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Daily Press Briefing

Adam Ereli, Deputy Spokesman

Washington, DC

April 26, 2005



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TRANSCRIPT:

12:55 p.m. EDT

MR. ERELI: Hello, everybody. Welcome to our briefing. We can proceed straight to your questions.

QUESTION: On Syria. They're gone, are they, for sure? Are you confident everybody that you want to see out is out, meaning troops and intelligence and all?

MR. ERELI: We think today is a historic day for Lebanon and its people. After almost three decades, Syria has withdrawn its military forces from Lebanon. This is an important first step in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1559. The United Nations has sent a verification team to Lebanon and Damascus to verify whether the withdrawal has, in fact, been completed, withdrawal of both military forces and intelligence assets. We await the report of this verification team to provide a considered judgment on whether the withdrawal is complete, but it certainly at this point looks, in terms of the military, Syria's military forces, that they are gone from Lebanon.

But we would stress in considering this issue that it's not just military forces, it's also intelligence forces. I think there are some lingering concerns that not all Syrian intelligence assets are out of Lebanon and it's important that they do leave Lebanon and Lebanese territory fully and completely in order to be in compliance with 1559. So we'll be, as I said earlier, looking forward to the verification team's report on that issue after they've been able to meet with officials and survey the landscape.

QUESTION: You're not concerned that not all intelligence assets have left, which is the same as saying, isn't it, that some have left?

MR. ERELI: Yeah, some have left but not all.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. ERELI: At least that's what UN Special Envoy Mr. Larsen made clear in his report, which was issued also today, which we welcome, which we -- and for which we express, I think, our thanks and appreciation for Mr. Larsen's efforts. He has devoted much time and good work on this report. We think it's a good contribution to our understanding of the situation on the ground there. We will be examining it and discussing it with our colleagues in the Security Council and take note of a number of its findings, and particularly the charge for the UN verification team to go to Lebanon and verify the full withdrawal of all Syrian assets.

QUESTION: How are you going to know that Syria has withdrawn all of its intelligence assets, or at least how will you be satisfied that --

MR. ERELI: Well, as a first step, we would look to the UN verification team to investigate the matter, to gather the facts on the ground, to talk to the relevant authorities and the relevant parties and to provide its judgment on the issue. And that will be something that informs us and informs our deliberations.

QUESTION: Are you saying, then, a Syrian declaration that it's withdrawn all of its intelligence forces would be insufficient for the United States?

MR. ERELI: I think if you look at the report of the Secretary General, you will see that in order to determine compliance with 1559 that this UN team has an important role to play and it's -- I think it's necessary to note that the Syrian and Lebanese governments have accepted the terms of reference of this verification team and will be cooperating with it.

Yes.

QUESTION: Adam, at this point, is the U.S. prepared to send Ambassador Scobey back to Damascus?

MR. ERELI: That's an issue that we have under, I think, regular review, but I don't have any criteria or benchmarks to share with you that, once met, will lead to the return of the Ambassador. I think when we determine that our bilateral -- that this is what's -- that our bilateral relationship can be helped and we can move things forward with a return, that's when we'll return.

QUESTION: Can I just follow up on that?

MR. ERELI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Originally you said that the withdrawal of the Ambassador was for consultations and just that you had no planned time or deadline to send her back. But now you're saying that the continued holding back of the Ambassador from going back to Syria is more of a diplomatic move --

MR. ERELI: No, I don't think I -- I don't mean to suggest today that there's any change in our handling of this issue than there was when the Ambassador returned to Washington. And the way you characterized it at the beginning of your question is the same as it is today, that she's withdrawn, she's returned for consultations and she will return to Damascus when we feel it's useful for her to return.

QUESTION: Could we -- is there a larger picture here? Does this -- in your -- in the U.S. estimate, enhance prospects for Syria playing a productive role in peacemaking? Does this mean anything besides what's evident?

MR. ERELI: Well, what's evident is significant. That's point one.

QUESTION: Right.

MR. ERELI: As I said earlier, withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon after almost 30 years of presence there is a significant development and it is something that should be recognized as such. Is it indicative of better and bigger things to come? I guess the jury's still out and it's hard to say. One would hope.

