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Press Availability in Baghdad

John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State

Ryan Crocker, Ambassador to Iraq

Baghdad, Iraq

June 14, 2007

QUESTION: You used the word urgency to (inaudible) Iraqis leaders to act. It looks from our point at least that very little of this (inaudible) some respects that they're further back even when you were here.

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: You mean in the situation in general.

QUESTION: I mean in terms of national reconciliation. (Inaudible).

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: Well, there is certainly a lot of water over the damn since I left. But if you're talking about the pending legislation, all I can say is -- and this is something the Embassy has been working and will continue to work -- is that different parts of the legislation seem to be at different stages of development. But I certainly think -- I think you may have written a piece or one of your colleagues has written a piece on this the other day -- the oil sharing law is probably the closest to fruition. And we certainly think it is important that they get this legislation done as quickly as possible, and that was one of the messages that I stressed consistently during my trip here with all the leaders I had the opportunity to meet.

QUESTION: You mentioned -- we read it in the New York Times -- what appeared to be a deadline, Sir, saying these things had to be done by next month if you were recorded correctly which I'm sure you were. What do you mean by that? Are you talking about an oil law by next month?

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: I haven't talked to anybody in terms of deadlines. I've stressed urgency. We've talked about the context in which this is taking place. There's not only an Iraqi context but also a context back home in the United States where the subject of Iraq is of course of very intense interest. There is a report owed to the Congress by the middle of July in connection with Iraqi funding legislation. And then of course there will be another report to Washington by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus in September. So, it's that context that I stressed and the importance of moving on these issues as quickly as possible. Plus, we think the issues are right. There is no reason why they can't be resolved, and what we've been doing is urging that every effort be made.

QUESTION: The so-called “benchmarks” were laid down last October -- and now it’s coming up July. Wouldn’t a deadline be helpful?

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: Well, I come back to what I said. I think the political context is important here. There is going to be a report by the Commanding General and the Ambassador in September and we hope that as much progress can be made as possible.

Let me say that I went to the north. I went to Kurdistan -- I went to Mosul as well as I mentioned. I just came from Ramadi. That was my most recent stop. And I’m impressed by some of the progress that has been made, and perhaps sometimes gets overlooked. Ramadi, the situation has changed dramatically from a year ago. And the security situation -- al-Qaeda’s grip has been broken there. And the process of consolidating security and preparing for reconstruction has begun, and it is a much more heartening picture than one might have expected from when I was last here in November as the Director of National Intelligence. So, if you ask me what my overall impression is based admittedly on a very short two-and-a-half day trip here -- three days -- is that the picture is mixed and it’s not entirely bleak by any means and that there are some areas of significant improvement that can be pointed to.

QUESTION: Sir, you were here right before and right after what happened yesterday. Did you sense in the reception that you thought -- and I guess in the atmosphere of the conversations that you had -- a shift in the (inaudible) more tension, more concern?

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: Well, actually shortly after I learned about it I was on my way up to Kurdistan, so I’m probably not in the best position to answer, but maybe the Ambassador would want to comment on that since he’s stayed behind and been here intervening 24 hours.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I’ve been struck over the last day by the very serious and measured way -- not only the Iraqi government but senior political and clerical figures have dealt with this. Right from the beginning the Prime Minister clearly labeled this an attack by al-Qaeda and part of a chain of attacks that have aimed at all of the people of Iraq as well as the Coalition. Attacks on Sunni mosques as well as Shia, attacks on Kurds, attacks on Coalition forces have been rallying the people of Iraq against a common enemy. We saw the same thing from Ayatollah Sistani. The Presidency Council met with the Prime Minister, so you had Sunni and Shia Arabs -- the Kurdish President -- kind of all sounding the same theme. I’ve been impressed in this 24 hours by the way the leadership of this country -- in the face of an enormous provocation and one of the a chain of locations by the al-Qaeda -- has thus far stood together.

QUESTION: What is the evidence on al-Qaeda? Both you and the government have spoken of al-Qaeda but without saying why you think it is except that they seem to be the most likely suspects.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I just don’t think there is any doubt it was al-Qaeda that first struck the Al-Askari in February of 2006 and the message this time was very similar to that. Charges very carefully placed to devastating effect. And again, it’s a pattern we’ve all seen again over the last couple of months since I’ve been here at the end of March. The attacks on the bridges, on religious shrines, the attack on the Parliament, the attacks on the population at large it’s clearly part of a concerted al-Qaeda campaign to try to reignite widespread sectarian strife. They succeeded in February ’06. Thus far in spite of a series of very serious attacks they haven’t succeeded.

QUESTION: Is there any evidence yet how al-Qaeda got access to carefully plant those charges to devastating effects?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I’ve seen some reporting on statements from the Prime Minister, but it’s the Iraqis who are in charge of the investigation at this point and you’d have to put that question to them.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) we've had a succession in the last few weeks of very senior officials (inaudible) to beat this drum (inaudible) that time is running out. It seems to me that if we take the Prime Minister -- the word of his public statements that they really are not, to take your phrase, as I think on the same clock. Indeed he is now saying and pointing more to a security than a political answer to this problem. So the question is, you've come from the United States, you can take a clear reading of the American political movement, do you really think this is understood here? Just now that they are in the end game?

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: I'm not sure I would paint such a stark picture. But obviously our political debate is extremely transparent. I can't imagine that they would not be observing it, and watching it. I think they certainly can, I'm sure they draw the conclusion that this is a subject of considerable controversy in our society and that clearly one of the things that would influence our continued ability to sustain our support here politically relates to progress that is made here. That's the urgent message. I think it goes a bit far to talk about specific deadlines, drop-dead dates and that kind of thing, John. I don't think that is where we're at, I think it is a question of bringing home the message that there is a great intensity of concern to see progress be made here on the ground in Iraq and we think it's possible.

QUESTION: You play that against the desire to be that people here not to be seen and not be told what to do?

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: We understand that. It's more a question of describing -- I think that everybody here would acknowledge that the role of the international community, the coalition, and particularly the United States support for Iraq is very important. And we're talking about some of the kinds of things that would be helpful, extremely helpful, in terms of creating the political atmosphere back home that would allow for continued -- the assurance of continued support from the United States.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I also think it is important to remember that these benchmarks aren't -- they're not our benchmarks. They're Iraqi benchmarks -- things the Iraqis said they want to accomplish for the good of their people and their country. What we're saying is "yes, that's important, and it's important to do it in a very timely fashion," So, it's not a question of us telling them they have to have a revenue distribution law as part of your oil framework agreement. They've said they need that. We're just saying let's get it done.

QUESTION: I get the impression (inaudible) that with all this debate in Washington, (inaudible) that Iraqi leaders look beyond all of this and beginning to predicate their actions on this issue that will have to be settled between themselves and possibly not peaceful, so in other words, your ability to persuade them to move now is prejudiced, the very thing you cite to them as a reason for moving is for them possible a reason for not moving. Is that (inaudible)?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: I'm just following the logic of the argument. I do see the argument. And I think that that is exactly why the deputy secretary was saying "you know in spite of the best efforts to press in that direction, we're not talking about a deadline." This date or else. This is -- no one knows it better than you -- this is an incredibly complex situation and the Iraqis face multiple challenges.

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: And how could anybody in good conscience, particularly the political leadership, want the suffering to continue a moment longer than it has to? I think that surely they must be fed up with this violence and one of the ways of helping to bring that under control is to promote harmony and reconciliation in the political process. It's not the be all, and end all, but it is one important element of it. Security is another. You and I have talked about the ingredients for success many, many times.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Thank you.

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE: Thank you.

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