

## Asst. Sec. State David Welch at Congressional Hearing on Lebanon

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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

Gary L. Ackerman (D-NY), Chairman

You are respectfully requested to attend the following OPEN hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, to be held in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building .

Date: Thursday, November 08, 2007 Time: 9:30 AM

Subject: Lebanon on the Brink witnesses: The Honorable C. David Welch, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State

C. David Welch

Assistant Secretary, Near Eastern Affairs Bureau

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia

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&ldquo;Lebanon on the Brink&rdquo;

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and other distinguished Members of the Committee for inviting me here today. I welcome the opportunity to discuss recent developments in Lebanon, the current political crisis, and U.S. policy to support a strong, sovereign and democratic Lebanon. President Bush and Secretary Rice have repeatedly underscored our commitment to Lebanon, and we are working with the international community to ensure free, fair, and constitutional Lebanese presidential elections, further the implementation of relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, strengthen the institutions and democratic processes of the Lebanese state, and in so doing, foil the efforts of Syria, Iran, and their Lebanese proxies and partners to destabilize a troubled nation and friend to the United States.

In 2004, the international community rallied behind a Lebanon struggling to free itself from Syrian domination and demanded, on behalf of all Lebanese, free and fair presidential elections via UN Security Council resolution 1559 (September 2, 2004). Instead, the tenure of President Emile Lahoud was extra-constitutionally extended under threat from the Syrian regime. Lahoud's actions during his tenure have severely undermined the credibility and influence of the Lebanese presidency. It is time for Lebanon to restore that institution by electing a president who will defend Lebanese sovereignty against enemies foreign and domestic and return a sense of pride and participation to Lebanon's Christian community and all its citizens.

Successful Lebanese presidential elections are a key priority of the United States. We will not endorse specific candidates, but we expect that Lebanon's next president will not be beholden to outside powers or terrorist groups and will uphold UN Security Council resolutions 1559, 1701 and 1757. Backed by the Syrian regime, President Lahoud, Hizballah, and Lebanon's pro-Syrian opposition are trying to block democratic elections. We are concerned that opposition MPs might seek to prevent an election, that President Lahoud might refuse to step down when his terms end at midnight on November 23rd, that further MP's might be assassinated or otherwise intimidated from casting a free vote, or that the pro-Syrian opposition would seek to form a second, illegitimate government. It is worth briefly recounting the chronology of their efforts to paralyze the Government of Lebanon, erode Lebanon's economy, and inflame sectarian tensions: In November 2006, the Hizballah-led opposition engineered the resignation of six cabinet members, including all five Shia Ministers, and charged that the government of Prime Minister Siniora was thereby illegitimate and unconstitutional. Lebanon's parliament did not open once during its spring 2007 session. Electoral sessions, originally scheduled to begin September 25, 2007, have failed to convene thus far due to boycotts by Hizballah and its allies. On November 21, 2006, assassins gunned down Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel. A massive Hizballah-led opposition rally in Beirut on December 1, 2006 inaugurated a sit-in that continues today, an example of the

opposition's continued intimidation and obstruction of the workings of the Lebanese state. On January 23, Hizballah and its allies tried to bring down the Siniora government through violent demonstrations that prevented freedom of movement and resulted in deaths and injuries. On February 13, 2007 bus bombings in Ain Alaq near Beirut killed three people the day before the commemoration of Rafiq Hariri's assassination, deepening the sense of fear that Syria, Iran, and their Lebanese cohorts hope will prevent the Lebanese people from asserting their political and economic independence. On June 13, March 14 parliamentarian Walid Eido was assassinated, and on September 19, March 14 parliamentarian Antoine Ghanem was assassinated.

The pro-Syrian opposition's campaign of destabilization has also endangered all Lebanese by interfering with the Government's implementation of UN Security Council resolutions. In violation of resolution 1701, Iran and Syria continue to provide weapons and support to Hizballah, and fighters and weapons continue to be smuggled across Lebanon's porous borders to other terrorist organizations such as Fatah al-Islam. Recent months have also seen worrying developments in southern Lebanon, where we are pleased to see more than 13,000 UNIFIL peacekeepers patrolling Hizballah's former stronghold alongside the Lebanese Armed Forces. On June 18, 2007, militants launched rockets into northern Israel from inside the UNIFIL zone, causing no casualties. On June 24, 2007, a roadside bomb attack killed six UNIFIL peacekeepers, and on July 16, 2007, yet another roadside bomb damaged a UN vehicle near a Lebanese army checkpoint.

