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Remarks to the Press in Baghdad, Iraq

John Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State

Combined Press and Information Center

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DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Good afternoon. I am delighted to be back in Iraq once again.

As Deputy Secretary of State and a former Ambassador to this country, I remain deeply interested in the situation here. I have therefore visited nine locations in eight provinces over the past six days: Basrah, Hillah, Al-Kut, Fallujah and Ramadi, Salahadin, Kirkuk, Baqubah, and of course Baghdad. I met with Iraqi local and provincial leaders, members of the Iraqi security forces and United States military, and my State Department colleagues on the provincial reconstruction teams.

I met with members of seventeen such provincial reconstruction teams, "PRTs" as we call them, which is more than half of the teams we have throughout Iraq. These teams are working hard to promote reconciliation, foster development, and build capacity in Iraq's provinces.

I have met with Prime Minister Al Maliki, President Talabani, Vice Presidents Al Hashimi and Abdul Al Mahdi, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh, and Prime Minister Barzani of the Kurdish Regional Government. Here in Baghdad I also toured Abu Nauwas Street to see firsthand how stability and prosperity are returning to many areas of the capital. And yesterday evening, I also had an opportunity to drive through part of the Kadamia district of Baghdad.

During my first -- during my visit, I reaffirmed the United States' strong support for the government and people of Iraq. I am encouraged by the advancements this country has made toward security and economic revitalization. The security surge has delivered significant results. Now progress on political reconciliation -- including key national legislation as well as economic advances -- is needed to consolidate the gains made thus far. If progress is not made on these fronts, we risk falling back to the more violent patterns of the past.

I also had good discussions on the Declaration of Principles of Friendship and Cooperation signed by President Bush

and Prime Minister Maliki on November 26. With this declaration, leaders of Iraq and the United States commit to begin negotiating the formal arrangements that will govern our strategic relationship in the future. The United States has an enduring interest in the security and stability of Iraq.

I also met with the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to Iraq, Ambassador Steffan De Mistura. The United States believes that the United Nations, particularly its representative in Iraq, can play an important role in promoting peace and stability here.

I found my travel to the provinces particularly heartening. It is clear that Iraqis, at both the local and provincial levels, are standing up to take control of their territory from violent extremists. This was most evident to me in Fallujah and Ramadi, where the citizens of Anbar province have rejected extremism and are affirming their desire for a stable, peaceful environment that will provide hope and opportunity for their children.

When I was United States Ambassador to Iraq, there was no such thing as provincial budgets. Now the central government is distributing revenue to the provinces, which have made impressive progress in executing their budgets.

Today, I had an opportunity to meet and talk with the men and women serving at the United States Embassy here in Baghdad. They, like many of the reporters who cover this story, are working in a most difficult and demanding diplomatic environment. They are separated from their homes and families and risk their lives every day in support of a united, stable, and democratic Iraq.

It is essential that the United States Congress approve the President's request to fund our military and civilian operations, which are critical to sustaining the success we and our Iraqi partners have sacrificed to achieve. Many provincial reconstruction teams were established after the military surge. Their funding, not covered in our regular budget, is particularly critical, and requires supplemental funding. Without this supplemental funding it will be necessary to curtail this critical activity.

I commend State Department personnel for stepping up to serve in Iraq, to fill 100 percent of the State Department vacancies here for the coming year. As chief operating officer of the State Department, this is an issue I follow very closely. Foreign and Civil Service personnel volunteer to staff the most challenging positions we have around the world, and I am proud to say that Iraq is no exception. Their adaptability and strong sense of duty will continue to carry us forward in this demanding time.

My colleagues serving in Iraq can count on my wholehearted support as they carry out their vital tasks in support of the Iraqi government and people. Thank you very much and I would be pleased to answer a few of your questions.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) just expand upon your thoughts about the political progress you mention in terms of (inaudible) some of the security gains here, especially with the recent raid on (inaudible) parliament regarding what was know as the de-Baathification.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Right. My point here is that with the security gains of recent months, and they have been significant and they are definitely very palpable, I certainly felt that way when I visited places such as Fallujah and Ramadi, that this is now an opportunity to follow up on these situations. And it's one thing to have brought the

violence under some semblance of control. But it's another now to follow up with the necessary reconstruction and stabilization projects that will help guard these regions and protect them from a recurrence of this type of violence. So it's time to now get in the resources that will help prevent a recurrence of this kind of violence. That would be my main point.

