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Press Briefing by Dana Perino

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:39 P.M. EDT

MS. PERINO: I just realized I have nothing to start with.
(Laughter.)

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Q We could start with Iran, the U.S. meeting with the Iranian envoy. You said today that was a one-time U.S. participation. You're ruling out any further contacts like this?

MS. PERINO: At this point, I don't know of any others. And the State Department certainly described it as a one-time meeting. This is a -- Mr. Solana from the European Union has an already scheduled meeting with the Iranians to get their response to the incentives package that we provided to them about a month ago. And Under Secretary Burns from the State Department will attend that meeting, along with the P5-plus-1, which are our allies in the international community who remain united in the position that Iran must halt its -- I should say suspend its nuclear uranium enrichment. And so, in that regard, our strategy and our goal has remained unchanged.

This is different that we have not participated in one of these meetings beforehand, but we believe it's a smart step to underscore the seriousness that we want to solve this issue diplomatically.

Q Let me follow up on what you just said, that you haven't done this before. Why haven't you? If it's all right now, why haven't you been willing to do it before?

MS. PERINO: We have been working with the international community, the P5-plus-1, the permanent Security Council members plus Germany, on a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions, the third of which we just released about a month ago. And we also got that resolution out -- I'm sorry, not just the resolution, but the incentives package out far and wide for all of the public to see, including the people of Iran, for whom we want to have a better relationship with.

Our beef is with the regime itself. We haven't done so before because the timing wasn't right to do so. We believe the timing is right now to go and underscore the unity of the international community that Iran must suspend its nuclear uranium enrichment, and then we can talk about negotiations from there.

The incentives package is quite generous, but it's only able to be realized if they meet the conditions

that we have long held not just here in the United States, but with our partners as well.

Q So it's just a question of the timing wasn't right, but now it is?

MS. PERINO: Now we have a new incentives package where we will go and be able to sharpen the contrast between what the Iranian people could expect from a more open Iran if they were to suspend its enrichment, but also to clarify the consequences for the Iranians if they don't take us up on the incentives package. There are -- there's two tracks. There is an incentives package, or there's a disincentives package. And the Iranians have a choice to make, and that's why we're going to go and press the issue.

Q What's the disincentive?

MS. PERINO: The disincentives are the sanctions if they don't accept the offer.

Q But you're saying this isn't negotiated? Is this negotiating with the Iranians?

MS. PERINO: Our principle remains the same, and the strategy and the goal remain the same, that they must halt the enrichment of uranium in order for there to be negotiations. And Secretary Rice has long said that that is her position, that if they were to suspend, that Secretary Rice would meet her counterpart anyplace, any time, and start to have negotiations, once it was verified by the IAEA that they had suspended. Nothing has changed in that regard.

Q Well, how can you say nothing has changed if you're sending over Bill Burns to even sit there? I mean, that certainly gives the Iranians --

MS. PERINO: -- different tactic. I said that the substance remains the same, but this is a new tactic. And we believe that -- this follows up on another new tactic that we used with Iran this summer when we sent over the incentives package, which is that Secretary Rice signed the letter, along with the P5-plus-1. The next step is for the political directors, of which Under Secretary Burns is one, representing Secretary Rice, will join in attendance with his partners at this meeting to receive the response from the Iranians.

Q Why is this different from what Senator Obama has suggested, sitting down and negotiating?

MS. PERINO: Well, our condition remains the same that there will not be any negotiation unless they suspend their uranium enrichment.

Q And you just flat out say this is not negotiating, even though there's someone sitting there in the room with the Iranians?

MS. PERINO: The underlying -- absolutely, because he's going there as a part of the international community showing their unity when it comes to the underlying fundamental principle, which is that there will not be any negotiations unless Iran suspends its nuclear -- uranium enrichment.

Q Can you understand why people might look at what's happening now and go back and think about what the President said in the Mideast about those who negotiate with terrorists or talk to terrorists --

MS. PERINO: As I just said --

Q -- as an appeaser?

