



On-the-Record Briefing on Secretary Rice's Meeting With the South Korean Foreign Minister

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MR. MCCORMACK: Okay. All right, everybody. What I would like to do is structure the briefing the following way so we don't have to keep Assistant Secretary Hill here for all the rest of the other meetings that took place with people outside the EAP region. I thought that Chris could talk a little bit about the Secretary's meeting with the South Korean Foreign Minister, take a few questions about his region, the Six-Party process, then we can move on to any other questions about any of the Secretary's other meetings.

So why don't we – Chris, I don't – if you have a brief overview, perhaps, of the Secretary's meeting with the South Korean Foreign Minister?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Okay. Well, let me just say that, you know, the Six-Party process has had its difficult moments in the past, and we're certainly experiencing another one now. It's a time when I think we need to work very closely with all our partners, and I think the Secretary's meeting with Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan is very much part of that process.

Obviously, we want to get through this – what's proving to be this very difficult second phase. In particular, we need to get through a verification protocol so that the aim of a verifiable declaration is actually achieved. The -- as you know, the North Koreans provided a declaration, but unless it's verifiable we only really have half a loaf here.

So I think the Secretary had a wide-ranging, good discussion with the Korean Foreign Minister. She'll be talking to other participants in the Six Parties. Because of the disablement, we have time; that is, time ahead to continue to work this issue. We don't expect any sort of dramatic developments, you know, in a matter of days. I think all of you saw the announcement from Vienna about the North Korean request to have the IAEA break seals. I would refer you to the IAEA on further details of that.

But you know, clearly it's a difficult moment for the Six-Party process and it's a time we're really going to have to work very closely with our other partners.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay. Why don't we take some questions.

QUESTION: Isn't it more than just a difficult moment? I mean --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: You mean more than a moment or more than just difficult? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Both. I mean this has been going on – this has been going on – or the North Koreans, to use Sean's description of it, the negative progression – is that what you said today? The negative progression from where we were in June and the blowing up of the cooling tower, things have gone progressively backwards.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Yeah, I wouldn't say they've gone backwards since June. I think the problem we've had is in trying to get a verifiable declaration; that is, we have a declaration from them but we don't have the verification protocol that needs to go along with that. And quite frankly, it's – we've had a difficult time in the past month. Now, this corresponds, of course, to, I think, widely reported issues involving the health of the leadership there. How much it relates to that, it's hard to tell at this point. But we feel we need to keep our focus on the verification protocol.

As you know, we had some good discussions of the principles of that when we were in Beijing earlier in the summer. We have some agreement on what the overall elements of a verification protocol are. But what we'd like to do is really to define better and to elaborate those elements so that when we get on with verification there won't be any misunderstandings of what verification entails.

So yeah, it's a tough process. It's not about what you write on a piece of paper. It's about what you do on the ground. It's about, you know, going into nuclear facilities in a way we haven't done before. And it involves proving out, you know, figures involving the amount of fissile material that they have. So we're in a degree of detail that we haven't had before. And I've said many times before, you know, the more you go into these Six-Party issues, the more difficult it gets. But we've been able to get through tough spots before, and let's see if we can get through this one.

QUESTION: Chris, you have people on the ground. Can you confirm that they actually broke the seals?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: No, I'm not in a position to do that. That was – I think the news came out of Vienna this morning, and so I don't have any information of what actually happened on the ground in Yongbyon. You know, with the time change, I think it was soon – evening in Yongbyon by the time it was the afternoon in Vienna.

QUESTION: So you didn't get in touch with --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: We have no confirmation that this process has moved forward. But I would direct you to the IAEA for that because this has to do with IAEA's seals and cameras.

QUESTION: Chris, when you say that – about the verification protocol, do you think that the North Koreans just don't actually want to verify what they wrote on the piece of paper and they can't? Or is that why this is all being held up? Or are they just playing their normal brinksmanship to get more from you? I mean, what do you think that this is all about?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, I mean, obviously, you're going to have ask them. It looks like – you know, they understand the need for verification, the fact that they provided 18,000 pages of documents is a sign that they understand the need for verification. I think to some extent the issue is the scope of the verification, how far – how much verification needs to be accomplished.

We believe that – I mean, they have agreed to all three elements of verification; that is, documents, interviews, and site visits. But we need these really elaborated in some detail. We also need a process by which, if there are sites that are in addition to the ones already known, if there are additional sites, we need a means by which to work with the North Koreans on identifying these and ultimately making visits.