The second would be that some of the legislation, the national reconciliation legislation that is on the agenda of the Iraqi parliament, the Iraqi Council of Representatives, would be extremely helpful if it could be passed and go forward as an indication that the people and the government and the legislature of Iraq are prepared to build on these security gains that have been achieved. And I'm hopeful that these kinds of laws, such as the de-Baathification law, such as the oil framework law and others, have a good prospect of passage in the near future. And I think that that would be extremely helpful in terms of consolidating the security gains that have been made thus far.

QUESTION: Sam Dagher with the Christian Science Monitor. My question is relating to Iran. How committed do you think they are to refraining -- continuing to refrain from funding and supporting Shiite militias in Iraq? And we keep hearing from the military that they have yet to see -- they are still looking for evidence that Iran has actually stopped supporting the militias. How do you view this yourself? And also are you concerned it's something that Iran may resume its support of the Shiite militias in Iraq? Thank you.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I think it's noteworthy that Iran has said that they are not engaging in these types of activities. But given the past experience and negative behavior by Iran both here and elsewhere in the region, I don't think we can be complacent about this. It is true that the level of violence has subsided and the number of incidents associated with explosively formed projectiles and other types of military equipment have declined. But there have, for example, been instances where people in Iraq have been detained who recently had military training in Iran.

So I think it's too early to conclude that Iran has, as a matter of deliberate policy, stopped engaging in these activities. I think the situation bears continued vigilance and I think we will have to wait and see if more evidence and more indications materialize to suggest that Iran has, in fact, made a deliberate change of policy.

QUESTION: A question from the (inaudible). You've talked about the national reconciliation project. And now what's happening in Iraq is an initiative of some disputes between the government and Adnan al-Dulaimi. Don't you think that this could influence the national reconciliation and don't you think that it is supposed that the United Nations should interfere to solve this dispute or crisis?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Right. This is -- first of all, I guess my principal point would be that this is a matter that the political actors, the political participants here in Iraq themselves must resolve, whether it's the government on the one hand or members of the Council of Representatives on the other. So I think that we would defer to the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Council of Representatives read on this issue. And the second point I would make is that I'm sure that incidents will arise from time to time which cause some people to question whether the national reconciliation process is going forward.

On the other hand, I would urge those who feel that way to consider the fact that a great deal of progress has already been achieved in the security area. People have stopped or reduced substantially carrying out acts of violence and there is, I think much more of a spirit of wanting now to move forward in a spirit of national reconciliation and I think we now have to give that process a chance to develop.

QUESTION: Kim Gamel, AP. (Inaudible) reconciliation, you said that you are optimistic that there could be progress very soon. Could you give us more specific of a time line when you think that, for example, some of this legislation could be passed?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yeah, you know, I think it's always tricky and always a little bit risky to predict specific time lines. After all, we're talking about a political process that is in the hands of a legislature of another country and of a government of another country. So we're just giving our best assessment. But as far as a specific time line, I would be very reluctant to predict that. But I think in areas such as the de-Baathification law, a new budget, the question of oil legislation, these are the types of legislation that we would hope and expect would move forward in the foreseeable future.

But please don't try to pin me down as to a date or a week or a month, because I would be very reluctant to do that. I think it would be imprudent.

QUESTION: If I could just follow up. I mean, I think you did tell the Washington Post in an interview published today, six months?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Yes, I'll elaborate. I believe it was a question about whether it could be done in six months. And my response was that I expect -- I expressed the expectation and the hope that six months from now, looking back, I thought it was reasonable to expect that these kinds of legislation would have been passed.

QUESTION: James (inaudible) from the Times. There was a little optimism back in March when the de-Baathification amendment was submitted that it was going to help the reconciliation process. It's now December and I don't think they've even debated the de-Baathification amendment yet.

What is specifically that makes you think there's going to be progress on this issue now? Certainly local Iraqi leaders, tribal leaders and the American commanders who work closely with them, especially with the CLCs have expressed a great deal of frustration that the government was doing nothing to provide services especially in Sunni areas, especially around Baghdad. How do you see that affecting the reconciliation process?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: On the question of exactly where the de-Baathification legislation stands, I'm simply not aware of the details, although I know it's an issue that's being actively considered. There has been a pension law, and I believe that has got a good prospect of moving forward. And that also affects the reconciliation issue and people who have -- who worked for the previous government. And if that law can pass, I think it would have a positive effect.