One would hope that we see that building on this withdrawal, we see an end to foreign interference in Lebanon; we see, as 1559 calls for, a Lebanon that is under the authority and all parts of Lebanon are under the authority of a strong sovereign government in Lebanon; that we see full diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon as befits two sovereign and independent states. We would hope that we see, obviously, elections in Lebanon that leads to a government that is not tainted by foreign interference. And we would hope that we see, I think, the kind of further disbanding of and disarming of militias and the kind of stability, institutional development and broader -- broader regional prosperity that such, I guess, a change of direction engenders.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. We have what we have, which is a Syrian withdrawal. Again, as Mr. Roed-Larsen makes clear in his report, there are a number of other steps to 1559 that have not yet been implemented. And implementation of those provisions are critical to, I think, further forward progress. And we and our Security Council partners, we remain focused and determined to help bring about the full implementation of 1559.

Yes.

QUESTION: Adam, what's the message today?

MR. ERELI: The message says what I just said.

QUESTION: No, to Hezbollah. We are now still with this issue of militia because reading what they are saying, writing, broadcasting for the last three weeks, I guess, they are nowhere near to even sit down and talk the weapons*.

MR. ERELI: I can't speak for Hezbollah. I can speak for the United States and for Security Council 1559, which calls for the disarming of all militias and for the extension of the authority of the sovereign Government of Lebanon over all of its territory. Clearly, that is an element of the resolution that we and the Government of Lebanon and our partners in the Security Council will be working toward.

And I think the most immediate next step we'll be focusing on are elections to take place by the end of May. And these elections will provide for a new political reality in Lebanon and that is a reality of a government that is fully and truly representative of the people of Lebanon. And let's see what kind of consequences that political reality has for events on the ground.

QUESTION: Let's -- if it's in order, let's remember why the Syrians went in in the first place, and they did restore order. You know, coming at this in a different way, maybe, I could ask you, the question would be: Are you convinced that the Lebanese have the wherewithal to maintain order? This relates partly to the Hezbollah question. Will you acknowledge that Syria, to a certain extent, kept a lid on a situation that could have been even more chaotic? In other words, who is going to fill the role that Syria initially played and may have partly played all along?

MR. ERELI: The situation and condition and reality of Lebanon now is very different from what it was when Syrian forces initially went into Lebanon, and I think it's the view of the Lebanese and it's the view of the United States and it's the view of the Security Council and I would daresay the entire international community that it is long -- the time has long since passed when Lebanon and control over Lebanon and the future of Lebanon should be given -- should be put in the hands of the Lebanese.

And again, today marks, I think, an important step in that direction. It's not over. We've got to continue to work together to help the Lebanese through this transition from a state that was -- that had a large foreign military presence and a large foreign hand in its internal affairs to a Lebanon that is back squarely in the hands of the Lebanese. But that is a -- it is a welcome development. It is a development that is long overdue and it is a process that we in the international community are strongly committed to.

Yes.

QUESTION: What's your position regarding the Lebanese prisoners in Syria?

MR. ERELI: I'm not familiar with the details of the issue. Can you elaborate?

QUESTION: There are Lebanese who are prisoners in Syria since 10 or 20 years and they are still there and their families are in Lebanon demanding to release them from --

MR. ERELI: Let me see what I can get you on that one.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MR. ERELI: Sir.

QUESTION: There was a poll by Zogby and another group in the second week of April among Lebanese of all various ethnics and religious groups and it showed much more support for the Taif Accord than for 1559 among all groups. Also, there was a very mixed bag about the disarming of Hezbollah, even among Christians, Maronites and a lot of groups, some somewhat surprising numbers.

My question is: Once the elections take place in May and assuming they go well and there is a legitimate Lebanese government installed that the United States recognizes as being such, and perhaps they may then veer away from some of the other details of 1559, this Lebanese government: they may not want to disarm Hezbollah, they may not want to do some of these other things.

You okay with that?

MR. ERELI: I don't want to prejudge the elections and I don't want to speculate on what a future government of Lebanon may or may not do. We think it's important that any government of Lebanon exercise authority over all of Lebanon's territory. That's a fundamental principle for any state, but especially one that really has seen -- has seen itself -- has seen such suffering at the hands of outside forces as Lebanon.

So without prejudging the results of the elections, without accepting the suggestion that the government will pursue policy A or policy B, for us, I think, and for the international community, it is a -- an important principle to follow is, an important goal to try to achieve, is the exercise of full sovereignty by a central government over all the territory of that state.

QUESTION: Adam, given the fact that Syria has now left, do you think that the Lebanese institutions and military -- do they have the capacity to exercise full sovereignty over Lebanese territory*?

