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Adam Ereli, Deputy Spokesman
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TRANSCRIPT:

1:10 p.m. EST

MR. ERELI: Well, now that our colleagues in the front row are here, we can begin. I don't have any announcements to begin, to start off, so let's go to your questions.

QUESTION: I have a question on Togo. This morning, the European Union declared that what happened in Togo last weekend was a coup d'etat. Do you share this definition, this assessment of the situation?

And I also understand that the new president, Faure Gnassingbe, is saying that he is willing to organize elections as soon as possible. Do you have any comment on that?

MR. ERELI: We are still working with our colleagues in the Economic Community of West African States and others in Africa to coordinate our response to the events in Togo over the weekend. Yesterday we made clear that we endorse the communiqué issued by the African Union Peace and Security Council which condemned the manner in which the de facto Togolese authorities organized the succession. We take note of the EU statements.

We are -- or the Economic Community of West African States continues to meet today in Niger. We have a representative at this meetings. Our Deputy Assistant Secretary for Africa Mr. Woods, is participating. He will remain in Niamey until the summit is over and we look forward, as I said yesterday, to a common position in response to this -- in response to the events in Togo.

Clearly, they are of concern to us. Clearly, we want to both register that concern and coordinate our response in a way that supports respect for the constitution, supports democratic processes. But I don't have a statement for you today.

QUESTION: But no coup d'etat, in your view?

MR. ERELI: In our view, the manner in which the succession was handled is of concern, and it is of concern not just to us but to the states of the region, first and foremost. There is -- there are efforts underway to address the manner in which this transfer of power was handled and I think what we're looking to come out of this is a collective recognition of what peaceful, constitutional, transparent and credible procedures are and how they can best be followed.

QUESTION: Sticking with coups, Human Rights Watch today issued a report about Nepal, suggesting that some of the people who had been arrested since the seizure of -- the King's seizure of power last week maybe disappeared, which is what happened the last time there was a state of emergency in Nepal in 2001. And I wonder if you have anything fresh on Nepal, and if not, if you could take a look at that, that report, and see what you have anything to say about it.

MR. ERELI: I don't have anything new to say about Nepal from what we've said previously, which is, obviously, that the actions of the King, in summarily dismissing the government and declaring a state of emergency and taking repressive measures such as banning media and jailing political opponents, is something that we view with the greatest concern. We have and continue to try to engage with the Government of Nepal in order to address these concerns -- not just by us, but by the international community.

I have not seen these latest reports about -- from Human Rights Watch. I'll see if I can get you our view on them.

QUESTION: Great. Thank you. There's also one from the International Crisis Group, for whatever it's worth.

MR. ERELI: Okay.

QUESTION: Can I ask you about -- I'm told that the legislation on immigration before the House -- you may not have this off the top of your head -- would prohibit PLO members from coming, entering the United States. One construction would be that that would prevent Mr. Abbas from coming to Washington to see the President. Maybe they'll meet in Geneva. I don't know.

Is this something the State Department has tried to smooth out that you're aware of?

MR. ERELI: I've seen reports that some members of Congress are considering actions in this regard, but I'm not aware of the status of those efforts. President Mahmoud Abbas is somebody who we've met with, who we have confidence in; who we think is an important and necessary interlocutor to help bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The President issued him an invitation, he accepted, and we look forward to being able to meet with him to help further our common goal of two states living side by side.

QUESTION: The object, I suppose, is -- I mean, the overall object is to screen out, I suppose, terrorists or terrorist supporters. Wouldn't it smooth things a little bit if he began to dismantle terrorism on the West Bank, which he hasn't done?

MR. ERELI: I'm not going to speak to the legislation because I'm not familiar with its provisions.

QUESTION: Yeah. No, just generally speaking.

MR. ERELI: As far as President Abbas, Mahmoud Abbas' actions with respect to terror, I think we've made it very clear that he has taken important, positive and encouraging steps. We've also made it clear that these are just that -- steps. He has said similar things. There is more that needs to be done. He has expressed the desire and the intent to do more. Our objective, our approach, is to help give him the wherewithal and support to follow through on those -- on that intention.

