

Transcript
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U.S. Department of State Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Bureau
Deputy Assistant Secretary Thomas Melia

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Mr. Melia: Thank you all for coming this afternoon. I am glad to be back here in Azerbaijan. This is my third visit in 18 months.

I am here with an interagency delegation from the United States government with representatives from the Department of Justice, the United States Agency for International Development, and my colleagues from the State Department.

The breadth of our delegation represents the breadth of our engagement with Azerbaijan. We are cooperating on many diverse levels and in many fields. Azerbaijan remains an important partner to the United States for a range of reasons as we engage on our policy built around three pillars. One is support for democratic validation and advancement; one is cooperation on security; and the third is cooperation on energy and other commercial matters.

In addition to meetings with senior government officials, we also met with civil society leaders, with journalists, and with members of the political opposition. What I have to say at the outset here is that the future political developments in Azerbaijan are for Azerbaijanis to decide. We are here as friends to provide advice or information as appropriate.

In our meetings this week, we urged government officials to respect universally recognized freedoms, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association, and not to penalize men and women for acting in accordance with these freedoms.

In all of our discussions, we talked about the importance of fostering pluralism—pluralism in civil society organizations, political parties, and media outlets as a foundation for long-term stability.

We are therefore urging Azerbaijani authorities to consider four concrete steps to enhance the political stability during this important year.

First is to investigate what appear to be credible reports of harassment of lawyers defending journalists and political and civic activists with an eye towards ending the obstruction of the work of lawyers who play a pivotal role in establishing the rule of law in modern society.

Secondly, we are calling for the immediate release from custody of peaceful democratic activists who have been imprisoned for utilizing their freedom of expression and assembly, and, in this context, I want to mention specifically that I met earlier today with Vafa Mammadova who is the wife of Ilgar Mammadov, an announced presidential candidate who was detained, who is in pre-trial detention for almost 90 days now. He was an important contact –someone I met with on my last visit—and I was disappointed that I was not able to meet with him on this visit.

Our third recommendation is that the government engage in a dialogue with Azerbaijani civil society, including those such as Free Thought University and other non-governmental, non-profit organizations that are trying to advance civic culture and democratic principles, as well as with international organizations that are here to support the democratic development of Azerbaijan.

An important part of this broader dialogue would be to facilitate the early registration of those NGOs that have sought to register with the appropriate authorities here.

Fourth, we urged the government to run its dialogue with Azerbaijan's opposition political parties and to work with them to create conditions that are conducive to open public debate and unhindered functioning of political parties during this election year. This is a moment of great opportunity for Azerbaijan to take a decisive step towards fulfilling the country's international obligations to

democratic standards, and we look forward to engaging with Azerbaijan throughout this year and beyond.

I will conclude where I began by underscoring that the United States is a friend of Azerbaijan, of the government and of the people of Azerbaijan.

With that we have a few minutes left to take a few questions.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. Your remarks regarding a third term nomination and Aliyev and red and black lines has caused quite a resonance in Azerbaijan society. So my question will be: Where do the red and black lines run in U.S.-Azerbaijani relations including the presidential elections?

Mr. Melia: Thank you for that question. I think you are referring to something that was published in Turan earlier today based on a conversation yesterday, and it was an incorrect quote attributed to me. I did not say anything that was attributed to me in the publication this morning.

We think that—more important than the question of a third term or not—is the quality of the process that will unfold.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. What are the red lines in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations?

Mr. Melia: I did not say that. I think Turan has corrected the record now.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. 2013 is an election year. If the elections will be falsified, will the sanctions be applied on Azerbaijan like in the case of Belorussia?

Mr. Melia: We are not going to prejudge the outcome of the elections. We hope that the government of Azerbaijan will welcome international observers to the process from the OSCE and other external organizations, and we also hope that the work of domestic Azerbaijani election monitors will be facilitated by the Election Commission and other authorities here. I think it will be very important now that Azerbaijan has invited the world to come here so many times in the last couple of years for major international events. The world has arrived, and the world will be

watching closely, and we are hoping the election will live up to constitutional standards and also the international commitments that the government of Azerbaijan has made to the OSCE and to other international bodies.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. The NDI and its activities were the focus of media attention recently. I would like to get your elaboration on the NDI and NDI activities.

