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### Speeches

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Transcript of Press Conference by U.S. Ambassador Richard Norland (03/27/2008)

U.S. Embassy, Tashkent

**Public Affairs Officer Carol Fajardo:** Today we have the special privilege of being able to bring to you Ambassador Norland. He is going to talk in general about how our relations are in Uzbekistan. Please we will be only able to keep this to an hour but he would like very much to have a good discussion with you while you are here. We've passed out copies of Ambassador Norland's biography so I won't be going over that with you today and we can go ahead and get started. Please join me in welcoming Ambassador Norland.

**Ambassador Richard Norland [in Russian]:** It is my pleasure to be here at this famous Press Gap. This is the first time I am participating in a Press Gap and I thank you all for coming. I know you are interested in asking some concrete questions but I'll begin with some comments and then take questions. First of all, thank you all for joining us this afternoon. I know many of you are regular Press Gap attendees. Thanks for taking the time to be here. I'd like to take this opportunity to discuss a few concrete issues with you. First, you may have noticed some interesting reporting on U.S.-Uzbek military relations. Much of this reporting was inaccurate. The United States currently has no bases in Uzbekistan, and the U.S. has not requested a military base in Uzbekistan. This issue was not on Admiral Fallon's agenda when he visited Tashkent in January, nor is it currently on the agenda of U.S. civilian leadership. Individual Americans seconded to NATO or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which is the UN-mandated mission to stabilize Afghanistan, can use the German air-bridge which transits Termez airbase to Afghanistan on a case-by-case basis only. As of January 31, 2008, Uzbekistan may now allow U.S. personnel assigned to NATO or the ISAF mission to transit Termez on a case-by-case basis. **[Note:** To date, there has only been one instance of one individual transiting Termez, a U.S. civilian NATO advisor.] This issue, I thought, would be of interest to you. Second, I hope you pick up a copy of our 2007 Human Rights Report before you leave today. This report clearly documents the United States' concerns about the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. Promotion of human rights remains a vital component of our multi-dimensional foreign policy with Uzbekistan. Please note, however, that this report only covers the calendar year 2007. Since January 2008, we have seen the Uzbek government make small but significant steps to improve its human rights record, such as releasing political prisoners and, very importantly, allowing the International Committee of the Red Cross to resume detention visits. We welcome the ICRC, and the State Department has officially welcomed announcement that their visits to detained persons resumed this month. We are encouraged by this step, and we continue to encourage the Government of Uzbekistan to take additional measures to address human rights concerns.

We believe it is important to engage the Uzbek government on the full range of issues in our bilateral agenda, including regional security, trade and investment, and cultural exchanges, as well as human rights. The Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Pamela Spratlen arrives tonight to do just that. Perhaps you have seen in the press that she was in Kyrgyzstan recently.

In contrast to calls for isolation, we currently see evidence that international interest and engagement with the Uzbek authorities can lead to positive steps.

Lastly, I'd like to mention that we are currently commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Tashkent – Seattle sister city relationship this year. Throughout the year we will be marking this relationship with exchanges, cultural events, and fun events such as this Saturday's spring cleaning of the sister city park corner of Barbur Park. The first such event was the Ilkholm Theater's tour of the U.S., which started in Seattle earlier this month. While not the sort of thing that makes front pages, these are the sorts of activities that

help us to come to understand one another better and build lasting friendships between us.

You can take copies of these remarks with you and at that I conclude the formal part of this meeting. And if you have any questions I'll try to answer. Yes, please.

**Deutsche Welle:** Regarding the military base in Khanabad, you said that 'this issue is currently not on the agenda of U.S. civilian leadership.' Is the military leadership interested in this base?

**Ambassador Norland:** We have just said that it was not on the agenda of Admiral Fallon, who is with the military, and it also is not on the agenda of the civilian leadership of the United States.

**Deutsche Welle:** If you, I mean your military had this base, would it help to carry out their mission in Afghanistan?

**Ambassador Norland:** I don't know. I can only say that, of course Afghanistan is a very important issue and both the U.S. and Uzbekistan are interested in this issue. Everybody understands that the solution of the Afghanistan problem is more a political and economic issue. Of course, there is also part which deals with security and military issues. But I can say that the issue of bases in Uzbekistan is not on the agenda.

