



Press Conference With Prime Minister Haarde and Foreign Minister Gísladóttir of Iceland

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs
Prime Minister Geir H. Haarde, Minister for Foreign Affairs Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir
Reykjavik, Iceland
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PRIME MINISTER HAARDE: Good afternoon. I would like to welcome you to Government House. The occasion is the visit by Under Secretary Nicholas Burns. We have had very good and useful discussions over lunch, and before that he attended a meeting at the Prime Minister's office and with the Foreign Minister. We are now ready to answer your questions. As you should know, he is a very high ranking official at the State Department and has responsibilities for many world issues. So, who wants to start?

QUESTION: What is the U.S. reaction to the Foreign Minister's comments that the new government 'regrets' the invasion of Iraq?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: First of all, let me say that I'm pleased to be here as a guest of the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. I have great respect for both of them, and I must say that we have traveled a great distance together, and if you allow me, I'll eventually answer your question. Iceland is a great ally of the United States, and Ambassador van Voorst and I are very grateful, as is President Bush, for our Alliance to NATO. We intend to maintain our defense commitment under the 1951 Agreement. We've discussed today ways to do that, and we had a great discussion over lunch, all of us together, over Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, climate change, energy, and United Nations and our support for it. So, I think it was an excellent discussion. Back in 2002 and 2003, I was sitting in NATO, and there were many countries that supported the United States' actions and some that didn't but we are all allies, and we respect each other. What's important now is that we all support Iraq, and a democratic Iraq, and an end to the violence. And, I certainly feel that in that respect, we had a very good conversation. I don't anticipate any problems and we will move forward in our alliance.

QUESTION: What about the recent disagreement with Russia over the placement of missile defense? Would that change the strategic importance of Iceland to NATO?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think Iceland has been important to the Alliance ever since the beginning of the Alliance back in 1949. Iceland is a country that has contributed a lot to the Alliance, and continues to. I thanked the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister for what Iceland has done in Afghanistan, for instance, as well as the Balkans. And on missile defense, the Russians have a missile defense system, they've had had it since 1972. It was very good to see President Putin saying the other day that there should be a missile defense joint venture between Russia and NATO in Azerbaijan. This accepts the rationale for missile defense, that is, it is defense not aimed at any country in Europe; it is aimed at those authoritarian countries to the south of Europe that one day could have the capability to threaten European citizens and civilizations. I think in NATO we have made a lot of progress at the April Foreign Ministers' meeting in Oslo. There was a great deal of convergence on this. We are not going to go back to the Cold War. There is no need for anyone to talk about threatening anyone else. We're going to go forward in a modern civilized way, and try to create peaceful conditions for people to live in peace here in Europe and in North America as well. We don't see missile defense as a problem; it's a divisive issue; we are happy to see the Russians accepting our rationale for it.

QUESTION: What is your reaction to the government's recent statement, saying that it regrets the Iraq war? Did it come as a surprise to you?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We have great trust and faith in our friendship with Iceland and its political leaders. One of the great things about a democratic alliance is that we're not all the same. NATO is not the Warsaw Pact. There are lots of different opinions. And we're all friends and we trust each other. So, while we may have a disagreement on some aspects of Iraq, that doesn't mean we cannot have a friendship and Alliance and agreement on many, many issues. We had a very good discussion today on all on these issues. I don't see we will have any problems in the future. But the proposition that we should support democracy in Iraq, stability and an end to the violence...I think almost everyone in NATO agrees to those three objectives.

QUESTION: What evidence does the United States have that Iran is giving weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: First, let me say, we have been disturbed to see that the Iranians continue to provide arms to the Shia militants in Iraq and to Hezbollah and Hamas. It's very destabilizing and quite negative and dangerous. On the question of Afghanistan, there is clear evidence that Iranian-origin weaponry has found its way into Afghanistan destined for Taliban and that's quite disturbing. I would want to lead you back to what Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said yesterday, when he was asked about this, he referred to the Iranian-origin weaponry, and he said he found it hard to believe that there was no connection between the Iranian government and those actions. So, I think we have a unity of views on that particular issue. We are seeking a diplomatic way forward; we want to have peaceful relations. We want to have negotiations on the nuclear issue but Iran is refusing to negotiate. And so you've seen that Russia, China, the United States and Europe are banding together to offer negotiations but if that is not possible, to say that sanctions will have to be presented, a third sanctions resolution, at the UN Security Council.

