

PRESS ROUNDTABLE

BY UNDER SECRETARY FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS R. NICHOLAS BURNS AT THE THIRTEENTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL OF THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

**Ljubljana, Slovenia
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UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you for being here. I apologize for keeping you waiting. It's been the normal kind of ministerial meeting where the issues will come down to the final hours, so we were just in a negotiating session with Minister Rupel and the European Union and the Russian delegation.

I'll make a few points and then I'll be happy to respond to your questions. First, let me just thank the Slovenian government and the President and the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister -- Foreign Minister Rupel, who was Chairman-in-Office -- for their hospitality. Also, for the great work and tireless work they did over the last year. Slovenia had a very active year, did very well as Chairman-in-Office and we're very grateful to you.

I think we released a statement that I made yesterday. You've got it. It is important it's the 30th Anniversary year of the OSCE. It's a historical institution. It did help the Eastern part of Europe to free itself from communism and dictatorship. Now I think what was interesting about yesterday and today's session, if you listen to all the speakers -- and this is an extraordinary group, 55 countries representing Central Asia, the Caucasus, Balkans, Central Europe, Western Europe, and North America -- there was a unity that I found in the statements, and that unity was that the OSCE's new mission has to be to complete the work of democratization in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, in Central Asia. And I think we have full-scale agreement on that.

The overwhelming majority of countries here -- the overwhelming majority -- believe that the OSCE is doing well and that its mission is strong, and that it does not need to be put on a psychiatrist's couch. It doesn't need to be fixed fundamentally. And in particular there was high praise for ODIHR for the election missions. We just saw a performance of ODIHR on Sunday in Kazakhstan, and you saw the excellent report that they produced, in a very difficult situation. You've seen what they've done in other elections across Europe over the last couple of years. Strong support for ODIHR, strong support for its mandate and for strengthening the mandate.

There were a few suggestions, or maybe one suggestion, that ODIHR be weakened or ODIHR's mission should be called into question, but I believe every other delegation said that ODIHR should be stronger, not weaker, and that we had full confidence in ODIHR itself.

We do have a document that I think will be agreed and it will be the reform road map. I think so, although some delegations are still looking at it. That's a good document because that document speaks about strengthening the OSCE and strengthening (inaudible) and doing even more to fulfill the core mission that the OSCE has.

Whether or not there's a declaration, ministerial declaration, at this point, I think it might be problematic. We'll know in a couple of hours. Perhaps someone will pull a rabbit out of a hat, but I kind of doubt it. Simply because we have, as we did in 2004 and 2003, we have the great majority of the countries, nearly all the countries, believing that we should reiterate and reaffirm the commitment of the Istanbul Commitments of 1999: that is that Russia should withdraw its military forces from Georgia and Moldova.

This year we're in an interesting position in that I think all of us are ready to praise the work done by Georgia and Russia together in the May 30th joint statement. We all believe it's a good agreement. We hope there might even be a separate statement on the situation in Georgia. That's also being negotiated as we speak. But there is good news. There has been progress on Georgia. It doesn't mean it's final, there's a final agreement. There are still some remaining obligations that both Georgia and Russia have, but for the most part this is positive.

There has been no progress on Moldova. In fact, there's been no progress since December 2003 in terms of reductions of the Russian force, which is about 1,500 men, and the Russian equipment in Moldova. Because of that, I think, 52 or 53 countries took the position, of the 55, that there has to be mention of the Istanbul Commitments pertaining to Georgia, and until now the Russian delegation has not been able to agree to that.

So unless there is a change in the last moment -- there's currently a proposal on the table by the European Union to which the United States has agreed, by the way, that would recall these Istanbul Commitments, praise the action on Georgia, but say that there needs to be more progress on Moldova. I don't know if the next hour or two we'll get all 55 countries to agree to that. If we do, there will be a declaration. If we don't, there won't be a declaration. But the overwhelming majority of countries believe that these Istanbul commitments are important. And if we do not have a declaration it is because we're not willing to trade principle for a document. The principle is much more important than a ministerial declaration. The principles have to endure. The ministerial declaration fades away as soon as you write your stories. So we've taken a principled position, as we have in past ministerials, and I'm talking -- you can talk to other delegations -- not just on behalf of the United States. I'm reflecting the view of the 52 or 53 countries.

