

Ambassador Richard Morningstar's Local Media Roundtable

Lankaran, Azerbaijan

September 25, 2012

Ambassador Morningstar: Good evening everybody. I hope you asked my French colleague all the hard questions. [Laughter].

Press: No, that is not the case.

Ambassador Morningstar: I know you'll give me all the easy ones.

Let me just say a few words. I've been to Azerbaijan many times before being ambassador, but until I came as ambassador I had only been in Baku. This is now literally my first time outside of Baku and my first time here in Lankaran. My wife Faith and I arrived earlier today and are just really impressed at what a beautiful city this is.

I had an outstanding lunch with Mr. Garashov, who was incredibly hospitable. Then we attended the FIFA Under 17 World Cup match between America and France at your very impressive stadium. It's really a beautiful stadium. As you know, the game ended nothing to nothing, and so that means that neither my French friend nor I are hugely unhappy, but maybe one of us could have been happier if the score had been one to nothing. In the United States, they say that a tie game is like kissing your mother. But it was a lot of fun to cheer for some very young and talented women. Both teams performed extremely strongly, and I know that both teams and all the other teams will enjoy their time here in Azerbaijan.

My wife Faith and I have been extremely busy since we arrived three-and-a-half weeks ago, and, as you know, I handed my credentials over to President Aliyev on September 3. Since then, we have met many Azerbaijani public officials as well as many private individuals.

Our bilateral relationship is very strong and complex. We work together on issues including regional stability, democracy, human rights, counter-terrorism and energy security, as well as economic development. I'm here in Lankaran not only to introduce myself to the people down here, but also to convey that the United States shares with Azerbaijan strong support for promoting participation among young women in sports and other extracurricular and academic activities. We think the role of women is tremendously important.

I think participation in these activities allows women to become confident and strong leaders of society. I think that team sports also teaches young people to work together later in life. It's again very good to see that the people here in Lankaran and the rest of Azerbaijan share these values.

Again, I want to thank the people of Lankaran for their hospitality and wish all the teams success in the Under 17 Women's World Cup. I hope if the United States doesn't win, that Azerbaijan does. Thank you.

Press: [Through interpreter]. Mr. Ambassador, first of all, I would like to use this opportunity to congratulate you on behalf of major representatives on your starting of your diplomatic mission. We are glad that your first regional trip is to Lankaran. We are hope that your tenure will witness the dissolution of the Karabakh problem.

My questions are, after the attacks on the embassy in Libya, what kind of security measures are you taking in order to protect the U.S. embassy in Baku? And we'd like you to share a couple of your thoughts about the level of cooperation between the United States and Azerbaijan.

Ambassador Morningstar: First, let me say I would be the happiest person in the world if, during my time in Baku, the Nagorno-Karabakh situation was resolved. I will work closely with the Azerbaijani government as well as with our negotiators as part of the Minsk Group hopefully for that to happen.

As you know, the situation in Libya was a great tragedy. I can tell you I was very heartened by the reception that my wife and I received at the football game today. I can tell you that with respect to our embassy in Baku, the cooperation with Azerbaijani authorities has been excellent. Of course we have to be vigilant, but we feel very secure, thanks to the help of the Azerbaijani authorities.

Press: [Through interpreter]. Recently, Russia and Armenia held joint military exercises along Russia's southern borders. As a response to that Azerbaijan has been holding large-scale military exercises. Don't you think that it is a challenge, it is calling for the war on both sides?

Ambassador Morningstar: I don't think at the end of the day either side wants war. I think it is critically important to both Azerbaijan and Armenia that steps be taken to renew the peace process and to move towards a lasting peace. I don't think any actions should be taken that inflame the situation and make the peace process more difficult. Again, I will work closely with our negotiators and with the Azerbaijani government hopefully to help move the peace process forward.

Let me just add one further point. I think that Azerbaijan is in a really good place to further its economic development and to become a real economic leader in this region. If this issue that has been going on now for 20 years can finally be resolved, I think it will help Azerbaijan attain even greater economic leadership and leadership otherwise in the region, as well as be very helpful to all parties, including Armenia. Peace and not war is the answer.

Press: [Through Interpreter]. First of all, Mr. Ambassador, we are glad to welcome you in Lankaran. We know that you are one of the leading experts of the U.S. diplomacy here. We know that you have been the senior adviser for the energy issues in the South Caucasus.

We know that the Armenian lobby is quite influential and has its own triggers and means. My question will be do you think the Armenian lobby is strong enough to blocking having fear and resolute attitude of your country in terms of the solution of the problem, or is it so strong that it makes U.S. to turn blind eye on the occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijani territories?

Ambassador Morningstar: No. My answer is no. We are committed to a peaceful resolution with respect to Nagorno-Karabakh, and we will work to do everything possible for that to happen. Different groups have different interests in the United States, but I can assure you that our government has only one goal in mind, and that is a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. I know from my personal conversations with the secretary of state that she considers this to be a very high priority.

Press: [Through interpreter]. Despite, Mr. Ambassador, from what you said I know that even though it's your first visit you will have quite a good impressions and information about our region. My question will be, what type of cooperation or in what spheres would you like to establish links and the cooperation with our region and our city?

Ambassador Morningstar: Let me put it this way. I think that our relationship, the United States relationship with Azerbaijan has to go beyond Baku. I had very interesting conversations today with Mr. Garashov, and he explained to me some of the wonderful potential industries that you have down here. In the agricultural area, for example, this is also I think a beautiful area that can attract tourism. I would like to interest American companies and individual Americans to recognize that this is an incredibly nice area here, worth looking into, where there could be some good cooperation, I hope. I think we can learn a lot from Lankaran, and I think that Lankaran can learn a lot from the United States.

Press: [Through interpreter]. Mr. Ambassador, up to several years ago the donor organizations of the United States including USAID that were carrying out, implementing various projects in the regions of Azerbaijan. Now it seems that they have stopped their activities or are not implementing any more projects. Is it the case?

Ambassador Morningstar: No, I don't think it is the case. I do think that as time goes on and Azerbaijan develops, the need for assistance drops off. Azerbaijan is very good right now at taking care of itself. But having said that, we still do have many AID programs, some of which affect this area right here.

For example, we have an excellent project related to dairy farming. We have programs that help develop young leadership. We have what's called here an American corner, to which young people can come to learn more about America and learn how they may make use of various programs that we have, including exchange programs in the United States. I'll be having dinner tonight with five Peace Corps volunteers who are working in Lankaran, although after the lunch that I had with the governor, I may not be able to eat until Tuesday morning.
[Laughter].

But let me also say that back in the 1990s, I was involved, in fact I was the coordinator for all of the programs that we had in all of the former Soviet Union. I was the Special Adviser to President Clinton. My personal belief is that the most important thing that we can do is to work in the regions and create connections between Americans and Azerbaijanis in the regions because it's in the regions that people know the least about the United States. Besides, I want to go to all the regions because they're all so beautiful.

Thank you.

###