MR. ERELI: Yeah. They have the will. They have the -- I think the determination. I think they will need international support, both diplomatic and perhaps technical, and there's certainly the -- I think there's certainly support for that.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Adam, you said a few minutes ago that you have lingering concerns that not all intelligence -- Syrian intelligence personnel have been withdrawn from the country.

MR. ERELI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: What occasions those concerns?

MR. ERELI: The report of Mr. Larsen.

QUESTION: And what kind of claims has Syria made, to your knowledge, about its withdrawal of intelligence personnel to this date?

MR. ERELI: I don't want to speak for Syria. I'd refer you to the report by Mr. Larsen.

QUESTION: I'm asking about your knowledge of those claims.

MR. ERELI: Our knowledge of those claims is they've certified that everybody's out, but they're -- but that is something -- that is a -- that is something that needs to be verified, that that's what the UN team is going to be doing, and that's why we look forward to their report to make sure that that is, indeed, the case.

QUESTION: And do you regard it as technically feasible for the Syrians to withdraw its -- whatever remaining personnel it has in Lebanon prior to the Lebanese elections?

MR. ERELI: Sure. That's the goal. That's what we're all working for.

QUESTION: And you still think that can happen?

MR. ERELI: Sure.

QUESTION: Now that the Syrians are complying or seemingly complying, just two questions, Adam. Aren't you -- let me give you the question totally from an Arab world point of view. Aren't you surprised to how fast the Syrians complied? Because even the Lebanese were asking for this withdrawal. It never came. We had to have what we had, and then we're facing it now. And then joining the question maybe of a future normalization, are you -- how fast can the U.S. go back to normal relations with Syria, now that we have an official withdrawal?

MR. ERELI: I don't want to predict next steps we might take diplomatically, just because I think that's premature. As far as are we surprised at how fast it happened, I think we're pleased that the events -- we're pleased that events have developed the way they've developed. We're pleased that Syria has withdrawn its forces from Lebanon. As I said before, this is an important step. It's not the end of the road. It needs to be verified. But it does mark a positive development certainly in the affairs of Lebanon and certainly for the people of Lebanon.

And I would add that, you know, in looking at how things have developed, one should not discount or minimize the importance of international diplomacy by the United States, by France, which co-sponsored Resolution 1559, by the Security Council, by the countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Jordan, all of which made it clear that the time had come for Syria to leave Lebanon. And in the face of that reality, we are where we are today.

But again, let's recognize the importance of diplomacy, the importance of the Security Council resolution, the important efforts of Mr. Roed-Larsen and the fact that we've worked together to achieve something positive for the Lebanese people while bearing in mind that more needs to be done and that this is a process to which, you know -- this is process which we are committed to seeing through.

QUESTION: Adam, just a follow-up on that question? You've used a lot of language -- historic step, important step, positive step -- in regards to Lebanon. Are you not willing to say that this might also be an important step towards the normalization of relations between the United States and Syria if the Syrians would --

MR. ERELI: Well, you know, again, I don't want to -- you're making it sound like our relations with Syria are not normalized. I mean, the fact that we've recalled our Ambassador for consultations is -- does not mean we don't have a diplomatic presence, does not mean we're not engaged regularly with the Government of Syria, does not mean that we don't have normal relations.

It is a step we took because that's what we thought was appropriate and called for and necessary at the time. But one should be under no misapprehension that we can't conduct business, the business we need to conduct with the Government of Syria with -- in the context of our present relationship.

So you're asking me, where are we going with Syria -- and everybody's asked in a different way -- where are we going to go with Syria as a result of this step? I can't tell you. I don't know.

QUESTION: Is it all right to move on? Because it's hard to unload* this unless we finish the briefing.

MR. ERELI: Okay.

QUESTION: Do you have a reaction to the election in Togo? If you don't, I'm not too sure we're moving on with it.

QUESTION: What?

QUESTION: If you don't, I'm out of here.

(Laughter.)

MR. ERELI: Don't leave yet, Barry. We note that Togo's election authority has declared Mr. Gnassingbe as the provisional winner of Sunday's election. This declaration has to be confirmed by the constitutional court. The provisional results, as announced, were 60 percent for Mr. Gnassingbe and 38 percent for the opposition candidate, Mr. Akitani Bob.

As we noted yesterday, there are numerous reports of election irregularities. We continue to investigate those reports and develop an assessment of them. As part of that process, we're working with the ECOWAS observers and other diplomatic missions in, I think, compiling some conclusions.

