

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

February 7, 2011

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President Obama Says Violence, Suppression Will Not Resolve Egypt's Unrest

By Stephen Kaufman and MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writers

Washington — President Obama said violence against peaceful demonstrators and the shutdown of information sources will not resolve Egypt's political unrest, and he repeated his call for the Egyptian government to immediately begin an orderly transition process that includes a broad section of the Egyptian opposition and addresses their grievances.

"The issues at stake in Egypt will not be resolved through violence or suppression," Obama said February 4 in remarks with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. "Attacks on reporters are unacceptable. Attacks on human rights activists are unacceptable. Attacks on peaceful protesters are unacceptable."

"The future of Egypt will be determined by its people. It's also clear that there needs to be a transition process that begins now. That transition must initiate a process that respects the universal rights of the Egyptian people and that leads to free and fair elections," the president said.

Obama told reporters he has had two conversations with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak since the country's crisis began, and on both occasions he emphasized to Mubarak that the Egyptian people — not other countries and not the United States — will determine Egypt's future.

"But I have also said that in light of what's happened over the last two weeks, going back to the old ways is not going to work. Suppression is not going to work. Engaging in violence is not going to work. Attempting to shut down information flows — it is not going to work," he said.

Obama urged Mubarak to consult with his advisers and "listen to what is being voiced by the Egyptian people" and decide on a pathway forward that would be orderly, but also "meaningful and serious."

"If you end up having just gestures towards the opposition but it leads to a continued suppression of the opposition, it's not going to work. If you have the pretense of reform but not real reform, it's not going to be effective," he said.

"The only thing that will work is moving an orderly transition process that begins right now, that engages all the parties, that leads to democratic practices, fair and free elections, a representative government that is responsive to the grievances of the Egyptian people," Obama said.

The president said the Egyptian government is responsible for protecting the rights of its people and the demonstrators have a responsibility to be peaceful. The United States is encouraged by the restraint that was shown on February 4 and "we hope that it continues," Obama said.

"We want to see this moment of turmoil turn into a moment of opportunity," he said. "I am confident that the Egyptian people can shape the future that they deserve. And as they do, they will continue to have a strong friend and partner in the United States of America."

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, told ABC News television February 4 that so far he has spoken twice to his counterpart in the Egyptian military, General Sami Anan, and "he has assured me he's not going to fire on his people; that they are very focused on the people of Egypt."

"We all hope [this] is an orderly, peaceful, violent-free transition," Mullen said.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs told reporters during a February 4 news briefing that U.S. leaders are "heartened to see restraint," but continue to receive "very disturbing reports about what you could only say is very systematic targeting of journalists, particularly international journalists."

"We deplore the images and the violence that we've seen for human rights groups and that have impacted particularly international journalists, and call again on the government of Egypt to take some concrete steps toward direct negotiations that will bring about the type of change that we need to see on a path towards an orderly transition and free and fair elections," Gibbs said.

Secretary Clinton: Democratic Change in Middle East a "Strategic Necessity"

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The status quo in the Middle East is unsustainable and democratic change in the region is a "strategic necessity," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told officials from NATO, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia at the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

"For all our friends in the region, including governments and people, the challenge is to help our partners take systematic steps to usher in a better future where peoples' voices are heard, their rights respected, and their aspirations met," she said February 5. "This is not simply a matter of idealism. It is a strategic necessity."

The secretary spoke as political unrest continues in Egypt and three weeks after Tunisian protesters drove the country's long-time president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, from power.

Without genuine progress toward open and accountable political systems in the region "the gap between people and their governments will only grow, and instability will only deepen," Clinton said.

The Middle East is facing a "perfect storm of powerful trends," she said. On January 13, Clinton told Arab leaders in Qatar that their people are demanding economic and political reforms and urged Arab governments to work with them to provide meaningful opportunities.

At the Munich conference, she said some leaders might believe their countries are exceptions to popular demands for greater political or economic opportunities, or that their people "can be placated with half-measures."

"In the short term, that may be true; but in the long term it is untenable," Clinton said.

The pace of change will vary from country to country, as each faces different circumstances, she said, acknowledging to Western leaders that the transition to democracy can carry risks such as chaos, instability or the replacement of one authoritarian regime with another.

