

Media Availability with Secretary Gates in Mexico City, Mexico

SEC. GATES: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here in Mexico. I was surprised to learn it had been 12 years since a secretary of Defense had been to Mexico. I was doubly surprised to learn that with that, I was -- it's the second.

Had good talks today with the secretary of Government, the secretary of Foreign Relations and the secretary of Defense. We focused, as you might expect, principally on the Merida Initiative and the importance of that initiative in terms of our shared responsibilities and shared commitment in terms of dealing particularly with the drug cartels. We talked about how the initiative is structured, particularly for fiscal year 2008, with more focus on -- first of all, structured to reflect Mexican priorities and focused more on the armed forces in Mexico because the Mexican government's view is that it is that the armed forces are better able to digest and work with the new equipment and use it more quickly. They are clearly interested in building the civil side of this struggle, and there is more money for that in the fiscal year '09 request.

So we talked about the importance of it. It is clearly an initiative intended to be supportive of Mexico's efforts, which we applaud, to deal with these cartels, and the armed forces -- expressed our condolence over the losses of the armed forces in this struggle.

And we talked about other areas in which we might expand cooperation -- for example, in information sharing. We certainly agreed that we needed to proceed in our cooperation on a step-by-step basis and with full respect for sovereignty. And I was very pleased with the talks. They were very cordial and very open.

I'm happy to take questions.

Q    Mr. Secretary, there was, as I'm sure you know, an attempt on President Karzai's life. At least one police officer was arrested, and there has been a lot more talk about Taliban infiltration of the security forces there.

What is -- is that a growing concern for you? Do you think that is getting worse and is that becoming a greater threat? And have you -- considering the information that we've heard lately about increased Iranian activity in Iraq, are you seeing the same type of increase in Afghanistan?

SEC. GATES: Well, I don't have the sense that the problem of infiltration is particularly worse than it has been in Afghanistan. This is a -- this has been fairly -- not common, but it has happened before, and I expect it'll happen again. And you know, we get reports all the time of uniforms being stolen and so on. And clearly the vetting process is an important one. And I think that both the Afghan authorities and those who

are doing -- who are helping them with the training clearly need to continue to make that an important focus.

With respect to Iranian support, I do not have a sense at this point of a significant increase in Iranian support for the Taliban and others opposing the government in Afghanistan. There is, as best I can tell, a continuing flow, but I would still say -- I would still characterize it as relatively modest.

Q Mr. Secretary, on the counternarcotic agenda, you stated before that some of the main threats to U.S. national security are hybrid threats. So have you contemplated increasing the military component of border security, like JTFN, Joint Task Force North, to confront this threat, perhaps increasing also the personnel -- the National Guard personnel on the border?

SEC. GATES: No, the deployment of the National Guard personnel on the U.S. side of the border was really a temporary deployment that was provided until the Department of Homeland Security could recruit and train a significant additional number of border police. They have done that. The numbers of the National Guardsmen will be reduced over the months to come as the additional border police show up.

Q But will you use any part of the U.S. military armed forces to confront the drug cartel threat from Latin America?

SEC. GATES: Well, we clearly are involved in trying to spot boats bringing drugs to the United States and cooperating with the Drug Enforcement Agency and our law enforcement agencies in that respect. But no, I don't see an additional military component to this. I think that the Department of Homeland Security and the law enforcement agencies are the proper place to focus this effort.

Q Mr. Secretary, there are reports today that there's a second carrier going into the Gulf. And last week Admiral Mullen talked about his increasing concern about the situation involving Iranian meddling in Iraq and basically talked about a viable military option. Is the United States increasing its presence? Are we seeing a sort of an escalation that goes hand in hand with that increase in rhetoric?

SEC. GATES: The size of our naval presence in the gulf rises and falls constantly. And this deployment has been planned for a long time. And I don't think we'll have two carriers there for a protracted period of time. So I don't see it as an escalation. I think it could be seen, though, as a reminder.

Q Mr. Secretary?