Now, this has come up in North Korean public statements as a desire on our part to "conduct house-to-house searches," which is, of course, not what we're interested in.

We're simply interested in the means, according to international standards, really, because I want to emphasize this is not the first time someone has had to verify a nuclear declaration. We just need the means to make sure that what they've declared to us is something we can verify.

QUESTION: Ambassador Hill, you said that – you mentioned the health of Kim Jong-il and the reports of the health. Who is making the decisions now as far as you can tell, and have the Chinese been able to provide some more insight into the decision making in the past month?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: You know, I'm not really in a position to answer that. I think – you know, how decisions are made in North Korea is always a bit of an opaque process and certainly this month has been no exception to that. But clearly, we are seeing a, you know, a tough line in the last month from them.

But again, I want to emphasize we are, you know, in touch with them through the New York channel as we have been. So I would rather you think of this as a very rough-and-tumble moment in the negotiation process.

QUESTION: Chris, you said that you wanted to work closely with your partners to try and get through this difficult patch.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Is that what I said? Well --

QUESTION: Well, my words is difficult patch. But are you hoping – are you planning to go to Beijing soon and have a Six-Party meeting or – I mean, what are you planning to do with the process?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: I think we're going to be consulting with our partners to see what the best way forward is and whether – you know, if there's a – if the – in the opinion of the chair of the process, the Chinese, they want to get us all together, that's fine with us. So we'll have to see on the basis of these consultations. And you know, some of them will be this week. I think we'll have additional ones next week. And we'll have a pretty good idea of what all our partners are thinking.

I must say what is gratifying is the fact that our – you know, and certainly in having telephone conversations with our partners, there's a general, you know, consensus on what we need to do. And I think everyone is trying to advocate the notion of, you know, being patient, working through the issue, and trying to get there.

QUESTION: Where are the consultations going to be?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, I mean, part of the process is being done here, right here in New York. I'll look forward to speaking to some of our partners later this week. And we'll – we'll have to take it from there. But we want to make sure that everybody is well knit up on the issue.

MR. MCCORMACK: The Secretary has dinner with the Chinese Foreign Minister tonight as well.

QUESTION: Chris, can you make any judgment on whether the problems that you're currently experiencing are related more to health issues or more to it's getting close to the end of the Administration and maybe they're going to wait it out?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: I'm not in a position to judge the issue with respect to health issues. With respect to how close to the end of the Administration, et cetera, our soundings from the North Koreans continue to be that they want to reach an agreement with the – in the negotiating context that they've got now. So I'm not sure I would assume that it's because of the U.S. election calendar. I don't think the North Koreans are looking at a future administration and thinking somehow that would be easier or whatever. I think they understand that the best time to do it is to get it done now.

I would really suggest to you, you know, look more – look at the issue of the verification regime and the fact that North Korea is not a country that's given to opening itself up on issues, and so they want to make sure that the verification is consistent with what they're prepared to do. And you know, that's just part of a tough negotiation.

QUESTION: Have you asked them, like outright, about his health – the North Koreans, through the New York channel? Are you --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: You mean the way a CNN reporter would, they would just blurt it out like that? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Yeah. We heard some things about Kim Jong-il. How's he --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Wait, let me get this down. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'm serious. Have you point blank asked the North Koreans, "We heard he's sick, what's the deal?" I mean --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, again, we've been in touch with the North Koreans. I'm not prepared to go into the details of what we talk about.

QUESTION: Chris, Fox has heard from two agencies that, in fact, at Yongbyon the re-installment process, or the reprocessing part, is actually complete. This is why they want to break the seals. They want to do operational tests. Can you – have you got any comment on that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, as I understand, any restarting of a – of the reprocessing facility would require rather extensive testing. You'd have to test what you've put back together and you'd have to test a lot of things. So I don't think there's any immediate potential for restarting the thing. But obviously, these reports are, you know, ones that we take very seriously.

QUESTION: But we've heard from our officials that it's a matter of weeks before they can start reprocessing the spent fuel.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: I think when we looked at the overall issue of, you know, how long it would take, our calculations were that it would take weeks for the reprocessing and months and perhaps – overall, it would take over a year for the overall plants, but that reprocessing was one that could be accomplished in a matter of very few months, depending on how the equipment operates, et cetera. So they're not ready to reprocess now, but certainly they have taken the machinery out and put it back together. But I would emphasize you need to talk to the IAEA about the details of that.

