

American

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Netanyahu and Abbas “Getting Down to Business,” Secretary Clinton Says

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says the United States is convinced that the legitimate aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians “are not incompatible” and that both sides have reached “a moment of opportunity that must be seized,” as direct discussions continued between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Jerusalem.

In remarks with Israel’s president, Shimon Peres, at his Jerusalem residence September 15, Clinton said the status quo between the two sides is fundamentally unsustainable. She said a negotiated two-state solution and a comprehensive regional peace provide “the only path to ensure Israel’s future as a secure and democratic Jewish state” and will address “the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for dignity, self-determination and a state of their own.”

Clinton spoke as the second round of direct discussions between Netanyahu and Abbas resumed at the Israeli prime minister’s official residence in Jerusalem after beginning in Egypt September 14.

“This is the time and these are the leaders,” she said, and both share a determination and an understanding of how important it is to move their discussions forward in pursuit of a peace settlement.

“I have sat with these two men, individually and together. I have listened to them talk candidly and forcefully. They are getting down to business, and they have begun to grapple with the core issues that can only be resolved through face-to-face negotiations,” Clinton said.

The core issues to be resolved include determining the final borders of a Palestinian state, the future of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements in occupied areas, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, water rights and future relations between the two states that include assurances of Israeli security.

“I believe they are serious about reaching an agreement that results in two states living side by side in peace and security,” Clinton said, which is in the interests of the United States, as well as both parties.

“The United States will stand by them as they make difficult decisions. We will be an active and sustained partner throughout this effort,” she said.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said September 15 that President Obama and his team continue to remain “very engaged” in the Middle East peace efforts.

“When we’re not involved in that engagement; when we’re not ... using our ability to push, we have tended not to have the results that would lead you to think we’re moving towards a comprehensive Middle East peace,” he said.

Obama was briefed on the discussions September 14 by Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell, and Gibbs said the president continues to believe that “we are in the midst of very serious direct talks, that both parties seem willing to engage in very frank discussions, and that we are slowly but surely making progress.”

U.S., Southeast Asian Nations Collaborate on Lower Mekong River

Exchange focuses on water-resource challenges in critical Asian watershed

By Nancy L. Pontius
Special Correspondent

Littleton, Colorado — Recently, professionals from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam spent three weeks in the United States exploring new ways to effectively manage watersheds and consider new approaches for the Lower Mekong River basin.

The tour, sponsored by the U.S. State Department, included visits to universities, hydroelectric power plants, a wetland, government agencies, an environmentally focused summer camp for children, and a community clean-up event at a neighborhood park. Tour members represented the Cambodian Forestry Administration, the nongovernmental organization Forum on Cambodia, Lao National Mekong Committee, Lao Water Resources and Environment Administration, Save the Mekong Coalition, Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Cultural Conservation Network, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam National University and Vietnam Environment Administration.

The trip highlighted U.S. watershed management practices and also facilitated relationships between the Asian visitors and their U.S. professional counterparts, said Frank Justice, an associate program officer with the Meridian International Center, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that promotes international understanding by exchanging ideas, people and culture. The State Department plans three more tours in 2010 on other topics critical to the Mekong region.

CHALLENGES TO THE MEKONG RIVER

Conflicting needs for the Mekong River have existed for

centuries. Five countries share this water source, which is used for drinking, sanitation, transportation, wildlife, the fishing industry and agriculture, especially rice farming. Notably, Thailand and Vietnam are the world's largest exporters of rice, a crop that requires considerable water and the nutrient-rich silt that is transported by the river annually to replenish the soil.

A relatively new use for the Mekong is hydroelectric power generation. Currently, more than 10 new dams are proposed on the river, and additional dams are being considered on its tributaries, Tim Hamlin, research associate at the U.S. nonprofit Stimson Center, told America.gov. These dams would have both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, dams will produce hydroelectric power, revenue and lower-cost electricity, Hamlin said, adding the last is especially important because some areas of Cambodia have some of the highest electricity costs in the world. Dams also will help control seasonal flooding and droughts, but traditional farming methods rely on the floods for water and soil nutrients.

On the negative side, the dams will hinder the down-river flow of silt, which is now deposited primarily in the Mekong Delta, Hamlin said. That silt is critical to current rice farming techniques. Dams also hamper fish migration and reproduction. Rice and fish are vital for the area's food security, Tanya Rogers, State Department desk officer for the Lower Mekong Initiative, told America.gov.

SISTER RIVER PARTNERSHIP

To improve management of transboundary water issues within the Lower Mekong region and to support the Mekong River Commission (MRC), a sister river partnership between the MRC and the Mississippi River Commission in the United States was formalized in May.

The Mississippi River Commission, headed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is working to "share best practices and lessons learned" from the United States with its counterparts in Southeast Asia, Rogers said. The members will be exploring areas of common interest, including water resource management, flood forecasting, water quality, hydroelectric power, agriculture and food security.

In another partnership outreach, the State Department hopes to bring government officials from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam to the United States in the near future to:

- Collect information on how the Mississippi River is managed.
- Visit U.S. government agencies that oversee water resource management.

