

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

January 6, 2010

Burma Has Not Taken Meaningful Steps Toward Credible Elections	1
Intelligence Not Fully Analyzed Before Airline Attack, Obama Says.....	1
Allies Want Nuclear Talks with Iran to Stay Open.....	2

Burma Has Not Taken Meaningful Steps Toward Credible Elections

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Burma's ruling military junta has not taken any meaningful steps that would add to the credibility of the country's general elections, proposed for later in 2010, the State Department says.

Spokesman Ian Kelly said January 4 that the Obama administration "will continue to take a measured approach to the 2010 elections until we can assess the electoral conditions and know whether opposition and ethnic groups will participate."

Burma's military rulers have called for the elections but have not yet announced when they would take place. If held, the elections would be Burma's first since 1990. Those were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by pro-democracy leader and Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The military rulers did not recognize the NLD's victory or allow it to assume power, and Suu Kyi has spent much of the past 20 years under house arrest.

"So far, we have not seen any meaningful steps by the regime to indicate it is putting in place measures that would lead to credible elections," Kelly said. "Much of the opposition's leadership remains in prison, there is no space for political dissent or debate, and no freedom of the press."

The Obama administration changed the U.S. policy approach to Burma to include engagement with its military rulers, along with maintaining continued pressure on the regime through economic sanctions.

Kelly said the United States is urging the Burmese government to address the issues that would allow for free, fair and credible elections, as well as to "engage Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic opposition, ethnic leaders and other stakeholders in a comprehensive dialogue on democratic reform."

This, he said, "would be a first step towards inclusive elections."

Kelly's comments came on the 62nd anniversary of Burma's independence from the United Kingdom. On December 30 he issued a statement expressing warm wishes from the United States to the Burmese people for the occasion.

In meetings between the Obama administration and representatives of Burma's military rulers in 2009, U.S. officials reaffirmed "unwavering support for an independent, peaceful, prosperous and democratic

Burma," Kelly said in the statement, adding that the United States is ready to improve the bilateral relationship "based on reciprocal and meaningful efforts by the Burmese government to fulfill the Burmese peoples' democratic aspirations."

The United States looks forward to a time when Burmese citizens can freely exercise their universal human rights, Kelly said. "We hope that day will come soon."

Intelligence Not Fully Analyzed Before Airline Attack, Obama Says

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama says a Nigerian man affiliated with al-Qaida in the Arabia Peninsula was able to board a U.S.-bound flight with explosives on December 25, 2009, because U.S. intelligence officials had failed to "connect the dots" of information that could have prevented him from being allowed onto the aircraft.

Speaking at the White House January 5, Obama said the incident shows that "al-Qaida and its extremist allies will stop at nothing in their efforts to kill Americans." The president added that his administration is "determined not only to thwart those plans but to disrupt, dismantle and defeat their networks once and for all."

At the same time, "when a suspected terrorist is able to board a plane with explosives on Christmas Day, the system has failed in a potentially disastrous way," he said. "And it's my responsibility to find out why and to correct that failure so that we can prevent such attacks in the future."

The president said he has ordered a review of the technology and procedures used in screening passengers who are boarding aircraft, and a separate review on the U.S. terrorist watch-list system which identifies individuals who would require additional scrutiny or who should be prohibited from flying to the United States.

He said U.S. officials had access to enough information before the attack that could have allowed them to disrupt the plot and place the suspected perpetrator, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, on a "no-fly" list.

"In other words, this was not a failure to collect intelligence; it was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had. The information was there," Obama said, but it "was not fully analyzed or fully leveraged."

"That's not acceptable, and I will not tolerate it," he added.

The president said that due to the unsettled security situation in Yemen, where the United States and Yemeni forces are confronting violent extremists such as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, his administration temporarily will stop transferring detainees from the Guantánamo Bay facility in Cuba to that country.

“But make no mistake. We will close Guantánamo prison, which has damaged our national security interests and become a tremendous recruiting tool for al-Qaida,” he said, adding that its existence “was an explicit rationale for the formation of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.”

The president said that in the aftermath of the Christmas Day attack, he has also ordered new airport screening and security measures, additional explosive detection teams and air marshals, and increased security cooperation with U.S. partners and allies.

The U.S. terrorist watch-list system has also been updated, and passengers flying to the United States from countries identified as state sponsors of terrorism and additional countries of interest will be required to undergo enhanced screening at airports.

“As we saw on Christmas, the margin for error is slim, and the consequences of failure can be catastrophic,” Obama said.