To begin to heal these wounds, Lebanon needs a strong, independent president committed to the defense of Lebanon's sovereignty and citizenry. To that end, we have joined with the international community in calling for free, fair, and on-time presidential elections held according to Lebanon's constitution. UN Security Council Resolution 1559, issued in 2004, called for free and fair presidential elections held without foreign interference; these have yet to occur. We have taken concrete steps to deter further disruption of Lebanon's electoral processes by issuing a travel ban and designating four Syrian and pro-Syrian Lebanese individuals under Presidential Executive Orders authorizing economic sanctions against those taking actions to undermine Lebanon's democratic processes and institutions and contributing to Syria's problematic behavior. We hope that the Syrian Government and Lebanon's pro-Syrian opposition understand that any interference in the peaceful and constitutional conduct of Lebanese elections will have very serious consequences.

Noting that the Maronite Patriarch of Lebanon has described a boycott of any electoral session as a boycott of the nation, we ask Congress to join the Administration in emphasizing the civic duty of all Lebanese parliamentarians to vote in electoral sessions. No one should use the threat of boycott to deprive Lebanon of a new president or to deprive Lebanese Christians of their highest political office. We applaud the recent House resolutions, as well as the Senate resolution, noting Congress's strong support for free and fair presidential elections in Lebanon.

The international community agrees that Lebanon deserves a strong, credible president who has the broadest possible support. At the same time, we recognize that democracies, including Lebanon's, have often elected presidents with an absolute majority of votes. Previously, Lebanese Presidents Sarkis and Franjeh won Lebanon's elections with the barest absolute majority of votes. We believe that any President elected in accordance with the Lebanese constitution and dedicated to Lebanese sovereignty would deserve the international community's immediate recognition and support.

In addition to our support for free, fair, and constitutional elections, we have continued our support to Lebanon's citizens and legitimate government as they work to recover from the devastation of the 2006 Hizballah-instigated conflict and this summer's battle against Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp. The United States has provided significant amounts of economic, military, and diplomatic assistance to support the security, freedom, and independence of Lebanon. America's assistance is intended to help all of Lebanon's confessional groups build a vibrant and sovereign democracy. While we have made significant progress since the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1701 in August 2006, there is still much to be done.

The United States, European allies, and regional partners continue to support the Government of Lebanon with substantial amounts of economic assistance. We have disbursed most of the \$230 million initially pledged by President Bush to aid Lebanon's recovery and have begun disbursing the more than \$770 million in recently approved supplemental assistance. Much of the \$940 million in pledges from the August 2006 humanitarian and reconstruction donors' conference hosted by Sweden and some of the \$7.6 billion generated by the January 2006 Paris conference aimed at fiscal stabilization and long-term economic reform have also been disbursed.

However, Lebanon's economy, already reeling from the summer war, has been further disrupted by the continuing political stalemate. The Hizballah-led sit-in in downtown Beirut continues to disrupt business in the city's busiest commercial district.

The Government of Lebanon is beginning to implement the economic reform plan presented at the Paris donors' conference. The reform program includes difficult reforms such as budget cuts, tax increases, and privatization of the telecom sector and other key industries. The plan also contains structural reforms aimed at increasing accountability and transparency, including the adoption of a fiscal accountability law; adoption of a new procurement code in line with

international standards, and the establishment of an integrated debt management unit at the Ministry of Finance to improve coordination, debt reporting and transparency. To encourage implementation of this reform plan, we have linked \$250 million of our grant assistance to support Lebanon in servicing its sovereign debt to benchmarks in Lebanon's economic reform plan. We have authorized the release of two tranches, totaling \$75 million, in conjunction with the Government of Lebanon's signing of an Emergency Post-Conflict Assistance (EPCA) program with the International Monetary Fund—Lebanon's first formal program with the IMF—and the government's submission of a budget proposal in line with its reform plan and the EPCA. We are working with the Government of Lebanon and the World Bank to use this \$75 million to directly service World Bank debt on behalf of Lebanon. We hope Lebanon's pro-Syrian opposition understands that an election marred by political violence or foreign interference will undermine the international community's ability to help Lebanon's economy prosper. Economic stagnation would have a disproportionate impact on Lebanon's poorer communities, particularly those in southern Lebanon.

