



Remarks to the Press Upon Departure From Haiti

Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

Airport Lounge
Port-au-Prince, Haiti
December 20, 2005

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: (in French) My name is Nicholas Burns and I am the Under Secretary of State of the United States in Washington, D.C. I am here in Port-au-Prince with an American team that is here to give our country's support to the Haitian people for the elections and a new government.

We had a very good day today here in Port-au-Prince. We had meetings with the Prime Minister and his team. We had lunch with representatives of the civil society here in Port-au-Prince; then we had talks with United Nations officials, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Electoral Council; and once again a second discussion with the Prime Minister.

I will say something in English to allow the direct translation in Creole and then I will be ready to answer all the questions. Thank you.

(in English) Ladies and gentlemen, let me just say that I am very pleased to be here with our Assistant Secretary of State, Tom Shannon, with Ambassador Carlos Pascual, and of course with Ambassador Tim Carney.

We have had a very good day of meetings here in Port-au-Prince. We came with one aim in mind, one objective in mind: we are strongly supporting the elections on January 8, the second round of elections if necessary in February, and the swearing-in of a new government, and a new president at the end of February. We think this is an extremely important time in the history of Haiti because the people of Haiti have an opportunity now to overcome the challenges of the past decade and to renew their society and to form a new government that, we hope, will provide stability and peace and economic reform to the country.

In all of our meetings today we focused on the question of the elections scheduled for January 8 and we were very pleased to hear from Prime Minister Latortue that he is determined that these elections will take place on the 8th of January. We just came from a meeting in his office with Mr. Bernard of the CEP, with MINUSTAH, Ambassador Valdès and also with the OAS. All of these officials agreed that the elections must go forward as scheduled.

There is never going to be a perfect time for these elections and there are still a considerable number of challenges that have to be overcome before the elections will be held on January 8th. But we were able to have an international conclave of sorts, where everyone was around the same table, and everyone agreed that it will be important to follow through with the commitment so that the Haitian people can vote on that day.

The key issue that all of these officials talked to us about was the voter card. And everyone from the Prime Minister and all the other officials assured us that those cards will be available, that people just have to go to pick them up. And if the cards are not available, for whatever reason, to some people, the receipt from the voting registration will allow that person to vote on January 8th. So we, my colleagues and I, suggested to the Prime Minister and to the international elections officials that they mount an ambitious information campaign on Haitian television and Haitian radio and through the good offices of the newspapers to remind citizens of the possibility of voting, of the possibility of getting a voter card, and if that is not possible, of the receipt for registration that will allow them to vote, it will get them to the polls and will allow them to cast the ballot.

What it is at stake here is the opportunity for Haitians to restore their democracy. That's what these elections will provide and that's why the United States is strongly supporting these elections. All of the officials with whom we met, beginning with the Prime Minister, denounced the violence that has been too prevalent on the streets of this country and this city over these past months. And all of us, of course, are very much opposed and condemn the spate of kidnappings that have taken place here in Haiti in recent weeks. We condemn equally the murder today in Cité Soleil of a Canadian police official who is here to help the Haitian people. He was murdered brutally this morning. The officials of MINUSTAH, including Ambassador Valdès, assured us that MINUSTAH is dedicated to making sure that violence does not play a role in this election and that people should not be intimidated from exercising their democratic right to vote.

Finally, let me say that the United States is a good friend of Haiti, we are hoping for a positive and successful election. And we are already looking beyond the elections to the creation of a new government. President Bush and Secretary of State Rice both believe that there is an opportunity for the United States to be helpful to the Haitian people following the elections. We have extended over \$400 million U.S. dollars in assistance to Haiti in the last 18 months. We are planning to commit at least \$116 million dollars in 2006 for projects here to benefit the Haitian people. In addition to that, we intend to continue to subsidize and to support the operation of MINUSTAH -- we are a major financial contributor to MINUSTAH -- so that MINUSTAH may have a reaffirmation of its mission as of February 2006. We hope very much that it will be extended here at that time.

So my colleagues and I will return to Washington to report to our Secretary of State. She was here in September. She has a great interest, as does President Bush, in the course of the elections, and we will report that we think that there is every reason to believe, based on what we have heard today, that these elections will go forward and be successful.

I will be very happy to respond to any questions you may have.

QUESTION: (in French) We know that safety remains the preoccupation of all Haitians and the members of the international community working on the organization of these elections. Ambassador Valdès has requested helicopters during the elections from the United States of America. Is there an American plan to reinforce MINUSTAH during the elections?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: (in French) Thank you for the question. We thoroughly discussed the situation in regard to the elections with Ambassador Valdès today. We had two meetings with him. There is not an American plan for security -- that it is the responsibility of the United Nations, MINUSTAH, and also the responsibility of the Haitian National Police. Ambassador Valdès told us that he is very comfortable with the level of assistance from the United States to MINUSTAH. I believe that we are the leader in regard to financial assistance and political assistance to MINUSTAH itself.

We discussed the elections. In the last weeks there have been discussions about the helicopters, but not much [today]. And I believe that MINUSTAH plans to [include helicopters in its election budget], but we must examine the details. It is my opinion that Ambassador Valdès is very comfortable with the plan. MINUSTAH is very strong and MINUSTAH is ready to ensure its responsibilities for safety here during the elections.

QUESTION: (in English) Did you receive assurances regarding the possible errors in the database of up to 1.5 million people who could be registered in the wrong voting centers? Did you receive assurances that would not disrupt the elections process?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: (in English) I should say that we had two conversations with the elections officials, as well as with the Prime Minister, and I left feeling comfortable that they have a fairly complete database of the potential voters. The challenge is: will those voters be informed as to where they need to go to get their voting cards. And if for any reason they can't get their voting cards or the voting cards are not ready for some individuals, the challenge will be that they will need to take their receipt from the registration and that will permit them to vote.

I would just say, to follow on, just to finish the answer to your question, there is never going to be a perfect time for these elections and especially in a country like this, that has had so many challenges to face over many years. But the time to have this election has come. It would not be a good idea, in our view, to keep extending and delaying and postponing the date of these elections. There is an interim government in place, but it is interim -- it has not been elected by the people. What is, in our view, as a friend of Haiti, absolutely necessary now is to have a government that is elected. That is the opportunity that January 8th brings to this country, in our view.

(in French) Now they are telling me that I should leave, so I thank you for your questions and wish you the best for Christmas, the New Year and of course for January 8th.

Thank you.

Released on December 22, 2005

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