



Daily Press Briefing
Adam Ereli, Deputy Spokesman
 Washington, DC
 December 10, 2004

INDEX:

IRAQ

Deputy Secretary's Meeting with UN Special Representative Ashraf Qazi
 Possible Increase in UN Election Workers
 Baghdad Fuel Shortages / U.S. and Iraqi Government to Address Short-Term Problems

PALESTINIANS

U.S. Support for Elections / U.S. Technical and Financial Assistance
 Query on U.S. Monitors

NORTH KOREA

Status of Six-Party Talks / Commitment to Return to Talks
 Query on Status of Special Envoy Detran's Meetings
 Proposal for Basis of Discussion
 Selig Harrison's Article on Nuclear Threat / Compelling Evidence of Uranium Enrichment Program
 Discussion of Plenary

JAPAN

Read-out of Deputy Secretary Armitage's Meeting with Former Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi
 Japanese Self-Defense Forces in Iraq

DEPARTMENT

Dr. Rice's Visit to Department of State / Agenda of Visit

ZIMBABWE

Parliament's Passage of Law on Non-Governmental Organizations

CAMBODIA

Attack on Non-Governmental Organization by Armed Assailants

TRANSCRIPT:

12:55 p.m. EST

MR. ERELI: Good afternoon. Welcome to our last briefing of the week. And I'm happy to take your questions.

Sir.

QUESTION: Can you say anything about the meeting that Mr. Armitage is having with the UN Envoy to Iraq, Ashraf Qazi, this afternoon?

MR. ERELI: Sure -- if I can find it. Deputy Secretary Armitage will be meeting with the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Iraq, Mr. Ashraf Qazi, this afternoon. It's a meeting to discuss the important work that the UN is doing in Iraq and to underscore our commitment to supporting Ambassador Qazi and the UN in carrying out its mandate there; that mandate covers both assisting the January 2005 elections and beyond.

It will be an opportunity also for -- I think for Deputy Secretary Armitage -- to express our appreciation for the important work that Ambassador Qazi and the UN Mission in Iraq are doing, and in particular, the valuable advice and support that they are providing to the independent election commission of Iraq.

I would note that the UN reports are that technical preparations for elections are on track and that training of election workers and voter registration is continuing. We have obviously been working closely with the UN officials to support their work, particularly in helping to address security concerns and we'll continue to do that.

QUESTION: Does the U.S. feel that the UN has enough people there to help with the elections?

MR. ERELI: I think both the U.S. and the UN look to increase their -- both the U.S. understands and the UN has said that they are -- they expect to increase their -- the number of people in Iraq. We've been working with them to help facilitate that, and we look forward to growing numbers of UN workers going there to help Iraq prepare for its elections.

QUESTION: In Baghdad, Adam, there are concerns that fuel shortages continue. And I just wonder what you're doing to address that, given its potential for inflaming unrest before the election.

MR. ERELI: Well, this is part of the insurgency designed to, I think, undermine public support for the government, for elections, for, frankly, everything that the friends of Iraq are trying to accomplish. It's part of the security problem that we're committed to dealing with, that the Iraqis and the multinational force are working to overcome. It's a reminder that the job is not yet done. I think that most people looking at the situation understand what the source of the problem is and we are committed to addressing it.

QUESTION: So the general strategy is sort out security so that, then, that this problem goes away. But in the meantime, is there any specific things that you're doing to

get fuel to Baghdad?

MR. ERELI: I think we are working with the Government of Iraq to both address the short-term problems posed by attacks against specific facilities, whether they be power plants or fuel lines or convoys or whatever. That's a short-term quick fix that responds to the immediate challenge. The longer term issue is confronting the insurgency, training Iraqi security forces, taking the fight to the enemy, which we're doing.

Sir.

QUESTION: Can I change the subject? Palestinian elections?

MR. ERELI: Yes.

QUESTION: The UN apparently is going to send about 60 of its workers to the occupied territories to help with the election. Do you have any comment on that, as far as facilitating the process?

MR. ERELI: I wasn't aware of that specific report. I think the United States has been very outspoken and I think forthright about our support for Palestinian elections in January -- on January 9th. Assistant Secretary Burns, in Oslo this week, announced our intention to provide assistance in support of those elections, both technical assistance, to help prepare for them and to help ensure that they're conducted in a way that I think will give legitimacy and credibility to the process and the outcome, as well as assistance for election monitors.

So we are on record as being both politically supportive but also financially assisting this effort and that is in full coordination with the international community, including the UN, including the Quartet. I think the EU and other Quartet members will also be doing their part. So what we see is, frankly, everybody coming together in support of a process that can help produce a responsible Palestinian leadership representative of the Palestinian people that is ready to engage in a process that leads -- engage in a process with Israel that leads to two independent states living side by side.

QUESTION: Anything specifically on U.S. monitors? Has there been a request? Have you made any offers?

MR. ERELI: No, neither, that I am aware of.

QUESTION: Is the U.S. amenable to sending election monitors?