Just a couple of other quick points, then we can go to questions. There are a lot of initiatives that are kind of below the press radar screen, but you might want to get hold of them. The OSCE will be deciding today, I think Ambassador Finley is here, on 15 or 20 other decisions, and some of them are quite important.

I just thought I'd mention a few. There's a trafficking in persons decision that would have the OSCE adopt a zero tolerance policy in trafficking of women and children. This is a policy that NATO has already adopted as of two years ago. It's very important, and we've had strong support from everyone on it so we're happy about that. There are many other documents that are important in this process.

Having said all that, I'm happy to take any questions you might have.

QUESTION: Would you describe the Slovenian chairmanship as balanced, (inaudible) in a different way maybe?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I was in...in the last two days I must have been in four or five hours of meetings with Mr. Rupel outside the plenary, small meetings. I thought he was very creative and very solid, did an excellent job of chairing. So we're very grateful to Mr. Rupel and to his delegation and his government.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, on Kazakhstan there was a reaction by the State Department Spokesman, (inaudible) mild criticism of the elections. There has been criticism that in countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, all regions of strategic importance of the U.S., the U.S. is not as critical as with other countries. What do you say to that?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: First, let me say that I fully agree with the State Department Spokesman. I thought the Spokesman made a brilliant statement yesterday. I think it was Adam Ereli, our Deputy Spokesman, who made the statement. I think what he said is pretty much reflected in most of the countries of this organization.

I had a chance to talk to the ODIHR head yesterday, who's just come back from Astana. We talked personally about what he perceived to be the successes and some of the shortcomings of the elections. I believe the OSCE position is very...almost identical with the American position as articulated by our Deputy Spokesman, and that is there was some progress in the Kazakh elections. You have to measure it against the prior elections. But there are also shortcomings. The OSCE clearly spelled out where the shortcomings are and we have not taken issue with that. We have agreed that there was some progress. There are also shortcomings, and we've conveyed that directly to the Kazakh authorities. We (inaudible), already.

So what you want to do in a situation like this, if a country that is trying to reform and trying to adapt itself to the democratic principles of Europe and North America, if that country is making progress over the course of 15 years, of course you want to state that as the ODIHR did. But if there are shortcomings you have an ethical obligation to say them, which he did. And we have also said them on the part of the United States. So I think that's the best way to answer your question.

QUESTION: What (inaudible) from Kosovo? You say you don't want (inaudible), but (inaudible)?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes.

QUESTION: So what is that? What is the future?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I would just refer you to what Secretary-General Kofi Annan said. He said in these negotiations there are two options: one is independence, and the other is continued Kosovar membership in -- involvement in Serbia-Montenegro under Serb sovereignty. And it's not for the United States or any other country to decide what the outcome of the talks shall be. They just began a week ago, so we have to leave it up to them to decide. The Kosovar Albanians, the Kosovar Serbs, and the Serb government in Belgrade. Those talks started last week, and we thought that (inaudible) has done a masterful job in setting up the talks.

There may be a statement here on Kosovo but it will not be to pass judgment on the political issues of the elections, it will be to congratulate the OSCE for its current mission and to ask it to continue to play that mission as these UN final status talks continue.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) the international community should not forget about Serbia. What can the international community offer Serbia in this process, (inaudible) for Serbia?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: In the Kosovo status talks?

QUESTION: Yes.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, you know the Serb government is a party to the talks, so the Serb government will obviously defend its interests in those talks. The United States has said for many years that we wish to have a full and good relationship with Serbia-Montenegro, but it is an incomplete relationship because Serbia has not arrested Mladic who was responsible for the war crimes massacre at Srebrenica, in July 1995. Until it does, the United States and the other NATO Allies have all said we can't support a normal relationship with Serbia. So it's really up to Serbia to put in place the foundations of the relationship.