"Revolutions have overthrown dictators in the name of democracy only to see the political process hijacked by new autocrats who use violence, deception and rigged elections to stay in power or to advance an agenda of extremism," she said, adding that the transition "will only work if it is deliberate, inclusive and transparent."

She said those who wish to participate in their country's political system should renounce violence as a tool of political coercion, respect the rights of their country's ethnic and religious minorities, and participate "in a spirit of tolerance and compromise."

The United States is ready to help its partners take "systematic steps" to bring about a better future that will meet their aspirations. Clinton said, and it is urging that the transition be "not only transparent and sincere, but very concrete, so that the Egyptian people and those of us on the outside can measure the progress that is being made."

But ultimately, the United States and other countries are "on the outside looking in" at events in Egypt, the secretary said. "This is going to be up to the Egyptian people themselves."

United States and Russia Conclude New START Arms Cut Pact

By Merle Kellerhals
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov exchanged diplomatic documents February 5 in Munich, concluding a two-year effort to reduce nuclear arsenals to their lowest levels in more than 50 years.

The instruments of ratification signed by Clinton and Lavrov to implement the New START pact govern reducing the number of nuclear warheads to 1,550 for each nation from 2,200 warheads. The treaty succeeds the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty that expired in December 2010.

Clinton and Lavrov exchanged the agreements on the sidelines of the 47th annual Munich Security Conference, which is an informal meeting of some 350 major policymakers from around the world that examines security threats and challenges.

"We exchange the instruments of ratification for a treaty that lessens the nuclear dangers facing the Russian and American people and the world," Clinton said February 5.

Clinton said this new treaty is a significant milestone in U.S.-Russian relations.

The treaty, which is the first major arms reduction pact since the last days of the Cold War, will reduce the two nations' nuclear arsenals to 1,550 nuclear warheads each over five years, but carries an additional five-year extension if needed. It also includes strict limits on the number of vehicles that can be used to launch the warheads. The United States and Russia hold 95 percent of the nuclear weapons in the world.

The treaty was signed April 8, 2010, by President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Prague. It is a centerpiece of Obama's foreign policy and reflects his broader view of a world free of nuclear weapons. Obama was awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to foster arms control and nuclear nonproliferation worldwide.

"This is the most significant arms control agreement in nearly two decades," Obama said after the U.S. Senate voted in favor of the treaty. "And it will make us safer."

The U.S. Senate approved ratification December 22, 2010, and Russia's parliament gave its final approval in January. Obama signed ratification documents February 2.

But Clinton also said that reaching this agreement figures heavily into renewing close relations between two former Cold War foes.

“With the exchange of these instruments, we commit ourselves to a course of action that builds trust, lessens risks, and improves predictability, stability and security,” Clinton said. “Our countries will immediately begin notifying each other of changes in our strategic forces.”

Within 45 days, the United States and Russia will exchange full data on existing nuclear weapons and facilities and the means to deliver them. In 60 days, both nations will resume on-site inspections that “allow each side to trust, but verify.”

Côte d’Ivoire’s Gbagbo Increasingly Isolated, U.S. Envoy Says

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — Laurent Gbagbo and his supporters have grown increasingly isolated in Côte d’Ivoire, says the U.S. ambassador to that country, Phillip Carter.

There is no controversy about the results of the November 28, 2010, second round of presidential elections in the country, which were monitored by the United Nations and marked a clear victory for the country’s former prime minister, Alassane Ouattara, Carter said, adding, “They were conducted well.”

Speaking to reporters February 4 at the State Department, he also stressed that the window for Gbagbo to leave honorably, peacefully, with amnesty, is closing.

Carter said that while there is a lot of press about the isolation of Alassane Ouattara at the Golf Hotel, “I would submit that they are both isolated. Gbagbo within his own presidential palace, with his own cohorts increasingly isolated within the international community, financially, politically, diplomatically, economically. Ouattara, although he is physically isolated at the Golf Hotel, has the support of virtually the entire international community and financial system, where he has been able to push out some of his diplomatic representatives to the outside — where he has been able to send ministers out. So what we see is that time seems to be on the side of Alassane Ouattara and not necessarily on the side of Laurent Gbagbo.”

