

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

March 22, 2010

Secretary Clinton to Co-Chair Strategic Dialogue with Pakistan.....	1
Middle East Quartet Calls for Peace Talks	1
Activists Call Burma's Election Preparations Undemocratic.....	2
Signing of New Nuclear Arms Treaty Near.....	3

Secretary Clinton to Co-Chair Strategic Dialogue with Pakistan

First ministerial-level dialogue opens in Washington March 24

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Ministerial-level strategic talks between the United States and Pakistan will open in Washington March 24.

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke anticipates a broad agenda for the discussions, which he said will mark “a major intensification” in the U.S. partnership with Pakistan.

“To me, a strategic dialogue means that we talk about our basic core objectives,” Holbrooke told reporters March 19 in Washington. The United States and Pakistan are working together to combat extremist groups including al-Qaida; empower Afghanistan so it can become self-reliant; and strengthen Pakistan’s security, democratic institutions, and economic development, including helping the country address its energy and water problems.

The strategic dialogue was launched in 2006, but with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton heading the American delegation, the March 24 meeting will be the first time the discussions are conducted at the ministerial level. Holbrooke said Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and high-level representatives from other sections of the Obama administration will also be participating, along with the “extremely high-caliber delegation which Pakistan is sending,” led by Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

According to a March 18 State Department press notice, the delegations will discuss economic development, water and energy, education, foreign policy, communications and public diplomacy, agriculture, and security.

“This is an intense and serious dialogue bilaterally between the U.S. and Pakistan,” Holbrooke said. “We’re going to listen carefully to whatever the Pakistanis say.”

The ambassador said he expects working groups to be established to deal with separate bilateral issues. “We want to move into operational things in such areas as water, energy and other issues. And that’s what we’ll do,” he said.

Asked about the delivery of U.S. assistance under the 2009 Kerry-Lugar Act, Holbrooke said the Obama administration is “looking for every way to accelerate the obligations and the disbursement,” acknowledging that

the money is not “moving as fast as we’d like it to.” Congress approved \$7.5 billion in nonmilitary aid for Pakistan under the Kerry-Lugar Act. The funds are released under congressional procedures that can be slow and complex.

“We are doing more. We will announce more. We want to do as much as the Congress will support,” he said. “This is hard for people to understand in other parts of the world. But Congress writes the checks.”

Holbrooke also said both the United States and Pakistan have made huge advances in overcoming what both sides have called a “trust deficit” that has hampered the bilateral relationship in the past. Holbrooke also stressed that the Obama administration’s support for Pakistan is in the United States’ interest as well.

“Everyone’s aware of the popular public-opinion polls, and we think that our support for Pakistan deserves more recognition among the people,” he said. “I think we’ve made a tremendous amount of progress in the last year.”

Middle East Quartet Calls for Peace Talks

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The Quartet for Middle East Peace has called for Israel and the Palestinians to resume peace negotiations that would end with the creation of an independent Palestinian state in 24 months.

The Quartet also urged Israel to freeze all settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including natural growth; to dismantle outposts built since March 2001; and to refrain from further demolitions and Palestinian evictions in East Jerusalem.

The Quartet statement came at the end of two days of meetings in Moscow and was read to the press by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The Quartet for Middle East Peace was created in 2002 to help find a way to end the violence between the Israelis and Palestinians. The members are the United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the United States.

George Mitchell, the U.S. special envoy for Middle East peace, had brokered an agreement between Palestinians and Israelis to resume indirect talks. These talks were stalled, however, after the Israelis on March 9 announced new settlement construction of 1,600 homes in East Jerusalem. Mitchell, in Moscow with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, leaves for the region over the March 20–21 weekend.

Ban was joined at the Moscow talks by Clinton and Mitchell, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,

Catherine Ashton, the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, and Quartet Special Envoy Tony Blair, the former British prime minister.

"The Quartet believes these negotiations should lead to a settlement, negotiated between the parties within 24 months, that ends the occupation which began in 1967 and results in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbors," Ban said.

Ban said a Palestinian state located in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is in the best interests of the Israelis and Palestinians, other nations within the region and the international community.

Lavrov told reporters at a post-meeting press conference with other Quartet members that the first step is for Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to begin indirect talks, and then move to face-to-face negotiations as trust and confidence on each side improves.

Clinton said everyone involved in the peace process is committed to the start of indirect talks.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley announced March 18 that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had spoken with Clinton by telephone again after they had spoken March 12 in a 45-minute telephone conference. Netanyahu is scheduled to be in Washington the week of March 22 to attend the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee meeting, and may meet with the secretary during that visit, Crowley said, but it will depend on how schedules can be arranged.

"They discussed the specific actions that might be taken to improve the atmosphere for progress toward peace," Crowley said in a prepared statement. "We are going to review the prime minister's response and continue our discussions with both sides to keep proximity talks moving forward."

