

American

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President Obama on Anniversary of Israel's Establishment

Obama congratulates people of Israel as they celebrate their independence

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
April 19, 2010

Statement by President on Israel Independence Day

On the 62nd Anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, I join the American people in congratulating the government and people of Israel on this celebration of their independence. Minutes after David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence, realizing the dream of a state for the Jewish people in their historic homeland, the United States became the first country to recognize Israel. To this day, we continue to share a strong, unbreakable bond of friendship between our two nations, anchored by the United States' enduring commitment to Israel's security. Israel remains our important partner and key strategic ally in the Middle East, and I am confident that our special relationship will only be strengthened in the months and years to come. I look forward to continuing our efforts with Israel to achieve comprehensive peace and security in the region, including a two-state solution, and to working together to counter the forces that threaten Israel, the United States, and the world. On this day, we once again honor the extraordinary achievements of the people of Israel, and their deep and abiding friendship with the American people. I offer my best wishes to President Peres, Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the people of Israel as they celebrate this happy occasion.

Iraqi Forces Take Lead in Combating Extremists

Biden cites increased strength and capacity of Iraqi security forces

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Vice President Biden and the top U.S. military member praised the increasing strength of Iraqi security forces as demonstrated by Iraqi leadership of a joint operation that killed the two most senior al-Qaida in Iraq leaders near Tikrit on April 18.

Speaking to reporters at the White House April 19, Biden said the deaths of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi are "potentially devastating blows" to al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), and demonstrate how Iraqis have assumed the predominant responsibility for securing their country and fellow citizens against violent extremists.

"This action demonstrates the improved security strength

and capacity of Iraqi security forces. The Iraqis led this operation, and it was based on intelligence the Iraqi security forces themselves developed following their capture of a senior AQI leader last month," the vice president said.

Until their deaths, the two individuals "plotted, planned and executed terrorist attacks against the Iraqis," as well as Americans, Biden said. The operation, the vice president added, "is evidence, in my view, that the future of Iraq will not be shaped by those who seek to destroy that country, but belongs to those who are building a strong and unified Iraq."

Biden urged Iraqi political leaders to consolidate the security gains against AQI by following up on the country's March 7 elections to form "an inclusive and representative government that meets the needs and aspirations of the Iraqi people."

The United States remains committed to ending its combat missions in Iraq by the end of August 2010 and to removing all U.S. forces from the country by the end of 2011, Biden said. The United States will continue its partnership with Iraq in other areas such as "education, cultural exchanges and the development of a strong economy."

Admiral Mike Mullen, who is chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the American Forces Press Service in Pittsburgh April 19 that AQI has been seeking to restore the level of sectarian violence seen in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 by carrying out a series of suicide bombings in Baghdad and Mosul since August 2009.

"The goal of [those bombings] was to generate sectarian violence, not just the immediate violence," Mullen said. "[Al-Qaida] leadership has been very focused on trying to reignite the sectarian violence Iraq was fraught with."

While echoing the vice president's comment that AQI had suffered "a potentially devastating blow," Mullen said the group remains a threat, and that Iraqi forces, with U.S. assistance, will continue their efforts against the extremist group.

"Al-Qaida in Iraq has been greatly diminished for a significant period of time," he said. "Their leadership has been killed and it's very, very significant in terms ... of its loss of sustainability. [But] this by no means eliminates al-Qaida in Iraq."

He also praised Iraq's leadership and security forces for the operation, which he said is an example of their progress since assuming the lead in security efforts from U.S. forces in 2009.

"Their leadership in this particular operation has been significant," Mullen said.

U.S. Pledges to Help Strengthen Pakistan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Compared with 15 months ago, U.S.-Pakistani relations have shown substantial improvement, says Ambassador Richard Holbrooke.

"Pakistan is a complicated country that faces huge economic, energy and water problems. And in this overall context, the Pakistanis are dealing with their problems," Holbrooke said. "But it needs our support."

Three weeks ago in Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton led the U.S.-Pakistani Strategic Dialogue "that was a tremendous step forward" in establishing a strong relationship based on common interests, he said.

"We're looking for ways we can help Pakistan strengthen itself, strengthen democracy and help it fight the insurgents in the west," Holbrooke said April 19 in a State Department-sponsored "Conversation with America." The insurgency Pakistan faces is "very dangerous both to them and to the United States."

The Taliban insurgency carries out its attacks on U.S. and NATO-coalition forces in Afghanistan from sanctuaries inside Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas in the extensive mountain range that divides Afghanistan and Pakistan, an area where political boundaries seem largely irrelevant. The United States and allies drove the Taliban regime that had ruled Afghanistan from power following the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Holbrooke, who is the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, said that before the Obama administration entered office in 2009, the U.S. focus had been on the 4.5 million people living in the federally administered regions and not the bulk of the 175 million Pakistanis. But the focus is now fully on the entire country, he said.