I would note an important development and one that we are encouraging was the meeting yesterday between AU President and -- AU Chairman and Nigerian President, Mr. Obasanjo, along with officials from ECOWAS in Abuja yesterday where discussions were held between the opposition and ruling party candidates in the Togo elections about forming a national unity government. This is an important initiative. This is an initiative which we support because we believe, along with the AU and ECOWAS, that an inclusive government focused on national

reconciliation would be a positive development and it is something that we continue to work with the AU and with ECOWAS to try to bring about as a way of healing the divisions in Togo and in a way of -- and as a means of promoting a political way forward that meets the various demands of the electorate.

During this process, obviously, we continue to stress to all the parties, both government and opposition, the critical importance of preventing violence by supporters and committing themselves to a peaceful way forward.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Change of subject?

MR. ERELI: Okay.

QUESTION: The Turkish Government gave another year's permission to the United States to use the Incirlik base in Turkey. Could you tell a little more about the new agreement and what is the exact role of the base for Iraq operations and other U.S. operations*?

MR. ERELI: For questions about our presence, our military presence at Incirlik, I would refer you to the Defense Department. I don't have anything for you on that.

QUESTION: New agreement?

MR. ERELI: I don't have any information for you on that.

QUESTION: Venezuela. The Venezuelan Government said today that Secretary Rice's visit to the region was an effort to isolate Venezuela. Any reaction on that? And is there any confirmation of an asylum request by Luis Posada-Carriles?

MR. ERELI: I don't have anything for you on an asylum request.

On the remarks by the Venezuelans about the Secretary's visit, I think the best answer to that is the words of the Secretary herself. She addressed this yesterday and she addressed it very clearly. She said we have a -- the United States has a long history with Venezuela, we have strong economic ties with Venezuela, we want to have good relations with Venezuela.

The issue is policies and decisions that the Government of Venezuela takes. We have concerns about those policies and those decisions with respect to domestic developments and the issue of democracy and freedoms in Venezuela, as well as actions that Venezuela has taken with respect to its neighbors.

So these are issues, obviously, we'll discuss. Obviously, they're issues on the minds of others as well. But it's not a question of isolating or taking steps against Venezuela. Rather, it's trying to create a climate and foster a relationship where values and principles that are commonly held by all members of the hemisphere can be realized in Venezuela.

QUESTION: Could a change in U.S. position towards Venezuela change? There are reports that say that it will harden and that --

MR. ERELI: Yeah, I don't -- again, those are not reports that reflect any reality in terms of decisions by the United States to change its policy. The policy is what the Secretary said it was and it's what I just articulated.

Anything else on Venezuela?

QUESTION: Iraq?

MR. ERELI: Let's go to --

QUESTION: Okay. Well, sort of on Iraq. There has been a judgment made by the Pentagon, I think, that -- of non-culpability in terms of the soldiers who killed the Italian agent outside of - at Baghdad Airport. The Italians are not accepting that. Can you give us a sort of feel for -- is there a diplomatic interchange on this and where do we go from here on this issue?

MR. ERELI: I think this issue has been -- has been not -- hasn't been -- well, the facts are that there's no conclusion to the report. The report is not complete.

QUESTION: *The report had* some conclusions, no?

MR. ERELI: No, the report has not been completed. I've seen reports citing Pentagon sources, but the Pentagon has not completed the report. The report has not been issued. It's not been finalized. So to write about findings, I think, is premature. We are working with our Italian friends in investigating the facts of this incident, finding out what happened and reporting on those findings. When the report is done, I think it will be released publicly, but that hasn't happened yet.

QUESTION: A second one?

MR. ERELI: Sure.

QUESTION: Maybe it won't be the triangle*. I wonder if you would like to comment on it. Today CNN reported that -- reporting that Zarqawi was about to be caught near Fallujah around February. I'm wondering if you have anything to add to that.

MR. ERELI: No. Don't know anything about it.

QUESTION: Fair enough.

MR. ERELI: Yeah.

QUESTION: Cyprus? What is the purpose of Mrs. Kennedy's visit to Ankara, Athens, Nicosia, Brussels and London?

MR. ERELI: Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Ms. Laura Kennedy, will depart May 1st for travel to Ankara, Athens, Nicosia, Brussels and London. And the purpose of her trip is to consult with parties on the way forward regarding a Cyprus settlement as well as on bilateral issues. As you know, our position is that the best -- our position is that the Annan plan offers the best way forward for a resolution of the Cyprus issue and that we are working to, I think, encourage movement by both parties in support of that plan.

QUESTION: Is it a new initiative?

