

Daily Press Briefings - US Department of State - May 5-12, 2008 - Lebanon Crisis

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Sean McCormack, Spokesman

Daily Press Briefing
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Washington, DC
May 12, 2008

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QUESTION: Sean, do you have any details on the conference call that the Secretary's going to have with the Friends of Lebanon group? What are they -- what's the reasoning behind this call?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, there was -- there was a statement from the Arab League over the weekend, which essentially condemned the actions of Hezbollah in sparking the violence which has led to the deaths of innocent Lebanese citizens. And the Secretary, as we detailed last week, was also working -- working the phones on this issue. And I would expect during this conference call with Friends of Lebanon, the so-called Friends of Lebanon group, that they're going to talk about what the current situation is and how they -- each individual state, as well as collectively, we might support the Siniora government in their efforts to work on behalf of the Lebanese people, bring -- help bring some order to the streets of Beirut and to Lebanon in the face of what is a direct challenge from Hezbollah, an armed group with -- operating outside the rule of law in Lebanon and, again, that was responsible for the deaths of innocent Lebanese civilians.

In terms of who is on the call, this is probably just a partial list. We'll try to get you the full -- the final list of participants after the phone call. But ministerial level of participation from Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK. I would expect also representation from the Arab League, the EU, and the UN on the phone call.

QUESTION: Who has organized the call? Who's leading it? Is it your call?

MR. MCCORMACK: I'm not sure if we did this or not. I wouldn't be surprised. It could be the French Government. But there have been some periodic meetings of this group on the sidelines of other international meetings. There was recently one when we were in Kuwait, and I know that there was one previously in Istanbul as well. So it's a group that periodically comes together either in person or by phone. You have in the past seen statements issued by this particular grouping. We'll, of course, keep you up to date, if there's anything here (a) to readout from the call or (b) any statement that flows from the call.

QUESTION: Right. What time do you expect the call to be?

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't know exactly. I think it's around two or so.

QUESTION: Sean, sorry. Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi – you were going way too fast for my --

MR. MCCORMACK: Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the UK.

QUESTION: Thank you for putting those in alphabetical order for us.

MR. MCCORMACK: Okay.

QUESTION: Sean, do you have any reaction to the --

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah. Always happy to help. Part of what we do here is try to make life easier for the press.

QUESTION: Do you have any reaction to the -- Siniora government's decision to roll back moves that your government supported last week, mainly taking action against Hezbollah's telecom network, et cetera?

MR. MCCORMACK: Look, the decisions that the government takes is, I'm sure going -- are done in the best interest of the Lebanese people. The Siniora government has shown itself incredibly resilient in the face of these kinds of challenges, not only from within -- from armed groups like Hezbollah, but also from without, as he referenced the continued Syrian meddling in Lebanon's political affairs. And this is a government that is dedicated to trying to expand the reach of democracy, deepen democracy in Lebanon, continue to engage in economic reforms that benefit all of the Lebanese people. That stands in stark contrast to the actions of groups like Hezbollah that we've seen recently that have resulted only in damage to personal property, certainly resulted in economic loss with the shutdown of the airport and the airport road. And most tragically, the loss of innocent Lebanese life. They've shown themselves willing to use force of arms and violence to kill innocent Lebanese civilians.

QUESTION: How worried are you that -- in the eyes of some observers that the Siniora government has come out weaker after taking a step back from its initial steps and that Hezbollah has come out stronger?

MR. MCCORMACK: We -- we think that Prime Minister Siniora and his government are strong. And once the dust settles -- you know, again, I'm not a political analyst, but I would -- I would suspect the Lebanese people will take a look at what happened. And clearly, what happened is an armed group, operating outside the rule of law, killing innocent Lebanese civilians. That I couldn't imagine would be too popular among the vast majority of the Lebanese people.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Do they plan to issue a statement after this conference call?

MR. MCCORMACK: We'll let you know. We'll let you know. We have a good --

QUESTION: Will you give a readout?

MR. MCCORMACK: -- we'll either get you some more information about the call, what they discussed, or perhaps a statement to follow.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. MCCORMACK: We'll let you know.

QUESTION: Can you get in on it?

QUESTION: Okay. And is -- do you still plan to do something at the UN afterwards, because on Friday a U.S. official told us that maybe after this conference call the Security Council could be -- speaking out.