**Turkistan Press news agency:** We learned from the press that the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will take part in a meeting of NATO. Islam Karimov will even make a speech there. I would like to hear your comment in this regard.

**Ambassador Norland:** I can just say that the invitation was probably sent by NATO. I do not know if the invitation was accepted or not, this question should be addressed to Oq-Saroy.

**Turkistan Press news agency:** I would like to know how you think about their participation, whether this would be important...

**Ambassador Norland:** This event is organized by NATO. And if NATO decided to invite, as far as I understand, NATO invited all leaders of NATO members and members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. I don't know if the invitation was accepted but, of course, it will probably be useful if all leaders of NATO and the region meet together and talk to each other. But the question of participation should be addressed to your President. I cannot comment on what I do not know is going to happen. I do not know if President Karimov will be there.

**TRT:** Iran wants to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). What do you think of this situation, taking into account that Uzbekistan is also member of SCO?

**Ambassador Norland:** That is a matter for SCO to decide. Membership in SCO is a decision for SCO; it is not appropriate for me to comment.

**Jihan news agency:** Uzbekistan abolished the death penalty effective January 2008. In your opinion, what implications does it have in terms of human rights observance?

**Ambassador Norland:** Let me give you my answer in two parts. In America we still have the death penalty. So in a sense it is not appropriate for me to talk about the death penalty being abolished in another country. I will say that in the United States there is a very strong debate about the death penalty. A number of states have... We have fifty states and a number of them, I think half, have abolished the death penalty. The Supreme Court is also reviewing the application of the death penalty. Our Constitution prohibits cruel and unusual punishment and the Supreme Court is looking at whether... how the death penalty is applied in the United States and if it constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. There have been some horrible cases where the application of the death penalty by lethal injection has resulted in extremely painful deaths for the prisoners involved. But as I say, this is still the subject of debate in the United States both politically and in the legal sphere. Now in Uzbekistan the decision to abolish the penalty I think we view as a very positive step. And I think because of our position in the United States, I would just leave it at that. Only to say it clearly represents an effort to take an important step forward in the sphere of human rights.

**Marina Kozlova, journalist:** You have mentioned that a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State is going to visit Uzbekistan and in this connection will there be a press conference and what is the main goal of this visit? And my second question, what are the tendencies here towards English language and maybe towards Russian language too in the past years? I mean the change of the situation in the country in regard to English language. Thank you.

**Ambassador Norland:** Pamela Spratlen arrives tonight for about a three-day visit. Her title is Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. And to be more exact she is Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary. Previously this post was held by Evan Feigenbaum. You all probably know him. He has now changed his duties. Pamela for some time will be dealing with these issues. As far as I understand we will not hold a press conference. It is not on the agenda. What is the agenda? The agenda is to have appropriate level conversations with people on the Uzbek side, to look at the important issues on our bilateral agenda. The program is yet to be confirmed. But we have the impression that she will be received at quite top levels and we are grateful for that. The goal is to discuss regional security, which is a usual issue in the U.S.-Uzbek agenda, the situation in Afghanistan, trade and investment, cultural exchanges, human rights, humanitarian affairs, the normal agenda that has not changed really since the Strategic Framework Agreement of 2002. And the context was established I think by President Karimov when I arrived last September. And he made clear there was a genuine interest on the Uzbek side to improve relations with the United States, that this would be a gradual process, that it would be based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and Pamela's visit is to continue this dialogue and try to advance it further. About English language - there is tremendous interest in English language here and part of Carol's job is to help to find teachers and find the ways to meet that interest. You know language is simply a tool, it is a bridge. And Russian language is also clearly a very important bridge in this region, so clearly there is a place for both languages and I think we see strong interest in both.

**VOA:** Mr. Ambassador, we know from the press that you've been advocating promotion of human rights, democracy in close dialogue with the government here, but there are representatives of democratic forces in the country who suggest holding a tougher line in demanding the human rights observance from the Uzbek authorities. What is the basis for you to carry out close dialogue as opposed to holding a tougher line towards Uzbek Government?

