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Secretary Clinton: Concern over Iran Should Be Addressed with “One Voice”

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The international community has “little choice” but to impose higher costs on Iran due to its provocative actions related to its nuclear program, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton tells congressional panels, adding that the Iranian leadership’s failure to respond to U.S. engagement efforts have helped to build international consensus in support of economic sanctions that some countries might have opposed otherwise.

Clinton testified before congressional committees in the House of Representatives on February 25 and in the Senate on February 24 to urge approval of the State Department’s proposed \$52.8 billion budget for the 2011 fiscal year.

The secretary told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that President Obama had offered Iranian leaders “the opportunity to engage in a serious way,” and described it as “a necessary and important step” that was taken despite some domestic political criticism. However, Iran has failed to respond “in a serious manner,” and since the initial U.S. offer of engagement there has been the revelation of a new nuclear facility at Qom, Iran’s decision to attempt uranium enrichment to a higher percentage, and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s February 18 report that Iran may be trying to design a nuclear-armed missile.

The Obama administration is now involved in a diplomatic campaign to further isolate Iran and apply pressure to encourage a change in the Iranian government’s behavior, Clinton said. The United States is urging a broad international approach on economic sanctions.

It is important, she told lawmakers, that “we speak with one voice, one voice within our government and one voice internationally, against Iran’s failure to live up to its responsibilities.”

She said intensive diplomatic consultations and the demonstration of the U.S. commitment to engagement has resulted in “a much warmer, much more receptive audience than we might have had otherwise” concerning new sanctions.

Speaking to reporters at the State Department February 25, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said a main focal point of pressure would be directed toward Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps, which “we think is playing an increasing role in Iranian society.”

“It is not our intent to have crippling sanctions that have a significant impact on the Iranian people. Our actual intent is actually to find ways to pressure the government while protecting the people,” Crowley said. “We believe in effective sanctions.”

He said sanctions have proven effective in influencing Libya’s 2003 decision to end its nuclear program, and more recently with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874, which has hindered North Korean efforts to proliferate “technology of concern.”

Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee February 24 that among its consultations with other members of the U.N. Security Council on ways to pressure the Iranian leadership, the Obama administration has been “heartened by the positive response from Russia.” It has also been making the argument to China that it should support sanctions because an arms race in the Middle East brought about by Iranian nuclear weapons could destabilize the region and “dramatically undermine the delivery of oil” on which China is dependent.

“We are beginning the process in the Security Council in New York, where language is being hammered out based on work that has been done by the Treasury Department and the State Department in coordination,” Clinton said. “We are targeting a lot of these proposed sanctions against the Revolutionary Guard.”

She added that her hope is that “the next 30 to 60 days will see a sanctions resolution emerge.”

Both houses of the U.S. Congress have passed proposals that would impose a wide array of sanctions against Iran and people or companies that do business with it. The sanctions, if enacted, would go further than the current policy of the Obama administration, but Clinton said she supports congressional action that is designed to encourage a change in Iranian behavior. “There can be a very good partnership between the Congress and the Obama administration in order to achieve that,” she said.

The State Department wants to offer suggestions on the congressional bills “about how they would better fit into our agenda in the Security Council,” as well as to “give the president some flexibility so that we can come out of the legislative process with a really strong tool and not just a statement of concern that won’t really dovetail with what we’re trying to achieve,” Clinton said.

Pentagon Welcomes Restored Afghan Control of Marjah

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – The Obama administration welcomed the transfer of authority in the central Helmand province town of Marjah to the Afghan government as well as the return of Afghans to their homes, increased freedom of movement, and the reopening of bazaars.

The administration says the transfer is symbolic of Operation Moshtarak's transition from a military effort to clear central Helmand of Taliban insurgents into one of maintaining Afghan control in the area.

Defense Department press secretary Geoff Morrell said February 25 that "it looks as though much of Marjah is now under Afghan and coalition control," adding that residents "have been very welcoming of us."

The transfer "is symbolic of where we are in this operation," he said. "We are transitioning from the clearing phase into the holding phase."

Morrell said that with five shuras, or traditional council meetings, between Afghan and coalition forces and the residents taking place on February 24, "there were more shuras taking place in Marjah than there were troops in contact," with "fewer than a handful" of coalition troops engaging with insurgent forces.

"That's the kind of progress that we've been looking for and that we are heartened to see," he said.

Morrell said many civilians are returning to their homes and there are signs that normal daily life is returning.

"The number of internally displaced people who are signing up for assistance from the government is diminishing each day as more and more people return to their homes," he said. "Bazaars are open again, and they are full, I'm told, of goods, which speaks of the fact that there is clearly a freedom of movement that allows commerce to re-emerge."

State Department Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said February 25 that U.S. civilian experts are also on the ground in Marjah, with more expected.