MR. ERELI: I would say it's a continuation of existing efforts.

Yes.

QUESTION: First, about John Bolton. There are -- the latest allegations concern apparently Under Secretary Bolton may have been trying to stretch intelligence about Syria in public speeches. Can you address the specific allegation and also any concerns that it may pose for the suitability of Mr. Bolton for the UN post?

MR. ERELI: A couple of points. First of all, these are not new allegations. These are -- this is a rehash of stuff that was written two years ago, when Under Secretary Bolton made his original testimony to the Congress on Syria. That testimony was cleared by the interagency and it represented U.S. policy and our best assessment at the time. So it was very -- it was very proper. And so questions of pushing intelligence are, frankly, unfounded. When you make testimony to the Hill and that testimony is cleared, then it represents the views of the Administration. That's point one.

Point two is Secretary Rice again yesterday made clear her strong support for Mr. Bolton, made clear her view that it's important that we move on on this issue and bring this issue to -- bring it to closure because there's work that needs to be done at the UN and Mr. Bolton is eminently qualified to do that work.

QUESTION: Adam, if I remember at the time, wasn't Mr. Bolton's testimony postponed so that the intelligence community would have more time to review some of the claims in there that he felt that he should make?

MR. ERELI: I think that really is not the issue. The issue is: Did Mr. Bolton shade or stretch intelligence? And the answer is clearly, no. And the proof is that before he went up to give the Administration's assessment on an issue that was sensitive and controversial, he and the State Department wanted to make sure that the information he was presenting represented the consensus view of all the stakeholders in the process. And that takes time.

And so I guess I would ask: What would you rather have -- somebody who rushes up to provide incomplete and inaccurate and uncleared information or somebody who waits, answers the -- asks the tough questions, looks at the issue from all its aspects, makes sure that all our ducks are in a row before testifying before Congress?

QUESTION: Well --

MR. ERELI: Because he's going to -- he's sure to get tough questions from the members he's testifying to. So in order to prepare for that, in order to be ready for it, in order to, I think, faithfully answer their inquiries, he's got to have all the information.

QUESTION: But the question -- obviously, I'd rather have the latter but the question isn't did he shade intelligence, the question is did he --

MR. ERELI: But that's the accusation being made.

QUESTION: Well, the question is that -- I don't think so. I think the question, the allegation that's being made, is that he tried to and the intelligence community went through the testimony and said no, this is what is important to say.

MR. ERELI: No, that's just -- that's unfair, unfounded and, again, unsubstantiated, as are, as I said yesterday, most of the charges being made. The facts are that before Under Secretary Bolton testified to the Hill, he endeavored to get all the facts, to make sure that what he was saying was accurate, was backed up by the interagency and represented the considered views of all the people involved on the issue. And that's what he said at the time when he presented the information.

QUESTION: Have you --

MR. ERELI: And I would urge you to go back to the record of testimony and you'll see that these issues were dealt with there.

QUESTION: This is just for the sake of the record, but have you met Secretary Bolton?

MR. ERELI: Ever?

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR. ERELI: Sure. I and many, many others in this Department work with him on a daily basis.

QUESTION: Did he ever bully you?

(Laughter.)

MR. ERELI: Do I look like the type to have -- that's been bullied?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'll ask the questions here.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Did he bully you?

MR. ERELI: No.

QUESTION: Did he ever in any --

MR. ERELI: Wait, wait, let's -- let's stop. I don't want -- this is not -- we should not make this a substitute for a congressional hearing. The issue is, and let's keep the focus where it needs to be, which is on the suitability of this nominee, the qualifications of this nominee and our willingness to work with Congress to answer their questions and give them the same confidence that we have, that the President has, that the Secretary has, that Mr. Bolton is the right man for the job at the UN.

So that's what we've been trying to do throughout this whole process and that's what we'll continue to do -- provide the information, get the facts out -- so that when people are able to consider them dispassionately and fully, they will come to the same conclusion that we have come to, which is that John Bolton should be confirmed.

QUESTION: I'm glad, actually, that you interrupted my stream of questions because it gives me hope that someday you'll do the same thing to Barry Schweid.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: But my final question on it is: Did you ever, in your personal experience with the man, ever see anything that would make him unfit for this service?

MR. ERELI: Again, the issue is not me. I've worked with John Bolton. I have a very good working relationship with John Bolton, as do many people in the State Department and many people throughout government, as is evidenced, I think, by the large number of letters written to the Hill on behalf of John Bolton by people who he's worked with -- former Secretaries of State, former Secretaries of Defense, former National Security Advisors.

