



Press Conference

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: It is nice to see you. It is nice to be back in Kyrgyzstan again. It is nice to be back at the lovely [home] of the Ambassador. I have been here since last week and I was able to have a number of meetings last Thursday and Friday and again today. I was very honored to speak on Saturday at the American University of Central Asia. They were having their graduation. They graduated over 200 students from a dozen or so countries. I was really pleased to spend a weekend at Lake Issyk Kul and to see some of the mountains and places that reminded me of some places in the western United States. So I managed to have a longer visit than ever before and to have a number of meetings where I was able to talk to people from the President to civil society and people from the parliament about the current situation here and about the things that the United States and Kyrgyzstan do together.

The visit to the American University of Central Asia was particularly important to me. We see this institution as becoming more and more important not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in Central Asia. Along with other fine universities here, it allows Kyrgyzstan to play a regional role as a center for education and ideas.

I also spent a fair amount of time with the president, prime minister and members of parliament discussing the wide range of our relationship. We have excellent cooperation on security and border security and I visited this morning with the director of the Drug Control Agency. We've been working on expanding our economic relationship, and particularly looking at the role of Kyrgyzstan in producing and sending electricity to other countries, especially to the south. We are trying to help Kyrgyzstan develop those opportunities both with feasibility studies that we finance and market reform steps that Kyrgyzstan can take.

And finally I took the opportunity to talk to people about the political situation. Our hope is that the political situation will settle down a little bit and constitutional changes and other reforms will go through, and that the parties can take their debates into parliament and start producing their results for the nation in the political arena. And [we are] looking at fairly significant assistance in the justice sector. Whether that goes forward or not will probably be decided in the next few months.

So I've had an excellent visit, I've had broad and useful discussions, with a variety of people, that I think reflect the strength of the U.S.-Kyrgyzstan relationship in the large number of areas that we are working together with Kyrgyzstan. I would be glad to take your questions.

QUESTION: Lately, renegotiations of terms of the U.S. lease of Manas facility has received much coverage as has the death of a Kyrgyz citizen at the hand of U.S. soldier, [and a] Kyrgyz request for the soldier to face Kyrgyz criminal charges. How would you describe the current state of the political and security context between Kyrgyzstan and the United States?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think that the state of the overall political and security context is very good, but in those discussions we do discuss the status of the base. I think everyone I have talked to understands that by hosting the base Kyrgyzstan is playing a very important role in stabilizing the region and helping the world fight terrorism. That's an important contribution that we all want to see continue. That said, the United States and many other countries use the facility here. We want to make sure that the base and the people who work there are good citizens and that they are supportive of the Kyrgyz economy and supportive of Kyrgyz sovereignty. During my visit we discussed ways to resolve incidents. We've discussed ways to enhance the cooperation between the airbase and people here locally, and ways to work regularly to ensure the smooth integration of the operation at the base with rest of the operations at the airport as well as with the local circumstances.

With regard to some of the problems that have occurred at the base, we have made a payment to Mrs. Ivanova that is pretty large, amounts to more than 20 years of her husband's salary. And we are investigating the incident and the conduct of Sergeant Hatfield, and we will determine at the end of that investigation what the appropriate action is. With regard to the airplane accident, we've done a thorough investigation and we're prepared to make an appropriate payment for the damage that might have occurred in that incident. So I think we are trying to resolve any incidents that have occurred, but even more than that we are trying to prevent such incidents in the future.

QUESTION: I would like to know your opinion if the terms of the further stay of the air base should be renegotiated and what would the U.S. reaction be in case the Kyrgyz parliament makes a decision to remove the base from Kyrgyzstan?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: A couple of things. First of all, we operate here with the permission and the support of Kyrgyz authorities. The United States and many other countries use the base here and whether we stay or whether we go depends on the decision of the Kyrgyz government. I am not surprised there's a lot of discussion about the base. We expect that in a democracy. That is a normal thing for parliaments to do. I tried to meet with some parliamentarians during my visit and the ambassador keeps in touch with them to make sure that they have facts about the base. I think, unfortunately, some of the debate includes things maybe being pushed in some circles and ideas that are just wrong and not factual. So we try to correct those things and give people a full set of facts so that they can discuss the base.

