

State Department Daily Press Briefing - Lebanon - May 7-8, 2008

Contributed by State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack
Thursday, 08 May 2008

Demonstrations in Beirut / Hezbollah Manipulation in Provoking Confrontation
US Has Full Confidence in Ability of Lebanese Government
Lebanese Military Has Proven to be Effective Professional Force in Past
Security Council Talking About 1559
US Watching Escalation in Tensions Closely

Daily Press Briefing
Sean McCormack, Spokesman
Washington, DC
May 7, 2008

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LEBANON

Demonstrations in Beirut / Hezbollah Closing Access to Airport

TRANSCRIPT:
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12:42 p.m. EDT

QUESTION: Do you have any comment on the demonstrations in Lebanon and the blocks made by Hezbollah on the airport route?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, I know that these demonstrations have taken place under the guise of labor demonstrations, but I believe that Hezbollah has actually linked them back to some moves that the cabinet had made. So I think that that reveals the action for what it is.

The Lebanese Government is dealing with the issue. Of course, nobody wants to see any violent confrontations occur. And I would just note that these kinds of actions serve only to hurt the interests of the Lebanese people. If you have access to the airport road cut off, that, of course, affects tourism, which is a real source of revenue for the Lebanese economy.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 12:56 p.m.)

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1:16 p.m. EDT

QUESTION: Can we move to Lebanon? How concerned are you about the street fighting that we're seeing there? It seems to have escalated today?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, you know, it's a -- certainly, as we are watching this unfold, it is a source of concern for us. I'm sure that it is even -- an even greater source of concern for the Lebanese people who have, once again, seen their daily lives interrupted by the actions of Hezbollah, who are, one could say, engaged in cynical acts of manipulation in provoking these kinds of confrontations and using violence to try to achieve their political ends in Lebanon.

So again, we have full confidence in the ability of the Lebanese Government. It is simply working to exercise sovereignty over all of Lebanon. It is simply looking to provide those basic things that the Lebanese people expect from their government: security, governmental institutions that function; an airport that is open so that they can travel, come and go as they please. These are all things that are being hampered at the current time by Hezbollah.

QUESTION: And that -- is that what you call the cynical acts of manipulation?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yes. Yeah.

QUESTION: Do you have any thoughts on the restraint so far on the Lebanese military? I mean --

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, they've proven themselves over the past -- certainly, over the past year, year and a half, to be an effective, professional force. We saw them deal with the situation up in Nahr al-Bared and they have over -- certainly, over the past year and a half, developed into a professional, respected institution within Lebanon.

QUESTION: Sean, I think Ambassador Khalilzad said something up at the UN today about further sanctions. Do you have anything more on that, what he might be referring to?

MR. MCCORMACK: I didn't see what he said. I'll check it out.

QUESTION: I mean, he basically said that if they -- you know, if --

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, I know they're talking about 1559 up in the Security Council today. I know that was on the agenda, so I'm not sure what else they discussed in the Council session.

QUESTION: Well, are there options for further sanctions?

MR. MCCORMACK: You always look at your options and you see what is most effective in terms of achieving the goals of 1559 and 1701.

Yeah, go--

QUESTION: Do you see this as yet another flare-up, as we've seen before, between Hezbollah and pro-government forces? Or is this seen as a turning point where Hezbollah feels its control is challenged and it is going to do everything to maintain --

MR. MCCORMACK: Hard to say. Certainly, we've seen an escalation in tensions and Hezbollah really be behind that escalation in tensions over the past several days, so that, I can't judge for you. I mean, usually, those are

things that you can judge better in retrospect. But it's -- you know, it's a source of concern. We're watching it, as are others, very closely.

QUESTION: But -- Sean --

QUESTION: Sorry. On the army, I mean, you say that they're professional, effective, but, you know, two days into the clashes, the airport road is still blocked, more roads are being blocked.

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: Are you not worried that they're not getting involved in trying to clear the roads and asserting control?

MR. MCCORMACK: Right. Well, those are going to be judgments for the Lebanese Government to take. And we are fully supportive of this government as one that is working on behalf of the Lebanese people and in the best interest of Lebanon. And they're going to take these decisions about security and deployment of forces and how to use those forces. They have demonstrated over the past several years that their interest has been in trying to make Lebanon a more prosperous, democratic place that is a state for all Lebanese, free from outside influence. So, it is our belief that they, with respect to the current situation, are acting in that same vein.

QUESTION: And you think that the Lebanese Government is in full control of the Lebanese army?

MR. MCCORMACK: I have -- yeah. Yes.

QUESTION: I have two questions, Sean.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay, Samir.

QUESTION: Is the Secretary making any contacts regarding the situation in Lebanon and --

MR. MCCORMACK: She hasn't made any calls specifically on that, no.

QUESTION: I see. And the second question: There is some speculation in the media in the Middle East about the meeting when Deputy Assistant Secretary Feltman invited the Ambassador of Syria --

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- and there's some rumors, you know. Do you have any guidance or any readout on what happened on 20 -- on that meeting which took place on the 24th of April?

MR. MCCORMACK: Oh, this is the one to inform him that we were going to be talking about --

QUESTION: Yes.

MR. MCCORMACK: -- their reactor or their former reactor? (Laughter.) The -- it was about a 15-minute meeting, Samir. It was really focused on that topic.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:45 p.m.)

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