

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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U.S. Warns of Pending Syrian Massacre in Aleppo

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 26 July 2012

Washington — With credible reports that Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's military forces have massed outside the city of Aleppo, the United States is concerned that "we will see a massacre in Aleppo, and that's what the regime appears to be lining up for," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said July 26.

Speaking to reporters in Washington, Nuland described the situation outside Syria's second-largest city as "horrific," and said the Assad regime "will stop at nothing to hold onto power."

"This is abhorrent, what this regime is willing to do against its own people. We have to call it out," Nuland said.

The Assad regime "has been given chance after chance to end the violence, to turn the page, to address the grievances of its own citizens," she said. "Instead, they've responded with bombardments and fixed-wing aircraft, helicopter gunships, artillery in the city and now this massing outside of one of the most historic and beautiful cities in that part of the world."

She said the operation against Aleppo is "another desperate attempt by a regime that is going down to try to maintain control," noting that Assad has increasingly lost control of territories within the country and the tactics of his forces have become more violent and desperate as that has happened.

"He will go. It's just a matter of time, and it's a matter of how many have to die before that happens," she said.

Russian and Chinese opposition to United Nations Security Council resolutions backing U.N. and Arab League peace efforts have effectively "checkmated" the Security Council, and the United States is working with others in the international community to support the Syrian opposition to prepare for the day after the regime ends, she said.

"In the absence of being able to work in the U.N., we have to redouble our efforts with like-minded nations outside of the U.N. system ... to do what we can on the humanitarian side, but most importantly now to work with the opposition on ... the plans and the principles that have to undergird a democratic transition," she said.

"We have to have a Syria for all Syrians, we have to have security for all Syrians, we can't have reprisals, we can't have individual agendas. We have to have people in Syria who are prepared to work towards a democratic future

that protects the rights of all. So that is what we are working on," Nuland said.

The Obama administration continues to believe that outside military intervention only will pour "more fuel on this fire" by adding to the violence and destruction. "The vast majority of Syrians ... continue not to want foreign military intervention, more weapons flowing into their country ... because they see the same thing that we do: It could potentially lead to a much greater loss of life," Nuland said.

But she said the United States has been supporting the Syrian opposition with nonlethal equipment, including communications equipment and medical supplies.

State's Benjamin Says Counterterrorism Forum Focuses on Action

By Phillip Kurata | Staff Writer | 26 July 2012

Washington — The State Department's top official for counterterrorism, Daniel Benjamin, says the U.S. government is pressing the international community to "come together" as never before in the struggle against terrorism.

With that need in mind, the United States led the move to create the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) in September 2011, a new apolitical, technical group that would sidestep "sterile debate" and focus on counterterrorism action programs, Benjamin told the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation in Washington July 24. The GCTF members are 29 countries on all continents plus the European Union.

The counterterrorism coordinator called the GCTF an example of "smart power" designed to diminish terrorist recruitment over time and help others do a better job defending themselves against threats within their borders and in their regions.

The Arab Awakening has made the GCTF's mission all the more urgent with the appearance of new governments discarding repressive practices that fueled radicalization for more than a generation, Benjamin said. "We didn't want to miss this opportunity to help shape the future," he said.

GCTF is about to open the first international rule-of-law training center in the country where the Arab Awakening began, Tunisia. The center will provide human rights-based counterterrorism training to criminal justice officials in North Africa and the broader Middle East, Benjamin said. In addition, the United Arab Emirates is hosting the International Center of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism, which will open in Abu Dhabi in September. The Tunisia and Abu Dhabi centers

and the GCTF as a whole will have a close partnership with the United Nations.

“All of this is not only going to provide us a more dynamic, strategically and practically oriented multilateral counterterrorism architecture, but is going to pay real security dividends for the U.S. and its partners,” Benjamin said.

The coordinator said the GCTF is seeking to build partnerships with nonmembers in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa and in Southeast Asia to demonstrate that the GCTF is truly committed to strengthening global civilian counterterrorism capacities and cooperation.