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, look, -- we'll let you know. Let's let them have the conference call first and then we'll brief you as best we can on what they talked about and perhaps any decisions that were taken as a result of the call.

QUESTION: You mentioned the idea of some kind of U.S. assistance and what kind of assistance would that take?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, we have a aid program of continuing assistance with the Lebanese military that we've talked -- and the Lebanese have talked about quite publicly. I don't have any new announcements in that regard in terms of the most recent violent acts by Hezbollah and the reaction by the Lebanese army. But it falls, at this point, primarily in the arena of political and diplomatic support for the government.

And I know that people say, well, what does this statement mean? Well, it means quite a bit, very oftentimes, when you have a government that is trying to address these kinds of serious challenges, both from within and from without.

QUESTION: Can you confirm that the U.S. has called -- came back to the region, came back to militarily --

MR. MCCORMACK: You can talk to the DOD about the movements and their assets.

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Washington, DC
May 9, 2008

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1:15 p.m. EDT

MR. MCCORMACK: Good afternoon, everybody. I have a couple things to start off with here, the first of which is a Media Note we'll put out after the briefing here, and just encourage you to make note of the fact that the Secretary is going to be having an event on Monday in the afternoon.

This is at the One Woman Initiative. It's the Fund for Women's Empowerment. This is something the Secretary has been deeply involved in, as you know, hosting a number of meetings. The focus on this issue and the centerpiece of this particular meeting is going to be the announcement of a public-private partnership of corporations, foundations, and the U.S. Government that will apply \$100 million to projects aimed at empowering women. So we'll put out a Media Note for you on that after the briefing.

And second, I'd like to update you on some of the phone calls the Secretary has been making on various issues this morning. She's been quite busy. First, on Zimbabwe, she has spoken with Botswana President Khama, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Zambian President Mwanawasa, and Tanzanian President Kikwete. And she really wanted -- she wanted to talk to these important leaders. Some of them are part of the SADC. Secretary General Annan, obviously, is somebody who is -- plays an important role in the international system, but is -- and particularly on issues related to Africa -- to talk about the current situation, how they see the situation moving forward.

On Lebanon, she spoke with Saudi Foreign Minister al Faisal. She is now -- I think right about now, speaking with French Foreign Minister Kouchner and also Secretary -- UN Secretary General Ban. With Secretary General Ban, she also spoke with him about Burma as well. And on Lebanon, it was really to talk about the current situation, what the international system can do to support this Lebanese Government that is acting on behalf of the Lebanese people in the face of illegal acts by the armed gangs aimed at destabilizing the political situation in Lebanon.

On Burma, as you know, she yesterday spoke with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang. I mentioned Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. And she also spoke with Indian Foreign Minister Mukherjee. Of course, part of their discussion also was about the Indian Civil Nuclear Deal, but they focused quite a bit on the issue of Burma. And the message there from the Secretary was to urge all the parties to do what they can to reach out and use whatever leverage they have with that top decision-making layer in the Burmese regime to get them to reverse the course that they have been on in terms of not allowing large scale humanitarian supplies to come into Burma, and then also, and very importantly, to allow experts who are -- can offer assistance with humanitarian relief into Burma.

Then, finally, I have a statement from the Secretary, and this is on Lebanon. We'll put out a paper version of this

after the briefing, but again, this is from her:

The United States is deeply concerned about the ongoing violence in Lebanon. We condemn the use of force by illegitimate armed groups and call upon all parties to respect the rule of law. Backed by Syria and Iran, Hezbollah and its allies are killing and injuring fellow citizens, undermining the legitimate authority of the Lebanese Government and the institutions of the Lebanese state. Seeking to protect their state within a state, Hezbollah has exploited its allies and demonstrated its contempt for its fellow Lebanese. No one has the right to deprive Lebanese citizens of their political and economic freedom, their right to move freely within their country, or their sense of safety and security.

Our support for the legitimate Lebanese Government, its democratic institutions and its security services is unwavering. This support is a reflection of our unshakable commitment to the Lebanese people and their hope for democratic change, economic prosperity and confessional harmony. We will stand by the Lebanese Government and peaceful citizens of Lebanon through this crisis and provide the support they need to weather this storm. With --

QUESTION: What harmony?

MR. MCCORMACK: Confessional harmony.

QUESTION: Confessional harmony?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yes. What it refers to are the political arrangements between the various groupings within --

QUESTION: Sorry. Didn't know --

MR. MCCORMACK: -- Lebanon.

