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"No Sign" Upcoming Burmese Elections Will Be Legitimate

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration remains disappointed by actions from Burma's ruling military junta ahead of the country's scheduled November 7 elections, but will continue to use both dialogue and continued pressure against the regime, with the understanding that this approach will require "substantial patience."

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell said September 27 that there is "no sign that there would be [any] legitimacy associated" with the elections process in Burma.

U.S. officials had previously criticized the junta's election laws, which prevented prominent politicians and pro-democracy dissenters such as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from participating in the vote. Under those conditions, Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy, chose to disband rather than compete in the November vote. The Obama administration has also criticized the Burmese authorities for increasing pressure on Burmese ethnic groups ahead of the election.

Campbell said it is "worrisome" that recent reports have indicated that balloting will be severely restricted in ethnic areas.

But he said the United States also recognizes that "after the elections there may be a different correlation of players, different relationships [and] different actors that may emerge that could create the opportunity for some sort of engagement that would advance not only American interests but the interests of others in the region and the dispossessed inside the country as a whole."

The assistant secretary acknowledged that the benefits of the Obama administration's dual policy of engagement and pressure with the Burmese junta "have been quite limited," in what he described as a "very honest and very clear ... assessment of our engagement strategy to date."

However, he said the mixture of engagement and measures such as sustained economic sanctions that target Burma's rulers and their interests is still "the right way to proceed," but the administration also understands that "this overall effort is going to require substantial patience."

"It will not be an easy road, but ... previous efforts at total isolation have failed, as have, frankly, the efforts of ...

complete open arms engagement," he said.

Campbell said the U.S. approach has enabled it to have "a different kind of dialogue" with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member.

"There is an overriding strategic priority on the part of the United States for a stronger engagement with ASEAN. We've attempted to undertake such a dialogue as an engagement strategy, but at the same time we have tried to stay very true to our principles and tried to be very clear about what our expectations are in terms of inside [Burma] as a whole," he said.

Asked if the United States supports the idea of a United Nations panel of inquiry to investigate war crimes in Burma, Campbell said, "We have not ruled anything out either on this issue or others, including sanctions on the way forward."

"We are looking at what transpires in November in terms of the way forward, and we reserve the right to take steps either to respond to positive steps or negative ones," he said.

U.S. Seeking to Restart Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in New York September 27 as part of the Obama administration's efforts to encourage renewed talks between Syria and Israel and bring about a comprehensive peace in the Middle East between Israel and all of its Arab neighbors.

Speaking in New York September 24, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman said the United States is speaking to both the Israelis and the Syrians "about how best to get a credible peace process going between those two countries."

"The fact that the secretary is seeing Foreign Minister Muallem ... speaks for itself in terms of our commitment and our hope that now is the right time to move forward in trying to restart the Syria-Israel track," he said.

According to Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Philip J. Crowley, the meeting between Clinton and Muallem will be the first between a U.S. secretary of state and Syria's foreign minister since 2007.

"Our focus is on comprehensive peace in the region," Crowley said in New York September 27. "We believe that Syria has a constructive role to play in achieving a

durable, lasting, comprehensive Middle East peace.”

Crowley added that Clinton will also use her meeting to reiterate the U.S. commitment to Lebanon’s sovereignty.

Feltman said Palestinian officials have said they would be “very supportive” of having Syria and Israel resume talks, even as their own discussions continue.

“Our view is that these tracks can reinforce each other. If we can get momentum going on all the tracks, it becomes mutually reinforcing,” Feltman said. “This idea that you had back in the ’90s of one track competing with the other no longer seems to prevail. Everyone recognizes the fact that going forward together ... has positive benefits ... for the various tracks,” he said.

The United States still has its own differences with Syria, which the assistant secretary said will not “disappear overnight,” but he said the Obama administration recognizes that “it is certainly in our interest to do what we can to engage the Syrians and Israelis in a peace process that can lead to a comprehensive peace.”

Feltman also urged Arab countries planning to meet in Libya for an October 9 summit to use the occasion to demonstrate their continued commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative that offered Israel normalized relations with all of its Arab neighbors in exchange for a complete withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967 and a resolution of the Palestinian refugee crisis.

President Obama’s September 23 remarks to the U.N. General Assembly made it clear that the United States wants the Arab states to act “in the spirit” of their initiative and “find ways to signal what are the benefits to Israel of the type of comprehensive peace envisioned in that document,” Feltman said.