QUESTION: Turning to Kazakhstan, how are the chances for the Kazakh chairmanship in 2009 after these elections?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know, that decision doesn't need to be made until a year from now, I believe, and I would really refer you to what Ambassador Finley has been saying -- she's here, she's done an outstanding job as our ambassador -- that is that the United States hasn't made, and I don't think most of the other countries have made, any kind of decision on this. We will all do it a year from now. A year is a long time. You have to take things as they come, and we'll have to see what the situation is like a year from now.

QUESTION: When you talk about strengthening, about ODIHR, do you have any concrete suggestions or ideas which go beyond --

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's very interesting that you asked that question because one of the proposals made, and it would be indiscreet of me to say which country made the proposal, was to have, in essence, ODIHR out under a spotlight and inspected for what is going right and what is going wrong and have a permanent council do that. Instead, the agreement that I think is going to be reached is that ODIHR will simply be asked, and the ODIHR head will soon be asked: tell us about your missions, tell us about the lessons learned from your missions, are there ways you believe you can strengthen your operation? He would come back a year from now and report back to the ministers and then the ministers would discuss that. A lot of us thought that was the proper way to proceed, since ODIHR is among the strongest parts of the OSCE. We wanted to make it very clear that we are not questioning ODIHR. We believe that ODIHR has been effective. But if ODIHR wants to offer some additional thought, that's perfectly appropriate. So that's been the decision. We are very pleased by that decision as (inaudible).

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, how must your contacts with the Russian delegation over the last two days -- Russia is going to take over the G-8 next year and the Council of Europe, as well. Could you sense during your talks with the Russian delegation, the minister, any willingness from the Russian side to have some things evolve in the year 2006, give or take the ODIHR issue and --

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We have great respect for the Russian Federation, Minister Lavrov and for his team, (inaudible) negotiators. I just came from Moscow. I spent three days there last week and we had excellent U.S.-Russian talks. So we're looking forward to the Russian presidency. The Russians have articulated a very good agenda for the G-8 presidency. We've agreed to that agenda. And we think that there's every reason to believe that this will be a good process for the G-8.

I should also say here there's no question that the Russian delegation does not agree with the majority of countries on these Istanbul Commitments, but Russia is giving a lot to the OSCE, has agreed to, obviously, to a budget for the next two years, has agreed to a scale of contributions. In any multilateral organization if you have differences you try to negotiate them. If you can't negotiate them, you still respect the other partner, and we have full respect for the Russian Federation. We just happen not to agree with it on all the issues, and that's not surprising for all of you who have followed the OSCE over the last couple of years.

QUESTION: Has there been any discussion here on the plans by the lower house of the Russian parliament to (inaudible) controls (inaudible) including (inaudible)?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: There has been very little discussion here. I discussed that in my trip to Moscow, and we've had bilateral discussions. I know many other countries are talking. But it is not an issue for the agenda here.

QUESTION: You mentioned the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The Caucasus, as the main focus points for OSCE. Does that mean that the OSCE in the future will be focused on, as it has been said, east of Vienna, south and east of Vienna, which is sort of what the Russians call geographical injustice?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, the OSCE actually focuses on all the member countries. The OSCE has had advice to give the United States, West European countries on (inaudible) processes, and I said in my statement yesterday, you've got it, that we welcome that. We welcome it. Just as we do in NATO, here in the OSCE, if countries have advice for us we're willing to listen to it. That's the democratic way.

So it's not just an organization that focuses on Europe east of Vienna. But let's face it: if you look at the development of Europe over the last 15 years since the end of the Soviet empire and communism, the greatest number of conflicts, frozen conflicts, of course are east of Vienna. And the greatest lack of reform in terms of democracy, human rights, electoral practices, rule of law, are in countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Countries that are absolute dictatorships, both of them.

So it's appropriate that an organization committed to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and free and fair elections, we're focused on those countries that are most challenged in that regard, and I've just named two of them -- Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, among others.

QUESTION: The Spanish minister told me yesterday that the Spanish government would like to see OSCE activity expand more towards the south of the Mediterranean because he said that many problems in Europe have their origins in Africa and the Middle East also, and not only not in the East, in Central Asia he said. What do you think about that?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well you know, this organization, like any other, has to reflect the will of its own members and there are 55 members. I think the clear...what you heard in most of the statements over the last two days was that we need to focus on the Caucasus and Central Asia and the Balkans. If there's something -- I'd refer you to Ambassador Finley. I don't know if there's been discussion about the OSCE work in the Middle East or North Africa.