QUESTION: So on Lebanon – yeah, on – the – you said that when she spoke to the Saudi, the French -- or was speaking with the French and Secretary General Ban, it was – what they were talking about was what can the international system do to help the Lebanese. And what was the answer to that question?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, fundamentally, it's a situation that the Lebanese Government is going to need to deal with on the ground. But of course, we are offering our political and diplomatic support, as are many others in the international system, to the Lebanese Government, which is acting in the best interests of the Lebanese people. It is really worth underlining the fact that these armed gangs, in taking their actions, have killed Lebanese citizens. It is also becoming more apparent now that the linkages that we know exist and then – and are ongoing between Hezbollah and Syria and – and Iran are starting to manifest themselves in the current crisis. We are seeing, now, some evidence of those groups that are linked to Syria, that are in Lebanon right now, are taking a much more active role in fanning the flames of violence and those acts that are -- those acts that are really destabilizing the political situation in Lebanon.

QUESTION: So you're saying that Iran and particularly Syria are --

MR. MCCORMACK: I'm saying, in particular, Syria -- I want to make sure we put this in the right context. We've had a lot of questions about Iran and Syria and the linkages between Hezbollah and are they playing a role in the current crisis right now.

I would say, up until this point, I haven't been able to say that. But I -- in talking to our experts who are really watching the situation on the ground quite closely, they are starting to see some evidence of those groups on the ground that have been linked in the past to Syria and are known to -- and over which the Syrian Government is known to have some influence are starting now to engage in acts that serve to really fan the flames of violence in Beirut.

Yeah, Samir.

QUESTION: You said you will provide political support. Is there any intention to provide any military support to the army?

MR. MCCORMACK: Right. We -- going back to this past summer, Samir, we have been working quite closely with the Lebanese military in terms of training and equipment. The programs, in terms of the kinds of assistance we provide around the world, is actually quite modest but has been important for the Lebanese military, which we believe is really a much more effective and professional institution now that serves the interests of the Lebanese people as a whole. I don't have any information for you about any recent assistance that we have provided in the context of this current crisis.

QUESTION: When you say that –

QUESTION: What about in (inaudible)?

MR. MCCORMACK: I don't have any information about that, Sylvie. Again, as I said, we have an ongoing problem -- ongoing program of assistance. But I don't have any information about whether there is any uptick in the level of assistance in the context of this current political crisis.

Yeah.

QUESTION: So, just to clarify, when you said in your statement that you're going to provide support needed, you mean political and diplomatic support? You don't mean anything --

MR. MCCORMACK: At the moment, that's what we're talking about, yeah.

QUESTION: Can you give us any idea of what evidence you're talking about, linking these -- the Syrians with the --

MR. MCCORMACK: It's really just -- it really is reporting back on the ground, as simple as seeing some of these groups that are known to have strong linkages to Damascus, and over which Damascus has some known influence, starting to engage on the ground, out in the streets, and really engaging in the kind of acts of -- or at least encouraging these acts of violence in -- that result in kind of an atmosphere of political instability.

QUESTION: I was under the impression you thought Hezbollah, as a whole, was in Syria.

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, that's true in terms of the linkages. But there are -- you know, there are a variety of different groups now in Lebanon, as you know, and there are various groups, individuals that are known associates, proxies for Syria. And your -- we hadn't seen any evidence of their really engaging during this crisis. But you're starting to see more evidence now on the streets and on the ground of their starting to engage. And that's the basis for my -- you know, revising --

QUESTION: Okay. Is that --

QUESTION: -- our earlier statements. And, you know, as I said, at the beginning, we didn't see it. Now we're starting to see more of it.

QUESTION: Okay. Is that -- does that mean that your -- you guys have evidence of specific individuals who are known proxies or known associates who --

MR. MCCORMACK: Groups, individuals. What we're going to also try to do is get you guys a briefing later on with some of our -- at least one of our Lebanon experts to maybe provide a little bit more insight to you -- for you on this.

Samir.

QUESTION: Is she considering calling Prime Minister Siniora too?

MR. MCCORMACK: We'll let you know if there's any other phone calls. I wouldn't -- I certainly wouldn't rule out that possibility.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Can you provide information at this point about any Americans killed, injured, the status of the Embassy at this point?