The GCTF is working with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum to strengthen counterterrorism while promoting trade to make regional commerce and travel more secure, efficient and resilient, he said.

“This week in Manila, for example, we’re hosting a training workshop on bus security,” Benjamin said. “As we saw last week in Bulgaria, this is an area of critical importance.”

The GCTF likewise is working with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to develop counterterrorism programs in Central Asia and Afghanistan and with the Organization of American States on programs geared for the Western Hemisphere, Benjamin said.

U.S. Eases Economic Sanctions on Burma in Response to Reforms

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 25 July 2012

Washington — The United States is easing economic sanctions on Burma, encouraging American investment in the country as it continues to tackle tough political reforms, according to Under Secretary of State Robert Hormats.

Hormats, the under secretary for economic growth, energy and the environment, said Burmese officials have made “a remarkable number of very substantial reforms” during the past year and a half and that the United States is responding “action for action” by easing sanctions.

“The point we’re trying to make is you’re on the right track in our view, we’re going to take measures to demonstrate that we support the track you’re on, we would like you to continue the process of reform and we will respond constructively if you do,” he said July 24 at the Washington Foreign Press Center.

Hormats led a trade and economic delegation to capital city Nay Pyi Taw and business hub Rangoon July 14–15

– the highest-level U.S. trip of its kind to Burma in more than 25 years.

The country has taken steps to democratize under President Thein Sein, including the release of about 500 political prisoners. The new leaders also allowed by-elections, during which Nobel Peace Prize winner and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s political party achieved substantial victories and gained more than 40 seats in parliament.

Additionally, the country has undertaken an agenda of economic reforms that include the development of more than 100 labor unions, moves to provide for an independent central bank and writing new laws and regulations for foreign investment.

Hormats said the reforms “are producing opportunities for more and more people in the country.” The United States, he added, has responded by easing sanctions to allow U.S. exports of financial services and U.S. private investments in Burma.

He said new U.S. investments should provide support for the reform process, as American companies are sensitive to environmental issues, cultural minorities and workers’ rights. In fact, the United States has instituted new reporting requirements for those seeking a license to invest in Burma, he said.

“These companies, when they do make their investments, need to provide information to the U.S. government on who they are dealing with, on their labor practices [and] their environmental practices, how they’re dealing with issues of land acquisition, and how they address human rights considerations,” Hormats said.

The new measure requires this information to be posted online and accessible to citizens both in the United States and Burma. It is intended both to give the U.S. government information on how American companies are operating in the country and also to allow the Burmese people a chance to monitor U.S. investors, Hormats said. The undersecretary added that the measure will encourage responsible investing and greater transparency, and “is a very positive thing” for all parties.

He said the United States continues to encourage Burma’s leaders to pursue additional reforms, including greater transparency, the release of all political prisoners and increased investments in health care and education for more inclusive growth across the country.

In addition to President Thein Sein and pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Hormats and his delegation met while in Burma with civil society leaders as well as Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament Thura U Shwe

Mann, Industry Minister Soe Thein, Central Bank Governor U Than Nyein and Deputy Commerce Minister Pwint Hsan.

Hormats was joined on the trip by recently arrived U.S. Ambassador to Burma Derek Mitchell, as well as Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Francisco Sánchez, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Joseph Yun, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Daniel Baer. Rounding out the delegation were senior business executives representing about 40 companies looking to establish economic ties in Burma.

The under secretary's visit comes following Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's historic visit to Burma in 2011, during which she praised political reforms and encouraged the country's leaders to continue working toward democracy.

AIDS 2012: High Hopes for Vaccine, Progress for Mothers, Children

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 25 July 2012

Washington — An audience eager for good news heard it July 25 at the XIX International AIDS Conference in Washington. Dr. Barton Haynes, a member of an elite circle of researchers on a quest for an AIDS vaccine, said he and his colleagues are more energized in their work than ever.

"The HIV vaccine field is invigorated. We are working hard. We are collaborating with one another, and we're treating this problem as a global emergency," Haynes said.

As a professor of medicine and immunology at the Duke University School of Medicine, Haynes has been on the hunt for an AIDS vaccine for 25 years.