QUESTION: Regarding the terms of agreement, are you ready to renegotiate them?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We just negotiated the agreement last year so I don't think it needs to be renegotiated now. At the same time, I have talked to the government about how we can talk, about how we can discuss operations at the base and how we can smooth out the operations at the base and clear up any difficulties that might arise in that area because of the heavy traffic to the base.

QUESTION: Kyrgyzstan is unique in hosting two airbases: [inaudible], which is considered to be the Russian base and [inaudible], which is considered to be an American base. Considering this fact, how do you assess American-Russian relationship in the context of airbases?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We don't have much of a relationship with Russians here in terms of both having bases here. These decisions are for the government of Kyrgyzstan to make in terms of having to decide how to support their independence and how to operate and support their security forces. We have security relations with Russia. We're not surprised that other people, particularly the ones in the neighborhood, have such relationships as well. Our security relationships with Kyrgyzstan are excellent. And it is not only the base -- it is drug control cooperation, border security cooperation, military cooperation, cooperation through NATO and a whole range of issues where we try to help Kyrgyzstan maintain its sovereignty and security.

QUESTION: One more question, if I can. In Kyrgyzstan there recently appeared a movement "For Removal of the Airbase from Kyrgyzstan," and this organization has already had two rallies. This movement is gaining force in its activities. You have already said that public debate is normal in a democratic country, and we understand there is debate in the parliament. However, now that ordinary people are raising their voice, do you see this as a threat to further operations?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No. I do not mean to denigrate the opinions of these people but the demonstrations I saw were fairly small. But people are entitled to their views. And they should come out and express them. But ultimately this is the decision for the government and the parliament to make. As I said, many countries operate through the facility at Manas, and other countries operate in other part of the region, like the French in Tajikistan and Germany in Uzbekistan. So there

is nothing very unusual about this arrangement. It is just a very active and important contribution for the security of Afghanistan and the security of the region.

QUESTION: Mr. ASSISTANT SECRETARY, the Prime Minister asked you about the possibility of including Kyrgyzstan into Millennium Challenge Account program. If this is not possible, because of the time frame, then can U.S. Government help Kyrgyzstan to sign off the \$2 billion debt in Kyrgyzstan?

Assistant Secretary BOUCHER: First of all these are two different issues. The Millennium Challenge program is an issue that will be looked at by the board of Millennium Challenge Corporation in the next several months. This program is in the justice sector. I think everybody I talked to agrees how important it is to reform the justice sector and get rid of corruption and make justice more independent here. One of the purposes of my visit was to ask the question, if it is possible to implement this program in the current political environment. I have to say that a lot of people and a lot of different parts of the political spectrum said the answer is "yes." So I will take that information back to Washington and I'll talk to the board before they consider their decision.

As for the matter of debt, the HIPC [Heavily Indebted Poor Country] program was something that I discussed during all my visits to Kyrgyzstan. The government made a decision not to participate in that program. That's their decision, and the Prime Minister asked me if there was not some other way to qualify for debt reduction, and frankly, that was a question that I did not have the immediate answer to. I have to look at it when I get back to Washington. There's no bilateral debt between the United States and Kyrgyzstan. So, I guess the debt is principally to the international institutions and maybe some other donors, but not to us. And thank you for asking a question that was not about the airbase.

QUESTION: During your last visits you talked about cooperation in the area of education. What steps have already been taken to implement some educational programs and what further steps are planned for this area?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I will let the ambassador talk about some of the specific programs, but we've tried to concentrate on two levels. One is basic education to improve the quality of education throughout the country for all the citizens. The other is to help build the American University into a premier institution for the country and for the region. I came specifically this time for the graduation at the university. I was able to announce an additional grant of \$3 million to support the university. And I watched the graduation of over 220 students, and they study everything from law to business administration and software engineering. We want to help to continue to build this university where they have students from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and other countries from all over the world. And as I said, this university and others like it could give Kyrgyzstan a real regional role as a center for education and ideas. That's a contribution to development. That's a contribution to regional cooperation and stability in the region, as well.

