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Press Gaggle by Dana Perino and General Douglas Lute, Assistant to the President for Iraq and Afghanistan

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

10:04 A.M. EST

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MS. PERINO: Hi, everybody. Just a little caveat. We have -- as you all know, we have a very busy day at the White House today. We're trying to cram it all in. We have an announcement this morning that we just put out. I'm going to do the schedule; I'm going to turn it over to Lute. He has until about 10:20 a.m. before his next meeting, but he'll answer any of your questions on the document that the President and Prime Minister Maliki just signed while they were on the SVTS at 9:00 a.m. And then I'll come back out and take a few questions, and then I've got to get to the Oval for the Olmert meeting.

The President had his normal briefings at 8:00 a.m. At 8:55 a.m., the President and Prime Minister Maliki got together for a secure video teleconference from the White House Situation Room, where they both signed a U.S.-Iraq Declaration of Principles. And General Lute, the Assistant to the President for Iraq and Afghanistan, will provide a short opening statement for you and then take some of your questions on that.

At 10:55 a.m. this morning, the President will meet with the Prime Minister of Israel. And at 1:15 p.m., he will meet with the President of the Palestinian Authority, President Abbas. Obviously this is in the lead-up to the Annapolis Conference, which will take place tomorrow.

At 3:00 p.m., the President will welcome the American recipients of the Nobel Prizes for 2007. This is an annual event at the White House, and the President is always honored to have the American recipients here. It's a wonderful opportunity to recognize their achievements in these important fields.

Today we will have Drs. Mario Capecchi and Oliver Smithies for their discoveries in stem cell research; for economics, Drs. Eric Maskin and Roger Myerson for laying the foundations of mechanism design theory. And Dr. Leonid Hurwicz is unable to attend -- he also shared in the prize. And the recipients of the Peace Prize, Vice President Al Gore, and representing the U.S. Delegation to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which shared the Peace Prize with him will be Drs. Sharon Hays, Susan Solomon, and Harlan Watson, for their efforts on climate change both to spread awareness and address efforts to counteract manmade contributions to climate change.

One quick point on this, since I know there's a lot of interest. The President is very pleased that both

Vice President Gore and Mrs. Gore will attend today. President Bush called Vice President Gore and personally asked him to attend. We did change one of the dates -- the original date we had looked at was one where Vice President Gore would have been out of the country, so we tried to accommodate to ensure he could be here. They will meet privately -- the President and Vice President Gore will meet privately in the Oval prior to the visit with the other Nobel laureates this afternoon. That will be in the Oval.

At 7:10 p.m., the President will make remarks at the Secretary of State's dinner with Annapolis Conference participants.

One quick gaggle announcement before I turn it over to General Lute. Today USAID pledged to make available over \$10 million of food assistance for the relief and immediate recovery efforts for the Cyclone Sidr response in Bangladesh. This brings the U.S. government total response to more than \$14.4 million in emergency funds, commodities and transportation to date. And further details about our response to that natural disaster are on USAID's website.

I will issue this transcript today, so you don't have to take notes as furiously, since we have our special guest, General Lute, who I'll introduce now.

GENERAL LUTE: As Dana just mentioned, today is an important day for us on the Iraq team, because President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq signed an important document that frames our emerging strategic relationship with Iraq. This so-called Declaration of Principles has its roots in the Iraqi leader's requests for a long-term bilateral relationship in their communique of August 26th. So the root here really goes back to this communique of 26 August.

The day after that, the President accepted the Iraqi request in concept, and today's document is now the first of a three-step process that actually codifies this mutual decision for a long-term partnership. The next step is that we'll look to renew the United Nations Security Council mandate for yet another year. This is actually required on its renewal date by 31 December.

And then in the course of 2008, the two countries, the United States and Iraq, will codify formally our bilateral relationship with, as we're calling it, the strategic framework agreement. Today's declaration outlines the main parts of what we expect that emerging agreement to contain. There should be a political-diplomatic segment, there will be a segment dealing with economic affairs, and then a security segment.