The cause for new excitement in the field, he said, is discovery of a new type of antibody that will likely be more "potent" in battling HIV than any other ever seen.

"One of the things that has so energized the field is the discovery of a whole host of new broadly neutralizing antibodies that bind to vulnerable sites on the HIV envelope, the so-called envelope's 'Achilles' heels,'" Haynes said.

He is also the director of the Center for HIV/AIDS Vaccine Immunology (CHAVI), funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health. The consortium joins researchers from six universities and academic medical centers to focus the best of U.S. brainpower on overcoming the key immunological roadblocks that have

bedeviled scientists so long.

One of those problems is HIV's unusual capacity for mutation, for reinventing itself into another viral strain before the immune system is able to produce an antibody that can destroy it or inhibit its effectiveness and virulence.

For that reason, Haynes compares HIV to an arms race in its capacity to elude researchers, attack the human body and perpetuate itself in new and lethal forms.

"One country makes a bomb. Another country makes a bigger bomb. The first country makes an even bigger bomb; the second country retaliates with another bomb," said Haynes. "Bigger and bigger, and so on and so on."

HIV follows that pattern of mutation in 80–85 percent of people infected. But in another 10–15 percent, investigators have found a more robust response, which produces a more powerful antibody. Researchers are tracking some of these rare subjects, watching how their antibodies develop in hopes of also gaining insight into HIV's mutations for survival.

Haynes said keeping vigil on the evolution of the virus in those patients could provide "a blueprint for vaccinologists" to understand the unusual capacity that some individuals have to produce effective antibodies against HIV.

Producing a vaccine to protect populations from HIV infection will require "completely new strategies of vaccine design that have not been used for vaccines to date," Haynes said.

Vaccine development is proceeding on a second front also, working from the marginally successful trial of a vaccine tested in Thailand. That trial, reported in 2009, showed a slightly greater than 30 percent protection rate among vaccinated subjects. Research continues to provide a better analysis of how the vaccine produced the positive results among that group.

GLOBAL PROGRESS FOR WOMEN, CHILDREN

The theme of the XIX International AIDS Conference is "Turning the Tide Together," selected by its primary sponsor, the International AIDS Society, and co-sponsors such as the Global Network of People Living with HIV and the International Community of Women with HIV/AIDS.

The U.S. global AIDS coordinator, Dr. Eric Goosby, is emphasizing the importance of making sure that women and children are riding that turning tide.

“The latest data are encouraging and a testament to the dedication and tireless work under way to virtually eliminate new pediatric infections,” said Goosby, who also leads the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). “The United States is committed to working with countries to succeed in this mission and achieve the goal of an AIDS-free generation.”

The data come from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), which released a global census on the AIDS epidemic just days before the conference began. New infections among children globally were down about 24 percent since 2009.

Providing antiretroviral therapy (ART) to pregnant, HIV-positive mothers has been a key initiative to bring on that change, with extension of such services almost doubling from 2009 to 2011.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is especially proud of the U.S. contribution to protecting mothers and their infants.

“In the first half of this fiscal year, we reached more than 370,000 women globally,” said Clinton when she addressed a session July 23. “We are on track to hit PEPFAR’s target of reaching an additional 1.5 million women by next year.”

Working with UNAIDS, PEPFAR is aiming to expand treatment for mothers who need it and to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS to zero by 2015.

China Still Facing Human Rights Challenges

By Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic | Staff Writer | 25 July 2012

Washington – A U.S. diplomat reaffirmed U.S. support for the rise of a “strong, stable, prosperous China” but spoke of the human rights challenges still facing the Asian giant in a press briefing July 25 after the 17th U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue.

“We recognize China’s extraordinary record of economic development over the last three decades,” Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner said, alluding to the gradual rise in living standards for hundreds of millions of Chinese over time. “At the same time, we see that political reforms in China have not kept pace with economic advances. Like people everywhere, Chinese people want to be treated with dignity.”