The appointment of a security coordinator is one step in that direction, from our point of view, from our side, and we will be continuing to do other things, coordinate, help support coordination with the Israelis, help support coordination with the other states in the region, Egypt and Jordan, as demonstrated by the recent summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, again, with the same common purpose, which is to move decisively and effectively against terror and those who practice it who have so far frustrated progress.

QUESTION: Can I just -- only, well, loosely related, or while I think of it. The Secretary said this morning -- or it's this afternoon, I guess, in Europe -- that the Quartet would meet in London coincident with the fundraiser; I guess it is, for the Palestinians. I don't believe she said at what level, and Quartets have met on secretarial level and on --

MR. ERELI: I believe it's at the level of foreign minister.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Elise.

QUESTION: New topic? Are you prepared to say anything on the killing of the Al Hurra journalist today in Baquba?

MR. ERELI: The United States is deeply saddened by the loss of Abdul Hussein Khazal and his son Mohammed. Abdul Hussein was the Al Hurra correspondent in Basra. Abdul Hussein, like so many other journalists working in Iraq, risked their lives so that others around the world may have a better understanding of what -- of the historic changes underway, and also, I think, a better understanding of the true face of terror that is committed to preventing people like Abdul Hussein and other scores of innocent Iraqis from speaking out, from expressing their views, from participating in deciding their future.

Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and his colleagues at Al Hurra during this difficult time. And incidents like this, I think, can only serve to remind us of what we're all fighting for in Iraq, and I think should provide us occasion to, you know, redouble our commit -- redouble our resolve and commitment to ensuring that those who practice these kinds of outrages don't succeed.

QUESTION: Do you know if his attachment to the United States, the fact that he was on the U.S. Government payroll, had anything to do with him being targeted, or is it possible to know that?

MR. ERELI: I don't have any information that would substantiate something like that. I think people -- Italian journalists have been kidnapped, French journalists have been kidnapped, innocent Iraqis with no connection to the United States have been wantonly murdered. So I think the connection to the United States is less the issue of -- less an issue than it is acting on -- acting in the interests of the Iraqi people, which is the real benchmark.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR. ERELI: Yeah.

QUESTION: A question on Poland. I realize that this happened at the White House but it -- I think it's something that you guys will end up dealing with. So if you could take it if you don't have an answer, it'd be great.

The President, in his photo-op with President Kwasniewski this morning, said that now we've got a way forward to make trips to America easier for Polish citizens. This goes to the issue of Poland's desire for, I believe, some kind of easing of visa requirements on its citizens. And I was wondering if you could explain what, exactly, you -- you know, what way the U.S. Government has to make trips, you know, or obtaining visas easier for Polish citizens.

MR. ERELI: The important point that the President is making, and one that we heartily endorse, is that it's very important for us that people be able to come to the United States to study, to conduct business, to engage in tourism, to get to know our country and the values that it represents.

With respect to Poland, as well as other countries, we are looking at ways that we can help facilitate this travel, that we can help countries meet requirements, legal requirements, regarding the visa categories and the issuances of visas. This is a process, frankly, of dialogue and of education, and of trying to take the right steps that facilitate travel within the framework of existing legislation and regulation. That's the subject of our engagement with the Poles, as well as a number of other countries. And the goal is to make it faster, easier, less burdensome to come to the United States while, at the same time, respecting our statutory limitations.

QUESTION: So when you say the discussions within the existing framework of legislation are [inaudible], you are not considering easing any of those requirements to make it easier for Poles, in particular?

MR. ERELI: I'm not aware of any pending legislation that would change the existing Visa Waiver Program.

QUESTION: So the government is not considering -- regardless of whether there is legislation pending, the U.S. Government is not considering seeking an easing in those requirements for the Poles?

MR. ERELI: Not that I'm aware of.

Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Do you have anything on the visit of the Irish Foreign Minister?