The goal of the civilian teams will be to demonstrate "clear benefits" to the Afghan people following the removal of Taliban control.

The teams are working on "early economic, agricultural, rule of law projects that can help turn perceptions more favorably toward the Afghan government," Crowley said,

and "more are coming in every day."

However, Crowley said, "no one is declaring victory." He noted the Taliban's capability of adapting to changing circumstances.

Morrell said coalition troops from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are still taking casualties, with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed by insurgents constituting their biggest threat.

The Pentagon spokesman praised the performance of the Afghan security forces. "These guys are every bit in the midst of this operation. They match us one for one on the ground. And they are in the fight," he said.

He said the higher rate of ISAF casualties is caused by their responsibility to clear roads, which puts them into close contact with IEDs. Also, to the Taliban, "we are clearly a more prized target than an Afghan security force member would be," he said.

Morrell said he hopes the increased Pakistani pressure on Afghan Taliban officials inside Pakistan, combined with the Afghan and coalition operation inside Afghanistan, will undermine the Taliban's confidence and capability, and will encourage fighters to "lay down their weapons, respect the democratically elected governments in both countries and want to reintegrate into society."

United States Welcomes News of Nigerian President's Return

Calls on all Nigerians to work in best interests of country and democracy

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington – News of President Umaru Yar'Adua's return to Nigeria is welcomed by the United States, which seeks a "strong ... positive and productive relationship" with that extraordinarily important West African country.

The United States encourages Nigerians to work in the best interests of their country and refrain from trying to achieve short-term political gains, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson told reporters February 24.

Speaking at the Foreign Press Center in Washington, Carson said it is important for Nigeria to continue along its democratic path. Speaking of Yar'Adua, who spent almost three months undergoing medical treatment outside the country, Carson said, "We hope sincerely that his health is sufficient to enable him to fully resume his official duties. Nigeria needs a strong, healthy and effective leader to ensure the stability of that country and to manage Nigeria's political, economic and security

challenges.”

Carson noted recent news reports suggest Yar’Adua’s health “remains fragile and that he may not be able to fill the demands of his office. We hope that President Yar’Adua’s return is not an effort by senior advisers to upset Nigeria’s stability and create renewed uncertainty in the democratic process. We all need a strong, stable, democratic Nigeria. We need it for Nigerians. We need it for West Africa. We need it for Africa. We need it for the global community.”

Nigeria “is extraordinarily important to its friends and partners,” he said. “As a nation of 150 million people, Nigeria’s democracy and its continued adherence to constitutional rule should be the highest priority of all of its leaders.”

Asked to elaborate on the situation in Nigeria, Carson said the United States is concerned in part because Yar’Adua has been out of Nigeria for so long.

“During that three-month period, very, very few people have had access to the president. Almost no ministers, including a delegation that flew to Saudi Arabia two days ago in order to see the president yesterday, have been able to see him. The only communication that anyone has reliably seen or heard is a very short two-minute BBC news clip that was done approximately a month ago.”

Carson continued, “I know from my own visit to Nigeria just two and a half weeks ago that a number of governors and senior officials have all traveled to Saudi Arabia and virtually none of them during this three-month period in fact have been able to see the president.”

When he returned late on February 23, Yar’Adua was moved so quickly from an air ambulance to a vehicular ambulance that few people saw him, Carson said.

“I think that approximately 10 days ago, the most senior leaders in Nigeria, the members of the National Assembly in the Senate and House of Representatives and also the members of the Federal Executive Council and the Governors Council, all unanimously passed individual resolutions” naming the vice president as acting president.

“That gave a sense of stability to Nigeria and confidence that the government was going to be able to move forward and discharge its responsibilities. Now we see the sudden return, with very little notice, of the president to the country. As I said before, we hope very, very much that the president has recuperated, is healthy and is able to resume his normal duties as president.”

Carson added that “it is very important that those who

are in responsible positions put the health of the president of Nigeria first. That they think of the interests of the stability and the continued democracy of the country as a primary focal point of interest. This is not a time where personal political ambitions should in fact take precedence over the stability and continued democracy and adherence to constitutional rule that governs Nigeria today.”

Elaborating on Nigeria’s importance in the region, the assistant secretary said the West African state is the second-largest Muslim-majority nation in Africa, one of America’s most important trading partners and the recipient of the largest amount of U.S. investment in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria supplies 12 percent of all U.S. oil as well, he said.

He cited Nigeria as a prominent leader in the Economic Community of West African States, a source of stability in West Africa – and a troop-contributing country to the United Nations in Africa, the Middle East and globally. Nigeria is also a member of the U.N. Security Council and a country “none of us can afford to dismiss or ignore.”

Ambassador Carson recently returned from travel that took him to Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Benin and the African Union summit in Addis Ababa. He also visited Spain for talks with European Union officials. Spain currently holds the presidency of the EU.