The dialogue, which took place in Washington, brought together American and Chinese delegations for two days of talks about human rights issues in both countries. The U.S. delegation was led by Posner and included

representatives from the Department of State, the Department of Justice, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Trade Representative, the Office of the Vice President and national security staff. The Chinese delegation was led by Chen Xu, the director general for international organizations and conferences in the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

The growing discourse on human rights in China was one of the central topics of the dialogue, Posner said. The delegations discussed legal reforms as well as restrictions on free expression and Internet freedom, the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities and the rights of Chinese laborers.

Delegates discussed human rights issues in general and specific terms. Noting patterns of arrest and extra-legal detention for dissidents, Posner said the dialogue drew on many recent cases in which lawyers, nongovernmental organization activists, journalists, bloggers and religious leaders calling for peaceful reform have faced detention.

While Posner acknowledged that the Chinese people are concerned about economic opportunity and jobs, he emphasized that they also want to have a “meaningful role in the political development of their own society” as well as lawful means of reporting legitimate grievances. He said such political change must occur from within a society rather than from outside it.

“In China, as elsewhere, we strongly believe that change occurs from within a society,” Posner said. “These discussions, then, are ultimately about Chinese citizens’ aspirations and how the Chinese themselves are navigating their own future. In every society, we believe it’s incumbent on government to give its own people an opportunity to voice their concerns and pursue their aspirations.”

The dialogue revolves around the application of universal human rights standards, Posner said, and it’s increasingly clear that millions of ordinary Chinese are becoming concerned about human rights violations in their country.

The dialogue also featured open discussion of discrimination and prison conditions in the United States, Posner said.

“We have human rights issues in the United States, but we also have a very strong system to respond to them,” he said. “We have an open press. We have lawyers who are ready to represent unpopular defendants, and they do so without fear of retaliation. We have a political process that is robust, to say the least.”

While in Washington, the Chinese delegation visited the political journalism organization Politico and the

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee to better understand how the free press and minority advocacy groups operate in the United States.

AIDS 2012: Doing What Works to Beat HIV/AIDS

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 24 July 2012

Washington — “Turning the Tide Together” is the theme of the XIX International AIDS Conference, which has brought more than 23,000 delegates from 195 countries to Washington July 22–27. As professionals and activists plunged into their discussions in the first days of the meeting, an alternate slogan for the event might have been “doing what works.”

“Treatment-as-prevention works in the field if you implement it,” said Dr. Anthony Fauci in a July 23 presentation, describing research conducted in Africa demonstrating that the number of new HIV infections drops when a high number of HIV-positive people receive antiretroviral therapy (ART) to reduce blood viral levels.

“There’s a 38 percent lower risk of acquiring HIV in those high [ART] coverage areas,” Fauci said. As the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Fauci has been on the leading edge of AIDS research for 30 years and is a key figure in working to achieve the U.S. goal of moving to an AIDS-free generation.

Research also provides strong evidence that male circumcision can be very effective in reducing female to male transmission, Fauci said. One study documented “a 42 percent decrease of acquisition of infection among Muslim male populations after voluntary circumcision,” Fauci said, quoting further research conducted in Africa.

Senior research scientist Dr. Nelly Mugo of Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi has led some of the African research on the use of treatment as prevention. She said the findings give doctors the chance to combat the disease in new ways.

“We finally have additional tools,” said Mugo, speaking to a delegate meeting July 24. “We haven’t been here before. How do we prioritize these tools?”

That’s a challenge Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton put to the convention delegates in a speech July 23. AIDS practitioners and health administrators need to pick up the tools that work in slowing the epidemic, she said, and drop those that haven’t worked.

But learning where the infected and at-risk people are is the first step in defining what tools will work. Global AIDS Coordinator Eric Goosby points out that different

characteristics of HIV transmission in various countries have resulted in many epidemics, not just one. Each city may find that the most new infections are occurring among different demographic groups, Goosby said in a panel discussion, whether that is transmission between heterosexual partners, men who have sex with men, sex workers or intravenous drug users.

Figuring out who they are and where they are must come first, Goosby said. “You then try to position your prevention intervention so they are in front of that population. It’s a lot easier said than done.”

