

Transcript

Deputy Assistant Secretary Eric Ruben

Media Roundtable in Baku

October 15, 2012

DAS Ruben: -- It's good to be back in Azerbaijan and in particular, on such a beautiful sunny day, to be back and to have very good meetings with Azerbaijani officials including the President and the Foreign Minister, as well as with representatives of non-governmental organizations.

I also am very very glad to have the opportunity to meet with you and to hear some of your perspectives and questions and I'd be glad to answer them to the best of my ability. So why don't we just start with some questions?

Media: [Through Interpreter]. I have two questions. The first of them, was there an agreement made for the upcoming meeting with of the presidents—I mean the President of Armenia and Azerbaijan—for the discussions of resolution of Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict? I ask this question because just before, some minutes ago I saw the Chairman in office of the OSCE, Mr. Kasperczyk having a meeting with you.

DAS Ruben: Thank you very much. Just to clarify, I unfortunately did not have the opportunity to meet separately with Mr. Kasperczyk, but he's an old friend and certainly we strongly support his work and that of OSCE.

I'm not here representing the co-chairs so I don't want to speak for them. The meeting that we're discussing, organizing, is a meeting organized by the co-chairs. So that was not my role in coming here.

We obviously believe that it would be helpful for the leaders to meet, but obviously that is something that has to be agreed among both countries and with the co-chairs, and that's not my role today.

Media: APA news agency. I would like to ask: What issues exactly did you discuss during your meetings with officials?

DAS Ruben: Really a very wide range of issues. The U.S.-Azerbaijani partnership keeps getting broader and keeps getting deeper and there's a lot to talk about.

Certainly we talked at length about developing our economic trade and investment relations further. I also had the opportunity to talk to American businesses and the American Chamber of Commerce here to discuss ways that we cannot just further investment in both of our countries but also to improve the investment climate and things that would make a big difference in that regard.

We also talked about the very important U.S.-Azerbaijani strategic partnership which is playing a positive role in many areas including currently in Afghanistan where Azerbaijani and American forces are serving together, but also in other areas around the world. We not only discussed but we expressed appreciation for the role that Azerbaijan is playing in supporting the NATO ISAF efforts in Afghanistan. It's very important support. It's support that I think has made a critical difference.

We also talked about Azerbaijan's democratic development, our support for that, our support for civil society here. And we discussed a lot of other things.

One of the other things that I think is important to note is now that Azerbaijan is a member at present of the United Nations Security Council, is playing a global role, and so the discussions are even broader than they used to be about global problems and issues that we share perspectives on.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. Your visit coincides with the critical remarks that just happened recently of Mr. President about BP and its activities in our country. Did you discuss the remarks or that situation with the President? And if you discussed also the civil society issues in Azerbaijan? What can you say? How do you evaluate, assess the overall situation in this regard in our country?

DAS Ruben: On the first question, it would not be appropriate for us to insert ourselves between the government of Azerbaijan and BP, so we do not do so. But we do very broadly support additional energy development in Azerbaijan. We obviously have supported Western energy companies' efforts to help Azerbaijan develop those resources. We believe it's been a big success. It's been to everyone's mutual benefit, to the benefit of the companies, to the benefit of the country. We believe there is enormous additional potential that we would like to see tapped and our support is for that.

In terms of the development of civil society in Azerbaijan, we believe it's a critical element of this society as it is a critical element of all societies. Healthy civil society helps government. Healthy government helps civil society. We have been working for many years to help foster that development here. I believe that there is a lot of creativity and a lot of very important work that's being done. Obviously there is work that still remains to be done and we want to continue to support that, both through our direct efforts on behalf of the U.S. government and also by fostering contacts between American civil society and Azerbaijani civil society.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. My question will be on the [Iran] sanctions. We know that the European Union is going to impose a new package of sanctions against Iran and that was the talk, of discussions, at the recent last presidential debate. I would like to know, is the United States government going to impose new sanctions against Iran? If so, if it's going to apply, what [inaudible] these sanctions will apply?

DAS Ruben: I think the most important thing to say in answer to your question is that we very much appreciate Azerbaijan's efforts to support the international community in the very very critical work we have to do to ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons. This is a consensus within the international community. I think as a close neighbor Azerbaijan has an important role to play and it has been playing it. We believe that we are making progress in convincing the Iranian government that it has very very positive options toward developing its economy, and pursuing peaceful uses of nuclear energy, if it wishes, under the non-proliferation treaty, but at the same time, forswearing the development of offensive nuclear weapons. So I think that is really the highest priority. We do believe as President Obama has said frequently, that sanctions have had an effect,

they are having an effect in bringing the Iranians to the negotiating table, and we believe that that effort needs to continue.

I'm not in a position to be more specific about possible additional efforts, but I can say we are determined to keep the pressure on Iran.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. I would like to know if you have had discussions on democracy in Azerbaijan. The recent Georgian elections proved that fair and free elections are the key element to overall stability within a country. I would like to know, on the eve of the upcoming presidential elections, have you had any discussions on the situation of democracy and human rights in our country?

DAS Ruben: I think, if you look at what Secretary Clinton said when she was here, we believe that democratic development is critical to overall development and something that we have supported since Azerbaijan first achieved its independence. It's something we continue to support. We do have regular dialogue with Azerbaijani officials. Very productive, positive dialogue on areas of democratic development, on ways that the U.S. can help further that development, and that will continue.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. You mentioned about the importance of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the meeting between Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents. My question will be on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, on the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The Armenian side has constructed an airport in the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh territory and the Azerbaijani side stated that it is going to shoot down, take down aircraft that will fly over Azerbaijani territory illegally.

I would like to know your remarks, your elaboration, on these developments. How do you see the solution of this issue?

DAS Ruben: Thank you. I think as you know, we are one of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs, and as such, we strongly support the efforts of the co-chairs. I think, as you also know, the co-chairs have publicly stated their very firm belief—and they're united in this—that it is very important for all delicate issues to be settled diplomatically, through negotiation. That there not be unilateral steps that

could make it harder to reach agreement or set back the process of negotiating a settlement.

As one of the co-chairs we, as I said, obviously support the co-chairs and share the view that questions like this need to be settled diplomatically, not unilaterally.

Thank you very much.

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