QUESTION: Well, aren't you concerned about this?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Am I concerned about this? Yes, we are concerned about this. That's a quote. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Did you say – you had mentioned earlier that there was some concern possibly of additional sites – can you be more specific about that. Have you (inaudible)?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: No, it's not a question of particular sites. It's a question of an overall process. And you have – when you have verification, do you only look at sites that are mentioned early in the beginning of the process, or do you have a means to look at additional sites as they become – as issues come up? And so

what is the means for that? How do you do it consistent with a country's sovereignty? Questions like that. There are international ways, international standards, for how this is done, and we would hope to try to get through that.

I must say in the last month it's been a little difficult to work through some of these issues. I know there's a lot of speculation as to why it's been difficult. But rather than speculate, rather than join in that speculation, what we've really tried to do is to address these difficulties on the basis of the substance.

QUESTION: Is there any desire to see other sites other than Yongbyon at this point?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, again, this has always been a process. And what we have looked at first in the declaration is the issue of the plutonium production, the issue of Yongbyon, with the understanding that we keep the door open for additional elements as we work those through.

MR. MCCORMACK: All right, let's take just a couple more questions here.

QUESTION: Today's meeting with – Secretary's meeting with Foreign Minister Yu, have they discussed about the future energy assistance which is linked to the disablement process?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Yes. Yes, there was a discussion of the energy assistance.

QUESTION: And how was --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, you weren't there and there's a reason you weren't there. (Laughter.) It was a diplomatic discussion, but I can assure you that issue was discussed.

QUESTION: And can you confirm that the assistance is linked to the procedure, the disablement procedure?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Well, again, I wouldn't get into the details of it except to say that clearly, as we've done, as we have provided HFO, this is indeed linked to the issue of the operation of Yongbyon.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay. Why don't we give you the last question.

QUESTION: I know from the U.S. perspective that everything is about getting the verification protocol in place and – to be able to move forward. But how much of this goes back to the issue of trust on the terrorism list issue? The North Koreans now saying that they don't want to move forward until they're off of the terrorism list. And is there a way around that? Is it – do the North Koreans have their heels dug in about the terrorism list and they're not refusing to talk about verification until they come off? I mean, is it a Catch-22 at this point?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: You know, I think they understand that we need a verification process. I think when you – if you don't have a clear process on how you're going to verify, problems will start coming up as you begin the verification process. So it's kind of – you take a choice. Do you want problems in the beginning in trying to negotiate the verification protocol, or do you want problems to come up every day that you're trying to do verification because you didn't spell it out in the first place? So our preference is to try to nail down the issues in advance. This is very much consistent with international standards of how you do this. And you'd have to ask the North Koreans whether they have a different view of that. But certainly, they understand that we need it and we need a verifiable declaration, and it's not verifiable until we have identified a set of means to verify things.

And so we're in the middle of a tough negotiation on it. I'm not saying it's easy. Obviously, there's a lot of, you know, concerns as we go through this. Obviously, it's of concern what we're seeing on the ground in Yongbyon. But I want to emphasize it's just a real tough negotiation and those of us engaged in it need to see if we can find our way through it.

QUESTION: Is it still a negotiation? I mean --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: Yes, it is.

QUESTION: But they haven't – so you don't regard what they've been doing over the last month as walking away?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: I think they have been staking out some very tough negotiating positions. We're in touch with them about our positions. I know other Six Parties are in touch with them, which is all the more reason why we need to work closely with the Six Parties. So yeah, the negotiating process does continue.

QUESTION: But are you even getting a sense that they're willing to move on verification without movement on the terrorism list? Are you getting a sense that they're willing to negotiate on it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: I think what's important for us is to have the sense that they want to complete this phase two despite what has been a very tough month in that regard. And we do have the sense that they want to continue to reach a phase two agreement. Whether we do that depends on the outcome of some – what continues to be a very, very tough negotiation. And maybe at some point, when it's all done, we can talk about it.

QUESTION: But why do you have to re-negotiate what you already negotiated? I mean, it's like you're going back to negotiate --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: No, no.

QUESTION: -- what's already been negotiated.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILL: What we did was we got from them a declaration and we have been trying to negotiate a protocol. We've made some progress on the negotiation. We've agreed on some of the major elements of the – of what verification will be. But there are some details that do need to be pinned down. And if they're not pinned down, you'll end up with a problem later on. So we're going to try to get those things pinned down and try to stick with the task and try to get it done.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, that ends the Chris Hill portion of our briefing.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

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