"That's a hugely important area, and we have special programs for it. But Secretary Clinton decided to re-emphasize the rest of the people," Holbrooke said. "And what did she turn to first? Energy."

During a trip to Pakistan in October 2009, Clinton announced six immediate projects and agreements between the United States and Pakistan. Two of the projects have been signed, he said, and some of those include planned water projects.

"I want to assure anyone in Pakistan ... that, led by

President Obama and the secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton, we are putting more and more emphasis on energy and water issues, and we will continue to do that up to the absolute limits of what the Congress will fund," Holbrooke said. "It is a big issue."

"We are working with the Pakistani leadership on every one of the economic, water and energy issues that we can. This is a vast undertaking," he said.

When traveling last summer in Karachi, the largest Muslim city in the world with a population of 18 million, Holbrooke experienced days when some sections of the city had electricity for only four hours. "This is not acceptable, and the people are understandably concerned about this," he said, which is why the United States is working with the Pakistani government to meet those pressing needs.

Last year, Congress authorized \$7.5 billion over five years in economic assistance for Pakistan. That commitment has now been funded and money will begin flowing into Pakistan.

The United States has been working closely with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to make certain that standby funding agreements are extended because projects of this size and scope require enormous funding sources. Holbrooke acknowledged that this type of support cannot be done by the United States alone; it requires broader international assistance.

In April 2009, the United States and international donors met in Tokyo and raised \$5.5 billion in commitments, and those funds are beginning to arrive. At the strategic dialogue in March, the United States and Pakistan reached agreement on a long list of economic development initiatives, deliveries of new military equipment and a genuine commitment to improve relations.

The use of the term "strategic dialogue" carries significant meaning because it is reserved for the most substantive and wide-ranging exchanges among major global partners with the United States, officials said.

Intense Diplomacy to Strengthen U.S.-Afghan Ties

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Afghan President Hamid Karzai and a large contingent of his senior Cabinet officials will come to Washington in May for meetings aimed at strengthening relations between the United States and Afghanistan, says Ambassador Richard Holbrooke.

Additional meetings and conferences are planned throughout the year, he added. They reflect an intense, strategic diplomacy designed to strengthen relations, expand governance by the Karzai government and maintain international support as the Afghan government grows and the security environment improves, Holbrooke said.

Since the beginning of this year, Holbrooke, who is the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal and other senior U.S. military officials have held six meetings with Karzai and his senior Cabinet. They met once in London at the international support conference January 28, twice in Munich, Germany, and three times in Kabul.

On April 10, Eikenberry unveiled a \$40 million program to improve governance in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan most affected by the Taliban insurgency.

"The last meeting we had was the longest, most sustained and most focused, and that was a week ago," Holbrooke said at an April 19 press briefing in Washington. "It was over two hours long and it was a very serious, substantive meeting."

Holbrooke said a recent stressful period has passed and the joint U.S.-Afghan work of helping build a new, democratic and stronger Afghanistan is going forward. Karzai had issued critical statements recently about U.S. and other foreign nations' involvement in Afghanistan.

"In terms of our relationships between us and the government of Afghanistan, we feel they're in good shape. There was a period where the waters got roiled a little bit, but that period is over," Holbrooke said. "I base what I said on my personal observations and interactions with President Karzai."

INTENSIVE DIPLOMACY AHEAD

At the State Department briefing, Holbrooke said the meetings in Washington will run May 10-14, but the majority of the meetings with senior U.S. officials and President Obama will be May 11-13 during a full schedule that will include breakout sessions with counterparts from each nation. The majority of the meetings will be held at the State Department and will be led by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, he said.

Meetings are planned with senior officials from defense, agriculture, justice, law enforcement, and other areas as schedules permit, Holbrooke said. There will be a press conference with Karzai and Clinton following what is expected to be a substantial bilateral session. Meetings are

planned around specific topics including rule of law, agriculture and communications.

Obama and Karzai will meet, and Holbrooke said there will be time for meetings with the senior leadership of Congress and sessions with public policy centers in Washington.

"It's going to be a very, very intense whole-of-government effort involving many members of the U.S. government," Holbrooke told reporters. "The point I want to give you is that we are taking this trip very seriously."

Karzai is planning a three-day peace jirga (grand assembly or council) that begins May 20. It is a consultative jirga with tribal and government leaders that had been scheduled before the Washington meetings, but was delayed until after this visit, Holbrooke said. A meeting of 40 foreign envoys to Afghanistan will convene in Madrid in the first week in June, and the United States will be there for that conference, he said.

Following that will be an international conference in Kabul on July 20 that will be hosted by the Karzai government and the international community, including the United Nations.

It will involve a domestic portion and an international portion, and Secretary Clinton plans to attend the international portion, Holbrooke said. "It is the follow-on to the London conference."

Afghan parliamentary elections are scheduled for September 18, and at some point, either before the elections or shortly after, there will be a trilateral conference of the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan, he said.

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