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## Daily Press Briefing

**Adam Ereli, Deputy Spokesman**

Washington, DC

January 10, 2005



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## **TRANSCRIPT:**

1:46 p.m. EST

**MR. ERELI:** Thank you for your patience, everyone. Sorry we were a little delayed, but I think it was worth it to hear from Director Natsios.

For my part, if we could begin with our regular accounting of the welfare and whereabouts of American citizens in the wake of tsunami disaster. To date, we have received 30,000 welfare and whereabouts inquiries. We have responded to -- I've got to do my math, I didn't do it before -- 28,200. So that leaves us with 800 -- about 800 that we're still working on. Does that add up?

**QUESTION:** No.

**MR. ERELI:** I'm sorry.

**QUESTION:** 1,800.

**MR. ERELI:** We've got 800 -- we've got 800 welfare and whereabouts inquiries we're looking at, we're still trying to track down. That's out of a total of 30,000 received.

**QUESTION:** Would it work faster if you had somebody who could add?

**MR. ERELI:** No, it would work faster if I had a calculator. I would note that last Friday when I briefed you, we were standing at about 2,100 welfare and whereabouts inquiries, so we've been able to make considerable progress. The number of American citizens confirmed dead stands at 18. The number of American citizen presumed dead is also at 18.

We were able over the weekend to confirm one death and eliminate one duplication in the presumed missing -- presumed dead category. Eighteen -- I'm sorry, 10 of the confirmed American citizens dead were in Thailand and eight in Sri Lanka.

Yes, Teri.

**QUESTION:** Could you characterize what kind of inquiries are coming off the list now? Because there are obviously not bodies being found, or the death count toll would change. So have these been found to be people that never were missing, just had never called in, weren't in the area, were in the area but are safe?

**MR. ERELI:** All of the above. There's really no way I can characterize them beyond that. I mean, there are cases of people who were in the area and have called in. There are cases of people who called in a long time ago but those who were initially making the inquiries never let us know. There are people who we've been able to track down that never knew they were the subject of an inquiry.

So it's the full range of things. With a number this large, you're obviously going to get a wide variety of cases.

**QUESTION:** And so the number of missing still is unclear, even as the inquiries are dropped to 800?

**MR. ERELI:** The number -- again, to stick to the vocabulary we use, we don't use missing, we don't use names, we use inquiries. And we've got 812 inquiries that we are trying to answer and trying to respond to.

**QUESTION:** Right, but last week you said you may be able to number -- to narrow it down to missing soon.

**MR. ERELI:** No. There's no narrowing down that we've been able to do.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you about Ukraine? Has it settled down, all the --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, let me just -- are we done with tsunami issues?

**QUESTION:** I'm sorry.

**QUESTION:** No.

**MR. ERELI:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Actually, I have some questions. There are some families in Thailand who -- of the missing or victims -- that have been very critical about the Embassy's efforts there in terms of them responding to their requests and about not being able to match their photo that they provided with a list of missing people. I mean, do you have any response

to this? They say that the Embassy seems really mismanaged and technologically not up to date.

**MR. ERELI:** Well, it is hard to respond to concerns about Americans looking for their loved ones when you answer the question without any details or without any specificity.

Number one, I think it is understandable that Americans who are concerned about the welfare and whereabouts of their loved ones are looking for answers and are looking for the U.S. Government to provide answers. For our part, I can tell you the entire U.S. Government is focused on that task. We've got our -- in Thailand -- we've got the State Department working on it, our Embassy working on it, our consular officers working on it. We've got consular officers in Phuket. We've got consular officers throughout the region working on the ground, working with NGOs, working with other missions, other embassies, to get the information and track down the information and try to match the information we have with the information that is being provided by families.

I think that there are inevitably going to be cases where what we are able to find out and the answers we give are not going to answer all the questions, and that's why we continue to work it and continue to try to narrow it down. But I don't know what the specific case that you're asking about is. I don't know what they're upset about. But all I can tell you is that you've got a lot of dedicated professionals who are focused 100 percent on trying to account for the whereabouts of every one of the 812 inquiries that we have outstanding, and that includes the case you mentioned.