So again, the issue is not my experience or other people's experience. The issue is John Bolton's record and John Bolton's record is the best argument in favor of his nomination.

QUESTION: Is there an explanation really objectively to why the controversy on one man? I mean, there are questions being raised there, but why? I mean, is it just political Washington?

MR. ERELI: I don't want to speculate. Let's -- again, I would stick to --

QUESTION: Is one of the issues that --

MR. ERELI: I will stick to the policy and the policy is that the UN needs -- the U.S. Representative to the UN needs to be a strong and forceful advocate for the United States, for reform, for the interest of America around the world.

John Bolton has demonstrated by -- in his 25 years of service to the nation that he is eminently qualified for this position and for this responsibility. He is the nominee of the President. The President has confidence in him. The Secretary has confidence in him and we believe he should be confirmed.

Yes.

QUESTION: Regarding this question tangential to this about the intelligence, of U.S. intelligence in Syria, I assume -- could you verify that you would not rely solely on the UN's reports as to the veracity of the Syrian withdrawal? And therefore, the question is: Would U.S. intelligence assets in Lebanon be vital to determining the withdrawal of Syrian assets from Lebanon?

MR. ERELI: I'm not going to comment on U.S. intelligence assets. As I said in my remarks earlier, we think that the UN verification team, with the cooperation of the Syrians and Lebanese, is in a position to report accurately on the state of affairs in Lebanon and we look forward to receiving that report.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Back on Bolton for a second. We keep hearing that Mr. Bolton is a strong voice for reform and a strong voice is needed. Does this mean that Ambassador Danforth was not a strong voice?

MR. ERELI: No, not at all. Ambassador Danforth was an excellent Ambassador to the United Nations.

QUESTION: If Ambassador Danforth had not stepped aside, would there not be a need for a strong voice now?

MR. ERELI: That's like a double-hypothetical, but Ambassador Danforth was a great Ambassador to the United Nations.

QUESTION: So why didn't he --

MR. ERELI: He decided to leave for his own reasons, so you've got a vacancy that you need to fill. Who better to fill that vacancy, to continue in the strong tradition of-- tradition of strong ambassadors to the United Nations that has been the hallmark of this Administration -- who better to fill that position than Mr. Bolton?

QUESTION: But the words "strong, tough reformer" were not used for Ambassador Danforth, and yet he was in the same position, the same Administration.

MR. ERELI: I think the words used for Mr. Danforth were indicative of the same confidence and appreciation of his abilities and his commitment to the Administration's policies.

QUESTION: Were the same -- were the issues that required reform not existing during the same time of his tenure?

MR. ERELI: No. Reform was an issue. I would note that one thing that's happened since Danforth has left is the Secretary General has presented his reform plan so that has become a much more prominent issue. But one should not conclude from anything we've said that reform is any less a priority, any less important, or that Ambassador Danforth was any less capable of dealing with it.

Yes.

QUESTION: Assistant Secretary Hill met with Chinese officials in Beijing earlier today. Do you have details on their meetings?

MR. ERELI: I have a little bit I can share with you. I don't know if I would call them details.

Ambassador Hill is presently in Beijing. He held meetings with Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei as well as other senior foreign ministry officials. He discussed a broad range of bilateral and regional issues during these meetings, including how to move the six-party process forward. He will travel to Tokyo on the 27th, where he will meet with his Japanese six-party counterpart, Director General Sasae and other senior Japanese officials.

QUESTION: Do you know if they talk about cross-strait relations like the visit of Taiwan's --

MR. ERELI: I don't have that detail to read out for you of the meeting, so I couldn't tell you.

QUESTION: Earlier, you described the contacts between Taiwan's opposition parties and the mainland as positive developments, but right before the opposition leader departs for China, a violent pro-independence protest took place at airport. Is the U.S. concerned about the, I mean, escalating political tension in China caused by the opposition party's visit?

MR. ERELI: We believe that steps that increase dialogue, support dialogue, support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait tension are to be supported, are to be welcomed, and that's the case with this latest visit and it's -- you know, we support the expansion of those kinds of contacts.

QUESTION: One last. Taiwan's Government warned the opposition party not to engage in state-related negotiations or sign any form* of agreement with Beijing. I'm just wondering if the U.S. has any concerns about the steps the opposition party may take could undermine the U.S. policies or change the status quo.

MR. ERELI: No, I don't have any comment to share with you on those discussions.

Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:37 p.m.)

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