U.S. funding has been provided in conjunction with \$50 million in project assistance to help strengthen legislative and judicial processes and municipal government operations, support civil society participation, and improve primary and secondary schools.

This year, we have also committed \$15.5 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which is providing housing, health, education and other assistance to those affected by the months of fighting between Fatah al-Islam terrorists and the Lebanese military in Nahr el-Bared. This assistance will aid thousands of Palestinian refugees displaced from the refugee camp, Lebanese and Palestinian host families, and residents of nearby villages damaged by the fighting. At a donors' conference in Beirut on September 10, Prime Minister Siniora reiterated his government's commitment to working with the United Nations, the World Bank, and the international community to rebuild the camp and surrounding areas. We are also doing our part in helping to address the needs of Lebanese citizens in the vicinity of Nahr el-Bared who were affected by the fighting.

As Lebanon has taken steps towards economic recovery, important strides have also been made to end the culture of impunity for political violence that has plagued its people and politicians for so long. The Syrian regime, Hizballah, and pro-Syrian opposition in Lebanon have resisted establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon to bring to justice those responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, and many others in a murderous campaign that sought to silence the defenders of Lebanese independence and democracy. Pro-Syrian ministers in the Lebanese cabinet resigned in November 2006, on a pretext rather than approve an agreement between Lebanon and the UN to establish the Tribunal, precipitating the current political crisis. Pro-Syrian Lebanese president Emile Lahoud abused the office of the presidency to block approval of the agreement, and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri refused to open Parliament's doors, depriving the legislative majority of its right to approve the tribunal.

Despite these efforts to disrupt the pursuit of justice for Lebanon and all Lebanese, the United Nations Security Council adopted UN Security Council resolution 1757 on May 30, 2007, after Prime Minister Siniora and a majority of Lebanese parliament members expressed their desire to see the Tribunal established by UN action if necessary in a petition to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The provisions of the UN-Lebanese agreement to establish the Tribunal entered into effect on June 10, 2007.

The Tribunal will be Lebanese in character, with prosecutions under Lebanese law, but with international elements to ensure impartiality and increase security for judges and witnesses, including both international and Lebanese judges and prosecutors and a Tribunal seat outside of Lebanon.

The Government of the Netherlands has agreed to host the Special Tribunal, and international donors are preparing pledges towards the Tribunal's budget; the United States has already made an initial contribution of \$5 million. Meanwhile, the work of the UN's Independent International Investigation Commission (UNIIC) continues under the leadership of Belgian Chief Investigator Serge Brammertz. In building his cases for potential prosecution by the Special Tribunal, Brammertz has been commendably discrete about his investigation. He has reported to the Security Council that he has uncovered important evidence and is nearing the end of his work.

By demonstrating that violence will not be tolerated as a means to political ends in Lebanon, and that the international community's commitment to Lebanese sovereignty in the face of unrelenting foreign interference is non-negotiable, the Special Tribunal will help return a sense of security to Lebanon and deter future political assassinations.