QUESTION: According to different sources of information, lately the Kyrgyz government was suppressing independent media. So what would you say about the current status of freedom of the press in Kyrgyzstan?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: This was a subject that we discussed somewhat during the course of my visit. And frankly, I heard different views. And I think everybody agrees that free press, informative press, are very important parts of national development. The base of all that is freedom of press. Some of the problems seemed to have calmed down.

We are also interested in seeing further development of independent media here in Kyrgyzstan. People don't need propaganda, they don't need biased news or tendentious views. They just need facts. They just need information. And that's where we think more independent media can really help Kyrgyzstan develop and give citizens of Kyrgyzstan more information to make their choices. I will give you an example on this situation at the base. Somehow, this idea that we might use the base to attack Iran keeps spreading, keeps coming up. Frankly, that's a ridiculous idea and any expert in military affairs or diplomacy would understand that. That's not what the base is here for; we have no intention of using it in that way. So, somehow, there are ideas like that keep coming out of biased media or biased experts. But it really doesn't help the people to make the decision about the base and doesn't help to understand operations at the base. So we are not saying there needs to be a pro-American view, but there needs to be independent, unbiased media.

QUESTION: You said that you've met and talked to many people. Can you specifically say what arrangements have been made or what agreements have been achieved in the course of your visit? And second question: the visit of Secretary Gates and your visit, are these an attempt of the American side to get some guarantees regarding the base?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think the visits, Secretary Gates' visit and my visit, are part of the regular back and forth between the United States and Kyrgyzstan. These visits happened last year, these kinds of visits happen this year. I think it is a reflection of a close and active relationship. The base is a bilateral question between the United States and Kyrgyzstan and not some issue for discussion at SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organization]. Countries of the region -- Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and others -- they make their own decision about cooperation with foreign governments and foreign military forces. And they make their own decision about how to cooperate to support stability in Afghanistan and in the region. They don't need other countries from outside telling them what to do.

In terms of the specifics that we discussed, because these are regular visits, I wasn't here to find one or another particular arrangement. I spent a long time with the Foreign Minister, the President and Prime Minister. I think we gained some understanding on how to ensure smooth operation at the base. I gained some understandings and I think a better basis for the decision on the Millennium Challenge grant. We developed some new ideas on how to work on the economic development of Kyrgyzstan, particularly how to tie Kyrgyzstan into the electricity production and flow to the south. And we looked specifically at how to enhance our security relations more broadly. So I think this was an excellent visit and allowed us to focus on some things as we move forward.

QUESTION: My question is about investments. I understand investments that you have been making have been mostly in media sectors, but there are very few American businesses operating in Kyrgyzstan. Do you expect in the near future there will be more American companies making investments in the Kyrgyz economy, particularly in the energy sector and maybe some really big famous companies, as well?

QUESTION: And the second part of the question is your vision of the future development of Kyrgyz-American relations.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: There are opportunities like that that will develop. To some extent it depends on what Kyrgyzstan does to develop an investment climate, to develop a market climate, and to develop a justice sector to secure investments and not be influenced by political pressure as we see happening now. These opportunities with energy can operate on a commercial basis. Tajikistan started bidding on a number of energy projects and they have bidders interested from half of dozen countries including the United States. So I think it shows if you can create the right investment environment, you don't have to go around to countries asking them to help you, but have offers from others to help you develop your resources. So one of the things we are doing is working with authorities here trying to establish a regional energy market. And we are investing in a feasibility study to establish the commercial basements for investment and development of the electricity sector.

As for the future relationship, I think the outlook is very positive. Everything I talked about during my visit, whether it was the wide conversation with the Foreign Ministry or the specific conversations with the Drug Control Agency or with economic officials [inaudible]. In all these things we were looking at how to do more, how to expand cooperation, how to expand our relationships. That's what we will be working on and that's what we will be talking about during my next visit.

Thank you.

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