MR. MCCORMACK: The Embassy is working. They're obviously taking the appropriate -- the steps that they believe are appropriate to do their work in a safe environment, a safe and secure way. We're in contact with the American citizens who are in Lebanon as -- partially as a result of the experience in 2006, we actually have a pretty robust Warden System and system of registration for American citizens there, so we're in contact with them, letting them know the -- how we see the situation. Of course, anybody on the outside who's considering traveling back to Beirut should take a look at the situation on the ground. The airport is closed; you can't actually travel from the airport in. So as always, it's an individual decision, but I think, given the circumstances, they should really exercise an abundance of caution.

QUESTION: Are you in contact -- are you trying to provide any assistance to Americans who are trying to leave the country at this point?

MR. MCCORMACK: We -- again, that's going to have to be on the individual initiative of these citizens. We'll do what we can, but at this point, we're not engaged in any authorized or ordered departure of our Embassy employees. So any decision for individuals to leave is going to -- they're going to have to make that on their own and find their own means to leave. But of course, we'll do what we can. It's one of our

primary missions, to make sure that we help out American citizens as they're traveling overseas.

Yeah.

QUESTION: You said that there's evidence of these groups that are backed by Syria's engaging -- evidence that they're engaging --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: -- engaging in what way? Supplying weapons, supplying manpower, what?

MR. MCCORMACK: I would just -- I'm not going to get into any more detail other than to see -- we've started to see them out in the streets and engaging in the -- in acts that really serve to fan the flames of instability.

QUESTION: Is it ultimately (inaudible) for Iran too, that they're engaging on the streets? Have you seen anything --

MR. MCCORMACK: Haven't -- I can't say -- I can't say the same thing about Iran. Charlie --

QUESTION: You can say nothing on -- regarding Iran?

MR. MCCORMACK: No, no. Charlie, we'll try to get you some more information. Again, we'll try to do a briefing with somebody who is one of our Lebanon experts.

Yeah.

QUESTION: The March 14th Group and their decision -- I guess one of the main decisions behind these clashes is their challenging of the telecom system that Hezbollah is pretty much their strongest point. Does the U.S. maintain its support for the March 14th Group? Do you think they're at an advantage point right now?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, we -- in the Secretary's statement, she restated our unshakable and unswerving support for the government, and the March 14th movement is a pillar of that government as well. We are absolutely in contact with them. Our Chargé on the ground, Ambassador Sison, is in contact with a variety of individuals who are involved in the government as well as the March 14th movement.

QUESTION: And as far as -- well, it seems to be Hezbollah taking control of many areas of Beirut. Is that a concern for the U.S. Government? How concerned are you about it?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, we're -- we are concerned, as are many others. And it's -- you know, it isn't -- you asked the question: Is the U.S. Government concerned? Yes, we are concerned, absolutely. But the real question is: Why are we concerned. And that is because in engaging in these acts, in these aggressive, violent acts, Lebanese people -- Lebanese citizens have died. So these people are killing Lebanese citizens and they're trying to, as we've seen before, turn back the clock on the kinds of progress, on the economic, political front that this Lebanese Government has made.

And certainly, we are going to do everything that we can in terms of political, diplomatic support that we can to support this government. And that is, in effect, supporting the Lebanese people in their desire for a different kind of Lebanon.

QUESTION: Sean?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, Kirit.

QUESTION: I'm a little confused there. You just said that you didn't see evidence Iranian-backed groups are trying to fan the flames, but the first time you mentioned that, actually, you said Syria and Iran starting to manifest itself. Which one is it, just to look at --

MR. MCCORMACK: It's -- sorry for the confusion. We're looking at Syria. Yeah, we're seeing evidence of these Syrian-backed groups.

QUESTION: Sean?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, Samir.

QUESTION: The March 14 leadership had a meeting and issued a statement saying the -- the Hezbollah

operation is paying to bring Syria back to Lebanon and Iran to the Mediterranean. What – how do you react to this?

MR. MCCORMACK: Very – very clearly, in the Middle East, there is a divide. And on one side of that divide, you see Iran, you see Syria, you see their proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other violent groups. On the other side of that line, you see responsible states that have an interest in seeing a different kind of Middle East that have – support a democratic Lebanon that is able – that has a government that's able to exercise sovereignty over all Lebanese territory. You see support for the creation of a democratic Palestinian state. You see support for a democratic Iraq now. Some of these governments themselves are not democratic, but again, they express support and manifest that support in tangible ways for a different kind of Middle East.

