



## Press Conference on U.S.-Kyrgyz Relations

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**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** I am here as the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, and the purpose of my trip concerns our relationship with the Kyrgyz Republic. The principle purpose of the visit was to participate in the second Comprehensive Policy Dialogue with Foreign Minister Ednan Karabayev. The CPD is an opportunity for the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic to periodically review, at a senior level, the wide range of issues that our two countries discuss together. We talk about our long-term interests, foreign relations, and our interest in further developing cooperation between our two countries. The Dialogue concerns three principle areas: political developments in the country; economics, trade, and cooperation; and security issues.

A second, very important reason for my visit this March was the launch, on Friday, March 14, of the Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold program. This program is a 16 million dollar program of technical assistance, and the technical assistance – not budget support – is provided to the government of Kyrgyzstan in order to help it achieve its own reform goals. The program is a very important one, since Kyrgyzstan is the first country in Central Asia to be selected to participate in the Millennium Challenge Threshold program.

You have all been given a fact sheet on the program, so I'd just like to highlight the three key areas of the Millennium Challenge Threshold program. The first is judicial reform, to help create an independent judiciary that is completely separate from the legislative and executive branches of government. The second area is law enforcement reform, in order to make law enforcement structures more responsive to the public and better create stability and security for the people of Kyrgyzstan. The third is criminal justice reform, with the purpose of trying to create a legal framework to fight corruption. Overall, this program focuses on goals that have been identified by the Kyrgyz people and articulated by the President of Kyrgyzstan and the government.

I had the opportunity to discuss this development with members of the government, civil society, and members of the public, to try to understand how ready Kyrgyzstan is to undertake this program. I'm pleased to report that the Prime Minister and others in the government affirm that they are as excited about this program as we are and will prepare to ratify it in the Parliament and move forward with implementation.

I think one of the important elements of this program that I'd just like to underscore is that it presents an opportunity for the government and the people of Kyrgyzstan to move forward on the development of democracy.

This program I think is very well-structured and will move forward step-by-step with requirements that the Kyrgyz side complete certain benchmarks before the program moves forward. We're also pleased that this program includes public outreach and envisions the participation of civil society.

Another reason why this program is important harkens back to what I said first about the Comprehensive Policy Dialogue and our discussion with the Foreign Minister of political developments in the country. It's not a secret that the United States has followed political developments in Kyrgyzstan very closely for some time. In the last six months there have been some developments that concerned us, starting with the Constitutional Referendum last fall and continuing with the Parliamentary elections in December 2007. We noted at the time, and we have continued to express our concern about some of the shortcomings in that election. In that, I'm referring specifically to the conduct of the election and the vote count and we note that the results of the election have still not been released by the Central Election Commission, which we think is an important step that needs to take place. But we went forward with this program and we are focused on its success because we know there is a rich history of successful reform in Kyrgyzstan and we want to keep working the government, and the people, and civil society to move forward with that success.

I'd just like to note before I take your questions that it's a great pleasure to be here – the weather is better than it is in Washington. I'm always pleased and warmed by the great hospitality of the people of Kyrgyzstan and the officials who welcome me. And it's important to take time to take stock of the bilateral relationship, which overall, I'm happy to report continues to be strong and constructive. And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** I have a quite lengthy question. We heard not long ago that NATO will use an airbase in Uzbekistan. Please tell me, is the U.S. planning to use the airbase in Uzbekistan?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** I'd like to categorically state that I do not know how this misinformation came out, but the U.S. does not have a base in Uzbekistan. You are probably aware that the United States closed its base in Uzbekistan in 2005 and since then we have not had a base. Some of the misunderstanding came about after Central Command Commander, Admiral Fallon, traveled to Uzbekistan and had meetings with officials there. Former Central Command Admiral Fallon said at the time, and it was published in the *New York Times* and other publications, that he went to discuss security considerations and did not discuss the base at all.

What is true is that there is a base at Termez – a German base. What is happening at Termez now is that the international staff and individuals associated with NATO now have permission to transit through Termez. And since the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, individual Americans who are associated with the international staff and with NATO, have had permission to transit through Termez. But I repeat, we have no base in Uzbekistan, and we have no troops in Uzbekistan.

**QUESTION:** Will there be negotiations? What are the plans?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** It would not be appropriate for me to speculate about our future plans. I would like to stick to what is the current policy of the United States, which I have just articulated.

**QUESTION:** In Kyrgyzstan, the protests against the [Manas] Base have strengthened. Are you doing anything to reduce the protests?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** I think before I address your question specifically, I'd like to say that the U.S. and the government of Kyrgyzstan have been cooperating since 2001 on the base at Manas. Both of our governments recognize that there is a global urgency – a global imperative – to fight terrorism, particularly in Afghanistan. And we have greatly appreciated the strategic commitment of the government of Kyrgyzstan to assist in Operation Enduring Freedom by hosting the base at Manas.