- Demonstrate ways to assess the environmental impact of the proposed Mekong-River dams.

To encourage dialogue and help with resolving competing needs in the Mekong basin, the State Department also is looking to help establish expert groups from the region to consider key issues surrounding the future development of dams, Rogers said. The United States would like to share what it has learned over decades of working on dam projects, she added.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Charlie Demas, director of the Louisiana Water Science Center for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), told America.gov that the center is looking to exchange information with its counterparts at Vietnam's Can Tho University about "how their delta is reacting to similar issues that have impacted the Mississippi River."

Like the Mekong, the Mississippi River has been eroding and compressing in coastal areas, and is facing reduced sediment supply in the river. Both rivers also must manage flooding and salt water intrusion into coastal land.

"We are looking at what can they learn from us, and what can we learn from them," Demas said. For example, USGS is sharing water quality data with Dr. Ni at the Forecast Mekong Institute at the university to examine apparently increasing salt levels in drinking water sources.

Can Tho University also is working with the USGS National Wetlands Research Center to share geographic information system (GIS) data used to develop Forecast Mekong, a software model based on a similar tool for the Mississippi River, to help better assess and manage the Mekong River and its delta.

In August, the State Department and USGS hosted 19 Vietnamese students at the Louisiana Water Science Center for a workshop on water resource issues facing the Mekong and Mississippi rivers, including sediment decline and coastal erosion. In the future, USGS staff will be teaching a course in GIS data management at Can Tho University, working with the MRC on using GIS data, and examining data to prevent land from sinking due to removing too much groundwater.

New Arms Reduction Treaty Enhances Weapons Inspections

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — A central component of the pending new arms reduction treaty between the United States and

Russia, known as the New START, is more open on-site inspections of each other's nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, says a senior U.S. diplomat.

"In that way, these treaties are very stabilizing because we view that as long as they understand what we're up to and vice versa, there is no opportunity for miscalculation," Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller says. In addition, it keeps both nations from engaging in spending more money on nuclear weapons when they are not really needed, she said.

On September 16, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is expected to vote on treaty ratification and send the measure to the full Senate for final consideration. For the treaty to win final approval, a two-thirds majority of the Senate – 67 votes – must vote for ratification, and the treaty must also win approval in the Russian Duma. Russian officials signaled September 7 that they are ready to ratify the nuclear arms pact this year, but are waiting to vote at the same time as the full Senate votes on the pact, according to news reports. It is expected that the Senate will hold a final vote on the measure after the November 2 mid-term elections.

90 PERCENT

Russia and the United States possess 90 percent of the nuclear weapons in the world. The New START is designed to succeed the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START I, and reduce each side's arsenals to 1,550 warheads. President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the treaty in Prague April 8.

The verification process in the treaty is essential for it to have meaning and to accomplish its goals of reducing strategic nuclear weapons, Gottemoeller says. Gottemoeller, who is the assistant secretary of state for verification, compliance and implementation, was the chief U.S. negotiator during the U.S.-Russian treaty talks. The lead Russian negotiator was Ambassador Anatoly Antonov, director of the Department of Security and Disarmament Affairs in the Russian Foreign Ministry.

The verification process has been one of the significant aspects of the treaty raising the most concern in the U.S. Senate. But Gottemoeller said that there are no side agreements with Russia and no hidden agreements.

The landmark arms reduction treaty between the United States and Russia would effectively reduce the level of warheads each nation possesses to its lowest point in more than 50 years. U.S. nuclear forces will continue to be based on the triad of delivery systems – land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic long-range bombers. But the treaty provides an upper

boundary of 1,550 deployed warheads for each nation, and up to 700 deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs or heavy bombers. Additionally, the treaty would permit up to 800 deployed and nondeployed missile and submarine launchers or heavy bombers.

According to a report from the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS), the treaty gives the United States and Russia seven years to reduce forces, remains in force for 10 years from ratification, and contains detailed definitions and counting rules that will help the parties calculate the number of warheads that count under the treaty limits.

Gottemoeller said that the New START does not limit current or planned U.S. missile defense programs in the United States or a more limited plan for Europe.

Ambassador Richard Burt, U.S. chairman of Global Zero, said during a briefing on the proposed treaty at Georgetown University September 14 that this treaty puts the United States and Russia back on the road to effective arms control.

"We shouldn't look at these arms control agreements, in my view, as just a series of episodic negotiations, but part of a process of leading to zero nuclear weapons worldwide," Burt said.

The likelihood of the United States and Russia conducting a nuclear war is very low to almost nonexistent, he added, but the threat today is very different from what it was during the height of the Cold War.

"It emanates from the growing number of failed states, from the growing number of weak states with weak governments, and the growing availability of nuclear technology," Burt said. "We should see this agreement as a very important step to creating a process of coming to grips with this new age of nuclear danger."

Along with the New START, Obama also submitted a plan to spend \$80 billion over the next decade to maintain and improve the United States' nuclear weapons complex. While the long-term goal remains to eliminate nuclear weapons, Obama has said that as long as others have them, the United States will also maintain an effective nuclear arsenal.