Q Would you agree that things are getting worse in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq after this attack on Sunday on Mr. Karzai?

SEC. GATES: No. I think that, you know, the problem with terrorism is they can always carry out a spectacular act that gains everyone's attention. This happens both in Iraq and in Afghanistan -- and I might add in other places as well.

I think that the situation in Afghanistan -- I think that the NATO declaration in Bucharest of the unanimous support of the alliance to continue regarding Afghanistan as the primary operational priority of the alliance is an important one, the decision of the French to send more troops, the deployment of our additional Marines.

I think that we have seen a change in the nature of the Taliban threat and the question is whether it's temporary or longer-lasting -- and that is, a turn from larger scale confrontations between 50, 100, 150 Taliban taking on either Afghan or coalition, NATO and other allied parties in large-scale firefights. And we're seeing much less of that and we are not seeing them occupy and hold areas of Afghanistan. But what we are seeing is a fairly significant increase in terrorist acts, in IEDs, in suicide bombers -- in fact, exactly the kind of thing that we saw in the attack on President Karzai the other day.

And so I think that they're confronted with the firepower and the strength of the coalition forces in Afghanistan, that they are changing their tactics. And we will have to clearly continue to adapt our tactics as well.

STAFF: And in the U.S. --

Q Mr. Secretary, given the violence that has led on from Mr. Maliki's crackdown on kind of Shi'ite groups in Basra and given the declarations from Muqtada al-Sadr about open warfare and attacks on U.S-led coalition forces, are you concerned that the United States is at risk of being drawn into what is essentially -- (inaudible) -- conflict between two Shi'a factions?

SEC. GATES: I think actually that what we are seeing is a conflict between the Iraqi government and lawless elements that do not want to become a part of the political process. I think everyone has made clear that if the Sadrists are willing to participate in the political process, that they would be welcome in that process.

What is intriguing is that because of the way Prime Minister Maliki has taken on the Jaish al Mahdi, special groups and others in Basra and some of these other gangs, the rest of the Iraqi government, which has not exactly been known for its unity, has in fact unified behind Prime Minister Maliki.

He has gotten the vocal support of virtually all elements of the government. So, and partly because they see him acting against a sectarian group that they were concerned he wouldn't act against. And I think that Iraq's neighbors, at least all but one, have taken positive notice of this as well.

So I think that this is the Iraqi government trying, in some respects, they're -- somebody asked me, a couple of weeks ago, who is the enemy in Iraq today? And my

answer is, those in Iraq who would prefer to engage in violence rather than join the political process.

So that's al Qaeda on the Sunni side. It is the Jaish al Mahdi, Special Groups on the Shi'a side. And I think that Maliki is interested in both the operations in Basra and the operation in Mosul, as well as what's been going on in Baghdad.

So I think you're actually seeing an Iraqi government more unified, in taking on these groups, than we have seen them in a while. But there's no question that it's a tough fight.

Q Mr. Secretary, there's been a lot of interesting information that has surfaced from the computers of Raul Reyes, the FARC commander who was killed a couple months ago. I was wondering, the information seems to show there's been a lot of aid, Venezuelan aid, to FARC guerrillas, in terms of getting them weapons and supplying them with money.

I was wondering if you had been able to evaluate that information. And if you had, what's your evaluation of it? What can the United States do, or should do, about this?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that -- well, I haven't had the opportunity to evaluate it personally and have read very little of it. But my impression is that the experts in the U.S. government take the information very seriously.

Q Mr. Secretary, when you were answering the question about the second carrier, you said, I think it could be seen as a reminder.

Is the deployment of this carrier a message to Iran?

SEC. GATES: I think I'll just leave it the way I did. I think it's a reminder.

Q Well, you seem to be doing a lot of reminding to Iran recently, and there seems to be an uptick in the rhetoric in Iran. Is the Defense Department laying the groundwork for a case against Iran for possible strikes?

SEC. GATES: No.