**Ambassador Norland:** I think you are addressing the issue of punitive measures, if I understand correctly. Let me refer you to some comments which are on our website which I made at the Open Dialogue conference on Law Enforcement and Human Rights on March 5. If you look on our website, I gave a [speech](#) there. Towards the end of the speech, I addressed the issue directly. With your permission, I will let those remarks speak to that question and so if you'd like to ask your second question...

**VOA:** Recently General Motors (GM) set up a joint venture in Uzbekistan, and the Uzbek government said that it is going to give some privileges for this company. Previously Newmont Company had received privileges but we know what the outcome was of that. We know also that the Uzbek Government hopes to attract more investments and in this regard what is your opinion about the general situation with the investment climate in Uzbekistan. Do you think that foreign investors will come to Uzbekistan?

**Ambassador Norland:** The issue of the investment climate is an extremely important issue. Because for Uzbekistan to fulfill its potential in the region with all of its resources and its well-educated population, clearly there is going to have to be... that the economy is going to have to be the driving force. For the economy to be a driving force, you are going to have to attract more foreign investment. Now, American investors respond to situations that they consider financially attractive; they are looking for a profit. And that means that, as we say, there has to be a level playing field for all the companies from outside that operate here. The fact that GM has chosen to set up a joint venture here means they see great potential for a mutually productive relationship with Uzbekistan. It is no secret that a number of American investors here are frustrated by some of the obstacles they run into in terms of the investment climate. The number one issue they mention to me is the issue of currency convertibility. But the fact that GM is coming here is a very important signal. I think that there is a basis for progress in this area. And I am hopeful that we are going to see the GM joint venture succeed and that it will be the first of more American investors who will come here soon. GM is one of the largest American companies, both in America and in the world. And so I congratulate, actually, Uzbekistan in reaching a deal with GM because that is a very important development.

**Qiyofa newspaper:** We know that the United States has been promoting human rights, but recently we

learned that the U.S Government has forcefully dispersed peaceful demonstrators who came out to protest against the war in Iraq and demand the return of the U.S. forces from Iraq. Don't you think that it is a violation of human rights to use force to disperse protestors?

**Ambassador Norland:** I am not familiar with the incident you are referring to. Is this in the U.S. that protests were dispersed? When, is it today?

**Qiyofa newspaper:** Recently.

**Ambassador Norland:** We have the right to protest. Usually you have to turn to authorities to obtain permission. Frankly speaking, I am not familiar with the incident you are referring to. Usually if they obtain permission, there is no problem. You are also talking about the broader issue of Iraq. And it is a controversial issue in American politics. Quite honestly, it is an issue in the American presidential election campaign and so the results of the election will say a great deal about how the American people view the Iraq issue. But as a matter of principle people in America who are unhappy with the war have the right to demonstrate peacefully and show their feelings about it. And then they have the right to vote for the candidate who will reflect their preferred approach, because the Republican and Democratic candidates do have slightly differing opinions on how to handle Iraq.

**Dilmurod Sayid, journalist:** I've been preparing an article critical of the activities of the U.S. Consular Section in Uzbekistan. Uzbek people travel to the U.S. only because there is a need for them to travel, unlike some Westerners who travel for leisure. One tenth of them [visa applicants] do not receive visas; they also do not get an explanation why they were refused a visa. They come again and again and they do not get an explanation, but they pay a fee for going through this visa interview. I think that it is not diplomacy, but a kind of murky business to make money. What do you think?

**Ambassador Norland:** Well, as a diplomat I sometimes regret that we have to charge people for the applications whether they get the visa or not. All I can tell you is that the business of processing visas is expensive. Congress has charged these fees and I can assure you that they are not used for any murky business. And Carol reminds me here that this is not only in Uzbekistan but in all other consulates. I want you to stop and think for a minute about the position of our Visa Consuls who are responsible for issuing the visas. Several American Vice Consuls about six years ago issued the visas to the people who flew the planes into the World Trade Towers. There is a tremendous responsibility that is placed on these officers. And the process for scrutinizing the visas is now much more complicated. It used to be that you could make these decisions here at post. Now they, most visas, almost all visas have to be referred to Washington for approval. And that process is, as I say, much more complicated and expensive now which is one reason why we charge the fees. It is also important to understand that U.S. immigration law puts the burden on the visa applicant to prove that they are not planning to immigrate to the United States when they apply for that visa. The burden of proof is on the applicant. You say that one tenth of the applicants were denied. In recent years, it was a case that 50 percent of people who got visas to go to the United States did not come back to Uzbekistan. And I think that says something about the economic situation here which needs to be looked at. What I can tell you now is that if the applicant comes with proper documentation to show that they have connections to Uzbekistan and they plan to return, I think there is a reasonable chance that they can receive the visa.