Maintaining flexibility in a national or regional AIDS strategy to allow regular re-evaluation of where and how disease transmission is changing is important, Goosby said, though difficult. Governments must sustain both their political will to combat the epidemic and their capability to adjust resources and response as infection patterns change.

Howard Koh, U.S. assistant secretary for health at the Department of Health and Human Services, said the emphasis on what works has been an important component of the National Strategy to Save Lives, the HIV/AIDS plan implemented by the Obama administration in 2010. In a July 24 panel with Mugo, Koh, also a physician, said a comprehensive national strategy, developed with input from all the various groups affected by the epidemic, is critical for maintaining both efficiency and effectiveness in the effort to get ahead of the epidemic.

Koh said the capability to develop new ways to address disease issues is also important. He described a plan to encourage more people to be tested for the virus in Washington, the host city for the meeting and a city with a rate of infection among the highest in the country.

“The District of Columbia’s Department of Health makes HIV testing available at the Department of Motor Vehicles,” Koh said. “So customers waiting in line for a driver’s license or other services can get a free HIV test.”

Koh said the Obama administration’s HIV/AIDS strategy increased testing by 13 percent in the United States in 2011 alone, expanded the availability of care for AIDS patients and eliminated waiting lists for ART everywhere in the country.

While many of the lectures and discussions among the thousands of AIDS conference delegates focus on the need to treat more people, raise more funds and build better care facilities, veterans of this long struggle remind how much has been accomplished.

“It was exactly 10 years ago in the conference in Barcelona

that I put forward the goal of reaching 3 million people with treatment by 2025," recalled Bernhard Schwartländer, who now serves as the director for evidence, strategy and results at UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. "We are at 8 million today. The global AIDS movement has achieved amazing results over the last 30 years, and there's no reason why it should not continue to drive change, innovation, health and human rights for all."

U.S. Moves to Reduce Violence in Somalia

24 July 2012

Washington – President Obama signed an executive order July 20 that gives the U.S. Treasury Department expanded authority to sanction individuals and entities that contribute to the persistence of violence in Somalia.

The order gives explicit authority to the Treasury Department to sanction individuals, wherever they may be located, who are acting to misappropriate Somali public assets, the department said in a press release. It is also aimed at political or military leaders who are recruiting or using children as soldiers, as well as those who are responsible for committing certain acts of violence against Somali civilians, including acts of sexual and gender-based violence.

"By expanding our ability to impose sanctions on those engaged in despicable acts of violence in Somalia, the United States is once again demonstrating its full support for the Somali people," said Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen. "We are also taking aim, in coordination with the international community, to cut off a key source of revenue for al-Shabaab," a Somali terrorist group.

To implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 2036, adopted unanimously on February 22, the executive order prohibits the importation of charcoal from Somalia into the United States and authorizes the Treasury Department, in consultation with the State Department, to sanction people who are importing or exporting charcoal from Somalia. Internationally, the sale of charcoal is a significant revenue source for al-Shabaab, the Treasury Department said.

In addition to being a significant revenue stream for al-Shabaab, the production of charcoal leads to environmental degradation that has contributed to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa, the department said.

AIDS 2012: Clinton Points Way to AIDS-Free Generation

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 23 July 2012

Washington – Delegates to the XIX International AIDS Conference greeted Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton with cheers and applause July 23 as she outlined the U.S. goal to achieve an AIDS-free generation in the near future, and she pledged an ongoing U.S. commitment to sustain funding for global programs to prevent the spread of HIV, to treat infected persons and to assist their families.

"We will not back off, we will not back down," Clinton declared to a chorus of whistles and hoots. "We will fight for the resources necessary to achieve this historic milestone."

Clinton first raised the call for achieving an AIDS-free generation in November 2011 in a speech at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), one of the world's foremost research organizations, which is developing the scientific understanding to make an AIDS-free goal possible.