Q The Mexican territory is part of the Northern Command of the U.S., and I'd like you to characterize for us exactly what is the level of cooperation -- relative cooperation between the Mexican army and the U.S. generals. Sometimes I have the impression that the relationship between the Mexican army and the military officers in the States is somewhat filtered or somewhat ceremonial. So how exactly has it evolved within the context of the Northern Command?

SEC. GATES: Well, I would -- I think that there is -- I think this is a relationship that is, in many respects, perhaps not in its infancy, but is young. And we are very mindful of the sensitivities here in Mexico. And so we are -- I would say that the relationship is limited, but both sides are looking for opportunities where we can cautiously grow it. And I mentioned some of those areas before.

One of the points that I would like to make about the Merida Initiative is that it is completely consistent with the testimony that Secretary of State Rice and I gave before the House Armed Services Committee a week and a half ago, in which we talked about the importance of the United States doing what it can to strengthen the capabilities of our friends, that it is in our interest that our friends have greater capabilities to protect their own security and to take care of transnational criminal activities such as the drug cartels.

And as we are looking to do this in other places around the world, I think that the Merida Initiative fits that category very nicely where we're really focused -- it's in our interest, because we have shared interests, to enhance the capabilities of the Mexican armed forces. Most of these programs that we're talking about under the Merida Initiative are funded and administered by the State Department, actually, not by the Defense Department, although, for example, if we are able to provide helicopters, we would obviously be involved in training and that sort of thing.

So I would say that it is -- and as I said, we're interested in educational exchanges. There have been some. We would like to increase the opportunities of the exchanges between our military educational institutions. We're interested in expanding information sharing. So I would say we're -- we would like to move forward, but we're doing so cautiously.

Q Mr. Secretary, earlier you laid out the enemy in Iraq as you see it -- al Qaeda in places like Mosul and Sadrists in places like eastern Baghdad and Basra. And yet the U.S. has said that al Qaeda is weaker and that the Sadrists are weaker. If that's the case, then why are U.S. troop deaths up and they're at 44 now, back at September levels -- if those groups are supposed to be weaker now?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that the thing to remember is that there has been a cease -- the principal reason is that for the last number of months Sadr has had a cease-fire on his followers. And while he has not ended that cease-fire, he has made statements that have -- that certainly some Jaish al-Mahdi and special groups have interpreted as being the go-ahead to attack coalition forces.

And so as we work our way around Sadr City, which we basically have stayed out of, we are encountering the kind of heavy combat -- there was a -- you will probably recall in either early March or late February, sometime in there, for about two weeks there was a spike in U.S. casualties and it was because we were engaged in heavy combat in areas where we had not before. We were going into new areas. And that's essentially what's happening now. And it has more to do with a mixed message, I think, coming out

of Sadr, in terms of whether or not his followers should maintain the cease-fire, or are they at liberty to go after U.S. troops. There's also some question how much discipline he has over this own movement at this point.

So I think it's -- I think that the casualties, first of all, a number of them have come through the rocketing of the Green Zone and of joint security stations coming out of Sadr City. We just hadn't seen that sort of thing for some period of time. So I think that's the reason for the spike in casualties, I'm sad to say.

Q If I could just follow up, then, you said that you're going into new areas, but Sadr City has been a recurring problem for the U.S. And the U.S. is going in at a time that it's also drawing down its brigades. How confident are you, then, that you can sustain the gains made by the surge while reducing the brigades in Iraq, particularly as you're going after groups in places like Sadr City?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, it's important to note that the decisions with respect to Sadr City principally will be made by Prime Minister Maliki. And there will be a significant element of Iraqi forces involved in this endeavor, and we will be in support of them.

Sadr City has been -- it's my impression -- has been relatively quiet until fairly recently. For example, the shelling of U.S. -- of the embassy in the Green Zone, really has been very modest. So I think -- I think that -- you know, clearly we're watching it very closely, but I think that -- I think that General Petraeus is very comfortable with the plans that we have in terms of at least bringing out the five surge brigades and continues to be.