P.J. Crowley, the State Department’s assistant secretary for public affairs, told reporters January 5 that the Obama administration is “adjusting the criteria” through which U.S. officials decide when individuals are added to a watch-list and are subject to extra security checks, as well as the no-fly list which prohibits them from boarding flights bound for the United States.

He also said the State Department has been heavily reviewing databases and revoking some U.S. visas it had previously issued. “We revoke visas because of fraudulent information and we revoke visas for terrorist information,” Crowley said, adding that the review is a continual process and roughly 1,700 visas have been revoked since the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington.

DOOR REMAINS OPEN FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

Despite increased security measures, Crowley said the Obama administration continues to welcome visitors from all over the world, and closing off the United States would fail to enhance U.S. security and instead be “counterproductive,” as many visitors come for legitimate purposes such as work, study and tourism.

“We want to have these people come to the United States. It's in our interest. It's in our foreign policy interest. This interaction between the American people and people of other countries is actually part of the process by which

ultimately we will defeat and mitigate political extremism,” Crowley said.

“So we're not closing our doors to the United States. Far from it. We welcome people coming to the United States. We're going to make sure that the process by which people come here and travel here is as safe as it can be,” he said.

Allies Want Nuclear Talks with Iran to Stay Open

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States and its allies are trying to keep talks with Iranian officials over its nuclear development program open and moving forward, but additional pressure and sanctions may be appropriate, says Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

“We remain committed to working with our international partners on addressing the serious concerns we have regarding Iran’s nuclear program,” Clinton said January 4 at a Washington press briefing with Qatar Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr Al-Thani.

The approach taken by the United States and five other western nations has been along two tracks: a diplomatic one involving direct talks with Iranian officials, and another involving pressure and sanctions through the U.N. Security Council.

China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States — collectively known as the P5+1 — have been negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program. This group grew out of earlier efforts by France, Germany and the United Kingdom to convince Iranian officials to suspend uranium enrichment in return for a package of incentives. The six powers also jointly offered Iran a package of trade and diplomatic incentives three years ago to forgo its uranium enrichment efforts, and added to the incentives, but Iranian authorities continued to reject suspension of uranium enrichment.

Uranium enrichment is one necessary component of weapons development to build a nuclear bomb.

In a tentative agreement reached with Iranian officials in October 2009, Iran would have shipped much of its low-enriched uranium out of the country for further enrichment into a form that would be difficult to use in weapons production. The latest offer involved Iran shipping the bulk of its low-enriched uranium to Russia for processing in a single shipment to be returned to Iran. The enriched uranium would be designated for use in a medical research reactor in Tehran, which has been subject to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

On January 2, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr

Mottaki rejected that offer and proposed an ultimatum to the western nations.

"We're disappointed by their response to the proposal for the Tehran research reactor," Clinton said. The Iranians, who have claimed that their nuclear development program is for civil purposes, offered a one-month deadline for the western nations to respond to their counterproposal.

Clinton said the counterproposal from the Iranians was unacceptable, as well as the deadline. She said the six nations that have been negotiating with Iran have not used the term "deadline" as a way of keeping the talks open and moving forward.

"We've also made it clear we can't continue to wait and we cannot continue to stand by when the Iranians themselves talk about increasing their production of high-enriched uranium and additional facilities for nuclear power that very likely can be put to dual use," she said.

"We have already begun discussions with our partners and with likeminded nations about pressure and sanctions," she added without elaborating on the details of those talks.

The U.N. Security Council has previously imposed three rounds of political and economic sanctions to convince Iranian leaders to halt uranium enrichment and give up plans for a weapons program. In November 2009, the IAEA Board of Governors voted to condemn Iran for building a second uranium enrichment plant at Qom, and the Iranian regime followed up by announcing plans to build 10 more plants to enrich uranium. Iran's primary nuclear development facility is near the city of Natanz.

RUTHLESS REPRESSION

Clinton said the United States and its partners are concerned about the behavior of the Iranian regime in recent months, and not just about its actions in the nuclear talks. She said the additional concerns stem from Iran's treatment of political opponents.

"We are deeply disturbed by the mounting signs of ruthless repression that they are exercising against those who assemble and express viewpoints that are at variance with what the leadership of Iran wants to hear," she said.

The Iranian regime's security services cracked down on major anti-government protests in several cities December 27, 2009, and arrested more than 500 demonstrators amid reports of eight protestors being killed, according to news service reports. Security services have also detained at least 20 high-level opposition officials, reports said.

"Iran is going through a very turbulent period in its history. There are many troubling signs of the actions that they are taking," Clinton said. "We want to reiterate that

we stand with those Iranians who are peacefully demonstrating."

Clinton said the United States condemns the loss of life as well as the detention and imprisonment, the torture and abuse of Iranian citizens.

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