MS. PERINO: As I said, there is no negotiation here. We are going there. Under Secretary Burns will be there as a part of the international community showing our unison that we are going to provide two paths for the Iranians from which to choose -- one, that they could accept the incentives package, and then if it's verified that they have halted their uranium enrichment, then there will be negotiations. And that's what I would seek to explain to the American people.

Q Just one last one -- I won't hog it here -- but you don't see that for the Iranian regime, this has got to be a pretty big deal, finally getting someone from the U.S. even sitting down there.

MS. PERINO: I think it shows the seriousness from which we've been trying to tell all of you for many months, which is that we want to solve this issue diplomatically. We seek to do so. We are going to continue to work with our international partners in unison, which is what we are going to do on Saturday. But the fundamental, underlying principle is that there will not be any negotiations unless Iran suspends its enrichment of uranium.

Elaine.

Q I know this morning you said that the ballistic missile tests that were done by Iran last week did not play a part in this decision to send Under Secretary Burns to Switzerland, but surely there must be some effect on what's happening on the diplomatic side, when Iran decides to flex its military muscle in that way. Are you saying that there's no link at all?

MS. PERINO: I'll have to refer you to the State Department in terms of all the decision-making that went into it. The President does support Secretary Rice's decision here to continue to show the unity. But in regards to specific tests that they did, obviously we said that those weren't helpful. They were against the U.N. Security Council resolutions and their international obligations. But that underscores again why it's important for the international community to show unity and say that there is a path of incentives in which we recognize your right for peaceful nuclear power; we've provided a path for you to get that. We've also provided paths throughout the incentives package for further discussions in international community integration.

But there's also a different path, which is, if they don't accept this offer, one, there will not be negotiations; and two, there will be additional sanctions.

Q How concerned is the U.S. -- obviously the President has only got a limited time left in office, there's going to be a period of transition -- that, in the interim, there will be time for Iran to essentially move forward on its nuclear program --

MS. PERINO: We've been concerned about that for a long time, but it doesn't -- Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon -- the question of their pursuit of a nuclear weapon goes back a long ways. And we're not certainly watching the clock in that regard. This President has been working with his international partners on a multilateral basis to come together, in unison, to call on the Iranians to suspend their enrichment of uranium, and if they were to do so and it could be verified, then we will start to have discussions with them. But up and until then, we will not.

So this meeting on Saturday is a chance for us to receive their response and for us to underscore the contrast between what the Iranians could expect from accepting the incentives package and what could be the consequences if they don't, which would be additional sanctions and no negotiations.

Yes, Jeremy.

Q The Iranians are already signaling that they are not planning to make any major concessions at this meeting. How quickly is the U.S. and the other members of the P5-plus-1 to move forward on sanctions?

MS. PERINO: On sanctions? I think we need to let the meeting on Saturday take place. And obviously the political directors, when they get together, will have a chance to communicate with one another about the next steps. And I think they're already sort of planning that, but they want to hear from them. And I think that even though you get signals from the Iranians, it isn't always -- you often get mixed messages. And so let's wait and hear from Mr. Jalili on Saturday and then we will provide our response after that. But I don't expect it immediately following that meeting, Jeremy.

Sheryl.

Q Dana, you said the President does support Secretary Rice's decision. Is it Secretary Rice's decision to send Mr. Burns, or is it the President's decision?

MS. PERINO: Well, she came forward with the recommendation that the President agreed with, Sheryl. I would not try to separate them. But she has been the lead negotiator with the P5-plus-1 on this issue, so that's why I said it that way.

Q You talk, Dana, about mixed messages from the Iranians. Is there some light at the end of the tunnel that the administration sees that has prompted sitting down with the Iranians when you haven't done it before? Is there something that you're seeing privately that the world is not seeing publicly, after ballistic missile tests, Iranian leaders saying they're going to continue their uranium enrichment and essentially thumb their nose at the U.N.?

MS. PERINO: Well, there are some things that we know that we wouldn't comment on in public, certainly, but we believe that now is the right time for us to press them on the incentives package that we have provided. And so I think I would have to leave it at that.