However, even as we work to stay the murderous hand of Lebanon's enemies, the nation has been forced to confront new threats. On May 19, 2007 the Fatah al-Islam terrorist organization attacked Lebanese security forces near the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp outside of Tripoli, Lebanon, touching off a three-month battle that killed more than 150 Lebanese soldiers and dozens of civilians, and resulted in the near-complete destruction of the refugee camp and displacement of more than 30,000 refugees. The Lebanese Armed Forces demonstrated unparalleled courage and resolve in their fight against Fatah al-Islam, despite facing severe shortages of ammunition and equipment. Furthermore, the military's performance in Nahr el-Bared silenced detractors who worried that units would fragment in combat or that commanders would bow to pressure from Hizballah, whose Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah sought to

discourage the LAF from going into the camps by calling entry into the camp a "red line." We are proud to have played a role in Lebanon's victory over Fatah al-Islam by shipping more than 40 plane loads of emergency military assistance to help the Lebanese army sustain its operations until a decisive victory was achieved. On September 2, 2007, the Government of Lebanon declared Fatah al-Islam defeated. We commend the Lebanese army's victory and honor the killed and wounded soldiers whose sacrifice helped to achieve it.

Even as the brave Lebanese soldiers responsible for this victory are returning to their homes and barracks for much needed recuperation, other security issues remain unaddressed. For example, weapons, primarily from Iran and Syria, continue to flow across the border from Syria into Lebanon. UNSCR 1701 called upon the Government of Lebanon to secure its borders and imposed a legally binding obligation on all states to prevent weapons smuggling into Lebanon. In his most recent report to the Security Council on the status of implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1701, Secretary General Ban noted a body of reporting from multiple international governments detailing serious breaches of the arms embargo. Prime Minister Siniora has himself presented multiple reports to the United Nations detailing transfers of weaponry, including long-range rockets, from Syria across the border.

We have called on UN member states to act aggressively in enforcing the arms embargo. The Government of Lebanon has deployed thousands of troops to the border to prevent weapons smuggling, and Germany has begun a pilot program to provide equipment and training to border security force, but these steps, while notable, have not significantly diminished the flow of weapons across the border from Syria. We hope to see a more robust international presence to assist in monitoring the border.

These weapons flows directly threaten the sovereignty and security of the Lebanese state by strengthening illegal militant and terrorist organizations such as Hizballah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization-General Command (PFLP-GC). We continue to join the international community in calling for the full disarmament and disbanding of these groups in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions 1559, 1701, and recently adopted 1773, which renewed UNIFIL's mandate. We again note the hypocrisy of Hizballah's claim to defend Lebanon even as the nation struggles to recover from the death and destruction caused by the group's unilateral, unprovoked, and illegal military actions of last summer.

Ultimately, a sovereign Lebanese state, strong security forces, and continued progress to implement UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701 are the best defense against Lebanon's internal armed groups, political violence, and foreign interference. To this end, we continue to encourage the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces to play more assertive roles in Lebanon, and are providing significant amounts of security assistance to ensure they have the training and equipment to do so including commitments of over \$320 million in the last 12 months. We are funding a \$60 million program to train and equip Lebanon's Internal Security Forces that will allow them to take over police functions traditionally carried out by the military. We have also massively increased our assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. In the aftermath of the summer war, and with the support of the Congress, we increased our security assistance from just under \$1 million in FY05 to \$40 million in FY06 and over \$250 million in FY07 to bolster the capabilities of the Lebanese Armed Forces. This assistance has already funded spare parts for helicopters, vehicles including Humvees to help the LAF patrol the south and the border, small arms and light weapons, small and large caliber ammunition, communications equipment, and training for LAF officers. The effects of our assistance on both the military's morale and combat effectiveness were evident in the fight against Fatah al-Islam. We hope to see a newly empowered Lebanese military more assertively defending the sovereignty and security of Lebanon.

As you can see, challenges in Lebanon are manifold. At present, the Cedar Revolution as well as UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701 are at stake. The international community must redouble its efforts to support Lebanon's legitimate government, its pro-sovereignty March 14 majority, and those Lebanese who share our desire for a strong, sovereign Lebanese state. In the meantime, we look forward to welcoming a new Lebanese president who will strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty, security, and democracy. We are confident that if given the choice, the Lebanese people will settle for nothing less.

U.S. and international support for an independent and democratic Lebanon is strong and non-negotiable. There are few nations in the world where the perils to sovereignty and democracy are as starkly contrasted with a burning desire for freedom and justice. Even in this time of turmoil, Lebanon remains a place of great hope.

Thank you for your time. I would be pleased to address your questions.