So we can see, if you look across the map of the Middle East today, various points where those forces for -- that aim to turn back the clock, those forces of violent extremism, those forces that have -- that call themselves resistance forces but really are engaged in sort of a deception of the resistance -- of that term, use of the term -- are trying to fight back against the spread of democracy, fight back against greater prosperity and freedom for the people in the Middle East. And that is the larger context in which these kinds of struggles like we see in the streets of Beirut take place.

Yeah.

QUESTION: What kind of evidence points to Syria when you say, you know, you're seeing evidence of Syrian-backed groups?

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: And is -- just to try to join up the dots, is Hezbollah one of these groups? You're talking about Hezbollah groups, you know --

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, not specifically Hezbollah. We know about the links between Hezbollah and Syria. But again, I can't point to Syria pulling the string on Hezbollah in taking these actions. Like I said, I can't be more specific than our reporting back from the ground seeing evidence of these individuals, these groups, known members of these groups, out in the streets engaged in acts of violence, engaged in acts designed to fan the flames of crisis. I can't be any more specific than that.

QUESTION: Sean?

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah.

QUESTION: How concerned are you that you might be -- what might be happening is kind of a repeat of what happened in Gaza, in the sense that you have a – here, you have a group that has been designated a terrorist organization by yourselves and others battling -- fighting for control -- fighting against a legitimately elected --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: -- government or a government that you consider to be legitimately --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: -- elected for control of a piece of -- a piece of territory that is – that's critical? The -- as you had with the PA, you have helped the Lebanese armed forces--

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- PA security forces in Gaza were overrun. Some of that stuff was then taken by Hamas.

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Do you -- are there any concerns along those lines or that you may -- at least in terms of U.S. assistance falling --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: -- in the hands of Hezbollah, or -- and also the larger picture --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: Are there concerns that Hezbollah might take control of Lebanon?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, each of these situations are completely different in terms of the specifics of the situation, the history, so again, I don't want to draw any linkages between Palestinian areas and Lebanon.

I would say that it -- the common -- the only commonality is one in which I tried to describe in answer to Samir's question, in talking about the basic struggle between those forces that are interested in building up democratic governing institutions that function on behalf of the people to -- are pillars of the democratic society, part of which is providing security to the people, and those who want to rule not by the ballot box, but by the Kalashnikov. And that's a real struggle in the Middle East today. You see that struggle in the Palestinian areas. You see that struggle in Iraq. You see that struggle in the past couple days in Beirut. So in that sense, there is that commonality. But I, again, don't try to -- I, in no way, am going to try to draw us any linkages between the Palestinian areas and what's going on in Beirut.

In terms of the assistance, no, I don't -- I haven't heard anybody express those kinds of concerns.

QUESTION: Well, aren't you worried that the result may be the same?

MR. MCCORMACK: You know, again, I can't tell you what the ultimate motivations or strategy of Hezbollah is in taking the steps that they have taken, violent steps that they've taken over the past several days. They very clearly wanted to destabilize the situation. They clearly wanted to provoke a confrontation with the government.

You know, again, the Lebanese Government is standing strong. They are acting on behalf of the Lebanese people. The institutions are functioning, including the military, on behalf of the -- the Lebanese people. And we have every confidence that they will be able to deal with the situation, although this is certainly a direct challenge to the Lebanese people. You know, you can see that, in that the real victims here have been, quite literally, innocents victimized by the actions of Hezbollah.

QUESTION: How are you going to stop Hezbollah, or how are the Lebanese going to stop Hezbollah if the army's going to stay out of it? And I take it --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: -- from your talking this morning, that the army, if it did get involved, could easily divide because they are made of different factions.

MR. MCCORMACK: Let me -- but the army has undergone a number of different tests over the past year or so, certainly. And that -- each time, they have met the test put to them and functioned under the orders of the elected government and on behalf of the Lebanese people.

There was another part to your question?

QUESTION: Well, the army -- I mean, you may have (inaudible) of the river, the north -- by Tripoli, they faced down the Palestinian leader --

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm. Yeah -- no, no, no, mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- and the Islamic militants.

MR. MCCORMACK: Right.

QUESTION: But here, we're faced -- the army -- there are Shiites in the army and --

MR. MCCORMACK: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- they would be facing Hezbollah. So how can you have Shiites fight Hezbollah? And it seemed this morning, you were happy that the army stayed out of it.

