here recently.

Lastly I would say that we have in our dialogue with Russia taken the position that the kind of activity they undertook in Georgia is not in keeping with the principles and policies that we think are appropriate to the 21st Century, and that going forward their behavior ought to be one of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of independent states. We think that is the best way to advance good international relations between all the countries concerned, and is the best way also to fully realize the economic and political potential of all of our countries.

I have time for one more question.

QUESTION: I'm actually interested in the Turkish-initiated Caucasus [inaudible] proposal [inaudible].

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I think first of all, I think [inaudible]. Are you talking about with respect to Armenia or with respect to --

QUESTION: [Inaudible].

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Right. I think that Turkey obviously has an important role to play. I've particularly noticed, and have noted the fact that they have reached out to Armenia recently, which appears to us to be a positive development. But I think many different actors have a role to play in this process.

Most importantly, as concerns Azerbaijan, I think the two countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan have a key role to play in this situation. If this is an example of where if the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could be resolved, then the full potential of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations would have a better chance of being realized.

Lastly, I would say that the so-called Minsk Group also has an important role to play in helping facilitate some kind of ultimate solution and of course the United States is a member of that group and we are prepared to play our part in facilitating a peaceful solution to that situation.

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