**QUESTION:** Is there a team of professionals in the region that are kind of ready to go in an emergency like this or, you know, was the kind of presence in the embassy have to be expanded? I mean, the implication of some of these families was that the embassy just wasn't equipped to deal with a disaster of this magnitude.

**MR. ERELI:** The answer is both. We have basically built-in surge capacity in the sense that when disaster strikes, we can quickly move people to the field to help. This was certainly the case in Thailand, where we had consular officers who were from nearby posts who immediately went to Thailand, and there were consular officers who were actually on vacation in Thailand who went off of vacation, said, I'm not going to go back -- I don't need to go back to my country where I was normally assigned. If you need me, I can stay here. And they did stay there and they did help out.

So we had that initial support, number one, and number two, as this crisis has continued, and as the scope of the crisis mounted, we provided additional assets to our posts in the field as well as here in Washington. That's another sort of thing to understand when you are looking at a response to a crisis like this is -- yes, you put additional assets in the field, but you also beef up what you're doing here.

In this specific case, we immediately convened within a few hours of the disaster a very robust task force, which is a special group operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in our Operations Center, to coordinate the U.S. Government response to this crisis. That task force included a special Consular Affairs component. So you had -- I think you had plussed-up assets in the field to deal with the people out there, and you had plussed-up assets back here to coordinate what was going on in Thailand, in Sri Lanka, in Indonesia and with the rest of the U.S. Government. And that is, frankly, standard operating procedure. When you have a crisis of this kind of magnitude and this kind of importance, you've got to readjust and you've got to use your resources in a way that meets the demand. And we've certainly been trying to do that from the very beginning.

Again, to get back to the point that you raised earlier, there are, unfortunately, 812 inquiries still out there, meaning 812 people who asked questions are waiting for answers. And we take pride in the fact that we've answered 29,200 of those -- now I did the math -- but that doesn't -- we don't lose sight of the fact that there are still 800 remaining.

**QUESTION:** Adam, just one more on this. In terms of the Embassy in Thailand itself, is there -- you know, would you say that the Embassy is overtaxed? Is there a system, whether it be for this embassy or other systems, in terms of trying to match a picture or a name with a list, I mean, is there a kind of comprehensive procedure in place to try and sort out some of these missing reports?

**MR. ERELI:** That is -- as I said, I wouldn't focus just on the Embassy in Thailand because, as I said earlier, this is an effort that the entire government is working on. That includes Thailand. That includes Utapao, where you're coordinating military assistance and relief assistance, and AID is at Utapao as well. And it includes back here at Washington.

Now, in the individual cases and how the sort of legwork, the detective work, is done on the ground, you have people in Thailand trying to track down evidence of people being in certain places or not being in certain places or leaving or going and that sort of thing. And as we said, that's sometimes a difficult task when Americans aren't -- don't register at the embassy or don't communicate with people or leave indications of where they are. But we've made progress on it in dealing with Thai immigration authorities, we've made progress on it in dealing with travel industry representatives. So those are all things people in Thailand are doing. I think -- we don't have indications that they lack resources. If they did lack resources, if they didn't have what they need in terms of personnel or capabilities, we'd get it to them. But we haven't heard that they're overstretched in that regard.

But at the same time, there are people back here in Washington supporting that and doing other parts of that effort. So if you have one person that you're looking for, you could have people in the Embassy in Thailand doing things, you could have people back here doing things. It depends on what the records are. It depends on what the information we have available is. It depends on who's best situated to go to the places that need to be asked and get the information.

**QUESTION:** On Ukraine --

**QUESTION:** Adam, a follow-up on that. Last week, you were asked the question about the numbers of people you actually had deployed.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** And I never heard an answer. Perhaps you provided one. I never heard it if you did. And I know it's probably a fluctuating number.

**MR. ERELI:** Right.

**QUESTION:** Some in, some out. Do you have any way to quantify the number of people you've had out in the field?

**MR. ERELI:** We actually have not quantified it in that way for a couple of reasons. One is because the number is fluctuating all the time in terms of people moving in, people moving out.