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, I'm not going to --

QUESTION: (inaudible) stop Hezbollah --

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, I'm not going to be armchair -- look, I'm not going to be an armchair general, and I would encourage others not to be armchair generals as well. The government is effectively trying to deal with the situation on the ground and they have command of the army, and they are deploying the army in ways that they think will be effective

in dealing with this. I would encourage people not to second-guess the government in that regard. They are acting in -- we believe, acting in the best interest of the Lebanese people.

It's really Hezbollah, again, that is acting contrary to the interest of the Lebanese people, in fact, killing innocent Lebanese civilians. So any sort of veneer that they might have tried to portray -- tried to use in portraying themselves as a resistance movement, I think has been completely stripped away, given the actions of the past several days.

Yeah.

QUESTION: People in the Middle East are saying that the U.S., pretty much -- not forced, but encouraged the March 14th Group to take this action and are now pretty much leaving it to face the consequences. Is this true? Are you -- is the U.S. maintaining its support for the March 14th -- for the consequences that now Hezbollah is wrecking upon?

MR. MCCORMACK: Well, we fully support the Government of Lebanon and (inaudible) -- and the political factions in that government that are working on behalf of the Lebanese people. What you're talking about is the Lebanese states simply exercising sovereignty over the territory of Lebanon. They are acting on behalf of the Lebanese people. You have a situation with Hezbollah that is trying to act as if it is not part of the Lebanese state in terms of building (inaudible) fiber optic networks, exercising a great deal of influence over how the airport is managed and run and what comes in and what comes out. You know, quite simply, for any government that is responsible to the people that elected it, it cannot stand by and have some entity operating as if it is outside the control of the state.

Now I know that throughout Lebanese history, and this has been a particular struggle and a particular issue, but the fact is this government has steadily been working to strengthen the institutions of the state and strengthen the institutions of the government so that they can effectively govern, and govern on behalf of all of the Lebanese people. So the actions that the government took certainly were legitimate actions that any government around the world would recognize as working on behalf of the people that elected that government.

QUESTION: But by taking this action, and the clashes that ensued in the last 48 hours, is it realistic to say that there is a possibility that the March 14th group can actually come out with even less influence, less control?

MR. MCCORMACK: Look, I'll leave it to political pundits to, you know, do the political scorecard. We support this government. We support those in Lebanon who are fighting on behalf of democracy and the Lebanese people.

QUESTION: Sean.

MR. MCCORMACK: Yeah, anything else on this?

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Sean McCormack, Spokesman
Washington, DC
May 8, 2008

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LEBANON

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Security Council Talking About 1559
US Watching Escalation in Tensions Closely

TRANSCRIPT:

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1:16 p.m. EDT

MR. MCCORMACK: Good afternoon, everybody. We can get right into your questions. I don't have anything to start off with. Who wants to --

QUESTION: I don't have anything

.

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: One more on North Korea. The assessment of the documents that Sung Kim received, will the U.S. primarily be doing the assessment or will the other four parties also receive the documents?

MR. MCCORMACK: You know, good question. Certainly, our folks are going to be doing an assessment and we are obviously going to be consulting very closely with the other members of the talks about this and sharing the information. I'll try to get you more on sort of the technical aspects of how people are going to – how an evaluation of the documents is going to unfold.

QUESTION: And are there any additional stops to Sung Kim's trip?

MR. MCCORMACK: No. He'll be coming back here.

QUESTION: Yeah, and just to follow up on that, in terms of the declaration itself, I mean, not all of the parties are nuclear states with the kind of nuclear expertise that the United States has or Russia has, for instance. So how do you – have you decided, like, on a mechanism for weighing the declaration? Because all five parties have to be happy with it, but not all five parties are equally, kind of --

MR. MCCORMACK: Right. Well, these are all highly developed economies with a great deal of technical expertise on issues related to nuclear technology, certainly with South Korea and in Japan, that's in civilian uses. So I think everybody brings something to the table and some level of expertise that they can apply in making their own judgments about this. But certainly, there's going to be a lot of discussion among the members of the six-party talks about the declaration once it's received. I have to emphasize, we haven't received, or the Chinese have not yet received, that declaration.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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

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

INDEX:

LEBANON

Demonstrations in Beirut / Hezbollah Closing Access to Airport

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.
