

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Vice President Biden: Middle East Peace at Moment of “Real Opportunity”

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Vice President Biden has welcomed the agreement by Israel and the Palestinians to hold indirect talks, saying renewed contact between the two parties will help reduce the level of mistrust between them and lead to a solution that gives both sides peace and secure, recognized borders.

Speaking in Jerusalem March 9 with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Biden said the interests of Israelis and Palestinians are “very much more in line than they are in opposition” and called on both sides to “step back and take a deep breath.”

During his earlier visits to the region during his long career in the U.S. Senate, Biden said, “the idea that we would speak with certitude about a two-state solution wasn’t so obvious.”

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process always had two components, he said, with “the actual definition of a state by borders and sovereign immunity and sovereign capabilities, but also the actual stuff of which a state is made. Institutions, everything from security forces to tax collection capability and everything in between.” That process “is under way,” he added.

Israel and the Palestinians “are at a moment of real opportunity,” the vice president said.

Biden also met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu March 9 and will meet in Ramallah March 10 with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. He will also deliver a speech at Tel Aviv University March 11 before traveling to Jordan March 12.

In a March 8 media note, Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell said both sides are discussing “the structure and scope” of the indirect talks. The Obama administration, Mitchell said, hopes the talks “will lead to direct negotiations as soon as possible.”

Mitchell returned to Washington for discussions with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and plans to return to the Middle East the week of March 14.

“We also again encourage the parties, and all concerned, to refrain from any statements or actions which may inflame tensions or prejudice the outcome of these talks,” Mitchell said.

Israel announced March 9 that it plans new housing in East Jerusalem. In a March 9 statement, Vice President Biden condemned the decision, saying that unilateral action “cannot prejudge the outcome of negotiations on permanent status issues,” such as Jerusalem.

“I condemn the decision by the government of Israel to advance planning for new housing units in East Jerusalem. The substance and timing of the announcement, particularly with the launching of proximity talks, is precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now and runs counter to the constructive discussions that I’ve had here in Israel. We must build an atmosphere to support negotiations, not complicate them,” Biden said.

Israel’s announcement also “underscores the need to get negotiations under way that can resolve all the outstanding issues of the conflict,” Biden said, adding that good faith negotiations can reach an outcome that will realize the aspirations both sides have for Jerusalem.

Secretary Clinton Urges Normalization of Relations with Honduras

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says Honduras has taken the necessary steps toward restoring democracy and deserves recognition and normalization of relations.

“We believe that President [Porfirio] Lobo and his administration have taken the steps necessary to restore democracy,” Clinton said at a March 4 press conference. “We share the condemnation of the coup that occurred, but we think it’s time to move forward and ensure that such disruptions of democracy do not and cannot happen in the future.”

Clinton wrapped up a five-day visit to Central and South America in Guatemala with leaders and senior officials from eight Central American nations. The discussions turned to controlling the violence from drug trafficking and recognition of the new Honduran government. Clinton acknowledged the problems related to drug trafficking and called on Latin American nations to continue the fight against trafficking and the corruption associated with the illegal drug trade.

Honduras held a presidential election in November 2009 and elected Lobo. A coup had toppled former President Manuel Zelaya in June, when army officers seized him and flew him to nearby Costa Rica. Clinton said the election was free, fair and legitimate according to

observers, and since then Lobo has worked steadily to restore democracy and the rule of law.

Following Lobo's swearing-in ceremony January 27, the new president immediately signed a decree granting political amnesty to those who were involved in the country's political crisis and also made it possible for Zelaya, who had returned to Honduras and whose term in office officially ended January 27, to leave the country safely for exile in the Dominican Republic.

"The Honduran family begins [the process] of reconciliation," Lobo said in a speech at the national stadium in the capital, Tegucigalpa.

Clinton said Lobo has established a unity government and a truth commission to fully investigate the political crisis. She announced that the United States would resume more than \$30 million in aid to the country.

"I have just sent a letter to the Congress of the United States notifying them that we will be restoring aid to Honduras," Clinton told reporters. Some nations in the region have said they will wait, but Clinton said there is no reason to wait further.

During Clinton's travel in Latin America, she consulted with leaders in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Costa Rica before concluding her trip March 5 in Guatemala.

Defense Secretary Gates Cites Progress in Afghanistan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Defense Secretary Robert Gates told reporters in Kabul that long-term success in Afghanistan ultimately will be determined by how well the Afghan government, with international support, can respond to the Afghan people and "inspire their loyalty."

Gates, in Afghanistan to check on progress since operations were expanded late last year, met March 8 in the Afghan capital with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and Army General Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). He also visited U.S. forces north of Kandahar March 9 to thank them for their efforts and sacrifice.

"The most pressing matter we've discussed was the major operation that President Karzai approved in Helmand province, where Afghan and international troops have succeeded in clearing almost all of Marjah and Nad Ali," Gates told reporters at a joint press conference with

Karzai. "Of course, the operation in Marjah is only one of many battles to come in a much longer campaign focused on protecting the people of Afghanistan."

Gates added that since McChrystal made protecting the population the centerpiece of his military strategy, civilian casualties have been reduced.

As operations have expanded in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan, Gates said, Afghan national security forces have taken on a greater role. Karzai has said his goal is to have 300,000 Afghan soldiers and police by the end of 2011. Gates said he will continue to work with NATO allies and other international partners to get more trainers and mentors to help achieve that goal.

"We're all united in wanting to see the Afghans assume greater responsibility for the security of their own country and their own people," said Gates, who last visited Afghanistan in December 2009 at the outset of expanded operations.

Soon after President Obama put McChrystal in charge of forces in Afghanistan in 2009 and after McChrystal had completed an in-depth review of the security situation there, McChrystal advised the president that the situation would deteriorate without a substantial expansion of operations and forces. But Gates said after meetings with McChrystal that the general no longer sees the situation deteriorating and that there have been a number of positive developments.

In December 2009, the president ordered an additional 30,000 U.S. forces to be sent to Afghanistan, and the international community, including NATO allies, made of additional military and civilian support, Gates said. So far, about 6,000 of that additional total have been sent to Afghanistan, with the remainder expected to arrive by the end of August.

"Improvements in the relations with Pakistan have yielded tangible results and increased cooperation along the border," Gates told reporters. Afghan forces have also responded quite well to Karzai's call to join the operations to secure the country from an insurgency being waged by remnants of the former Taliban regime.

Karzai told reporters that a peace jirga, a tribal assembly, will be convened in about a month and a half and will solicit guidance from the Afghan people on how to move forward toward reintegration and reconciliation where it may be possible. Part of that reconciliation process is to convince some of the Taliban insurgents to lay down their arms and support the country, he said.

Karzai said that some of these insurgents were forced by circumstances or by other means to join the Taliban, but

they are not members of that regime or the related al-Qaida terrorist network. And those insurgents who renounce violence and the Taliban and the al-Qaida network would be included in the reconciliation.

“There are, we believe, thousands of those fighting for the Taliban who do so out of economic necessity or because they or their families have been intimidated,” Gates said at the press conference with Karzai. “It’s important to create the conditions for them to rejoin Afghan society and rejoin the Afghan political system.”

But Gates also said it is important that reconciliation be done at a time when it conforms to the terms of the Afghan government, when those who are reconciled agree to or abide by the Afghan constitution, disarm and dissociate with the Taliban and al-Qaida.

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