Second of all, we don't think it gives the full picture of everything that's being done. The answer we're comfortable with is there are hundreds of government officials from all kinds of agencies working to find out the welfare -- to answer the welfare and whereabouts inquiries of American citizens. There are hundreds of consular officials in the region and in Washington. But let's not ignore the other embassy officials: Regional Security Officers who are going to law enforcement; medical officials who are going to local medical offices; officials from other agencies, whether they be the Centers for Disease Control or the military, who, when they find information or look for information, get it back to our consular officers.

So it's not something that we want to give you -- can easily give you a specific number of consular officials who are working on this, because, as I said, the number is fluctuating but, number two, it doesn't tell the whole story. The whole story is told by the wide variety of government officials helping out in this effort.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you about Ukraine?

**MR. ERELI:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Has the process of -- appeals process, if you will, gone far enough along that you're able to accept that the runoff elections results.

**MR. ERELI:** Was that a question?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Are you able to accept the runoff election results as --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I'm not aware that a final certification of results has been made. So we would certainly wait until that result is made before commenting on the final results. Also, it is our understanding that after the election commission does announce the official certification results, Ukrainian law allows seven days for the submission of any appeals of the certification to the Supreme Court. So I think there are a couple of steps that have yet to take place.

One, the Central Election Commission has to certify the results; two, any appeals have to be heard and ruled upon. We would certainly expect the Supreme Court would act promptly and fairly and transparently in reviewing such complaints.

But before any of that happens, we're not going to speak to or comment on what the final results are, simply because they haven't been officially pronounced.

**QUESTION:** That sounds like more days than the Secretary of State has on the job. Can we pretty much conclude he will not go to the installation -- inauguration?

**MR. ERELI:** I would take this one step at a time.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**QUESTION:** Of course, the timing is a bit fluid, but if it does fall while he's still Secretary of State, is it his hope, even if he can't attend, is it his hope to go to the inauguration?

**MR. ERELI:** I would just take this one step at a time.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Can I ask you another on Ukraine?

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** The outgoing president has given a green light for the Ukrainian troops to leave Iraq. Now, this follows a blast that did kill several Ukrainian soldiers. Although the lawmakers asked for this move to be taken a while back, the timing of it is a little suspicious. Does this smack of Ukraine running scared now that they've had their own casualties, or did they coordinate this abrupt departure with you?

**MR. ERELI:** I would reject any notion that anybody is running scared in this matter. First of all, Ukraine has courageously supported the multinational force in Iraq. They are one of the largest contributors of troops. They are an important partner to the coalition's efforts. We value their contribution and we recognize their sacrifice.

We certainly express our deep condolences on the death of eight Ukrainian soldiers and one Kazakhstani soldier who were killed in an explosion in Iraq over the weekend, and we wish the wounded a speedy recovery.

As far as what Ukraine's further plans are with its troop deployments, this is going to be an issue for the incoming president and incoming parliament to decide. We would certainly look to any change in Ukraine's contingent to be done in full consultation and with the multinational force and in a measured way. And it, I think in no way -- what is done in the future should in no way detract from what has been contributed in the past, which, as I said earlier, is brave and courageous service in support of a noble cause. And for that, Ukraine, I think, should -- has every right to stand proudly with those who have worked to support the ambitions of the Iraqi people.

**QUESTION:** I'm all right to think, then, that your belief is the decision on withdrawing troops depends -- rests with the incoming leader and with the incoming parliament, and not Kuchma?

**MR. ERELI:** This is a decision that the incoming government is going to look at and make. I'm not aware -- I suppose the new government -- or the government in power now, the transitional government could decide something, but I'm not aware that that decision is, frankly, on the docket.