Activists Call Burma's Election Preparations Undemocratic

By Daniel Schearf
VOA News

Bangkok — Burma rights and exile groups want the international community to denounce the government's preparations for elections this year, saying they are undemocratic and are increasing ethnic tensions.

A coalition of rights groups and political exiles on March 19 said election laws released last week confirm that Burma's military government intends to use the elections

to legitimize its rule.

The coalition, called Burma's Movement for Democracy and Ethnic Rights, wants foreign governments to reject the elections.

The election laws require parties to purge political prisoners from their ranks, including detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The rules also require allegiance to the controversial 2008 constitution, which reserves a quarter of all parliamentary seats for the military.

Khin Ohmar is with the Forum for Democracy in Burma, which is part of the coalition. She says military rule would ensure continued ethnic oppression and human rights abuses.

"And, it's not only us here on the border but also the people in the country, whose voice cannot be raised and heard freely, are saying the same thing — this is the constitution forced by the regime to adopt in 2008. And this is the constitution that has actually given a sole power, overarching power, to the military regime in all three branches of the government," she said.

The United States has called the laws a mockery that will ensure the elections lack credibility. The U.S. and several other governments have imposed sanctions on Burma because of its poor human rights record.

But Burma's closest neighbors have said little, preferring diplomatic engagement.

The coalition also expressed concern about increased hostilities against ethnic militias, including those that have cease-fire agreements with the government.

Ahead of the elections Burma's military has been trying to force the militias to consolidate as a border security force.

Zipporah Sein is general secretary of the Karen National Union, which has been fighting authorities in eastern Burma for decades.

"They [militias] do not accept the 2010 election, they do not accept to become the border guard force," she said. "So, the regime also sends troops to their areas. ... So it surely that the fighting [will break] out again," said Sein.

Burma has yet to announce a date for the elections, the first in two decades, but says they will take place this year.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won Burma's last elections but the military refused to hand

over power and has kept her under house arrest for most of the time since.

The coalition stopped short of calling for an election boycott and acknowledged that some opposition politicians, including within the NLD, want to take part in the elections.

The NLD is to announce later this month if it will participate.

Signing of New Nuclear Arms Treaty Near

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington – The United States and Russia are close to agreement on a new treaty to reduce nuclear arsenals, though technical issues remain to be resolved, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said March 19 in Moscow.

During a two-day visit to Moscow, Clinton met with President Dmitry Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on a range of shared issues. The arms treaty is a significant part of an initiative launched by the Obama administration to improve relations with Russia.

“Since our first meeting in Geneva, a little more than a year ago, Minister Lavrov and I, along with our respective governments under the leadership of both President Medvedev and President Obama, have worked toward a new beginning in the relationship between the United States and Russia,” Clinton said at a Moscow press conference with Lavrov. “We believe that this reset of the relationship has led to much greater cooperation, coordination, and a constructive ongoing consultation on numerous issues that are important to our bilateral relationship and to the global issues that we both are facing.”

The treaty talks began early in 2009 to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START I, that expired in December 2009. Making the world nuclear-weapons-free has become a signature foreign policy initiative outlined by Obama in an April 5, 2009, speech in Prague. It became a significant reason for his selection for the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.

In addition to seeking a world free of nuclear weapons, Obama pledged to work for greater arms control and nonproliferation goals. The arms talks come at a time when Washington is enlisting Moscow’s support in curbing the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran.

While the arms reduction talks have extended well past the December 2009 target set for reaching an agreement, U.S. and Russian negotiators have kept the talks on track

and are focused on key verification provisions, which are essential components of any arms control accord.

“We are very encouraged by progress on a new START agreement. Our negotiating teams have reported that they have resolved all of the major issues and there are some technical issues that remain, but we are on the brink of seeing a new agreement between the United States and Russia,” Clinton said. “We hope and expect that there will be a signing in the near future.”

“We also discussed a range of other issues from Iran to Afghanistan and so much more as part of our ongoing consultation,” Clinton added.

Obama and Medvedev talked by telephone March 13 on the status of the START talks, the White House said recently. “Both leaders are committed to concluding an agreement soon,” said Mike Hammer, a spokesman for the president’s National Security Council.

Medvedev will be in Washington for the April 12–13 Global Nuclear Security Summit.

The United States and Russia agreed to maintain the provisions of START I until a new agreement is reached, saying that strategic stability is important.

Clinton said recently that the arms reduction treaty is “a technically very complex treaty to accomplish. We share an interest in making real reductions in our strategic arsenals, and that is the most important point. To do that in a way that is verifiable, but which is less costly and less operationally complex than the previous START agreement, is the key challenge, and we are working through it together.”

While in Moscow, Clinton also attended meetings of the Quartet for Middle East Peace that is hoping to re-start Israeli and Palestinian peace negotiations. The Quartet includes Russia and the United States and also the United Nations and the European Union.

(Preceding items distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://america.gov>)