Carter told reporters the ongoing situation in Côte d’Ivoire is both an African and Ivorian matter first and foremost. “The Africans are basically looking at their resources and their means by which to allow for this political transition to occur as peacefully as possible. The Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS]

has indicated that should that fail, they are looking to consider military force, but that is a last resort.”

The career diplomat, who was in Washington to attend a chief of mission conference at the State Department, said he expects to see “continued pressure in the diplomatic, political, economic and financial channels to persuade, dissuade Gbagbo from the course that he is on. That will continue. How long it will take is unclear.”

What is currently seen, Carter said, are efforts by Gbagbo “to marshal support amongst certain long-standing partners” to justify his efforts to cling to power. But, Carter added, what is being seen among African nations overall, is “the recognition that the election was a good one and that you have to honor the results

“Setting that election aside would be a major step back for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa,” the ambassador asserted, “given the huge investment that was made by African and national institutions, the international community, the fact that the election was transparent,” internationally observed, “and the results are factual — a matter of fact and not a matter of interpretation.”

Carter mentioned the human rights abuses that are occurring in Abidjan and in the western part of the country and condemned the post-election violence, in which some 250 people have died. He added that the casualty numbers are expected to rise.

He told reporters that targeted sanctions imposed against Gbagbo are beginning to bite. “The financial situation is getting tough” for banks there, and there is a financial crisis in Abidjan now, with trade slowing down, he said.

Gbagbo “has been pirating, he has been stealing money from parastatal corporations to meet salaries,” Carter said. “He has been extorting local businesses to pay in advance their taxes ... putting increased pressure on a variety of companies that are involved in natural resources, be it coffee, cocoa, petroleum, timber. ... They are resisting. What we are seeing is an effort there by him to marshal as many resources as he can to get the money to make his payroll, probably to acquire additional weapons.”

The United States is looking at the full range of tools that can be deployed against Gbagbo, Carter said.

“We have taken some significant steps. We stand with ECOWAS and, more importantly, we stand with President Ouattara. President Obama has congratulated him on his election and we have engaged his government as best we can. ... We work with our African partners.”

But Carter reiterated that the United States is “not in the

lead on this. This is an African thing. We work with ECOWAS. We are working with the African Union. We work with our development partners, being the European Union or outside. We work within the context of the [United Nations] Security Council," he said, which was discussing Côte d'Ivoire that same day.

"So we are actively engaged on the diplomatic front and bilaterally we have imposed travel restrictions on a number of individuals ... and targeted financial sanctions on five individuals," which include Gbagbo and his wife. Carter said more individuals will soon be added to that list.

"That will have an impact in terms of who can do business with whom in that country by the international community, so the bite is happening," he said. Gbagbo is under "increasing pressure" as he tries to remain in power while Alassane Ouattara is working to "gain the instruments of governance."

Day by day, he said, Gbagbo's ability to hold onto power is weakening and, for that reason, pressure on him must be maintained, both bilaterally and multilaterally, within the context of ECOWAS, the African Union and the United Nations, so that democracy can prevail in Côte d'Ivoire.

30 Years Later, Praise for and Words from Former Iran Hostages

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — When hundreds of young Iranian activists took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, the U.S. diplomats there thought they would face an uncomfortable but brief incident in a period of tense relations between the two countries.

After 444 days, the crisis ended — a painful period for the hostages, their families and the United States, but one that the former hostages say ultimately proved far worse for Iran, where conservative Islamic hard-liners used the crisis to eliminate moderate voices in positions of power.

The U.S. State Department used the 30th anniversary of the 52 hostages' release to honor them as heroes and to hear the thoughts of five prominent former hostages. The event in a standing-room-only auditorium at the State Department in Washington also paid tribute to others involved, including the hostages' families, Canadian officials who sheltered six American diplomats and engineered their escape from Iran, members of the U.S. military who died in a failed rescue attempt and negotiators who finally secured their release.

The former hostages who came together for a panel

discussion led by Andrea Mitchell, the chief foreign affairs correspondent for NBC News, said they knew they faced a serious situation in November 1979, a few days after the U.S. allowed the deposed Shah of Iran to enter the United States for medical treatment.