**QUESTION:** You haven't heard that Yushchenko also doesn't approve of troops in Ukraine?

**MR. ERELI:** Sure we've heard that.

**QUESTION:** Okay, you've heard it?

**QUESTION:** Ukraine? Or troops in Iraq?

**QUESTION:** I mean, sorry, Ukrainian troops in Iraq, yeah.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes ma'am.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Two Kuwaiti security men were killed today in Kuwait. And can you update me on any talks between Washington and Kuwait or, you know, U.S. officials and Kuwait regarding that? And does this have anything to do with the Iraq elections coming up, do you believe?

**MR. ERELI:** I'm not familiar with the report of the killings that you mentioned, so I can't really comment on that. I wouldn't -- and for that reason, I don't have any basis on which to respond to speculation that what happened in Kuwait is connected in any way to Iraq. I think that is -- sounds like speculation to me.

As far as coordination contact with U.S. officials and Kuwaiti officials, we have a very close and ongoing program of counterterrorism cooperation. It's part of a much broader bilateral dialogue and bilateral relationship. And I think we enjoy, I think, very productive contacts in the counterterrorism area. We are both committed to working against those who would support violence and the killing of innocents for their twisted agenda, whether it be in Iraq or whether it be in Kuwait or whether it be elsewhere.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up?

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can you say anything more about this warden message that went out to Americans in Kuwait about a potential car that's seeking to -- individuals in this specific car that are seeking to attack Americans and Westerners and whether there's any specific kind of reconnaissance or efforts going on to apprehend them?

**MR. ERELI:** Yes, well, I can assure you there are efforts underway to address the nature of this threat, but I don't have more information about the threat beyond what was said in the warden message.

**QUESTION:** About the Iraqi election. You know, are there almost 5,000 either Turkish PKK terrorists, they are living in the northern Iraq. Are you giving them the right to vote in coming Iraqi election? Are they registered as an electoral --

**MR. ERELI:** For who's voting and who's qualified to vote in Iraq, I'd refer you to the Iraqi -- the Independent Elections Commission of Iraq. I can't answer that question. What I can tell you is that the United States Government has made it clear to the Government of Turkey that we regard the PKK as a terrorist organization and that, together with Iraq, we are committed to preventing the PKK from using Iraqi territory for attacks against Turkey.

**QUESTION:** Is that U.S. policy you never touch with or talk with the terrorists, right?

**MR. ERELI:** True.

**QUESTION:** But recently, three times in the Iraqi official -- U.S. officials visit the PKK terrorist camp and they spoke with them.

**MR. ERELI:** I don't know that that's true.

**QUESTION:** They have a picture --

**MR. ERELI:** That's what you say. I have not -- that does -- I'm aware of no visit by a U.S. official to a PKK camp or discussions with PKK.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And another question is the Ambassador Edelman in Ankara, he said that don't bother to whatever the Iraqi Kurdish leader said, that we come to agreement with the Turkish officials to solve or respond to Iraqi Kurdish area. Can you elaborate what kind of --

**MR. ERELI:** No, I'm sorry, I did not see those remarks so I'd refer you to the Embassy for them.

**QUESTION:** Adam, can I ask you about the post-election game plan, if you have one?

**MR. ERELI:** In Iraq?

**QUESTION:** On the Electoral Commission --

**QUESTION:** No, in the territories.

**QUESTION:** Can I --

**MR. ERELI:** Back to Iraq?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Do you have any reaction to reports that the Electoral Commission resigned over the weekend? Which has been reported before, not been true, but --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, there have been a number of reports. We cannot confirm it. This is a report that the Electoral Commission Board of Anbar Province resigned. We cannot confirm it. I think for details you'll have to go to the Iraq -- the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq.

What I would say is that, obviously, ongoing violence continues to be a challenge for these elections. The members and workers of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq are showing great courage and great patriotism and a great sense of public service in working to -- in working throughout the country to help prepare for the elections. And we, I think, salute them. Despite the threats that they face, their preparations are continuing. They continue to hire staff. They continue to take care of the logistics for elections throughout Iraq, and as a result preparations are moving forward for an election on -- at the end of January.

So, in short, they're facing challenges, they're confronting them courageously and they're overcoming them.