Today's agreement is not binding, but rather it's a mutual statement of intent that will be used to frame our formal negotiations in the course of the upcoming year. It's not a treaty, but it's rather a set of principles from which to begin formal negotiations. Think of today's agreement as setting the agenda for the formal bilateral negotiations that will take place in the course of '08.

Let me just outline the importance of this document. First of all, I think it's important to the people of Iraq. It signals a commitment of both their government and the United States to an enduring relationship based on mutual interests. The basic message here should be clear: Iraq is increasingly able to stand on its own; that's very good news, but it won't have to stand alone.

It's important also to the people of the region, for Iraq's neighbors. The United States considers Iraq a key factor in regional stability, and just as we have longstanding relationships with other states in the region, we're looking to shape our future relationship with Iraq in the course of these negotiations in 2008. And finally, it's important to America. It signals that we will protect our interests in Iraq, alongside our Iraqi partners, and that we consider Iraq a key strategic partner, able to increasingly contribute to regional security.

And with that, I'm happy to take a few questions.

Q Will there be a long-term military presence, and how large of a military presence will there be?

GENERAL LUTE: So shape and size of any long-term, or longer than 2008, U.S. presence in Iraq will be a key matter for negotiation between the two parties, Iraq and the United States. So it's too soon to tell what shape and size that commitment will take. But you can be sure that that will be a key part of the negotiations that are framed in today's document.

Q And permanent bases?

GENERAL LUTE: Likewise. That's another dimension of continuing U.S. support to the government of Iraq, and will certainly be a key item for negotiation next year.

Q General Lute, first off, is this a step toward a final status of forces agreement?

GENERAL LUTE: We anticipate that one of the dimensions of this multi-dimensional agreement I just described to be negotiated in '08 will be something like a status of forces agreement, which would then replace the existing Security Council mandate as the authority by which we operate alongside our Iraqi partners inside Iraq. So we're going from a multilateral, U.N.-based mandate, if you will, and in the course of '08 we want to move that increasingly towards a bilateral setting.

Q Is there any precedent for this in history? I mean, there wasn't anything like this after Korea or Vietnam or any other kind of American engagement.

GENERAL LUTE: Well, in fact, we do have a long-term bilateral with Korea. There are about a hundred countries around the world with which we have bilateral defense or security cooperation agreements. You should think about the one that's emerging here with Iraq as one in that same sort of setting.

Q If this is a non-binding agreement, then how serious is it? Why is it non-binding?

GENERAL LUTE: Well, it's important for two reasons. First of all, it specifies that both parties, Iraq and the United States, agree that we need another year of a Chapter 7 under the U.N. charter -- a Chapter 7 mandate for '08, which gets us, then, another year to negotiate our bilateral arrangement. So it does that. And then second of all, it sets the agenda for these two negotiating teams. So the two negotiating

teams, Iraq and the United States, now have a common sheet of music with which to begin the negotiations. They have a table of contents, if you will, for their work in '08.

Q What is your time frame for these negotiations in '08? Do you have an idea of when they'll begin, and do you expect them to conclude by the end of the Bush administration?

GENERAL LUTE: Again, very early in the calendar year of '08, and the target we've set on the wall for ourselves is to conclude by July.

Q How can any nation make a deal under occupation and not feel coerced? And anyway, they don't really have a sort of government there at all.

GENERAL LUTE: Well, let me just push back on that a bit. First of all, all major national leaders of the existing Iraqi government initialed off on this. So this was not done between the United States and Prime Minister Maliki alone, but rather between the United States and Maliki as he represents the presidency council and other national leaders inside Iraq.

Yesterday the exact text of this document was read before the council of representatives. It was discussed. And while we didn't expect and the Iraqis didn't ask for a formal vote on this -- it doesn't rise to that level of negotiated document -- there was general agreement and there is general agreement among all the key national leaders in Iraq that this is a positive step forward.

Q Can I follow up?

GENERAL LUTE: Sure.

Q Is this a facade for the Middle East conference, so it doesn't wave this big cloud of our being in Iraq?

GENERAL LUTE: It's not linked in any meaningful way that I can think of to what's going on in Annapolis. As I said, its roots really go back to August 26th. And if you go from August 26th to 31 December, when the Security Council resolution needs to be renewed, you have about four months of work. We're three months into that four-month process. So this helps us get to where we need to be by 31 December by codifying, on behalf of both of the national leaders, that we need to get one more Chapter 7 mandate and then get ourselves into '08. So it's really just a natural course of events coming out of 26 August.

