



Interview With Wire Services

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

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UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We are deeply disappointed by the vote in the House of Representatives today. Turkey is one of our most valued and important allies worldwide and we think it's important that an issue as difficult as this, and we recognize that there were deportations and mass killings during that period, that it be handled in a productive way. The Turkish government has offered to open the Ottoman archives. They've offered to have shared historical commissions with the Armenian government. It's our belief that that's the better and more productive way forward.

What we're going to do is, I'm going to call the Turkish Ambassador in just a minute. Secretary Rice will be on the phone with the Turkish leadership when she gets up tomorrow morning. We will obviously impress upon the Turkish leadership our deep disappointment, the fact that we opposed this resolution, that the administration worked very very hard to try to produce a different kind of vote, and that if you look at the multiplicity of American interests in the Middle East we need a good and constructive relationship with Turkey. Whether it's creating peace between Israel and the Palestinians, we need Turkish help there. Dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat, we need Turkish help. Dealing with Syria and of course all the challenges in Iraq, we need Turkish help. Turkey will be hosting an Iraq Neighbors Conference in less than a month's time.

So we want to convey to the Turkish people and Turkish government a message of respect and a message of support for them and the hope that we can continue to work together on a productive basis.

QUESTION: How big a risk do you think you face of the Turks either pulling the plug on Incirlik or withdrawing support for any of the other issues you mentioned?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We had hoped to have a different outcome today. We anticipated the strong possibility of the outcome that was produced, so we've been talking to the Turkish government over the last several weeks. Our advice has been we certainly understand that there's going to be great unhappiness in Turkey among the population and the press and the government, but we need to continue to work together.

Peace and stability in Iraq is in Turkey's interest as well as that of the United States. Dealing with Iran successfully is in Turkey's interest. So we hope very much that the disappointment can be limited to statements and not extend to anything concrete that would interfere with the very good way that we've been working with the Turks for many years.

QUESTION: Did the Turks at any time indicate to you that they would pull the plug on Incirlik or --

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I was in Turkey two weeks ago and met with the leadership there, had extensive conversations and talked to the Turkish Ambassador and a number of Turkish parliamentarians yesterday who were visiting. A representative from each of the three leading parties came and we saw them and they saw the Congress and the Turks have not been threatening anything specific, and we think as good allies we should now in a very difficult situation, we should now stick together, continue to work together, and try to produce some of the positive outcomes on these issues that are in Turkey's interest as well as in American interests.

QUESTION: Could this have an effect on the border with Iraq and Afghanistan?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We certainly hope not. What we have been trying to do is to convince the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional leaders in Northern Iraq to be helpful to Turkey on the PKK issue. The PKK is a real threat to Turkey. Twenty-seven Turks, soldiers and civilians, have been killed in cross-border attacks over the last several weeks. Over the last 10 or 15 years a countless number of Turks have been killed. It's a serious threat. We designated, we the United States, the PKK a terrorist organization about a decade ago. We have been urging the European governments, and there are still some that allow PKK political front organizations to set up shop, to shut those down. And I think in the United States government Turkey has a friend on the PKK issue and a supporter. It's a vicious terrorist organization. It deserves universal condemnation. And what the Turks need and want is effective international action to inhibit these cross-border raids and that would point to the need for a better functioning relationship between Iraq and the Kurdish leaders as well as Turkey. And it's our job to try to bring that about and we're working very hard to try to have that concrete action to inhibit cross-border attacks by the PKK.

QUESTION: How concerned are you that what little leverage you might have had to stop the Turks from launching an incursion into the north just went away today?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think that the Turkish government knows that the United States is if not its strongest ally in the world, one of its very strongest. They know that the United States government pulled out all the stops to oppose this resolution, starting with President Bush, extending to Secretary Rice and Secretary Gates. There was an extraordinary effort over the last several weeks to try to convince the Congress not to take this step. Turkey knows that. And Turkey knows that the United States has been there for Turkey in the past and we're certainly going to be there for them in the future.

So our strong wish is that we continue effective cooperation with the Turkish authorities. That will certainly be our message tonight and tomorrow as it has been our message for several weeks.

QUESTION: But just as like you saw with the war in Iraq that when the parliament voted not to let you use Turkish airspace, I mean you can't really do anything about your domestic political considerations with the Congress. They can't maybe have, when something like this happens it --

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: The Turkish government leaders know that there's a separation of powers in the United States. That today's action was an action by the House Foreign Affairs Committee. This was not an action that was supported by President Bush and the executive branch of our government. We gave impressed that upon the Turkish government. Obviously they know that. And also in our interviews, public interviews with the Turkish population. Sean has tried to make that very important distinction and I'm trying to make it right now.

QUESTION: Do you think that these actions by Congress will put U.S. troops at risk in Iraq?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We certainly hope and expect that the good cooperation and coordination between Turkey and the United States will continue. Obviously Turkey's aware that Iraq for us is our number one foreign policy priority; that the health and welfare of our troops is, of course, of elementary importance to us; and I've heard nothing whatsoever from the Turkish authorities to indicate that they would do anything that would hurt our troops. Nothing whatsoever. I would commend the Turkish government for the way that it's interacted with us in these very difficult weeks leading up to this vote. They have been highly professional. They have not made threats. They have tried to work with us through this. I think the Turkish government knows at the very highest levels...I met with President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan two weeks ago, but more importantly, President Bush and Secretary Rice have been in touch with them. They know how hard we worked against this resolution.

I think that will be an important factor.

QUESTION: Are you telling them, and do you plan to try to turn this around legislatively?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: This is in the hands of the Congress. Our strong advice has been not to pass this resolution. Should it come to the Floor we will oppose it and we would urge the Congress not to take this step in the full House of Representatives.

QUESTION: How much of this is just politics, Democratic politics?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't question at all in any way, shape or form the motives of the Members who voted on either side of this issue. This is a very difficult issue.

If you know the Armenian community, and we have great respect for the American Armenian community, this is a very serious issue for them. And this is the way we've looked at it frankly for the better part of 15 years in the last three American administrations, and we've said and Sean has said it and he said it in his written statement tonight that he issued that these are serious issues that do need to be looked at.

The deportations and mass killings from 1915 to 1917, they do deserve to be looked at, but the proper way to do it in our judgment is through joint commissions. And for Turkey and Armenia to take this up as two governments, and the Turkish government has for a number of years been putting forward what we believe are very responsible initiatives to try to get to the historical evidence and to open up the archives.

We're not going to question at all, in any way, shape or form the motives of Members of Congress because many of them voted their conscience and this is a very deeply difficult issue and we recognize the difficulty of this issue on both sides.

QUESTION: The timing certainly couldn't be worse.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: The last three administrations have not supported this for the last 16-17 years. The timing is not good, because Turkey, it's a new Turkish government, it's facing a lot of challenges. It's facing a PKK challenge which we sympathize with, but we are counseling the Turkish government to handle the PKK issue through what we hope will be enhanced and more effective dialogue on the part of the Iraqi authorities with it, but certainly not through the use of force across the border.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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