**QUESTION:** But why can't you -- the U.S. is working closely with these people. Why wouldn't you be able to confirm whether or not that's happened?

**MR. ERELI:** Because there are conflicting reports and it's not clear exactly what happened. So rather than comment publicly on something that we don't have all the information on, it's better to go directly to the source.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** This is about concerns that there may not be enough Sunni participation in the election and/or enough Sunnis voting. Can you respond to reports that you're perhaps considering with the Iraqis reserving some seats for Sunnis after the election?

**MR. ERELI:** That's a report that we've spoken to, the -- and we've actually, I think, refuted fairly categorically. There are 275 seats up for election on January 30th, and the elections will fill those seats. That is what's provided for in the Transitional Administrative Law and that is what the International Election -- Independent Election Commission of Iraq is committed to doing and we're going to support that.

Yes, Adi.

**QUESTION:** Can you give us an update on the MEK? Are they -- have any members of that group left Iraq for other countries, let's say, Iran, for example? And what is the status of that entity right now in terms of how the U.S. is dealing with them?

**MR. ERELI:** That status of the entity hasn't changed. It's a Foreign Terrorist Organization and we're dealing with them as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

As you know, there are a number of MEK members and affiliated persons in -- under coalition supervision in Iraq. Some of them have been -- some of them that are not -- that have not -- that have been found not to have engaged in terrorist activity have been voluntarily repatriated to Iran. There are others who do not want to go back to Iran and third-country repatriation options are being looked at. But beyond that, I don't have anything new to say.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you about Iran? Today, again, a senior official, Museveni, he sometimes has a voice on nuclear issues, has muddied the waters of the negotiations with the EU-3, saying that if Iran's needs aren't satisfied by March then they will end the suspension of uranium enrichment.

My question is, what's your reaction to this type of statement that shows their suspension is only that; it's a limited suspension? It's not going to be -- and it doesn't appear to be anything permanent. Do we just for the inevitable -- for the negotiations to inevitably collapse?

**MR. ERELI:** What we're waiting for is for Iran to adequately respond to and answer the concerns of the international community as expressed in multiple Board of Governor -- IAEA Board of Governor resolutions, and as expressed in their meetings with the EU-3.

Clearly Iran's uranium enrichment program is a concern. There are clearly outstanding questions that have not been answered. It is -- we look to Iran to provide answers to the questions, and the kind of transparency and openness and forthrightness which would dispel the many and significant doubts the international community has about its program.

I haven't seen Museveni's remarks and I can't speak to the latest state of negotiations between Iran and the EU-3. But clearly, there's a purpose behind these negotiations and that purpose is to help bring Iran into compliance with what their NPT and IAEA obligations are. Their uranium enrichment program is obviously something that causes -- that raises grave doubts about that commitment. And they've got every opportunity to dispel those doubts, but they, I think, steadfastly persist in causing more problems than they solve.

**QUESTION:** So is there anything that the U.S. can do to help the EU-3 in their negotiations or does it all depend on Iran?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, look, the United States and the EU-3 have the same objective, which is to -- which is to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons. And we believe they have a nuclear weapons program. To the extent that we have supported this EU initiative, we think it's -- we think it can help move things in the right direction. But as I said -- and we continue to, I think, consult with them and share information.

But let's remember there's an IAEA process that, at the end of the day, Iran is going to have to answer to.

**QUESTION:** With respect to Iran, there's a report that Halliburton, through some of its subsidiaries in the Cayman Islands and elsewhere, have an ongoing contract right now with Iran. Isn't that highly illegal as far as you're concerned?

**MR. ERELI:** I'll have to check on it. I don't know what contract you're talking about.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I change the subject?

**MR. ERELI:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Do you have any reaction to the now release of the Oil-for-Food documents and the -- what some consider pretty damning evidence that the UN knew what was happening through its own probes over the years?