MR. ERELI: I think we'll see what the situation calls for. Let's see what the situation develops, what the needs are. The point of departure is the general proposition that we are willing and eager to do what is necessary to help ensure an elections process that is a -- that reflects well on the Palestinian people.

QUESTION: Is it about whether there's a need for such monitors, or is it a safety consideration?

MR. ERELI: No, I think it's right, at this point, as far as I'm aware, it's what are the needs and desires.

Yes.

QUESTION: Can we switch to North Korea?

MR. ERELI: Yeah.

QUESTION: There are conflicting accounts, published accounts, of whether the North Koreans said that they were or were not willing to go back to six-party talks when they met with Joe DeTrani in New York. What's correct? What did they say?

MR. ERELI: I'm not in a position to talk publicly about North Korea, what North Korea might have said privately. What I will tell you is this, that publicly North Korea has said -- North Korea has committed to coming back to six-party talks. And they did that at the last round and that is their public position. They have also said that they are not yet ready to come, to return to talks at this time. It's our view that talks should resume as soon as possible.

That's the point that we're making to the point that Special Envoy DeTrani is making in his visits to the region. We think it's in the interest of all parties to return to talks as soon as possible. So you have, on the one hand, a commitment to return to talks, yet on the other hand, is statements that they're not ready to return to talks at this time, and you have, you know, our position which is that we think that all the parties should get back together as soon as possible.

QUESTION: Did he come away more hopeful that talks would restart soon after his talks?

MR. ERELI: You'd have to ask -- I haven't spoken with Special Envoy DeTrani. I think we come away from these meetings, his meetings, with a sense that all parties that we've spoken to want to see talks resumed and think it's important to resume talks as soon as possible and in agreement that that's the goal that we should -- the near-term goal that we should be working toward, obviously, in the broader context, of trying to accomplish our overall aim, which is an end to North Korea's nuclear program.

QUESTION: And you include North Korea in all parties we've talked to?

MR. ERELI: No, I'm not speaking for North Korea. No.

QUESTION: Well, I can't remember exactly when it is that this was offered, but remember that Assistant Secretary Kelly made some kind of new overtures in terms of what the U.S. would be willing to offer North Korea in terms of a possible deal concerning not only the security guarantee but other kind of inducements.

MR. ERELI: I'm not aware of any new inducements. As you know, we put a proposal --

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. ERELI: -- forward that we thought was flexible.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, have they asked for anything in addition to the proposal, or is it your sense that the unwillingness to come to the table is just because they're not ready, or do you get the impression they're holding out for something more before they sit down?

MR. ERELI: I wouldn't want to ascribe motivations to the North -- to what to this point has been the North Korean refusal to come back to talks. It's our view that we put forward a flexible and good proposal that should be the basis for discussion at the talks. That proposal addresses the full range of issues before us, but keeping front and

center the fundamental objective of addressing all aspects of North Korea's nuclear program.

Now the point is not to negotiate that proposal outside the framework of six-party talks or to use a refusal to come to six-party talks as a means to change the proposal. The proposal's there. We think it's a good one. If there are suggestions or responses, the place to discuss that from our point of view is in the six-party context.

Yes.

QUESTION: Adam, do you have a readout on the meeting between the Deputy Secretary and the former Foreign Minister --

MR. ERELI: Do you have same subject?

QUESTION: Still on North Korea.

MR. ERELI: Okay, yeah.

QUESTION: In *Foreign Affairs* today, there is an article by Selig Harrison, who's described as a North Korea expert, is saying the U.S. Government exaggerated the threat from North Korea's nuclear programs, just as it manipulated intelligence about weapons in Iraq. Do you have a comment on that?

MR. ERELI: Yeah. I think that those claims are wrong. And we think there is clear and compelling evidence, a wealth of clear and compelling evidence about North Korea's uranium enrichment program. We have known since the late 1990's that North Korea is interested in enrichment technology. We obtained clear evidence over two-and-a-half years ago, that it was pursuing a covert program to enrich uranium and assessed that North Korea was pursuing uranium enrichment as an alternate route to nuclear weapons.

This program was in clear violation of international commitments that North Korea voluntarily undertook, including its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and its commitments under that 1994 Agreed Framework in the North-South Denuclearization Declaration. In addition to that, the director of Central Intelligence reported to Congress that North Korea had begun seeking centrifuge-related materials in large quantities in 2001, and that it was also obtaining equipment suitable for use in uranium feed and withdrawal systems.

There are claims made in the article that we learned about the uranium enrichment program from the North Koreans. That's not the case. We were already aware of the program before they ever talked to us and we informed them of our knowledge about it in October 2002, and it was at that time that North Korea acknowledged to senior U.S. officials that it was pursuing such a covert program.

So I think that it's not a question, as Dr. Harrison suggests, of us exaggerating something, but rather the case of there being a multitude of, I think, clear and persuasive evidence that North Korea itself has acknowledged.

Yes, to you.

QUESTION: So do you have a readout on the Deputy Secretary's meeting with the former Foreign Minister of Japan this morning?