Q So you have the Obama campaign on one side welcoming this, saying that the administration is moving toward their point of view. You have -- and former Ambassador John Bolton saying that this is a major flop for the administration and that essentially the administration is rolling over to the Iranians.

MS. PERINO: I'm not going to respond to either one, but I'm going to restate our view, which is that our longstanding, fundamental principle has been that Iran has to suspend its uranium enrichment, or else we will not negotiate. That remains the same. There's nothing changed in that regard.

Q I'm going to change the subject whenever we're ready.

MS. PERINO: Any more on Iran? Okay.

Q Yes, just one last thing. The one-shot deal supposedly gives some sort of wink or some sort of hint of progress without doing as much as you want, is there -- are you ruling out a second time around with Burns or somebody else? Or is this just one --

MS. PERINO: It's hard to predict the future, Roger. I think that the way we see it now, that this meeting, in terms of receiving a response from the Iranians on this incentive package, is going to be a one-time meeting. And then we'll cross other bridges when we come to it, but the underlying principle remains the same, that they have to suspend their uranium enrichment or else we won't negotiate, and that there are disincentives if they don't accept the package.

Q Understood, but there's a door you leave open to a second meeting --

MS. PERINO: I think it's impossible to predict the future, but in terms of this meeting, they're calling it a one-time meeting.

Olivier. Still on Iran?

Q Yes. Did any of the other P5-plus-1 countries appeal to the United States to join this meeting, or was this entirely a decision made by Secretary Rice?

MS. PERINO: I haven't been a part of the -- I haven't been a part of any of those discussions, but I think that they would welcome the fact that the United States, one, signed the letter -- had Secretary Rice sign the letter with them back about a month ago, and that we continue to walk in lockstep with them when it comes to this issue.

Q And tensions between the United States and Iran are blamed partly for high oil prices. Did that factor in the decision at all?

MS. PERINO: No.

Oh, I'm sorry. Sorry, Bill. Ann.

Q Will Ambassador Burns make public -- make to the Iranians a list of sanctions that they have not seen before, or consequences that are strictly American consequences, or are they on behalf of the EU and the other --

MS. PERINO: I'm going to refer you to the State Department. Sean McCormack, my counterpart over at the State Department, already had a lengthy briefing in which -- I didn't get the chance to see the whole thing, but he may have been asked that question. I don't know specifically. But he laid out what the role of Under Secretary Burns is. And I don't think -- the way you describe it, I don't think that at all is something that he's going to be doing.

Q This morning you said that the United States would have -- would clarify the consequences of Iran not --

MS. PERINO: All I mean by that is that we will make sure that it's understood that if they do not accept this very generous incentives package that there are consequences, and those consequences would be sanctions -- additional sanctions.

Q And would those be United States sanctions or would they be on behalf of --

MS. PERINO: It could be a mix, I don't know. I'm not going to prejudge them.

Anyone else on Iran? Bill.

Q On Friday you put out a statement outlining your objections to the housing bill as currently constituted. Has there been a discussion between the White House and either House of Congress about modifying it? Is there movement? What can you tell us?

MS. PERINO: Yes, Secretary Paulson and Secretary Preston at HUD continue to work with members of Congress, as do members of our team here from Legislative Affairs, in keeping -- and they are keeping the President informed as to the state of negotiations over the housing bill. We have a lot of hope that we'll be able to get this done -- get this bill to the President's desk in a form that he could sign before the end of the month.

Q Before the end of --

MS. PERINO: Well, before the end of the month -- next week. I've been a little bit messed up on my time frame ever since Japan, I keep thinking it's the third week of July -- or the fourth week of July -- it's the third.

So the -- Secretary Paulson, I believe, met with them yesterday, members of the Congress, talking not only about this urgency he feels he needs in terms of the Fannie and Freddie package that he asked for on Sunday night, but also the importance of the provisions that are in the bill, including some of the objections that we have, which is the CDBG money, community development block grant money.

Q What are the objections? Can you spell those out? Why would the President veto this?