On the issue of services, I can comment on where I did visit, which was Fallujah and Ramadi and there, compared to when I went there six months or a year ago -- and I did visit those places both six months and a year ago, there's a lot more being done than there used to be in terms of electricity, repair of the streets, government monies coming to the provinces.

This is an area where services and government performance has improved since I was ambassador here. When I was ambassador, after the assault on Fallujah back in November-December of 2004, it was very difficult, very challenging to get the government to expend resources for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Fallujah. I mean, it was hard to get \$5-, \$10-, \$15 million. Now, it's something on the order of \$100 million that has been spent in the recent budget.

So money and budget execution has improved substantially. So I'm not so sure -- I'm sure that, while I'm certain that more can always be done and we are all working on that, and we are working to support the government in achieving that, I think we've got to recognize that quite a bit has been accomplished already.

And the last point I would make in that regard is if you look in terms of both -- in terms of the electricity production in this country, that situation has certainly improved in recent months and stabilized.

QUESTION: A question from the Turkish News Agency. The Turkish troops launched an operations against the PKK fighters in Kurdistan. Do you think that the military operation came late or on time? Or -- and what does the American government think of this operation?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I have no comment on any military operation that might have taken place. And I think you might have to direct that question to others. But what I would say is this. That -- and this is a subject that I discussed both when I was in Iraqi Kurdistan and in my discussions with the government here in Baghdad. I think we all agree, the United States government, the government of Iraq, the government of -- the Kurdistan regional government and, as a matter of fact, the government of Turkey that the PKK is a very negative organization, it's a terrorist group and it cannot be allowed to operate from Iraqi territory against the country of Turkey. So we are all -- we share the common goal of seeking to end PKK activities in Iraq once and for all. And it is important that that be accomplished so that many of the other important gains that have been achieved both in Turkey and in Iraqi Kurdistan not be jeopardized. So it's very, very important that the PKK be effectively dealt with.

QUESTION: Question from (inaudible). The American administration or government adopted -- and the American troops adopted the formation of Awakening troops in some of the areas in Baghdad and they supported them financially. And I don't know if there was arming or not. Don't you think that this could form new militias called Awakening?

And the second question is regarding the private security companies. There are many incidents that were committed by the security companies like the Blackwater. And the American embassy said that we cannot leave this security company and they should work with us. But the (inaudible) said there should be some punishment. So why does the American embassy still persist in keeping this security company and why don't you change it? Why aren't there any kind of procedures against this security company?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: On the first subject, the Awakening, in our judgment, is a manifestation of the fact that people are tired of violence, they are tired of al Qaeda, and citizens of Iraq themselves want to do something to bring peace back to their neighborhoods so that they can develop their lives in a normal and tranquil fashion. So I think that is what is at the root of the forming of these Awakening groups.

And we have encouraged these groups in a number of areas with the idea of helping restore security. But there is certainly no intent and certainly not our desire to support any kind of behavior that could lead to the creation of new militias. In fact, the whole idea would be that forces and individuals in such groups would either ultimately become members of the regular security forces or they would be reintegrated into normal, economically productive lives in their communities. So there is certainly no desire or intent on our part to encourage the formation of new militias. And I think properly managed, this initiative can make a very positive contribution to the security of the neighborhoods in which they operate.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: You have to repeat the question, I'm sorry.

QUESTION: The question was regarding the private security companies and the incidents.

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Right. We've taken a number of steps as a result of the September Blackwater incident to bring the performance and standards and activities of our security agents and security details under the best possible control. We've improved coordination. We have assigned additional State Department security officers to accompany our convoys, to monitor that proper standards and proper performance criteria are met. And we are, of course, also in dialogue with the government of Iraq through the joint commission that was created as to what else might be done in the future.

As far as whether or not the Blackwater company will continue to provide services to the United States Embassy, we have said and continue to say, we will first await the results of the investigation of the incident that is being carried out by our Federal Bureau of Investigation.

QUESTION: Karl Bostic with NBC News. On the matter of refugees, we now see coming home both internally displaced and the external ones, I guess numbering almost maybe up to 4 million. In your visits, how big of a concern was that in terms of the timing of this, in the sense that it may actually undermine the gains in security that are being made if there is no system in place to properly resettle them, especially if you've got situations where homes are being occupied, there is no way to resolve property disputes? Is there a concern about touching off another round of violence if there's no system in place for the refugees? And what's the U.S. role in facilitating this?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I guess the first thing I would say is that it's symptomatic -- it's a good sign of improved security conditions that internally displaced people as well as people who have left the country are now wanting to come back to Iraq or back to their homes. And this is a constructive thing and a good indication about the improving security conditions.