Q Mr. Secretary, a quick thing. You said that the cooperation between Mexico and the United States -- decisions of security, can be better. How can it be better, besides the Merida Initiative? And how -- other strategies do you have?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think -- again, I think we just have to take it a step at a time and explore what the opportunities are for expanded cooperation. I think that nobody has a menu that they're working from or a checklist. As I say, this is -- this relationship is still -- is still relatively young. And I think that the first area that we're clearly focused on is the Merida Initiative and going after the cartels.

And the focus there is enabling Mexico to go after the cartels. There aren't going to be U.S. combat troops or anybody like that down here as part of that. This is a challenge that Mexico has taken on. And we support it, and we will do what we can to support it. But we essentially will take the guide or the lead of the Mexican government on this in terms of what they think would be helpful.

STAFF: We have about five minutes, and still four people haven't gotten questions --

SEC. GATES: I would just say, on the question of the reliability of the FARC information, just point out -- or somebody just pointed out for me -- that Interpol is evaluating the information now for authenticity and substance. And then it'll be up to the Colombians to decide how to use it.

Q Mr. Secretary --

Q You mentioned the positive things that have come out of the Bucharest summit -- increasing commitment of troops from France. What are you hearing from the allies about the personnel decisions, especially General Petraeus to be CENTCOM commander? Was there any reaction from the NATO allies on that?

SEC. GATES: To be honest, I haven't heard a word from them, and I am taking that as no news is good news.

Q Mr. Secretary --

Q Mr. Secretary, regarding the issue of the Merida Initiative, what's -- the perception of the possibilities of a budget being approved this year by the Senate? And if not -- if the Senate does not approve the budget for the Merida Initiative, to what extent cooperation could work in the -- (inaudible)?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that -- I think it is very important for the United States Congress to fund the Merida Initiative. Mexico is one of our two closest neighbors. We have a shared concern and a shared threat in the drug cartels. It is in the United States' interest to enhance Mexico's ability to deal with these cartels. And this is a -- in my view, a wise investment of American money in our own -- that is in our interest as well as in Mexico's.

It -- we have put the money in the fiscal year 2008 supplemental so as to get it as quickly as possible. And my impression is that the leadership of both houses of the Congress are trying to act on the supplemental before our Memorial Day at the end of May.

So I hope they are able to do that, for a lot of different reasons. Clearly the supplemental is focused principally on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Merida Initiative has absolutely nothing to do with either of those. We only put it in the supplemental because it provided an early vehicle where we might be able to get the money quickly.

And we will continue to work with the Congress in the hope that in May they will in fact approve the money.

Failure to do so, I think, would be a real slap at Mexico and would be very disappointing. And it clearly would make it more difficult for us to help Mexican armed forces and their civilian agencies deal with this difficult problem.

Q Are you worried about the possible corruption that we have seen before in the Mexican armed forces?

SEC. GATES: Well, my impression is that the Mexican government is acting vigorously to deal with that kind of problem. And you know, we're talking about the purchase of equipment.

I'm not -- in fact, let me ask a factual question to somebody who knows something about this stuff. Will the money be -- will we actually buy the helicopters and turn them over to the Mexican government?

So I think, you know, we would, as I understand, we would be buying the equipment and turning them over, turning the equipment over to the Mexican government.

(Cross talk.)

Q Mr. Secretary, what is the status of the report General Petraeus is preparing about Iranian activity in Iraq? And what do you see as the implications that will come out of that?

SEC. GATES: To be honest, I don't know. I know that they're putting together what they have. But in terms of when it's going to be made public and so on, I just don't know.

Q Mr. Secretary, today, the Mexican government accepted to talk directly with the Mexican guerrilla group EPR. And this group attacked all facilities in Mexico.

Does the United States approve of this kind of talks with a group that's committing terrorist acts?

SEC. GATES: Mexico is a sovereign state. The United States is going to defer to the Mexican government, on what it believes is in its best interests and in the best interests of Mexican security.

STAFF: Thank you all very much.

SEC. GATES: Thank you.

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