



Press Conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South And Central Asia

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

August 9, 2006

Released by U.S. Embassy Uzbekistan

AMBASSADOR PURNELL: Thank you all for coming out this evening. We apologize for being a few minutes late. But it is a great pleasure for me to be able to introduce to you this evening Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher. He is, I am sure, no stranger to you. He has dealt with the press and public issues for many years in his distinguished career. This is his first visit to Uzbekistan in his new capacity. And I know that he looks forward to taking your questions this evening.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Thank you, Jon. If I can, I would like to say a few words to start. This is my third visit to Uzbekistan. I came here before with Secretary of State Albright and then with Secretary of State Powell. I have had sufficient opportunity now to meet with the people in our Embassy who are doing a terrific job. I have met with people from Uzbekistan who are working on democracy, civil society and other development matters. I have had a chance to meet with some of the partners who help us carry out our programs that help the people of Uzbekistan. They work in areas like health, water and civil society.

I have also had an opportunity to have extensive meetings with some of the leadership here: about an hour and a half with the Foreign Minister and about two and a half hours this evening with President Karimov. I have told everybody here that the United States very much values the independence and sovereignty of Uzbekistan. We congratulate Uzbekistan as it approaches its fifteenth year of independence. So our interest in cooperating with Uzbekistan is to help it find new opportunities to move forward with its independence. We are not here to play games. We are not here to try to contend with any other powers. We expect Uzbekistan to maintain all its ties with Russia, with China, with Europe, with Turkey and other nations.

We think we can help Uzbekistan to find other opportunities and other choices as well. And the more choices this nation or any nation has the more independence it has. I also said that we want to establish a new basis for cooperation. The areas that we identified in our strategic partnership statement of 2002 indeed remain valid. We agreed that we do have common interests in security issues, fighting terrorism, drugs, proliferation and things like that. We have interests in economic and business cooperation and all of the things that go with such cooperation. And we have an interest in the economic and political development of a healthy society here.

We obviously have very strong differences about the events in Andijon and the human rights situation. But we think that if we are going to establish the basis for cooperation then we can discuss some of these issues as well. So, we talked about these areas of common interests in practical ways. And we also talked in a practical way about the actions that are needed to try to rebuild trust, to try to achieve real cooperation in these areas. These were good discussions, these were thorough discussions. But I cannot tell you at this moment what will happen next. It will depend on what both sides actually do to pursue and develop this cooperation. For our part, we are willing to try. But we have to see what happens. With that, let me take your questions.

QUESTION: The signing of an agreement creating a Central Asian nuclear free zone is planned for September 8 in Semipalatinsk. This is an initiative of Uzbekistan and it is the result of longtime cooperation. This nuclear free zone is considered to be one part of a reliable and effective system of regional security. Mr. Boucher, how does America evaluate the prospect of this nuclear free zone in Central Asia?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I have not actually focused on this nuclear free zone and I do not have any particular comment about that. But in that connection, I would say that the achievements in this region on non-proliferation have been quite good. There are indeed countries in this region which have gotten rid of nuclear weapons, gotten rid of nuclear facilities, gotten rid of nuclear waste to try to keep it out of the hands of terrorists and other people who would do ill. So non-proliferation has been an area where the United States has cooperated with the countries of this region and we would hope and expect to do so in the future.

QUESTION: Mr. Boucher, the last visit of an official representative of the U.S. Government happened in September of 2005 when Mr. Daniel Fried visited Uzbekistan. He had a meeting with the President of Uzbekistan. Can you tell us what is the difference between these two meetings – the one you had today and the one that took place last year – given the fact that even after last year's meeting of a U.S. official and the Uzbek President there has been no real warming of Uzbek-U.S. relations?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You are right. Dan Fried came here and addressed many of the same issues last fall. I read the reports about his visit and talked to him about his visit. I do not know if I have done anything much differently than he. And indeed there have been some continuing problems in our relationship and in the work we do here since he was here. I suppose I came because I have to get to know the country, the people and the leaders for myself. I think I owe them the decency of listening to them before we have to make whatever decisions we do about the relationship. I believe and they believe that there still remains a sound basis for us to find common interest and that we should continue to try to find it. But we have been prepared in the past to take serious steps if the relationship deteriorates. And we may have to do that in the future. But I think if both sides want to do it, we do have a basis in common security issues, finding economic opportunities and working together for the political and economic development of this society – a basis grounded on those common interests could lead to cooperation. For our part we are ready to try. And that is why I am here.