Since that time, Clinton said, all U.S. government health agencies have been working at an increased pace to reach the goal domestically and internationally. HIV – human immunodeficiency virus – will not be completely absent in an AIDS-free generation, but, Clinton said, it will be so controlled by medications and so contained by prevention methods that no one will develop the debilitating disease that steals vitality and productivity from its victims.

"Our strategy includes condoms, counseling and testing, and places special emphasis on three other interventions: treatment as prevention, voluntary medical male circumcision, and stopping the transmission of HIV from mothers to children," Clinton said.

"Treatment as prevention" has been a breakthrough scientific finding of the last couple of years. If persons with HIV infection receive life-sustaining antiretroviral treatment (ART), the level of the virus in the bloodstream drops to a point where the chance of transmitting the virus to a partner is greatly reduced.

In the last nine months alone, Clinton said, U.S. investments have put 600,000 more people on ART, which increases the total number of people receiving therapy with U.S. support to 4.5 million. The U.S. goal is to provide ART to 6 million people by the end of 2013.

The United States is also earmarking more funding for another prevention method proven to significantly reduce female-to-male transmission: voluntary, medical male circumcision.

“The impact can be phenomenal” in the level of prevention achieved, Clinton said, as she explained U.S. investments to support close to 1 million more circumcision procedures in various countries.

Treatment-as-prevention can also protect another population vulnerable to HIV infection: infants born to HIV-infected mothers. Reducing the viral load in the mother’s bloodstream is a proven practice for preventing infection of the fetus so that the mother gives birth to a healthy infant.

Clinton announced in her AIDS conference speech that the United States will invest \$80 million to ensure that infected pregnant mothers are able to gain access to treatment.

U.S. programs have supported the Zambian government’s effort to expand treatment for pregnant mothers, Clinton said.

“Between 2009 and 2011 the number of new infections went down by more than half,” Clinton said, “and we are just getting started.” The United States will provide more assistance to other treatment-as-prevention programs in Zambia, a country that has an estimated infection rate among young adults of 13.5 percent, among the world’s highest.

“We will for the first time get ahead of the pandemic there,” Clinton said.

The U.S. secretary of state announced several other initiatives to address the global AIDS issue: research to identify the most effective means of reaching certain infected populations; a “challenge fund” to motivate country-led service expansion; and investment to support civil society groups who target vulnerable populations.

Clinton shared the stage at the opening session of the AIDS conference with a U.S. scientist who deserves a share of the credit for expanding understanding of the disease to the point where an AIDS-free generation is conceivable. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has been a leader of the U.S. research effort and has achieved global prominence in medical circles.

Fauci has attended all 19 International AIDS Society conferences, dating back to the 1980s. Those early years – when science had just identified the virus causing a previously unknown, rapidly debilitating and fatal disease – are the years Fauci describes as “the dark years” of his career. At that time, he would diagnose a person infected with HIV and know the patient had only six to eight months to live. Thirty years of research has made a monumental difference in what Fauci can say to a

25-year-old patient recently diagnosed as HIV-infected.

“You put them on combination therapy, and you can look them in the eye and tell them it is likely, if they adhere to that [treatment] regimen, that they will live an additional 50 years,” Fauci said, as a wave of applause surged through the audience of AIDS conference delegates.

Fauci also sketched out the “scary” side of this scenario: the person who doesn’t know he’s infected, or doesn’t seek treatment, or doesn’t follow the drug treatment regimen faithfully. Significant numbers of people fit that profile, and they must receive a new level of attention if an AIDS-free generation is to be achieved.

Fauci called on the AIDS community to create a “care continuum” that finds, tests, treats and monitors HIV persons to ensure the virus is contained and not transmitted to other people.

U.S. Pledges Continuing Humanitarian Support for Syrians

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 20 July 2012

Washington – The United States is working closely with Syria’s neighbors to support the estimated 140,000 Syrians who have fled the country’s ongoing violence, according to Under Secretary of State Maria Otero.

She spoke in a telephone briefing on U.S. humanitarian aid for Syria July 19, shortly after her trip to Syria’s neighbors Turkey and Jordan.