MS. PERINO: Well, I would look -- I don't know -- I don't have all of them at my fingertips. The large one, and the main one, is that the bill as passed by the -- either the House or the Senate has \$4 billion in it that would go to states to buy already foreclosed properties, which we believe does not help homeowners, but helps banks. And we actually think that it's unnecessary to have in the bill.

So we're hopeful that they would be able to strip out that provision and then pass it, because it has very good pieces that we've been asking for for a long time, like the GSE regulator for Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and also the modernization of the Federal Housing Administration; plus, we have the vehicle now to get the Secretary Paulson requests attached to it. So we're hopeful that we'll be able to get that done next week.

Q What Secretary Paulson requests are you referring to?

MS. PERINO: On Sunday night, Secretary Paulson, in his announcement, said there are three things that he needed in terms of authorities to be able to address the problems that are -- the potential problems with the GSEs.

Q Would the President veto the bill if it didn't include the Paulson requests?

MS. PERINO: I've heard of no change in terms of the -- oh, you mean, this is in terms -- I thought you were talking about --

Q If it doesn't include Paulson's requests for --

MS. PERINO: I can't imagine that Congress is going to go forward and finish a housing bill that doesn't include the urgent requests of Secretary Paulson, because I believe that we're all equally concerned about the economy and so I think they understand the urgency of it. I just can't imagine that they would pass it without it.

Q And you expressed optimism this morning that you'd be able to get it next week.

MS. PERINO: Sure.

Q Can you be more specific about why you're optimistic?

MS. PERINO: I would just say that the feedback that we're getting from Capitol Hill from members of Congress is that they do believe that they'll be able to get something done and to the President. And we are hopeful that they get it to us in a form that he can sign, which would include stripping out that CDBG money.

Peter.

Q Same issue, and another follow-up, too, Dana. Following up on something the President said yesterday -- he said the administration always moves quickly when it sees economic weaknesses. Why didn't it move more quickly on this Fannie and Freddie thing? These bad loans and their impact on these two mortgage heavyweights has been well known for a long, long time.

MS. PERINO: I would say that what we have done in terms of what we are able to do through the executive branch has been done in terms of some of these pieces. But we have been asking for a GSE regulator since 2003, and Congress hasn't moved forward on it. We increased the urgency and turned up the concern on August 31st of 2007 -- nearly a year ago -- asking Congress to take action on this problem.

So we have been leading on this issue. We've been trying to get Congress to agree to do it. And now we're in an urgent situation, and that's why I say I can't imagine that they would go home for the August recess without getting this done.

Q Well, the urgent situation emerged before last Saturday, before last weekend. Why did it take that long to come up with --

MS. PERINO: Secretary Paulson took action in regards to those urgent authorities that he said he needed when he thought it was appropriate and needed them. I don't think it would have been appropriate for him to have acted sooner. But I also would point you back to the fact that we've been waiting for Congress to pass a housing bill that everybody seemed to think, from both sides of the aisle, needed to be done as of last August when the President first asked them to pass it. But now we're nearly a year to the day when the President asked for it, and the housing situation has not improved.

We do think we'll be able to pull out of this towards the end of the year, but it's going to take a while, and we think that the legislation would certainly help, especially in sending a signal to the market.

Q Pull out of what by the end of the year?

MS. PERINO: I would say just the housing crisis or the downturn that we've had in the housing market.

Q And then one other follow-up on something I asked you about earlier this week. What were you able to find out about White House guidelines for fundraising for the Bush library?

MS. PERINO: I know that nobody -- yes, I did follow up on that. I did find out there's no connection between the library and actions in the administration. Officials are not allowed to be a part of it. And President Bush has asked that members of his foundation do not inform him about anyone who has written a check, or decided not to write a check, until after he's no longer President.

Q And what's the word for people who are either officially soliciting for the foundation or freelancing because they're friends of the President, in terms of linking any donations to any official actions --

MS. PERINO: If you're referring to the Steve Payne situation, obviously --

Q Payne or anyone else.

MS. PERINO: -- we would say that that was inappropriate, and only people who are authorized to be a part of -- that are a part of the foundation and are acting on behalf of the President are allowed to do that. But no one is allowed to try to say that there would be official action done under this administration in connection to any contribution that they may or may not make to the library.