MR. ERELI: Our Special Envoy, Ambassador Mitchell Reiss, is meeting with Irish Prime Minister Ahern at -- Foreign Minister, sorry -- at 1 o'clock today. Foreign Minister Ahern, we expect, will give us an update on the Northern Irish peace process. Since that meeting isn't over, I don't have more of a readout for you than that.

QUESTION: The Irish press had a story today suggesting that the Administration is not inviting any of the Northern Ireland parties to St. Patrick's Day activities here next month. Do you have anything on that?

MR. ERELI: You're talking about an event at the White House, which the White House is planning for, so I'd refer you to them for details. I know that Mr. McClellan addressed the issue in his briefing earlier today. My understanding is that, from the White House, is that no decision has yet been made regarding invitations. They're under consideration. But I'd refer you to them for more.

Yes.

QUESTION: In Africa, both Sudan, as well as Zimbabwe, seem to be spots that are just [inaudible] human rights, and Kofi Annan made a statement concerning that. And the [inaudible] have just put five prominent people on trial, three of which were -- or two of which were in the ruling party, and they've given them long jail terms.

What happens when the United Nations agenda is disregarded by some of the countries, such as Zimbabwe and Sudan? And in Sudan, along with the rebels, they want this brought to a court trial. You're not necessarily for an ICC trial in Europe but more for a trial in Africa?

MR. ERELI: There are two questions here. One, what happens when countries don't meet international standards of human rights and don't comply with their obligations to the United Nations in that regard? The simple answer is they are -- they become more and more isolated within the international community. They do not enjoy the benefits of strong, positive relationships with international organizations and other states as a result of their -- there's a word I'm looking for -- as a result of their behavior.

And it remains, I think, ultimately, it's the people of the country that suffer and it's the responsibility of all of us who want to work for empowerment of the individual and a better future for those people in those countries not to forget those cases and, more importantly, to continue to keep them at the forefront of international debate, of international concern and of international action. And I think that's the role we try to play in the UN and that's the role that responsible members try to play in the UN.

So these actions by Zimbabwe, the actions by Sudan against the innocent population of Darfur, are very much at the forefront of international debate and are the subject of, I think, strong resolutions at the United Nations.

With respect to the issue of accountability in Darfur, there has been -- well, there are discussions underway at the UN and among the members of the UN about how best to structure that accountability. I think the important point to make here is that there is broad agreement within the international community that those responsible for the crimes in Darfur -- and there's also agreement there have been crimes in Darfur -- but that those responsible for the crimes in Darfur need to be held accountable.

As I said, we are discussing with other members of the Security Council how to respond to the findings of the UN's Commission of Inquiry that substantiated our findings of crimes against humanity in Darfur and substantiated our call for accountability. And, obviously, we are looking at ways to do that. The United States feels strongly that in the interest of promoting human rights on the African continent, in the interest of recognizing the important role that states on the African continent have to play, that there be an important role for the AU and for representatives of the Africans in any structure, in any mechanism, that is entrusted with enforcing accountability on those responsible.

QUESTION: And a follow-up. In the next few weeks there will be an election in Liberia, and they seem to be back on track, having roughly 40 candidates, even though that number seems very high right now. But there's some countries in Africa, as I mentioned, that are doing the proper thing and others that certainly aren't.

MR. ERELI: I don't have much to add to that.

QUESTION: Adam, I'm trying to figure out whether there's any truth to a story in *The Washington Post* today, which I'm told may actually have at least one inaccuracy in it. The story says that the initial questions that were put to Secretary Rice yesterday at Sciences Po in Paris were vetted in advance by the school and by the State Department. Is that true? Did the State Department vet the initial questions?

MR. ERELI: I wasn't there so I don't have all the details, and my understanding is that those who were there and those who were involved in the event have briefed the press traveling with the Secretary extensively on this story.

The information that I have is that we asked the school to pick a couple students who would be able to ask questions to make sure that, you know, the students were able to get some questions in.

We were very clear that the students could ask any questions they wanted. The Secretary did not know the questions in advance. And I think if you'll look at the questions, you'll see that they covered the whole gamut of issues and they were -- they weren't softballs.