She said the “alarming events” in Syria are “continuing to evolve even at a faster speed, raising huge and deep concerns for all the countries in the region” as well as for the international community.

The country has been embroiled in violent conflict since March 2011, when Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad launched brutal crackdowns on political opponents that have now left more than 14,000 people dead.

Kelly Clements, deputy assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, said in the briefing that the violence is continuing to grow and that more and more Syrians are crossing borders every day seeking safety.

“In the course of just one night, nearly 1,300 Syrians arrived at Turkish camps,” Clements said, adding that there are reports that more than 8,500 Syrians crossed the border into Lebanon in the 24 hours before the briefing.

“For this reason, our support is crucial to ensuring that basic needs are met,” she said.

Clements said the governments of Syrian neighbors Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon have taken on a significant financial burden in providing shelter, medical care, food and water to refugees.

"We commend them for their generosity," Clements said, "but they are not alone."

She said the United States is providing an additional \$6 million to bolster the humanitarian response to the crisis.

"This brings the total amount of U.S. assistance in 2012 to nearly \$64 million, and more is coming," Clements said.

She said the aid is being delivered largely through international organizations with staff and infrastructure in Syria and neighboring countries.

"Humanitarian assistance is provided on the basis of need, not political affiliation, and is being distributed to the most vulnerable through [United Nations] agencies and other international and local nongovernmental organizations working together," including the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the U.N. Children's Fund, the World Food Programme, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, and other international and local nongovernmental organizations.

Clements said lack of access due to violence is keeping humanitarian agencies from reaching those in need, and called for all parties to facilitate access for relief workers to reach affected areas and populations.

Mark Bartolini, director of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, said there are "really heroic efforts going on right now inside of Syria to help people that are most in need," and that these efforts are having a positive impact. He said in the briefing that there are an estimated 1.5 million Syrians in need still in the country, including between 300,000 and 500,000 who have been displaced from their homes.

"We're not reaching everyone, but we're doing the best we can and we're hopeful that we'll be able to get further access as the situation moves forward," Bartolini said.

Otero said the United States is working with international agencies as well as government leaders across the region to expand humanitarian aid because as the violence increases, more and more Syrians are expected to flee.

"We will continue our support for those affected by the violence in Syria even as we look forward to the day when all Syrians can live in a free and democratic country," Clements said.

President Calls for Legislation for Cyberdefense

By Phillip Kurata | Staff Writer | 20 July 2012

Washington — President Obama is urging lawmakers to strengthen U.S. defenses against cyberwarfare.

The president said foreign governments, criminal syndicates and individuals are probing U.S. financial, energy and public safety systems daily, looking for opportunities to wreak havoc.

"Taking down vital banking systems could trigger a financial crisis. The lack of clean water or functioning hospitals could spark a public health emergency. And as we've seen in past blackouts, the loss of electricity can bring businesses, cities and entire regions to a standstill," President Obama said in an essay published in the Wall Street Journal July 19. He urged the U.S. Senate to pass the Cybersecurity Act of 2012 before the United States suffers a crippling attack.

The president said the key to effective defense against cyberattack is sharing of information.

The Bipartisan Policy Center said in a report released July 19 that more than 50,000 cyberattacks on private and government networks were reported to the Department of Homeland Security from October 2011 through February 2012.

These were "only a small fraction" of cyberattacks carried out in the United States, the report said.

Many private companies conceal cyberattacks out of fear that their reputations would be harmed and their customers would disappear if the public knew their computer systems had been compromised, the report said. Former National Security Agency chief Michael Hayden and businessman Mortimer Zuckerman oversaw the drafting of the report.

The report agreed with President Obama that greater sharing of information would enhance cybersecurity. "Despite general agreement that we need to do it, cyber information sharing is not meeting our needs today," the document said.

The president said new cybersecurity legislation must also protect individual privacy, civil liberties and the interests of free enterprise.

PCWorld magazine reports that the cost of cybercrime to corporations rose 56 percent from 2010 to 2011. The median cost of a cybercrime to a corporation was \$5.9 million and the average number of days it took to resolve a cyberattack was 14 days, the magazine reported.