QUESTION: What he said is that this partnership should be intensified.

AMBASSADOR JULIE FINLEY:-- dialogue of cultures.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know, we've been open to...we very much appreciate the EU, the Barcelona process that just finished after ten years. NATO has its Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. OSCE has its own dialogue. All that's good. We're in favor of that. But the major focus of the organization has to be on the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia. Why do we say that? Because I think there is a strategic consensus here that our ultimate objective is to create a Europe that is stable and peaceful and united. That's the promise of 1989-1991. And that has occurred in Central Europe. It has not yet occurred in the Balkans, the Caucasus or Central Asia. So, that's the historical mission of the OSCE, moving forward out over the next decade. I think if you look at all the statements made, that premise, that strategic vision is there.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) said yesterday that Iran denied (inaudible) proposal to enrich uranium in Russia. So how now do you see the future of talks with Iran (inaudible)?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, the U.S. position is very well articulated on that issue. We understand there may be some further meetings between Iran and the EU-3. We'll have to see how those meetings unfold. But the U.S. position remains as it's been articulated over many, many months.

QUESTION: (Inaudible)?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We're not part of the meetings. We're not taking part. So you'll have to ask the people who actually go to the meetings.

QUESTION: What (inaudible) more or better?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think Slovenia had a very successful presidency. I know Minister Rupel probably has a lot of frequent flyer miles. [Laughter]. And that's probably good for him, the Slovenian government. We really respect the job they've done.

We have a very good relationship with Slovenia, by the way, our ambassador -- and their Ambassador -- Robertson. Ambassador Robertson and I had a chance to talk to Minister Rupel yesterday about our bilateral relationship. We're very grateful for what Slovenia has done in doubling its troop contributions to Bosnia and to Afghanistan and maintaining its troop contributions to Kosovo.

Slovenia has volunteered, on its own, to send demining experts to Iraq. Slovenia is a valued member of the NATO Alliance so we have an excellent bilateral relationship. We have increased American investment coming out in Slovenia by American companies.

Do you want to say anything, Tom, about --

AMBASSADOR TOM ROBERTSON: I think the Slovenian journalists are aware of (inaudible). (Inaudible).

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yeah.

AMBASSADOR ROBERTSON: (Inaudible), Slovenian journalists and other journalists, which we (inaudible).

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know, being Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE is a hard job. You have 55 unruly countries. All of us with different positions, different statements. I thought that Slovenia did a really fine job.

QUESTION: Sir, what's a question of the (inaudible) with (inaudible), and what do you think about the (inaudible) against Poland and Romania of losing their voting rights, Romania of course if they join.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We gave to each delegation yesterday afternoon a copy of Secretary Condoleezza Rice's statement, and we wanted to make sure that each of the 54 governments had it. They all did read it. I would just...Secretary Rice is giving a press conference right now in Berlin with Chancellor Merkel, so I would defer all questions to her, obviously. She's my superior, my boss. I obviously -- She's answering all the questions that are being asked.

QUESTION: But what I mean is were worries expressed by delegations to you in this framework?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Not a single one. Not a single one.

QUESTION: (Inaudible)? Is there no way (inaudible) without agreement on Moldova and Georgia?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: The NATO Allies, all 26 of us, have taken the position since 1999 that while we want to put the CFE treaty before us, we cannot until Russia meets its commitments to withdraw its military forces from Georgia and Moldova. That's important, because Russia started the process of taking its troops out of Poland and then out of Estonia, Latvia, back in the early 1990s. This is a historical process. It must be completed. So our willingness to put the CFE Treaty in the (inaudible) is contingent upon the Russian, the fact of Russia completing military withdrawal from Moldova and Georgia. That's why we may not have a declaration today. I hope we do. That's why we did not have one the last two years. It's that issue. It's an issue of principle. We must defend principle and frankly defend the interests of Georgia and Moldova, two members of this organization. Okay?

QUESTION: Thank you.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much.

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