QUESTION: Considering that you have touched upon the issue of economic cooperation, I would like to ask the following: As you may be aware, the joint venture Zerafshan-Newmont has faced certain problems – they say that the U.S. side is ready to sell its share to third parties. Have you discussed issues of economic cooperation in general and the Zerafshan-Newmont JV in particular? And can you provide us with more specific details about these discussions?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We keep in very close touch with American companies here. But I am afraid it would not be appropriate for me to discuss the affairs of any particular company. I think the only thing I would say is that there are companies that are finding it increasingly difficult to do their business here. We did discuss these issues today. And I expect we will continue to discuss them in the future. The actions that are taken with regard to some of these particular situations I think will lead other investors to draw their own conclusions. Therefore, I would say that it is important that they be able to handle the situation carefully and fairly. But in terms of public discussions I think I have to leave it at that.

QUESTION: There are a number of Islamic organizations that are trying to strengthen their presence in the country through participation in various social and economic projects, for instance, Akramiyas. Why does the U.S. Government characterize some Islamic organizations as fundamentalists or terrorists and other organizations as not terrorist organizations? Do you not think that some kind of dual standard is being applied?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: The standard is violence. If people are violent, we need to call them what they are. If they are setting bombs to kill innocent people, we need to call them terrorists. At the same time, there needs to be a place for Islamic believers in the political process. Believing in Islam and even conservative Islam is not a barrier to participating in society. We feel we should welcome peaceful believers to participate in society and to participate in politics.

QUESTION: "Even an animal cries when beaten" said a young Uzbek man who was accused of membership in a banned Islamic group. He said this at his trial while explaining why he signed a confession and how he was tortured. A sixty-six year old musician is on trial for writing a song about the Andijon violence. What is your opinion of the never ending string of trials of peaceful Muslims, [human] rights defenders and dissidents in Uzbekistan? I guess it is difficult to lose a diplomatic mask, but

try to imagine we are having a round of beers in a bar on E Street.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, we are not, are we? I do not have a problem giving you a frank answer to that. The United States has been and continues to be profoundly concerned about the human rights situation here. The government here knows that and we report on it in our human rights report. The question is whether we can move forward to improve the situation; whether we can have a dialogue; whether we can try to improve the situation for the people who have been victimized by human rights violations; and whether we can find a way to move forward – for this government to find a way to move forward here in the area of human rights. They say they are. So we are going to see what we can do in that area. But it is a very important area to the United States and the people of the United States. And it will continue to be an area that we want to work with the people here in Uzbekistan to improve. I'm sorry, I have got to go, so we are going to do one last question.

QUESTION: In 2001, on October 3, my colleague and I were present in a press conference that you gave for American journalists. A few days later, you arranged a similar press conference for journalists from Central Asia. And I remember that you quite effectively managed to avoid direct questions. I understand that this is the art of diplomacy and Mr. Purnell has mentioned a number of times at different conferences that this is a diplomatic art and you are successfully demonstrating this art. So I would like to ask this direct question for which I would like to receive a direct reply. During the last months, a number of American [non-governmental] organizations had to shut down their operations in Uzbekistan, except maybe for one, the National Democratic Institute. So here is a question: Have you discussed the issue of to what extent these organizations will re-establish their operations here in the future or we should expect some kind of new organizations in Uzbekistan. Have you discussed this issue with the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Yes. That is the direct answer.

QUESTION: What steps will the United States take if relations between the two countries worsen?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: If relations get worse? I do not know. We will decide at that time. Is that direct enough? Thank you. Sorry, I have to go, I have things I have to do. Thank you.

Released on August 9, 2006

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