MR. ERELI: Yes, I do. The Deputy Secretary met this morning with Mrs. Yoriko Kawaguchi, who is Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Foreign Affairs and former Foreign Minister of Japan. They discussed a broad range of topics, including the situation in Iraq, North Korea nuclear and abduction issues, and U.S.-Japanese relations. Their meeting lasted about 40 minutes.

QUESTION: Can I follow up on that?

MR. ERELI: Yes.

QUESTION: Did they discuss anything about the Self-Defense Forces staying in Japan for another year?

MR. ERELI: Do you mean in Iraq?

QUESTION: I'm sorry. Did I say Japan? In Iraq, please.

MR. ERELI: I don't know if that issue came up specifically. As you know, yesterday we spoke publicly from the podium about our, you know, great appreciation for this decision and our admiration for what the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are doing to help humanitarian and reconstruction work in Iraq, and I think that's the sort of -- that's the -- that's how I would characterize their discussions, if it came up.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Yes.

QUESTION: What can you say about Dr. Rice's visit to the Department today? Who is she meeting with, and what will she be told?

MR. ERELI: Dr. Rice will be coming to meet with some State Department officials today, as part of her preparations for confirmation hearings for the position of Secretary of State. This will be her first visit to the building, but I should add, she's been working pretty diligently for the past several weeks on the transition. She has received a wealth of briefing materials. She has spoken with and met with the Secretary to begin the in-brief process. So it is a transition that is already in train, and I think that is well in-hand and proceeding very well, very smoothly.

Today's meeting will be -- will focus on -- and I think it's important to note that her first meeting in the building with officials of the State Department will focus on: management and security issues; the personnel system in the State Department, training, hiring civil service, foreign service specialists, specialist systems training, family members -- programs for families; security at our missions overseas, as well as border security issues.

So those are the three things that the meeting today will focus on.

QUESTION: You do mean her first visit to the State Department since she was --

MR. ERELI: Yes, first visit since she was nominated as Secretary -- or since her nomination was announced, and first visit as part of the transition exercise.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Oh, no. We've got a ways to go.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Can I go back to the -- Mr. Armitage's meeting? I wondered -- you mentioned that they talk about abductee issue in the meeting. I wonder if they talk about the recent -- the Japanese (inaudible) issue, and if they discuss about the debate in Japan that Japan, you know, should put sanctions on North Korea.

MR. ERELI: Right. I don't know if that was discussed. I couldn't say. I don't have that detailed a readout.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. ERELI: Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Yes, a quick follow-up about North Korea. I understand that there is an idea floating that if North Korea is not ready to have a formal, clearly type of six-party talks, then we must just go ahead with informal -- or I don't know how to characterize -- but the working level type --

MR. ERELI: Working level group?

QUESTION: -- group, within -- possibly within this year. How is that idea to the United States? Is that acceptable?

MR. ERELI: I'm not familiar with that. I don't know that that's a -- that's something that's being considered. So I wouldn't really want to hypothesize. I think our focus is on getting all of the parties together. A plenary is what was discussed. Whether there are other modalities for doing that, or other forums or venues or types, I just don't know.

Yes.

QUESTION: Adam, the Zimbabwe Parliament has passed a legislation that would appear to require the closure of human rights and non-governmental organizations that either have foreign support or contacts, which is basically all of them, and I just wondered your reaction.

MR. ERELI: Right. As you said, the Parliament of Zimbabwe has voted to pass a law on non-governmental organizations. It is our view that this law, if signed by President Mugabe, will stifle political debate in the exercise of civil liberties in Zimbabwe by preventing international human rights groups from operating there. Specifically, the bill would prohibit domestic groups working on human rights and governance issues from receiving foreign funding from any source, including Zimbabweans living overseas. It would set up a mechanism for government oversight of non-governmental organizations that would be highly intrusive and subject to political manipulation.

In our view, this bill is an assault on civil society and an attempt to curtail political discussion in Zimbabwe. It is yet another sign that the Government of Zimbabwe may not be serious about holding free and fair parliamentary elections in March 2005, and we call upon President Mugabe not to sign this bill. That's our view of it.

Ma'am.

QUESTION: Do you have anything on the kidnapping in Cambodia of about 80 women rescued from this U.S.-funded shelter?

MR. ERELI: Yeah. I think we put out a statement on that yesterday. Just for your information, what happened is that on December 8th, I believe, Cambodia's -- I'm sorry, December 7th -- Cambodia's Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Department had rescued 84 women and children from a hotel notorious as a brothel for sex trafficking of children.

A day later, there is an attack on the NGO which was protecting these people, and which receives U.S. and international assistance, and armed assailants abducted all but one of them, and this is -- was horrific to us. We deeply deplore the actions of those responsible for this outrageous attack and we demand that the Cambodian Government take immediate action to locate the 91 women -- I think I mentioned 84 -- the total is 91 women and children who were abducted from the shelter, and that once they locate them, they rescue and protect them.

We also believe that the Cambodian Government must thoroughly investigate this outrageous attack and must bring those to justice responsible.

I would also add that our ambassador in Cambodia has expressed our grave concerns to the highest levels of the Cambodian Government.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Okay, thanks.

(The briefing ended at 1:20 p.m.)

DPB # 203

Released on December 10, 2004

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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