In the years that we have been cooperating, Manas has played a very important role, and continues to play an important role, in fighting terrorism. That doesn't mean that the base has not been controversial – at times it has been. I would just like to note that in many places where the United States has bases, sometimes issues arise and at times, the base can be unpopular. Our goal is to work very hard with the government of Kyrgyzstan, our embassy works very hard and the staff at the base works very hard to help the government of Kyrgyzstan, the people of Kyrgyzstan, understand the very important role that the base plays.



Nonetheless, sometimes protests occur, but I talked earlier about the importance of political developments of Kyrgyzstan, and one of the things that's important to us is protecting the rights and responsibilities of the Kyrgyz people under the Kyrgyz constitution. And as long as it's done legally, that could include expressing their views about the base. So we are working at the same time to protect constitutional rights, to ask the government to protect the rights of citizens, but at the same time to make sure the base functions well and does its very important job.

**QUESTION:** I would like to know, the people who organize these protests – they are concerned about the land and the work of the airbase. How long is the base going to be in Kyrgyzstan?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** Thank you for your question – it's a very important one. As you know, when Secretary Rice came to Kyrgyzstan in 2005, she and President Bakiyev came to a strategic agreement that Kyrgyzstan would host the base in its effort, its contribution, to the important fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. So the key point is how long will it take us to be successful in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. President Bakiyev underscored once again in December that he is prepared to maintain the strategic commitment that he had made with Secretary Rice as long as is necessary in order to fight terrorism in Afghanistan. So, the effort continues, the presence of the base continues to be extremely important, and we will continue to work on the same basis that was created in 2005 by mutual agreement. Obviously we would all like success as soon as possible and no one envisions that the base will be here forever but as long as it is necessary we will continue to work with our Kyrgyz hosts in order to make sure that the base can carry out its operations effectively.

**QUESTION:** I want to double check about the Threshold program. I understand the major goal is to fight corruption. So let's imagine that we end corruption, will the U.S. do something to help us fix our 2 billion dollar external debt, which has accrued mostly due to corruption?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** What I'd like to focus on is the part of your question about the Threshold program. Let's do this one step at a time. The Millennium Challenge Program is, as I said before, a program of technical assistance designed to help the government of Kyrgyzstan. And as I mentioned the goal, and as you noted, one of the key goals is to help combat corruption. But I think it is important to note that the program has not even started yet. The program was just launched on Friday. So, the focus of our effort now is to help the Kyrgyz government and the Kyrgyz people make that program successful. And of course that will take some very, very hard work. There are, as I mentioned, some benchmarks that have to be met. It will be step-by-step, [a] very challenging process.

This is a two year program and I think perhaps it would be possible to address your question after we finish the two years of the Threshold program, we need to go step-by-step to make sure it's successful.

I do want to note that the Threshold Program is not the only form of technical assistance that the United States is providing to the government of Kyrgyzstan. There are other areas in which we are working in the economic sphere. And so, just the last part of your question – the government of Kyrgyzstan itself made a decision about the HIPC program. That was a year ago, and now our focus is on helping the government of Kyrgyzstan to build a stronger economy so that it is in a position to have the tax revenues that it needs, so that it is in a position to pay its debts, so that it is in a position to be a much wealthier country.

**QUESTION:** There was some press report that some land was (inaudible) by Kyrgyzstan to the Russian navy. What do you think about that?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** I would urge you to speak to the Russian authorities and the Kyrgyz government. That is a bilateral issue between the two countries, and I have no comment on that.

**QUESTION:** Why does the United States criticize the results of the parliamentary elections but nonetheless continues to give money to Kyrgyzstan?

**Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Spratlen:** That's a fair question, but as I mentioned in my opening statement, the United States has a long history of cooperation with the Kyrgyz Republic on political and economic reform. And it was our confidence that there is the capacity of reform in Kyrgyzstan that gave us the confidence to go forward with this program at this time. But I have to say, honestly speaking, that there is skepticism and that there were doubts in Washington about whether this was the right time to go forward with the Millennium Challenge Threshold program, precisely because of the elections.

As I mentioned, we remain concerned about the overall direction, the trend line, of democratic reform in Kyrgyzstan. But at the same time, there is a history here of successful reform, and we believe that the Millennium Challenge Threshold program offers the government of Kyrgyzstan, the people of Kyrgyzstan, the civil society of Kyrgyzstan an opportunity to reenergize the reform and move in a more positive direction in a key area. And we will be working with the government of Kyrgyzstan in order to help that result come about.

So, as we end this press conference, I'd like to thank you for your attention. I very much appreciate the members of the press and hope that you all get everything right that I said, and I look forward to meeting with you on my next visit.

Our relations are developing, are continuing to strengthen, and I expect to come back to continue that dialogue.

Thank you very much.