QUESTION: One question about Serbia. Serbian leaders say they will not accept the independence of Kosovo. And the Russians seem ready to veto any resolution on the independence of Kosovo. Where is this issue heading?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, it is clear that the great majority of opinion in Europe, which is where Kosovo is, as well as in North America, is that Kosovo should be independent. The people have waited eight years. Ninety-five percent of them are Kosovar Albanian. The United Nations has been running Kosovo for these eight years. So, it is time, the United Nations says, to get on with the final status of independence for the people of Kosovo. I don't think any country can block that. And our position, as articulated by President Bush the other day, is that we should have a very quick transition to Kosovo independence and a decision by the Security Council that would lead to independence. Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish President, has done a great job, a first class job in these negotiations. And I believe we will see Kosovo independence in a fairly short period of time, with strong support from Europe and the United States. I don't see any country being able to block this.

QUESTION: What about Russia?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Russia doesn't have troops in Kosovo as we do. Russia hasn't been part of the political and economic effort inside to help stabilize Kosovo. We have. We would hope that Russia would understand that independence is the best thing; the best way to preserve stability. There's a much greater risk of instability without a solution than with a solution.

QUESTION: When do you think a vote will come up in the Security Council?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't know when it will come up but our Ambassadors in New York are debating that today. The United States, France and Britain are trying to push a resolution and we hope that can succeed in the earliest possible timeframe. We are strong supporters of independence for Kosovo.

PM HAARDE (translation): I would just like to mention that we discussed Iceland's bid for the UN Security Council. Maybe one of you would like to ask what the U.S. position is on that.

QUESTION: Does the United States support Iceland's bid?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Ambassador van Voorst and I had a good conversation with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister on this issue, and I explained to them that the United States has a tradition of never announcing publicly for whom we vote at the U.N. But I did say that we very much welcomed the fact that Iceland wants to put itself forward because Iceland is one of our great democratic allies, a country in which we have great trust, a country that has always supported the international system. So, this is a positive development that a country like Iceland wants to sit on the Security Council. We sit in the Security Council and when you have countries that are pragmatic, that want to build the UN up and support the UN, it always helps the UN and our policy is to help build a stronger United Nations so it can cope with these great issues like Darfur, Somalia, the humanitarian crises of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. We need countries willing to pitch in to help resolve these problems.

QUESTION: The Foreign Minister has said she wants to go to Palestine. How can Iceland help in the situation there?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We just had a chance today to discuss all these issues. The last thing in the world I'm going to do is give public advice to the Prime Minister or Foreign Minister of Iceland. But look, we need every country to participate for peace, to try to build peace. We haven't had peace for 59 years in the Middle East, and so, of course, we welcome efforts by the Government of Iceland to promote peace as we do the governments of all democratic countries. That's normal and it's what we need.

QUESTION: Norway has established relations with the Hamas Government. What if Iceland does the same?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I was the State Department spokesman 10 years ago. I learned one very important lesson...never answer a hypothetical question.

Foreign Minister Gísladóttir: I would like to draw your attention that we spoke about climate change because it is a common interest by both our states to use renewable energy sources. It is clear that in the United States there are many opportunities to use geothermal energy. And we, Icelanders, have a lot of knowledge about renewable energy. There are many companies and banks in Iceland that show interest in this issue. This is an area in which the U.S. and Iceland can work together. This area offers many good opportunities, in which our countries can cooperate together in the future. We could have exchanges to get to know more about these matters.

PRIME MINISTER HAARDE: The Under Secretary is going to follow that matter closely and plans to bring it to the attention of the right people in the U.S. that deal with those issues, for example, in the Department of Energy.

QUESTION: Mr. Haarde, did Iceland ask for help in its bid for the UNSC?

PRIME MINISTER HAARDE: No, we did not. The U.S. stand on this issue is well known.

(End of press conference)

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