Cyberattackers "are more ingenious in how they launch the attack, which makes it harder to find once they launch it," says technology expert Prescott Winter as quoted in the magazine.

Another technology expert quoted in the magazine, Larry Ponemon, says computer firewalls no longer are able to keep out all cyberattackers.

"There is no such thing as a bulletproof perimeter," Ponemon said. "It's absolutely guaranteed these days that the attacker will get in. So the strategy has to change from watching the outside wall to trying to figure out what's happening inside the network."

No Nation Can Combat Cybercrime Alone, Attorney General Says

By Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic | Staff Writer | 20 July 2012

Washington — Emphasizing that no nation or government can combat cybercrime alone, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder urged greater international cooperation in developing a global strategy to fight a variety of Internet- and technology-based crimes at the Singapore Academy of Law in Singapore July 19.

"In this new era of seamless commerce and instant communication, we've seen businesses prosper and innovation thrive unlike ever before. But the cutting-edge technologies that we now rely on have also created new vulnerabilities," he said. "And a growing number of criminals are actively seeking to exploit them in ways that can inflict significant, lasting harm on innovators, consumers and entire countries."

Holder's speech at the academy was part of a two-day stop in the Southeast Asian city-state that included meetings with his Singaporean counterpart and other government officials. During the trip, Minister for Law K. Shanmugam and Holder signed the Preventing and Combating Serious Crime (PCSC) agreement, which increases information-sharing between the two governments to more effectively respond to transnational organized crime and terrorism. After Holder's meetings with the minister for foreign affairs and the minister for law, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing the strong legal partnership between the United States and Singapore.

Greater international cooperation in fighting cybercrime is vital because cybercriminals can perpetrate crimes with devastating consequences against any country or company in the world, but unlike criminals on the street, cybercriminals are not deterred by the physical presence of law enforcement officials.

"Cybercrime knows no boundaries — attacks launched in Southeast Asia can disrupt financial systems in America; counterfeit products manufactured in China can be made available for sale to anyone on the Internet," he said. "And cybercriminals can now operate beyond the reach of traditional law enforcement mechanisms — using technology to steal information and commit financial fraud half a world away, and with just a keystroke can mount cyber attacks against infrastructure networks that span numerous countries."

A coordinated international response to cybercrime is also necessary to protect common values like personal privacy and personal freedom, Holder said. Some progress toward achieving this goal has already been made. The Department of Justice's efforts to deepen bilateral engagement with such partners as Germany, Brazil, Hungary, Hong Kong, China and now Singapore in the past three years have yielded constructive dialogue on the development of a global strategy for cybercrime. The Justice Department has also increased outreach and exchange programs with allied countries' legal officials, beefed up its international law enforcement efforts, participated in cyber or intellectual property enforcement training and educational programs, and assembled task forces for a variety of cyber-related crimes.

Holder praised the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime's mutual legal assistance framework and provisions that give signatories the tools to fight cybercrime as "the most important of these international collaborations [on fighting cybercrime]." Acknowledging Japan's ratification of the convention last month, he urged Singapore to follow suit but expressed optimism about measures against cybercrime already under way in the Southeast Asian city-state, such as the construction of the INTERPOL Global Complex for Innovation. Scheduled to open in 2014, the complex will enhance the global response to cybercrime by training law enforcement officials in police tactics, forensic analysis and database capabilities.

Nations must come to terms with the fact that cybercrime will continue to evolve and develop a comprehensive strategy to fight the shape-shifting threats in order to protect national security and civilians.

"Today, together, it's time to ask: What can we do to confront the shared threats that we face? How can we ensure that our partnership and coordination remain an example for other nations around the world?" he said. "'And perhaps most importantly, we must consider: How can we achieve these objectives while safeguarding civil liberties and honoring our democratic institutions?'"

An appropriate balance between security and liberty must be achieved, Holder emphasized. Because democratic

values are often a nation's most valuable tools for ensuring peace and security in times of crisis, they cannot and must not be compromised in a country's efforts to fight cybercrime.

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