QUESTION: So did the State Department receive the questions in advance, regardless of whether she saw them?

MR. ERELI: You'll have to ask the party. I'll put it this way. Whether somebody in the Secretary's party saw the questions in advance or not, did not have a -- I don't think it had a bearing on what the questions -- what questions were asked.

QUESTION: Well, I guess what I'm trying to get to -- because the report leaves the clear impression that the State Department wanted to vet the questioners and the questions -- and so, as a matter of policy, does the Department under Secretary Rice, who's answered an enormous number of questions from an enormous variety of media outlets in the last week to ten days, feel that it needs to know: (a) in advance who's asking a question; and (b) what they're going to ask?

MR. ERELI: No, I think you -- I think that's making too much out of this. As I said before, we said that the students were free to ask whatever questions they wanted to. That's principle number one. Principle number two is, we didn't pick the students who were going to ask the questions; the school did. So I don't think there is a basis here to conclude that somehow there's any restrictions on free speech.

QUESTION: But you still dodged the basic question, whether or not the officials in the traveling party knew what was going to be asked, and if so, why bother with that?

MR. ERELI: As I said before, whether some officials knew what the questions were going to be or didn't know what the questions would be: (a) the Secretary didn't know; (b) that knowledge does not in any way compromise -- or compromise the freedom of people to ask what they want, or suggest that there was control over the questioning.

QUESTION: Well, nobody is suggesting that. It's just --

MR. ERELI: But I mean --

QUESTION: There's just a level of curiosity as to whether the State Department took the trouble to find out what was going to be asked.

MR. ERELI: Yeah. I think this is a level of logistical detail that, again, I just don't have.

QUESTION: Well, why not just -- why not just let her stand up and let everybody who wants get the microphones and ask questions, which I think has happened -- I mean, I have certainly been at events with Secretary Powell where it didn't seem like there was any kind of screening or prior -- you know, people just seemed to stand up, walk to the mikes and ask questions. That happened, I think, in Brussels in December.

MR. ERELI: I mean, every event is different. Some events -- I mean, you go to a big event with a lot of people, with a lot of questions. You -- depending on the circumstances, you handle it differently. I think in this case there were -- it was at the Sciences Po, which was an academic institution where there are students. You want to make sure that everybody gets their chance at the microphone. You had students, but you also had NGO activists, you also had diplomats, you also had had think tank people. And there was, I think, a concern that the students who were there, and for, you know, whose institution was hosting it should get a shot at answering -- asking questions, which is why we go to Sciences Po and say, "Could you please make sure that we get at least five students to ask questions?"

QUESTION: Well, then why should anybody be asking the students what they're going to ask? I mean, it's one thing to say, yeah, okay --

MR. ERELI: I'm not saying we did ask what they were going to ask.

QUESTION: Somebody said you did.

MR. ERELI: So we said -- we made it clear that they could ask whatever they wanted to ask.

QUESTION: But somebody clearly asked them what they were going to ask, and I wonder why you would want that.

MR. ERELI: I don't -- again, you'll have to talk to the people in the party. I don't have that level of detail.

Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: I just wondered if you had any comment about the counterterrorism conference in Riyadh. It looks like there was some discussion about creating an international counterterrorism center as a way to respond to the various issues.

MR. ERELI: First of all, let me congratulate -- let us congratulate the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for hosting a successful counterterrorism conference that brought together over 50 countries and international organizations.

The conference produced a declaration, or issued a declaration of recommendations that we believe demonstrates the seriousness of the international community's commitment to combat terrorism and we welcome its calls for strength and cooperation and coordination among countries in the struggle against terrorism, money laundering, weapons trafficking and drug smuggling. I would also note that the statement declared that terrorism has no justification, regardless of the pretext or alleged motives. We welcome that as well.

As far as the international counterterrorism center goes, we will be part of the Saudi-led task force on the proposed international counterterrorism center, and I would note that U.S. Homeland Security Advisor Frances Townsend has indicated that anything done to increase the sharing of intelligence is a net gain but, at the same time, we need to be mindful of the need for continued bilateral exchanges of information.