**MR. ERELI:** Actually, there are two releases to talk about. One is the release of documents by the Independent Inquiry Committee, and I think you're talking about the audit reports. We're studying these reports. We certainly welcome their release. The State Department, like the UN and like Mr. Volcker, wants a full accounting of the Oil-for-Food program. These documents, I think, are welcome in increasing our understanding about how that program was managed, as well as increasing the congressional -- helping the congressional investigations.

We would expect, or we expect that the Independent Inquiry Committee will release all the documents related to this investigation, as well as the Oil Overseers' Report, as we've requested, and in the interests of full transparency.

For our part, we are also releasing a number of documents to the Independent Inquiry Committee, at their request. We have been working quite intensively over the last weeks and months to respond to their requests for documents and information over an eight-and-a-half-year period of time. We worked with the Iraqi authorities, particularly the Board of Supreme Audit, to ensure that the Volcker committee received thousands of pages of Iraqi Oil Ministry documents in August 2004. And, at the Volcker committee's request, we initiated a search of the State Department's records. And based on our review, based on our discussions with the Volcker Committee, we've worked out a Memorandum of Understanding with the committee that allows us to share documents and communications with the committee, and outlines procedures for the committee to interview State Department employees.

This week we will share the first tranche of documents with the Volcker Committee. And we expect that we will be sharing additional documents. The first tranche numbers in the thousands of pages.

Also, I would note that this week begins -- the Volker Committee begins interviewing State Department employees about their involvement and their work with the program.

**QUESTION:** When was this MOU signed?

**MR. ERELI:** Not very long ago, but I'll have to get you the exact date.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And before that, you said this is the first release.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** It can't -- it's the first tranche of papers that the UN has -- I'm sorry -- that the U.S. has given to the Volcker Committee and it's the first request they've made of you?

**MR. ERELI:** I'll have to check. I think it is. Because they -- I'll have to check and see if this is the first one. It certainly is the largest and the most significant.

**QUESTION:** And do you know if you gave them everything they asked for?

**MR. ERELI:** We have -- yes -- we have endeavored to give them everything that we can find. I don't know if they've -- they've asked for, as I said, they've asked for us to look through eight-and-a-half-years of documents, so this first tranche may not be everything they've asked for, but it's everything we can identify and lay our hands on at the moment.

**QUESTION:** And you don't have any initial response to some of the findings. Is that where you say you're still studying their request?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I think before reacting to the findings -- we're not going to react to the findings, really, until the report is done. That'll be the appropriate time to react to the findings. The committee is preparing their final report. It will be issued in the near future and we'll reserve comment until then.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** New topic. This is about the chemical weapons stockpile in Albania that last year the U.S. earmarked money to help Albania destroy it. Can you talk about how the process is going and whether the Albanians have been cooperative on this and how much longer you think needs -- it needs to be done?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I really -- it would be hard to say how long it's going to take. But the Albanians have been working closely with us and the international community to identify the problem and deal with it.

They have approximately 16 tons of bulk chemical agent that must be destroyed pursuant to the Chemical Weapons Convention. They have fully cooperated with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in identifying the chemical weapons stockpile, in making a full stockpile declaration, in ensuring the stockpile is secure and in moving toward destruction as rapidly as possible.

They have asked for U.S. assistance and we are providing that assistance under the U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction program. The Department of Defense, which is responsible for this program is developing an implementation plan and overseeing agent destruction. That destruction will take place by the CWC convention-mandated deadline of April 29th, 2007. So there is a date. I stand corrected.

And the plan includes movement of a U.S.-supplied portable chemical weapons destruction capability into Albania, the conduct of chemical weapons destruction operations by U.S. contractors, and return of the portable capability back to the U.S. upon completion of the destruction.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Moving on to the Palestinian elections.

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask one more about that? Sorry.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** You say they've got 16 tons of bulk chemical agent?

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** For how long have you've known they've had had that full 16 tons? Do you know?

**MR. ERELI:** My information is that the determination was made in 2002.

**QUESTION:** Okay, moving on to the Palestinian elections. Does the United States still consider the elections successful considering that less than half of eligible Palestinians were able to vote and the fact that Palestinians living outside the occupied territories weren't given the right to vote versus the U.S. supporting Iraqis outside of Iraq to vote?