There are issues with respect to resettlement, reintegration, which we believe will certainly need to be addressed. We provide a certain amount of funding for humanitarian assistance to Iraq that deals with refugee and IDP issues, and we can give you the -- Phil can give you some of the data on that.

But I think that importantly, as you suggest, this is going to require and does require the attention of the government of Iraq and the United Nations as well. We think that this is an opportunity for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to come back to Iraq and play a more active role in dealing with the very kinds of issues that you just mentioned.

QUESTION: A question from the Japanese News Agency. I would like to ask a question about the local leaders and if American leaders think there is a new kind of violence that will appear on the Iraqi soil after the al Qaeda or major networks of al Qaeda have been dissolved? And those increase and feed upon corruption. And we know that there is any kind of proactive thing to fight this, like corruption.

And also I have another question regarding the Middle East. Spreading democracy in Iraq could enhance an idea of pursuing other failed government in the region that led to the construction or led to the focus of terrorism in one country?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I think I'm going to have to ask you to repeat the second question because I didn't fully understand.

But let me address your first question. Rule of law is one of the high priorities of our embassy and of our government in assisting Iraq. Capacity building for judges, helping encourage the -- excuse me, I'm getting an echo here -- encouraging the formation of criminal courts to deal with terrorism, a whole range of issues, the efforts to combat corruption. These are all issues where we provide assistance, support and capacity building.

We recognize that corruption is an issue. But I think that the most important thing that we can do is work with our Iraqi counterparts to try and deal with this matter on all fronts.

Now, your second question, I need to ask you to repeat.

QUESTION: I would like to say that the aim of the United States was to topple the government of Saddam Hussein, and that it was a threat to the peace and security in the Middle East. But also there are other governments like this in the Middle East. So does this enhance the idea of pursuing other governments in the Middle East that actually are the reasons of spreading violence in the world and by fighting them or pursuing them could end terrorism in the world?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Right, thank you.

I think that our question may be a little bit too subtle for me. But I think that what I would say here is that our policy is to support democratic governments and governance and the concept of democracy. That is a goal that we have for not only this region but other parts of the world.

But as far as some of the other countries in the region, such as I suspect you are referring to Iran, for example, whose behavior towards Iraq has been quite negative and which has also now started to allow the export of military to the Taliban, for example, in Afghanistan, in addition to supporting extremists in other parts of the Middle East region, and also working on developing a nuclear capability, our policy is to pursue our goals towards Iran by peaceful means through diplomatic engagement and through diplomatic means. Alternative use of force or of military means is always an option. But it is not the course of action that is being pursued at this time.

Perhaps two last questions.

QUESTION: There were reports this week that the Iraqi government has handed the U.S. Embassy a letter asking for Chemical Ali (inaudible) to be handed over for execution. And can you confirm that you received that letter? And do you still have them in custody and will you be handing them over?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: I won't talk about what diplomatic communications we have received. But I will say, yes, they still are in United States custody. And once we have received -- once the government of Iraq has reached a consensus on what they wish to do about these detainees, we will then take action. But at the moment, there is --

the government of Iraq itself has not reached its own consensus as to what to do about this situation, so we await that.

QUESTION: Thank you. Larry Kaplow with Newsweek. You went to Kirkuk and the Kurdish region. Can you talk about where that issue is now, that it's apparent there won't be a referendum by the end of the year. Is there a new trajectory for dealing with that? And did you get any sort of feeling from the Kurdish officials about how long they might be willing to wait on that?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: It is an issue that obviously needs to be dealt with. It's the issue of Kirkuk as well as whatever other boundary or territorial issues as might exist within the country of Iraq. Clearly, it's not going to be possible between now and the end of this year to mount a referendum. And if I remember correctly, Article 140 of the constitution calls for a referendum by the end of this year.

But interlocutors that I met, both in Kurdistan, in Kirkuk and in Baghdad all agreed that this is an issue that needs to be worked on and that a process needs to be found to move this issue forward. So I would expect, and it is my understanding from the discussions I had on the subject of Kirkuk, that efforts will be made in the new year to get a process going forward that deals with Article 140 of the constitution and, of course, the issue of Kirkuk.

Thank you very much.

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