QUESTION: One of the issues that came up there was trying to come to terms on a definition for terrorism -- a very difficult issue. Does the U.S. feel any progress was

made in this area?

MR. ERELI: I mean, we've consistently said that -- we've consistently resisted attempts by countries to define terror as a means of justifying certain acts that they -- of terror that they might consider to be acceptable. So I think there's a -- our view is there was a broad consensus and it was certainly reflected in the declaration about what terrorism is and the -- not accepting the need to come up with some definition for the purposes of this conference.

Yes.

QUESTION: Also on Saudi Arabia.

MR. ERELI: Sure.

QUESTION: I believe tomorrow is the first phase of municipal elections in Saudi Arabia. Do you have any observations on this milestone?

MR. ERELI: Well, obviously, it's a welcome development. I think it's a sign that Saudi Arabia is not immune to the reforms sweeping the region; that this is an opportunity for -- although they're just municipal elections, still a welcome and important opportunity for Saudi citizens to participate in the process of local governance.

My understanding is the elections will take place over three stages. The first stage begins in Riyadh, and the other stages will include other parts of the country. And we will be, obviously, watching these developments closely and working to help sustain and encourage the process of reform in Saudi Arabia, just as we do with other countries throughout the region, in recognition of the circumstances in the country.

QUESTION: Is it your understanding that women will not take part, and if not, do you have any thoughts on that?

MR. ERELI: My understanding is women will not take part. Obviously, the United States thinks that full participation in the political activity of the country is something that is -- that should occur, and we would welcome that. We would, as a general principle, think that that's the direction to go in and that's the goal to shoot for.

Yes.

QUESTION: Under Secretary Bolton said yesterday in Tokyo that China hasn't done enough to halt missile and arms proliferation to Iran. And also, there were reports that a senior NSC official recently sent [inaudible] to Chinese president to ask him to put more pressure on North Korea. So my question is: Is this a general thinking of this Administration or the State Department that China hasn't done enough or could have done more in North Korea and Iran?

MR. ERELI: On the first question, which is the question of proliferation, as you know, the United States follows very carefully proliferation activity -- not simply with respect to China, but with respect to countries throughout the world. It is a -- obviously, a huge priority for the United States that weapons technology, advanced weapons technology, not get in the hands of dangerous regimes, so we track very carefully proliferation activity.

In the case of China, again, as is well known, we have sanctioned a number of Chinese entities for violations of missile technology and control regime and other laws against proliferation.

With respect to the Government of China, again, I think it's well known we've made very clear that nonproliferation regulations, while there has been important progress made in that area in China, implementation of these restrictions still has a way to go. And I think Secretary Bolton was -- or Under Secretary Bolton was echoing that in his remarks.

On the subject of Director -- Senior Director Green's visit to China, I think that's a subject that has been very amply dealt with in our public comments. White House spokesman McClellan spoke to it earlier today. I really don't have much more to add. He is there in China, as well as other countries in the region, consulting on how we can work together to bring North Korea back to another round of six-party talks.

China has obviously played, and continues to play, a very constructive role in that effort, both in that effort as well as in the talks themselves, in hosting the talks and bringing the talks as far as they've gotten. I think it's incumbent upon all of us to do what we can to bring North Korea back to the talks as soon as possible. It's something that we agreed to at the last round, including North Korea, and it's something that everybody wants to see -- that five of the six want to see happen as soon as possible.

QUESTION: Is the Secretary planning to visit Asia, like China and South Korea, Japan, to consult about North Korean issues?

MR. ERELI: I don't have anything to share with you on further travel of the Secretary, other than I expect more trips -- I would expect more trips.

Yes.

QUESTION: Oh, still on China. Secretary Rice, this morning in Brussels, she expressed a strong concern about lifting the arms embargo to China. Could you elaborate, or could you tell me the detail conversation between Secretary Rice and the European leaders regarding this issue?