And also, could you comment on -- in a meeting with Senator Kerry, Sharon had criticized Syria and said Israel is not willing to work with Syria. Can you comment on where does the U.S. stand on that?

**MR. ERELI:** President Bush has issued a statement yesterday welcoming the elections in the Palestinian territories, recognizing them as free and fair.

We certainly see this as a key step towards building a democratic future in the Palestinian territories, and we've made it clear that we stand ready to help the Palestinian people and their new government realize their national aspirations. And we look forward to working with President-elect Mahmoud Abbas in helping to develop the kinds of institutions -- political, security and economic -- that will allow them to meet the needs of the Palestinian people and to help engage with the Israelis in moving towards the establishment of a Palestinian state consistent with the President's vision of two states living side by side.

As far as the situation with Syria goes, the United States has long made it clear that it supports direct engagement between Israel and Syria to resolve the outstanding issues between them and to end the state of war between them. That is something that we have been in the past and we remain ready to support and assist in any way that we can, but that requires, first and foremost, a willingness by the parties to move and to engage. And that's something that we haven't seen until now.

**QUESTION:** So how do these comments impede the process of engagement between the two countries?

**MR. ERELI:** I haven't seen the comments, so I won't -- wouldn't be able to respond to them. Bringing Israel and Syria together to, again, resolve the issues that make the conflict -- that make the conflict outstanding is that's going to take political will on both sides and it's something -- but it's an issue that they're going to have to confront and deal with.

**QUESTION:** Do you have anything to say about where the roadmap process stands now that the election is over?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, it stands where it stood before the elections, which is that you've got an opportunity for progress with the Gaza disengagement plan. That is something that President Abbas, President-elect Abbas, has said he will help work to carry out. You have the need and the importance of consolidating control and authority over Palestinian security forces and moving to end violence, which, again, is a goal that Abbas has endorsed.

So I think the way forward, from our point of view, is very clear. The way forward from the Palestinian and Israeli point of view, as they've stated is, is very clear. And now it's frankly time to get down to business.

**QUESTION:** So do you anticipate that the U.S. will provide any additional direct assistance to the new government to help them with what they need to do? And are you providing the Palestinians with a wish list or, you know, kind of list of tasks that you'd like to see in coordination with the Israelis or Egyptians, in terms of --

**MR. ERELI:** No, there's no wish list -- there's no wish list that I'm aware of. And on the subject of assistance, I think we've not made any decisions regarding assistance, post-election. Obviously, we have been, I think, very generous with our assistance in the past. We're the largest donor. We've given -- we gave \$20 million recently in direct assistance. And we've said that based on Palestinian actions and needs, we'll continue to keep the situation under review.

**QUESTION:** But you don't have a list of -- you haven't identified a list of tasks that you'd like to see the Palestinians do before negotiations can be restarted.

**MR. ERELI:** No, no.

**QUESTION:** Adam, same subject.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes/

**QUESTION:** The Hamas political leader, Khaled Mishal, has said that U.S. officials got in touch with Hamas and met with two Hamas leaders in Gaza. Had you heard that? Do you have anything on that?

**MR. ERELI:** I'd seen the reports, and I checked, and there's no knowledge of any such meeting that I have -- that I have or no meeting that we're aware of ever took place.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up to that.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** On ABC's Nightline, Ted Koppel interviewed him Friday night. Is that troubling? And do you think there were any commitments made between Mr. Abbas and Hamas prior to the election that's going to be a stumbling block?

**MR. ERELI:** I'm not aware of any such commitments. Clearly, for us and for the Israelis and for what the Palestinians have committed to, there's no room in the future of the peace process, or in the future of engagement between the Israelis and Palestinians, for groups like Hamas to carry out terrorist operations and to kill innocent people. That is a basic non-starter. So that is something that's going to have to be dealt with very quickly and very forthrightly.

As far as Mishal talking to American news networks, I don't have any comment really on it.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR. ERELI:** Thanks.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:30 p.m. EST)

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