Gottemoeller said that, in 1991, START I took the number of deployed nuclear weapons down from about 12,000 warheads on each side to about 6,000, then the Moscow Treaty in 2002 reduced that number to a range of 1,700 to 2,000. This treaty, she said, takes it down to 1,550 warheads.

"We always knew that this treaty was going to be a kind

of ... bridge or transition treaty to deeper reductions," she said.

Progress Toward Millennium Development Goals Is Mixed

World leaders meet in New York to discuss improving the lives of the poor

By Christopher Connell
Special Correspondent

Washington — On the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the numbers tell a mixed story about the world's progress toward eradicating poverty, enrolling all children in primary school, promoting gender equality, combating AIDS and malaria and ensuring environmental stability.

As world leaders journey to a meeting in New York September 20–22 to discuss ways to pick up the pace toward meeting the ambitious goals by 2015, one reason for hope is that some countries in dire circumstances are making progress with approaches that others would do well to follow. President Obama will speak about the challenges ahead in an address on September 22, the final day of the three-day MDG summit taking place during the annual gathering of leaders for the United Nations General Assembly.

U.S. officials already offered a road map for the journey ahead in a strategy report released in August by the U.S. Agency for International Development. USAID identified four keys to success: innovation, sustainability, tracking development outcomes and mutual accountability. "We will exercise global leadership to ensure that these imperatives are reflected in the outcome document of the MDG Summit," USAID said.

USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah said, "Enormous progress has been made so far toward meeting the MDGs But much more remains to be done. If we are to meet the ambitious objectives we have set, historic leaps in human development will be needed. For this reason, we must be even more determined, strategic, and focused on results as we chart the path to 2015."

In September 2000, the leaders of 189 nations pledged at a United Nations summit to "spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty." They committed to act in concert to achieve eight lofty ambitions by 2015:

- Cut in half the proportion of people living under the poverty line (after inflation, less than \$1.25 a day today) and those going hungry.
- Achieve universal primary education and equal access to all levels of education for girls and boys.

- Promote gender equality and empowerment of women.
- Reduce child mortality by two-thirds.
- Reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters.
- Halt the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other infectious diseases.
- Protect the environment and ensure sustainability.
- Forge a global partnership for development.

Selim Jahan, director of the Poverty Practice in the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP), told U.S. congressional staff members at a September 8 briefing, "In terms of progress, we have a mixed picture. Impressive progress has been made on certain fronts, but then there are also gaps." Some countries and regions have done well on some MDGs but not others, he said, and even within some countries, groups have been left out of the gains.

The global financial crisis of the past few years and epic natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, the Haitian earthquake of January 2010 and the current massive flooding across Pakistan all have set back progress. The United Nations Population Fund says a half million of the 21 million Pakistanis affected by the floods are pregnant women and 1,700 go into labor every day.

But there are unmistakable signs of progress. The UNDP says that during the past two decades, the number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day has fallen from 1.8 billion to 1.4 billion. China, India, Vietnam and Brazil are among the countries that have made major gains in reducing poverty. Despite some progress in sub-Saharan Africa, more than half the population is below the poverty line. Still, the global poverty rate has been reduced from 46 percent in 1990 to 27 percent, and that puts the MDG poverty target within reach.

UNDP says the number of children who die before age 5 has declined from 12.5 million in 1990 to 9 million in 2008. Most of these deaths are considered preventable, and much of the gain has come from large-scale campaigns to vaccinate children against measles and other illnesses. "In sub-Saharan Africa, measles-related deaths decreased by 91 percent between 1990 and 2007," UNDP says in an assessment report, *What Will It Take to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals?*

The United Nations says 89 percent of children in developing countries were enrolled in primary school in 2008, up from 84 percent in 2000, and the gap between enrollment of boys and girls has nearly closed.

Progress has been slower on reducing maternal mortality. Improving the health of mothers "remains the MDG target for which progress has been most disappointing," the World Health Organization says. In 2005, there were

400 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, compared with 430 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990, the UNDP said, and "about 99 percent of maternal deaths worldwide still occur in developing countries," where prenatal care and even skilled medical help during deliveries are limited.

The Center for Global Development (CGD), a Washington nonprofit that conducts research on how to reduce global poverty, recently published an index of how much progress countries are making toward the MDGs. Analysts Benjamin Leo and Julia Bartheimer singled out 15 "star" performers that they said were likely to meet at least half the MDG goals by 2015. Honduras stood at the top of their list, followed by Kyrgyz Republic, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Armenia, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ghana, Malawi, Mongolia and Uganda.

CGD also identified a dozen "laggard" countries making the least progress, according to data tracked and reported by the United Nations. At the bottom were Guinea-Bissau and Afghanistan, followed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Liberia, Haiti, Cote d'Ivoire and the Central African Republic. The analysts said, "Most countries fall somewhere in between, demonstrating solid progress on some indicators and little on others."

Still, the progress thus far leaves grounds for optimism, said UNDP's Jahan, an economist from Bangladesh. "The MDGs are achievable, believe me," he said. "The world has the knowledge, resources and experiences to make it happen."

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