MR. ERELI: No. I can't. (A) Because I wasn't there, and (b) because I think the Secretary dealt with that issue very fully in her public remarks, explaining why the United States felt that a lifting of the arms embargo on China at this time was not -- was not a good idea and explained our discussions with and, I think, relationships -- discussions with the Europeans on this issue and how we were looking to move forward on it. I think her remarks covered it pretty well. I don't have much to add.

QUESTION: So, as you know, then, on this issue, then also the Japan's Government shares the same concerns with the United States. What kind of prospect do you have on the cooperation with the Japan on this issue?

MR. ERELI: What kind of cooperation with Japan on this issue?

QUESTION: Yes. And what kind of conversations do you have with the Japan on this issue?

MR. ERELI: Well, the United States has the -- with all countries on this issue, we make known our concerns, make known how we view the issue, and basically look at -- to discuss ways that those concerns can be addressed and we can meet the mutual goals of supporting human rights and ensuring regional stability. And there is clearly a convergence of views between the United States and Japan, I think, on this issue. And that's -- I think that reflects a broader consensus, a broader understanding of how to approach security in the Pacific region between the United States and Japan.

Yes.

QUESTION: Does the United States trying to raise the issues other than the North Korean nuclear program in the coming six-party talks? Issues like human rights and kidnapping of --

MR. ERELI: Let's -- the focus of our attention on the upcoming rounds of six-party talks, frankly, is the proposal that we presented many months ago that deals with the North Korean program. That's really the focus. That's our focus.

QUESTION: I raised this issue because I heard that the family of a Korean reverend was kidnapped by the North Koreans a couple of years ago. The family of the reverend visited the State Department yesterday and the officials of the State Department told them that they would raise the issue of this kidnapping in the coming six-party talks. And can you confirm that?

MR. ERELI: I don't have that information.

QUESTION: No?

MR. ERELI: Mr. Lambros.

QUESTION: Yes. Mr. Erel, do you know if Madame Secretary Condoleezza Rice, during her last trip to Ankara, discussed also Greek-Turkish bilateral issues and the Cyprus problem, and to which extent?

MR. ERELI: Again, in answer to -- I'll give you the same answer I gave to your colleague. I think this issue was addressed very fully by the Secretary in her numerous public comments following her meetings in Ankara, in interviews with Turkish television -- different Turkish television outlets, and her press availability with Foreign Minister Gul.

She said that they talked about the situation on Cyprus. She reiterated our view that we would like to take steps to ease the economic isolation of Turkish Cyprus. And for, really, the readout of those meetings, I'd refer you to those transcripts.

QUESTION: I know this because I read all of this stuff. I'm asking if they discussed also Greek-Turkish bilateral issues, like the Aegean one?

MR. ERELI: I'm not aware that they did.

QUESTION: Do you know if Madame Secretary of State is going to meet in Brussels with the Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat?

MR. ERELI: I don't know.

QUESTION: And also, may we have a readout about her recent trip to the area by the Cyprus Coordinator, Under Secretary Laura Kennedy?

MR. ERELI: Ms. Kennedy is the Deputy Assistant Secretary for -- in the Bureau of European Affairs. That's in addition to her role as Acting Coordinator of Cyprus. She is currently traveling in the region for which she is responsible. That includes visits to Belgium, Greece, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azer -- and Azerbaijan.

As I said, she is traveling in her capacity as Deputy Assistant Secretary, not in her capacity as Acting Coordinator for Cyprus. She is still traveling so I, you know, I don't have a lot more detail than that to share with you.

QUESTION: And the last one. According to *Washington Post*, the Pentagon's chief investigator is looking into the military's practice of paying journalists to write propaganda-type stories to a website section called "Southeast European Times," and in influencing public opinion in the Balkans. And many of them is also Greek, namely, George Anagnostopoulos, who is under investigation. I am wondering if the Department of State has a similar website.

MR. ERELI: Not that I'm aware of. Was this a Pentagon website or a website --

QUESTION: Yes. It's a Pentagon.

MR. ERELI: No. The only website I'm aware of is the website that you can log on to.

QUESTION: No, I'm saying does the Department of State have a similar one?

MR. ERELI: No, not that I know of.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:55 p.m.)

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