**Dilmurod Sayid, journalist:** My question was why they do not get an explanation of refusal; this is my biggest question.

**Ambassador Norland:** They do get an explanation. They are given a letter and the letter says: "You do not qualify under provision X of the law"; and 99 percent of the time it is the provision which says that you have to prove that you are not an intending immigrant. If you see it as useful, we can arrange a meeting with our Consul, with whom you can discuss these issues. If someone would like to talk about a concrete case, then there is a possibility to meet with the Consul.

**Oriat Dono FM radio station:** I'd like to add to the Qiyofa correspondent's question. The demonstration in the U.S. was last week in New York where peaceful demonstrators went to a demonstration dedicated to the fifth anniversary of the launch of the military operations in Iraq and 70 protestors were arrested. Many TV and radio companies reported about this, including Euronews.

**Ambassador Norland:** I look at the AP headlines. And I haven't seen about this incident.

**Oriat Dono FM radio station:** I read the Human Rights Report on Uzbekistan which was posted on the website on March 12. I read the criticism on the child labor in Uzbekistan. In this regard, I'd like to remind you of a report which was issued by several human rights organizations in the U.S, where they mentioned that 800 children were involved in corn harvest works. In this regard, why does the U.S. see the shortcomings in other countries, yet try to conceal its shortcomings?

**Ambassador Norland:** Well, first of all, any country is welcome to do a human rights report on the United States. If we did one on ourselves, it would probably lack credibility. But I have told the Uzbekistan Foreign Ministry that their Embassy in Washington is welcome to analyze the human rights situation in the United States and a number of embassies and other organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch do that. We are not trying to say the U.S. is perfect. We know we have many problems in our country. Congress requires us to do this report every year and we do our duty. On the child labor issue here, I think it is a very nuanced situation, more nuanced than some people will say. I think that some try to politicize this issue. But we know that various international organizations such as UNICEF and ILO carry out close dialogue with the Uzbek Government and I am confident that it will result in something positive.

**Ezgulik human rights organization:** Last year there were special envoys from the Department of State as well as representatives from Human Rights Watch, who came to Uzbekistan in order to hold talks with the government of Uzbekistan. They did not meet with other organizations and, in this regard, do you think they have some kind of hidden agenda in terms of a relationship with Uzbekistan, because for example the European Union has some unclear situations in regard to sanctions and, as a chief diplomat of the United States, do you have some strategic plan in regards to Uzbekistan or does it depend on the behavior of President Karimov?

**Ambassador Norland:** We have no hidden agenda here. Our relationship is improving. There is still some room for progress in some areas. And we are confident that through engagement and dialog we are going to continue to make progress. I think you had a question and this is going to be the last one.

**Uzbek Radio [in Uzbek]:** In light of improving relations between the United States and Uzbekistan, do you think ACCELS and IREX will re-open their offices in Uzbekistan?

**Ambassador Norland:** One thing I should say is that, in addition to English and Russian, Uzbek language I think is also becoming very strong here. I am sorry that I don't have any Uzbek yet. I hope that ACCELS will return. It is very important for us, because all work related to students exchanges is very complex. It requires a lot of paperwork. At present, our colleague Carol and her section are dealing with this issue. We really need ACCELS and IREX to return to do this job. And I think that there are talks going on in this regard. And the last question, please.

**AP:** Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned several times that the relations with Uzbekistan are improving. Are these relations improving under conditions of the Uzbek side or under the conditions set by the West?

**Ambassador Norland:** It is a very good question for the next meeting. We will be discussing this and other more strategic questions in our next meeting. This is a question that requires a long answer. Thank you.

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