Mr. Melia: There have been some erroneous statements in the media about NDI and some questions raised about their work and how they operate. The leadership of the organization has been in town this week meeting with government officials and with their partners here. I think—I hope—that the misunderstandings about NDI's work here are cleared up now. NDI is a very well known organization that works in many parts of the world, sharing information about democratic politics, about elections, about civil society organizations, and about parliaments. The best way to think of them is as a resource, as a provider of information. That is what they have been doing here for Azerbaijanis, and, as far as I know, they have been in great demand in civil society for engagement with them and taking advantage of the resources that they present.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. I would like to know how the government, reacted to the issues that were raised regarding human rights. We all know that our country faces serious problems regarding this issue. It has been six years now that the freedom of assembly has been banned. And also the level of corruption is increasing each year. We are also facing a number of other problems. Also I would like to know what was the reaction to the possibility of releasing those behind bars, those in custody.

Mr. Melia: I do not want to characterize specific responses in particular conversations, but I would note that the government of Azerbaijan has been very accessible to us and very engaged in a robust discussion on all these issues, and even where we have not come to a common understanding on some of these issues, I think we are engaged in very serious government-to-government conversations.

I think it is important to give some credit where credit is due and make a note of the very interesting pilot project of the Asan Centers that have pilot projects here in Baku to provide to the community with various government services in a way that eliminates opportunities for corrupt dealing by local officials.

This is an important beginning to modernizing the way that lower levels of government interact with citizens, and so we want to encourage the government to build that out to the rest of the country and perhaps look for other ways in which the operations of the government can be made more transparent and less vulnerable to corrupt dealings.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. I have two questions. One is about the meeting—or the efforts to meet—with Ilgar Mammadov. Did you make a request to meet with Ilgar Mammadov in prison? And, if so, why was the visit turned down?

And the second question is about the overall situation with democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, and other freedoms. In comparison, you talked about the positive indications, like the Asan service. In comparison with your previous visit, how do you evaluate the situation in the area of freedom of expression, freedom of the press and other?

Mr. Melia: We did request permission to go visit Ilgar Mammadov in prison. In the end, we never received a definitive reply. So while we were not told “no,” we were not told “yes.”

On the second and third questions, I have to say that we receive many more reports of obstruction of the work of lawyers and arrests of people for their peaceful political activity that have happened since January 1. So we are a little more concerned now, since the previous visit, about the human rights climate in Azerbaijan.

It happens that, tomorrow, the State Department will release its annual Human Rights Report on every country in the world. That will be on-line at the State Department tomorrow. So I would urge you to look at that. That is our most comprehensive statement about the situation of human rights in Azerbaijan for the calendar year 2012 that is ending on December 31.

We have time for one more question.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. One of my colleagues just before talked about the areas that our country, this government, is facing wide criticism. Again I would like to ask, given in the light of all that said, what is your approach, what is your opinion regarding the third term nomination of the president? And have you expressed your opinion to the president or to other high level government officials regarding that issue?

Mr. Melia: Just to be clear, let me repeat first what I said at the outset, that the future of Azerbaijan will be determined by the people and government of Azerbaijan. We are familiar with the amendment to the constitution that changed the term limits from two terms for a president to three terms, and the referendum in 2009 that was incorporated into the constitution. While some concerns have been expressed by Azerbaijanis and international activists about the process, I have to say that the international experience of different countries does not tell us this is automatically a good thing or a bad thing that the constitution was amended in this way.

So the more important thing I think is what the nature of the electoral campaign will be this year. How open the competition will be, how open the media will be, and ultimately whether the citizens of Azerbaijan are able to decide who the next president will be.

Thank you very much.

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