Q Dana, follow on that. Does the President know Steve Payne?

MS. PERINO: I think -- yes, he believes that he would have met him before. I don't think that he knows him all that well, but he has met him before. Certainly he's been -- Steve Payne has been somebody who's been involved in Texas politics for a long time and been a supporter of the Republican Party. So he knows who he is. I would repeat that he was never a employee of the White House, but he had been a part of advance trips in the past. We use a lot of volunteers when it comes to advance.

Q Does Mr. Payne have any ability to facilitate people getting in contact with this White House? Does he have access to access?

MS. PERINO: Access to access? I would -- possibly. I don't know, in terms of -- I've never met him so I don't know in particular.

Q You don't know if he could carry through on promises to help people get in touch with people at the White House?

MS. PERINO: In terms of -- look, I'm sure that he probably knows a lot of people throughout the administration, given his history. But it would be inappropriate to say that he could -- for anybody to say that they could get anything done or any meeting done in exchange for a contribution to the library, or to the party, or anything else.

Q Thank you, Dana. Two questions. Georgia has a new law allowing residents who pass criminal background checks to carry concealed weapons onto mass transit and into state parks and other locations. But Atlanta Airport officials say they are exempt from that law. And my question: Does the President agree with the state, or the airport authorities?

MS. PERINO: I haven't talked to him about a specific Georgia -- Atlanta, Georgia issue, so I don't have anything for you on it.

Q Okay. A spokesman at the Democratic National Convention office in Denver yesterday said that he could not confirm that convention speakers will include President Clinton. And my question: Since I presume that President Bush believes that such national conventions of both parties should so welcome his fellow President, we can conclude that he believes President Clinton should be welcomed as a national convention speaker with no attempt by anyone to direct what President Clinton should

and should not say, right?

MS. PERINO: I really believe it's none of our business, so I wouldn't comment.

Q It's none of your -- but he's --

MS. PERINO: It's clearly none of our business.

Q It's a President of the United States. He's certainly concerned about all other Presidents, isn't he, Dana?

MS. PERINO: I don't think he really is thinking a lot about the Democrat Convention.

Go ahead, Jeremy.

Q The World Court is urging the U.S. to do all it can to halt the executions of five Mexicans -- that came out this morning. Do you all have any reaction at this stage on that?

MS. PERINO: Only that I know that the ICJ issued a preliminary decision. And it's something that we're reviewing now, so I don't have anything more for you on it.

Sheryl.

Q Dana, I have with me today my colleague, Umar Cheema. He's a prominent journalist in Pakistan; he's a Daniel Perle Fellow. He has a question, which I can ask on his behalf, or we can let him speak for himself --

MS. PERINO: If he'd like to, I'd be delighted.

Q Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity. My question is about the introduction of bill that Senate Foreign Relations Committee introduced yesterday, seeking to triple non-military aid to Pakistan in the next five years.

MS. PERINO: Seeking to end?

Q To triple non-military aid to Pakistan.

MS. PERINO: To triple -- oh, okay.

Q And conditioning military aid with the certification of Secretary of State. I just wanted to ask whether it's a major shift in administration policy to rely more on civilian government instead of Musharraf --

MS. PERINO: I wish you would have been here yesterday, because President Bush talked a little bit

about Pakistan in his press conference, in which he said Pakistan is a friend and an ally and someone that we rely on to work together on issues of counterterrorism. I'm not familiar with the legislation that was introduced yesterday, but President Bush has been very supportive of aid for Pakistan in the past -- and not just in regards to military-to-military aid, but we really think it's extremely important, especially in the FATA region, to help improve the economic condition for people in that area. I know that it's very challenging terrain -- there's not a lot of roads and there's not a lot of electricity, and therefore not a lot of commerce. But those are issues that we are trying to work together on along with the Pakistanis. So we will take a look at the legislation. I know that in the President's budget there is already aid money for those types of aid packages for Pakistan.

Q Thank you.

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