



Interview With Satinder Bindra, CNN Senior Correspondent

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs
New Delhi, India
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SATINDER BINDRA:How has this been like, Ambassador, your first trip here? Any big surprises? Or you've just sort of settled in real fast?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think I've settled in fairly quickly. With a country like India, there's always a lot of stuff you just don't know, and so you go back, do your history, talk to your staff, and... I picked it up. I know the issues, I know where we want to go. I just don't always know the history. Sometimes, the Indian side... they're frank, they tell me how to do things, and...

SATINDER BINDRA: Ambassador, grave concern in South Asia, that Nepal is headed to perhaps becoming a failed state. How do you read it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think we have a lot of concern, along with the countries of this region, that Nepal is headed in decidedly the wrong direction. The steps the King took a year ago to eliminate democracy and to try to run the country, they haven't worked, and they're not working, and they're not going to work. The steps he's taking now to arrest people, they're not working. There needs to be a restoration of democracy. The political parties need to be able to stay together, move together, but then have a democracy, run the country democratically. And the Maoists really have to abandon this fight. Because they're doing horrible things. They're killing people, they're going into villages, and they're bombing people. There may be a partial cease-fire in the country now, but there's still horrible things happening out there. The only way to solve this is for politics to come back and democracy to come back.

SATINDER BINDRA:How can you engineer a political solution there? What do you have to do? What does the U.S. have to do?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think first we have to work with others, and many people have some influence in the situation, as many of us that can talk frankly to the King, talk to the political parties... There are many things we can do to support political parties during this difficult period and to discourage the King, to withdraw some of the support that we've put in that direction.

SATINDER BINDRA: But more specifically, your message to the King?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: My message is restore democracy.

SATINDER BINDRA: Would you agree to having the Maoists join part of the political mainstream? Would you agree to have the Maoists become part of any future government in Nepal?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't think that's a choice for us. We're not going to decide the future government of Nepal. We want it to be chosen democratically. The parties that are violent should abandon the violence, and stop the horrors, and then move into the political mainstream. They can contest power through a political way. If they win, they win. If they don't, they don't.

SATINDER BINDRA: Now you've been thinking about restoring arms supplies to Nepal. Is that something that has been finalized? Or is the thought process...

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No, there were some erroneous reports on that. We have not been thinking about restoring arms assistance in Nepal. We are not looking at any change in our policy of not providing lethal aid from the United States to Nepal.

SATINDER BINDRA: Mr. Ambassador, how do you see the future there? How are you going to work with India to do something there, because recently hundreds have been arrested?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We've got to work together with India, neither one of us can do this alone. There are other countries that have a lot of influence. I think the first step is for the international community to work together. The message is very clear. We all need to deliver it, and the King needs to listen.

SATINDER BINDRA: If these protests continue over the next few months, then what? How do you see the situation?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, we'll deal with the situation as it evolves. I think there's always more things we can do to continue essentially the same policy, and make the King understand that half is not working, of making clear to everyone that restoring the political process is the only way for Nepal to find a better future.

SATINDER BINDRA:When all these protests happen – tear gas is fired, hundreds of politicians are arrested – what do Nepalese diplomats tell you when you express your concerns? What are they promising? What are they thinking of doing?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know at this point, they laid out a course, which is basically the continuation of the present course – more elections without real participation, more efforts by the King to manipulate the political situation. That's just not working. It's not going to work. It's not the right thing, and it's not working. Really, the only thing is to restore political parties and democracy.

SATINDER BINDRA: Ambassador, has the nuclear deal been a harder sell than the Administration first thought, at least in Congress?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think we understood how difficult some of these questions are. It's not easy to define how this deal works with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, how it works with the traditional system, and what it really means for India and its future. We've tried to help people understand those things. But, there are a lot of serious questions there, we knew that, we knew there were serious questions. A lot of people early on sort of started to say no; now we've had a lot of people start to say yes. So you know, that's politics. We'll see how it works out. We're still confident. We're still optimistic that this deal will pass our Congress, that it will pass the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, but we all have to do our part, and we'll try to get there.

SATINDER BINDRA:What are you doing to convince the fence sitters?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Part of it is laying the facts before them, letting them see what India's nuclear power program is, letting them see the important role that nuclear power has to play in the development of the Indian economy. Letting them see the benefit, what effects this will have on our relationship, on India's ability to produce power without putting more pressure on the oil markets or polluting the air more. So, getting the facts out, talking to people who have questions and answering their questions.

SATINDER BINDRA: Is there anything India can do to make this an easier sell in Congress?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: There are about four or five pieces that have to be put together. India has to do its part, and has indeed started to do its part.

SATINDER BINDRA: But be specific. What can India do specifically?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, we're negotiating a bilateral nuclear agreement with India. So, once Congress authorizes the trade, the framework will be in there. It can be in place soon afterwards, whenever possible, for that trade to occur. So we need to have a good negotiation, quick negotiation... India has started talking to the International Atomic Energy Agency, because many people want to know what's the nature of the safeguards that will be applied. So India has begun that by sending a top official to Vienna this week. There are a lot of pieces that we both have to do, and we're both trying to get them done.

SATINDER BINDRA: One of the specific provisions in the legislation that's been tabled in Congress is that should India conduct another nuclear explosion, then the President has the authority to call the entire deal off. Now that's caused a lot of concern here in the Indian media. What do you make of it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think, first of all, India does have a moratorium on nuclear testing that they've adopted, that they've continued, and that it expects to continue. So it shouldn't be much surprise to know that's an important element of this deal.

SATINDER BINDRA: But India wants the right to have possibly in the future another test, if they need to...

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I know. You know, the fact is that all the major nuclear powers have called a moratorium on testing. We continue to do it. We expect India to do what other countries have done. And it just makes clear in the law that that's the expectation of Congress as well.

SATINDER BINDRA: What's it going to take from the Administration in the next few days? What's the strategy? Next few days and weeks, what's the strategy? We can keep this short, if you want.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: A lot of hard work. Patiently answering all the questions. Pursuing all the pieces of the deal that need to be put together.

SATINDER BINDRA: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Thank you.

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