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On-the-Record Briefing on Lebanon, Iran, and Other Issues

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

New York City

September 19, 2006

(10:45 p.m. EDT)

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: This was the sixth meeting of these foreign ministers since January. We met for two hours -- the ministers and the political directors. It was the shortest of the meetings. Usually these meetings go to 1 or 2 in the morning. And this may have been one of the better meetings. It may have been, in fact, the best meeting.

We started off with a discussion of Lebanon, and in fact the Italian Foreign Minister joined us. And a long conversation of Lebanon over what had happened this summer, but more importantly a lot of conversation about how to make UNIFIL succeed, how to sustain a strong military effort in support of UNIFIL, how to work for an international reconstruction conference that would help to rebuild Lebanon beyond the Stockholm conference that some of you covered. This would be a conference at the World Bank and IMF would help to organize for the longer term reconstruction of the country. So lots of discussion on that, where the Italian Foreign Minister because they're taking the lead, the French Foreign Minister, Secretary Rice and others who are centrally involved exchanged views.

There was also a bit of discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the Quartet and the state of that relationship. That was a good 45 minutes at the beginning of the meeting.

The rest of the evening was focused on Iran, as these meetings usually are. It was a very good discussion. It was a very productive discussion. Productive because -- what's wrong? You don't like the word "productive"? You want another word?

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Pardon?

QUESTION: We knew you were going to say that.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Did you? (Laughter.) Gosh, Glenn, I'm just too predictable. (Laughter.)

Productive because they were able to reaffirm the way forward in how to deal with Iran in the following respect.

Very strong support, first, for Javier Solana's current negotiations with Ali Larijani. I say current. The ones that have been underway now for a couple of weeks. Very strong support for them by everybody.

Second, a reaffirmation that we're all seeking a diplomatic solution to the problem.

Third, and very importantly, we all reaffirmed that 1696 is the basis -- is the avenue forward for these six countries, and that means 1696 in full.

So what that means is, fourth, if Iran does end up suspending its enrichment-related programs, and that would have to be verified by Dr. ElBaradei in the IAEA, then we'll proceed to negotiations. And Secretary Rice reaffirmed the United States -- in fact, she said she would be at those negotiations, the first round.

Fifth, if Iran does not suspend, then we will fulfill 1696; we'll adopt sanctions measures under Article 41 of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

Last, I'd say that -- two more points that they agreed on. They agreed that the political directors would continue to meet this week and next in order to continue our discussion of how to implement 1696; i.e., if we had to get to sanctions, what kind of sanctions would we agree to? And on that I should say -- and also I testified this morning before the Foreign Relations Committee and went through all this for the senators, there is currently no agreement on that. We still need to work that out.

And last, I would characterize the negotiations, the current state of play, as follows. Are there any veterans of Dayton here? November 1995? Yeah, there's Carol. So I think we're in extra innings, meaning the June 1st document and then the 1696 called for a timeline. They called for Iran to suspend -- the Security Council resolution -- by August 31. It's now September 19th. What happened is that in late August the Iranians finally got serious. They sent us that extraordinarily interesting document that a lot of you have read. We are still trying to do a textual analysis of it. Sentence diagramming and that kind of thing. They then began a series of discussions with Solana at the Larijani level and it's the most serious discussions that I think Solana has had since June 1st. And so we are in extra innings. We are seeking a diplomatic solution and the United States is certainly willing to support Solana's discussions.

Now, these extra innings aren't going to be endless and there will come a time shortly, but I won't put a date on it, when we're going to have to see an unequivocal answer because there is no unequivocal answer from the Iranian Government.

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