Q You mentioned the size and the shape or the scope, stuff like that. Will this contain time lines or goals for the withdrawal of troops?

GENERAL LUTE: It is not currently anticipated to do that. What we would anticipate --

Q You're leaving the door open?

GENERAL LUTE: It's not that nature of an agreement. What we expect this to do is set a bilateral

mandate for the continued presence and missions performed by U.S. troops, and other coalition troops, as well, outside of the U.N. Security Council mandate. So what U.S. troops are doing, how many troops are required to do that, are bases required, which partners will join them -- all these things are on the negotiating table.

Q Thanks, General. Two questions. Do you hope that this has any effect on the political reconciliation process? And on the flip side of that, could a breakdown in the political reconciliation process have any effect on this agreement between the U.S. and Iraq? And second, what are the other key negotiation items besides troop presence?

GENERAL LUTE: Besides?

Q Troop presence.

GENERAL LUTE: I think you'll be provided, actually, a copy of what was signed today. And it outlines four major -- three major categories, as I said: political, economic measures, and then security measures. So it's kind of outlined there. There are about a dozen or so major categories that we expect to be negotiated.

And your first question was?

Q Political reconciliation, will this have any effect on it, in your view, or could a breakdown in that process have any effect on --

GENERAL LUTE: We believe, and Iraqi national leaders believe, that a long-term relationship with the United States is in our mutual interest. From the Iraqi side, the interest that they tend to talk about is that a long-term relationship with us, where we are a reliable, enduring partner with Iraq, will cause different sects inside the Iraqi political structure not to have to hedge their bet in a go-it-alone-like setting, but rather they'll be able to bet on the reliable partnership of the United States.

So to that extent, to the extent it doesn't cause sectarian groups to have to hedge their bet independently, we're confident that this will actually contribute to reconciliation in the long run.

Q General, will the White House seek any congressional input on this?

GENERAL LUTE: In the course of negotiations like this, it's not -- it is typical that there will be a dialogue between congressional leaders at the negotiating table, which will be run out of the Department of State. We don't anticipate now that these negotiations will lead to the status of a formal treaty which would then bring us to formal negotiations or formal inputs from the Congress.

Q Is the purpose of avoiding the treaty avoiding congressional input?

GENERAL LUTE: No, as I said, we have about a hundred agreements similar to the one envisioned for the U.S. and Iraq already in place, and the vast majority of those are below the level of a treaty.

Q Thank you, General. When you talk about Iraq not going it alone and depending on the United States, I can't help but think how just two allies in the coalition of the willing, Poland last month and yesterday Australia, elected governments that were going to take steps to completely withdraw their participation. This has been a pattern in other elections around the world. Was this factored in, in the agreement?

GENERAL LUTE: No, the size and shape of other than U.S. contributions to this coalition, the one in Iraq, but also to international forces in Afghanistan has changed with elections and domestic politics over the years. I'm with you; I read carefully that two key and very strong allies, the Australians and the Poles, have made announcements about reshaping their commitment to Iraq over the course of the next year. We're hopeful that they'll do that in full coordination with us. We think they will. And furthermore, we note that both of those countries, Poland and Australia, are already making sizable commitments to the other war, if you will, to the effort in Afghanistan. And then -- I'm sorry?

Q Why is that? Why?

GENERAL LUTE: Why are they doing it? I think they see it in their interests. I mean, fundamentally, states like Australia and Poland and others don't commit their troops lightly, so I'm sure that they view this in their own interests. That can be the only deduction I have.

And last one, please.

Q Just a quick one, who are the U.S. negotiators? Is that Ambassador Crocker?

GENERAL LUTE: Ambassador Crocker was the key --

Q No, in the upcoming negotiations that you --

GENERAL LUTE: No, we will form a special team, and I'll refer you over to State in terms of the internal makeup of that team. But there will be a U.S. negotiating team that will take this major negotiating task on in the course of '08.

Thanks very much.

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