Exhibit Celebrates Listener Letters to Afghanistan’s Radio Azadi

Contemporary letters and older manuscripts displayed at Library of Congress

By Howard Cincotta

Special Correspondent

Washington – When Soroush and Hamraz, two teenage friends and fervent radio listeners, wanted to show their appreciation for Radio Free Afghanistan, or Radio Azadi, they did what thousands of other Afghans have done. They wrote a letter.

The difference: Their letter was an illustrated scroll more than 200 feet (63 meters) long.

“We wrote about how one can achieve one’s goals,” Hamraz said in a short video. “We also wrote about pride in our country, love and other things.”

A selection of the more than 15,000 letters received by Radio Azadi is now part of a multimedia exhibit, called “Voices From Afghanistan,” which opened February 24 at the Library of Congress in Washington.

The exhibit has been mounted in cooperation with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), based in Prague,

Czech Republic, which broadcasts to 21 countries in 28 languages, including Radio Azadi's Dari and Pashto.

LETTERS AND LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The Library of Congress is displaying the contemporary letters alongside older documents and photos from the library's own Central Asian collections, demonstrating the astonishing richness and continuity of Afghanistan's culture, despite decades of conflict.

The exhibit features audio clips and a short video of the adventures of Soroush and Hamraz, who have remained determined to keep writing to Radio Azadi despite the skepticism and outright opposition of some adults in their small farming community north of Kabul.

Radio Azadi's director, Akbar Ayazi, was so impressed by the massive scroll that he invited Soroush and Hamraz to visit the station in Kabul. The boys were late in arriving, however – their bus had been in an accident and they showed up bruised and bandaged, without a thought of cancelling for a later time.

The letters to Radio Azadi are filled with prayers and poems, complaints about corrupt officials and poor schools, pleas from refugees and the disabled, and song requests from young people in love.

Azadi broadcasters try to respond to as many letters as possible, and regularly read a number of them on the air.

Although most are from individuals, some letters are written by village scribes representing the views of several people or a small community – another long-held Afghan custom.

One letter contains a prayer:

"Oh lord, awaken us from our state of ignorance/
Dazed and proud we are, bring us to our senses."

Another letter suggests that it's time for Afghan officials to wake up: "We don't know why the government is daydreaming."

Many letters carry on the deeply held tradition of illustrating letters with calligraphy and ornate designs – especially flowers. Often, the letters are rolled up as scrolls or in accordion folds, another cultural practice that is centuries old. Younger listeners, however, don't hesitate to send e-mails if they have the means.

"This is an opportunity to see beyond Afghanistan as a platform for conflict, and to honor the great spirit of its people," said RFE/RL President Jeffrey Gedmin at a February 23 reception marking the opening of the exhibit.

James Billington, director of the Library of Congress, said, "These letters are a window to see a society, its culture and troubles – and how it continues the distinctive traditions of its history."

SURROGATE BROADCASTING

The intense engagement of the population with Radio Azadi in its eight years of operation has made it the most popular radio station in Afghanistan, broadcasting uncensored news, discussions, call-in shows and music 12 hours a day in Dari and Pashto. It continues to flourish despite fierce resistance and threats from the Taliban.

"Radio Azadi is a lot more than reliable journalism," Gedmin said. "It's almost more like a dance, a courtship with its countrymen, based on trust and respect."

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty receives direct funding from the United States as a private, nonprofit organization, overseen by a presidentially appointed board. However, Radio Azadi is not an official voice of the United States – that is the job of the Voice of America.

Instead, Radio Azadi is an example of surrogate broadcasting. As Gedmin wrote in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, surrogate stations are "government-sponsored broadcasts that provide accurate and reliable news to countries where independent media do not exist."

RFE/RL broadcast to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but the end of communism didn't bring an end to authoritarian regimes that restrict independent media and freedom of information. As a result, RFE/RL redirected its efforts from the new democratic states of Europe to a swath of countries from Russia and the Balkans to Central and South Asia.

RADIO MASHAAL

RFE/RL's newest broadcasting initiative, modeled after Radio Azadi, is Radio Mashaal ("Torch"), directed at the Pashto-speaking areas along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. Radio Mashaal is designed to counter the messages of hate and intolerance from illegal Taliban radio stations through independent news reporting, open debate and engagement with listeners.

Radio Mashaal, launched in January 2010, is on the air for only two hours daily now, increasing to nine hours by September. On Radio Mashaal's first broadcast, Haroon Bacha, a widely popular Pashto singer forced to flee by Taliban death threats, performed on the air. He will also host a cultural affairs show. Thus, not only has free and independent radio come to the Pashto regions of Pakistan, but broadcast music too.

“Radio Mashaal’s commitment to professional journalism in the local language will be an important contribution to peace, reconciliation and democracy in the region,” said Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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