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2006 PRESS RELEASES

Assistant Secretary of State Welch Press Availability After Meeting with Prime Minister Siniora

Jan. 14, 2006

Assistant Secretary Welch: I am very glad to be back in Beirut. I am joined here today by Ambassador Feltman and Mr. Elliott Abrams from the White House. We've all had the opportunity to meet today with several important figures here in Lebanon. Just now we completed a long and productive discussion with His Excellency Prime Minister Siniora. As I have come to expect from my several visits to Lebanon, my meetings with the Prime Minister, and our meeting today, are useful, important opportunities. We discussed the situation here in Lebanon, the relationships of importance to developments in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region, and of course the importance of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Lebanon. Mr. Abrams and I emphasized to the Prime Minister the strong commitment of the President of the United States to the people of Lebanon, and to this government, during what America recognizes as a period of great opportunity and historic transformation.

The United States remains confident that the discussions being held by the Lebanese people present the promise of a strong, united and democratic Lebanon, which offers security, hope and prosperity for all its people. The diverse population of this country is a rich source of talent and energy upon which to draw to create transparent and accountable government institutions, a strong economy and a hopeful future. We Americans admire you in Lebanon.

The Prime Minister described the steps his government is taking to advance its agenda for political, economic and institutional reform. We support this Lebanese-designed and Lebanese-led process. In our view, implementation of comprehensive reform will give the Lebanese greater confidence, promote interest from other countries interested in participating in the Lebanese economy, and demonstrate accountability and transparency of government to

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you, the Lebanese people.

I shared also with the Prime Minister, as well, our deep admiration for the courage and strength of the people of Lebanon in achieving your vision of a secure, democratic state, despite the regrettable intentional provocations to harm Lebanon's unity that have come from outside. I extended my deepest condolences on the tragic loss of Gibran Tueni, Member of Parliament and respected journalist and advocate of freedom. Despite his loss, the champions of Lebanon's liberty still stand tall. And there are many others who join him in advocating freedom, independence and full sovereignty for this nation. We are determined to support Lebanon in ending forever the practice of political assassination that has plagued this country for so long.

As we have said repeatedly, and as Secretary of State Rice recently re-affirmed, Syria must cease obstructing the investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and must cooperate fully and unconditionally with the United Nations Independent International Investigation Commission. This is required by UN Security Council resolutions. The United States calls upon Syria to respond positively to the requests of this investigation commission. If Syrian obstruction continues, we will not hesitate to refer this matter back to the Security Council for further action.

Let me be very, very clear in another statement. We stand firmly with the people of Lebanon in rejecting any deals or compromise that would undermine this investigation or relieve Syria of its obligations under Security Council resolutions. We remain firmly committed to seeking justice and pursuing this investigation to its ultimate conclusions, wherever that may lead. The United States has not, and will not, make any deal with Syria or anyone else in the international community at the expense of the freedom of Lebanon. We believe firmly that Syria must cease its interference, including through the use of local proxies, in the internal affairs of Lebanon.

The commitment of United States to Lebanon and the Lebanese people is firm, enduring and non-negotiable. My visit to Beirut today, once again, testifies to the importance the United States accords its relationship with Lebanon. Thank you all very much. I'll take one or two questions.

Question: Do you interpret the motives behind the Egyptian-Saudi initiative as attempting to undermine the investigation into the Hariri assassination?

Assistant Secretary Welch: I don't believe that that

was the intention of either Egypt or Saudi Arabia or anyone else in the international community. I think the demands put forward in the resolutions from the Council are really very explicit and clear and there can be no regression from those requests. We are all concerned to see this investigation proceed. I believe that is the determination of the Egyptian and Saudi leadership. I understand that because we have had direct contacts with them to clarify their objectives. As I said in my statement, there can be no deal or compromise about this and there won't be.

Question: The U.S. has been accused of interference in the politics of Lebanon. And I believe you have heard about the protesters that are near here today. What is your comment?

Assistant Secretary Welch: I think with all that Lebanon has endured, I doubt that anyone can seriously say that the United States is interfering in Lebanese politics. We're friends of the country. If anything, our motive here is to protect Lebanon, not interfere inside Lebanon. I think our record and our relationship attest to that. In so far as the voices of the people are concerned, we're always pleased to hear what those voices are—even when they may object to our policies. We believe strongly in the freedom of expression, even if people disagree with us, as long as it is done peacefully. That's a right we have in our country and I am glad to see that others share it. We would just like it to be done peacefully.

Question: Are you going to meet some other personalities, and who are they, and why didn't you meet with President Lahoud?

Assistant Secretary Welch: We expect to meet some other people this evening. We shall not be meeting the president.

Question: Why?

Assistant Secretary Welch: We believe that the democratic process should be allowed to unfold here in Lebanon with no interference from the outside and in a way that respects the rule of the people.

Question: You've warned Syria to cooperate with the UN international investigation. Is there a time frame in which Syria needs to comply with the Security Council? How long will you be patient?

Assistant Secretary Welch: We're quite patient but the pace of the investigation is not set by the United States or any member of the Security Council or member of the international community. The investigation proceeds according to Mr. Mehlis,

and now his successor Mr. Brammertz, and their direction of it. As I said, we want to see where it leads and it should it lead wherever it is going to lead without any impediment from anyone, Syria or otherwise. The Council received reports that were very disturbing about Syrian cooperation. We sense that Syria is still hesitating in meeting the requirements of the resolution. We believe that this constitutes obstruction. This investigation must proceed. We don't understand why, if there is no guilt on their part, they would be hesitant in answering the Commission.

Question: Many groups are calling for regime change in Syria, including the Syrian opposition and even in Lebanon. What is the U.S. view of regime change in Syria?

Assistant Secretary Welch: It's good to hear some other voices come out of Syria and from outside Syria about what is going on there. We believe that Syria should change its policies as we have said on many occasions. We have concerns about Syria's destabilizing behavior, sponsorship of terrorism, interference in Lebanon, its manipulation of some of the Palestinian groups and these are concerns we share with others. We believe that Syrian behavior should change. This is a very difficult situation for Damascus. I believe they are increasingly isolated in the international community because of this behavior, and it's up to them to change it.

I'll take one more question.

Question: With respect to implementation of UNSCR 1559, the U.S. insists on implementation, while here in Lebanon some believe that this should be settled among the Lebanese. Do you have a comment?

Assistant Secretary Welch: The requirements of 1559 are very important and we believe they should be met. There is a process underway to do that. Some parts of the resolution have been addressed and others remain to be addressed. We respect that there should be a Lebanese dialogue about how to accomplish that, just as long as there is no compromise about the destination.

Thank you all very much.

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