He also urged Arab states to continue to support Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in his administration’s negotiating efforts with the Israelis and to “continue and expand their financial support for the Palestinian Authority” so that an independent Palestinian state will have functioning and credible institutions on its creation.

Feltman said that during her September 24 meeting with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, Secretary Clinton reaffirmed U.S. support for Lebanon’s unity, stability, and its state institutions.

“There has been a rise in tensions over the past few weeks in Lebanon, without question. And we think ... that it’s in the interest of all of the many friends of Lebanon in the region and internationally to do what they can do to help reduce the tensions,” he said.

In its discussions with Lebanon’s neighbors, the United States has “emphasized the point that the Lebanese need to be in charge of Lebanon, that Lebanon’s sovereignty [and] Lebanon’s independence need to be respected,” Feltman said.

The Obama administration also supports the special tribunal that is investigating the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and Feltman said the tribunal has enjoyed the support of Lebanon’s current and preceding governing Cabinets, as well as the international community, and it “should not be politicized.”

“We’re convinced that for any society it’s important not to have impunity for murder, that the tribunal is not a political body; the tribunal is about justice and truth. And I think that’s why the Lebanese supported it when they asked the international community to help create it,” Feltman said.

United States to Strengthen Engagement with Puntland, Somaliland

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States will strengthen engagement with the governments of Puntland and Somaliland in Somalia as part of a two-track policy aimed at curbing the growth of terrorist extremism, but also to support the Transitional Federal Government, says Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson.

At a briefing September 24 in New York, Carson said the two-track policy supports the Djibouti peace process, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the government of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, president of Somalia.

Carson, who is the assistant secretary for African affairs, told reporters at the special briefing that the first track is designed to help the TFG become more effective and more inclusive and to give it the ability to provide services to its people. In addition, the United States will continue to work to strengthen the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Engagement with Puntland and Somaliland is part of the second track, he added.

“We hope to be able to have more American diplomats and aid workers going into those countries on an ad hoc basis to meet with government officials to see how we can help them improve their capacity to provide services to their people, seeing whether there are development assistance projects that we can work with them on,” Carson said. “We think that both of these parts of Somalia

have been zones of relative political and civil stability, and we think they will, in fact, be a bulwark against extremism and radicalism that might emerge from the South.”

The United States, as part of the second track, will reach out to groups in south-central Somalia, local governments, clans and subclans that are opposed to al-Shabaab, the radical extremist group in the South. These are groups, Carson said, that are not allied formally or directly with the TFG.

“We will look for opportunities to work with these groups to see if we can identify them, find ways of supporting their development initiatives and activities,” Carson added.

But Carson said the United States will follow the African Union position and recognize only a single Somali state.

A major meeting on Somalia was held by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on the sidelines of the opening of the U.N. General Assembly that brought together heads of state from five different African nations, several African foreign ministers and European foreign ministers, Carson said.

Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg represented the United States at this meeting and set out the two-track policy, Carson said. The problems in Somalia, he added, are viewed as a national problem for the people of Somalia, a regional problem for Africa and a global problem.

“It is a problem that has metastasized over the last two decades, which has led to a situation where we now have international piracy, foreign fighters going into Somalia, and some groups in Somalia supporting remnants of the al-Qaida East Africa cell,” he said.

The situation in Somalia poses a regional problem because of the large number of refugees flowing into neighboring Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Yemen and Djibouti, he said. In addition to a large flow of refugees, large amounts of illegal arms are flowing into Somalia and illegal commerce is going on, he added.

“Somalia is a collapsed state with a weak government unable to project either power or stability or to provide services to its people,” Carson said.

Carson said that greater engagement means meeting periodically with government officials from Puntland and Somaliland, discussing a range of development issues that include health, education, agriculture and water projects.

The aim is to strengthen their ability to govern and to

deliver vital public services, he added. All U.S. operations for Somalia are run out of Nairobi, Kenya, he said.

The Djibouti peace process is an African-led initiative that has the support of IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, according to Carson in a March press briefing on the peace process. It has the support of the African Union and the key states in the region, and has also been supported by the United Nations, the European Community, the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, he added. The Djibouti peace process recognizes the importance of trying to put together an inclusive Somali government and takes into account the importance of history, culture and clan and subclan relations.

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