L. Bruce Laingen, the senior U.S. diplomat in Tehran in 1979, recalled that he was at a meeting that morning at the Iranian Foreign Ministry with officials of the provisional government that had taken control after the downfall of the shah. At the end of the meeting, the embassy's chief of security, Alan Golacinski, reached him with word "that things were happening on the other side of town," Laingen said. He tried to enlist the aid of Foreign Ministry officials, but they were helpless — and in short order, they were out of power.

John W. Limbert Jr., the embassy's political officer at the time, said the takeover didn't seem so serious at first — and, from what its planners said in later years, it wasn't meant to be. He compared it to "a 1970s-style sit-in. Some of us remember those days: We marched into the university president's office, we drank his Scotch, we rifled his files, smoked his cigars, we issued some brave communiqué and we marched out. ... That's what it appeared we were dealing with."

Even as the takeover continued for days — with the support of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and other Iranian hard-liners — Limbert said most of the hostages thought it would end soon. "All we could say was, 'This thing can't go on. Somebody, some adult, is going to get in the middle of it, will fix it and will set things right,'" Limbert said.

David Cooke, a young vice consul in 1979, had his doubts. He said he reminded his co-workers about the capture of a U.S. ship by North Korea 12 years earlier. That incident, like the embassy takeover, occurred near the beginning of a U.S. presidential election year, and the 82 captured sailors weren't returned until after the election. "The election-year cycle just freezes the ability of people to do things," he said.

Cooke's prediction proved accurate: Although a few captives were released quickly, 52 remained as hostages for 14 months, until the day Ronald Reagan took the oath of office to succeed Jimmy Carter as U.S. president in January 1981.

The time passed in different ways for different hostages. Laingen and two colleagues spent all but the final few weeks being held at the Foreign Ministry. Among those captured at the embassy, some were beaten or faced other forms of torture, such as mock executions, the former hostages said.

"Being in prison for 444 days, whether you are, quote, 'treated well' or 'treated badly,' is horrendous, and no matter how you look at it, we were imprisoned and treated badly even if we were not tortured," said Barry Rosen, the embassy's press officer. "Some were not tortured, some were tortured. Just being there for 444 days in darkness and isolation, that's enough for anyone."

Rosen said being cut off from news of the outside world was difficult. He and Lieutenant Colonel David M. Roeder spent two months in a cell outside Isfahan, and their captors provided them a bit of reading material from the Washington Post: the advertisements of boats for sale. Roeder, a boater, used the ads as inspiration, and each afternoon he would put himself and Rosen on the waters of the Chesapeake Bay – in their imaginations.

What they couldn't imagine, the men said, was the importance the hostage crisis had assumed in the United States and the concern Americans had for their fate. Cooke said their captors "would tell us occasionally that this is a big thing in the United States, and on the news every night the newscasters start out with 'This is day 132 of the hostage crisis in Iran,' and we frankly didn't believe them."

Limbert said the truth began to sink in only when the hostages' plane to freedom landed on a cold, snowy early morning in Frankfurt, Germany. "We pull up to the terminal, and there are hundreds of people outside waiting for something and shouting and holding signs, and I turned to somebody and said, 'My God, what's going on? Somebody important is landing here?'"

The hostages were not looking for their "15 minutes of fame," Limbert said, and it soon ended: "Having been to the White House, having been here and there, within a week or so you're standing out in the cold in Washington waiting for a bus," he said.

Limbert said the lasting effects of the hostage crisis have been most severe in Iran. "What happened to us was difficult. It was frightening. It was very uncomfortable," he said. "But ... the real victims of this thing were the Iranians, who have suffered for 30 years and continue to suffer under a very difficult and very harsh regime, which took power thanks to those events."

Cooke said that, for the United States, the hostage crisis had a powerful effect in healing the divisions of the Vietnam War era. The hostage-taking was "such an outrageous act against the United States" that it pulled Americans together, he said. "This was a chance for Americans to say, 'No, no, we really are something different. We really are not what our enemies declare that we are.' And I think that's the real significance of the hostage-taking and our release, is that it really brought

about a change in American attitudes, so it's something that I'm really very proud of."

As a result, Cooke said, Americans are more united even when they disagree on such issues as the U.S. role in Iraq or Afghanistan. "People can certainly disagree about the policy. But there's absolutely total, unanimous agreement that we're going to support our troops there and we're going to support the men and women of the Foreign Service and the other civilian agencies that are working in both countries."

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