

**STATE DEPARTMENT REGULAR BRIEFING
BRIEFER: TOM CASEY, DEPARTMENT ACTING SPOKESMAN
STATE DEPARTMENT BRIEFING ROOM, WASHINGTON, D.C.
12:48 P.M. EST, MONDAY, MARCH 13, 2006**

On U.S. policy on dealing with Hamas and/or Hamas ministers:

Q I think you just said the U.S. government is looking at the possibility of dealing with a government that has Hamas in it.

MR. CASEY: No, I was asked whether --

Q You were asked if it's not dominated by Hamas, what about it? And you said, "That's what we're reviewing. We're reviewing what we should do about dealing with the next Palestinian government," which of course we all know will have Hamas in it, if not in a dominant role.

So now you've -- unless I'm mistaken -- you've left the door open to dealing with a Palestinian government that has Hamas ministers.

MR. CASEY: No. Barry, let me --

Q I mean, I think --

MR. CASEY: No. Barry, let me make it clear to you.

Our policy is well-known. You have it. **We are not going to deal with a Hamas-led government. We are not going to have contacts with members of Hamas.** That's a standing-long policy. I'm not trying to change any aspects of U.S. policy here.

Q I know policy has a subtle way of evolving -- particularly Middle East policy -- in this building. I've watched it over many years. You're now talking only in terms of the law prohibiting you from dealing with Hamas?

MR. CASEY: No --

Q I don't hear anything else about Hamas being a terrorist organization. I don't hear that you don't like Hamas' way of doing things.

MR. CASEY: Okay, Barry --

Q You're just sort of hemmed in by some law.

MR. CASEY: No, Barry. Let me make it clear to you, Barry, just in case --

Q Not you. I don't mean you, Tom. I mean, the guidances that are written by the NEA are fairly transparent.

MR. CASEY: Barry, look, in case there's any question of this -- Hamas is a terrorist organization. We do not support terrorism. We believe Hamas needs to change its ways.

I can't -- I am not trying to change U.S. policy. I'm not trying to adjust U.S. policy. I'm not trying to signal anything new in U.S. policy. It remains the same.

As to whether we might be able to have a contact with an individual member of a perspective government, that might -- that will emerge from this process. What I can't do is speculate for you on that because I honestly don't know the answer.

Q Sure. Okay, so that's clear, that the position of the United States at the moment is there is no decision yet whether the door is open or closed as to maintain -- as to having a contact with X minister, if he's from X party as long as that's not Hamas, even if it's in a Hamas-led government. We were led to -- we may be -- thought that a Hamas-led government, no matter who's in it -- we're not having any contact with anyone in that government. This seems to us different.

MR. CASEY: Well, it shouldn't seem to you as different. I'm not changing U.S. policy, and if anything I've said has led you to that conclusion, I would dissuade from doing so.

Q Can I -- can I -- can I take one last stab at this?

MR. CASEY: Sure.

Q You just said --

Q It might not be the last.

Q You just said we're not going to deal with a Hamas-led government. Does that refer to everybody in that government?

MR. CASEY: That refers to a government that does not meet the conditions that the Quartet has laid out.

Again, I am not in a position to be able to speculate for you as to who -- what individuals within the Palestinian Authority structure we might or might not have contact with, other than to reaffirm our long-standing position in policy that we do not have contacts or conversations with Hamas.

Q Listen, there's probably in the Iranian government perfectly nice guys. I mean, you know, maybe the agriculture minister or maybe the -- I don't know -- the social secretary. But you're not dealing with Iran. You're not dealing with anybody in the -- as far as we know -- who knows? You may be sending them Bibles for all I know, but you're not dealing with Iran, as far as we KNOW.

MR. CASEY: Let me make --

Q So you are, Tom -- I don't want to -- it's a pity that you have to be put through all this -- but because policy evolves -- and it's not your doing, it's not your doing and it's like we're hammering you, and we're not -- it's nothing personal.

MR. CASEY: Barry, maybe --

Q You're not ruling out dealing with ministers of a Hamas-led government. That's a fact.

MR. CASEY: Okay, Barry, I'm ruling out dealing with ministers of a Hamas-led government. I'm ruling out dealing with a Hamas government. I'm not changing our policy. Okay?

On a presidential statement on Iran:

Q Are there drafts floating around at this point? Has anybody introduced -- have you introduced language that you'd like to see, or right now is this just a theoretical discussion of the ingredients --

MR. CASEY: I think they're discussing elements of it. I'm not aware that a text has been circulated at this point.

Q Are you planning on proposing something? Is the U.S. going to introduce a resolution?

MR. CASEY: I think, again, what we're looking for up front is a presidential statement. I'm not sure exactly who will table the first draft or who will put the first one on the table.

Yeah?

Q Is it the U.S. expectation to have a presidential statement this week?

MR. CASEY: It's our expectation that the result of the first Security Council meetings on this will be a presidential statement. I don't know that there's -- since it's not on the council's calendar at this moment, I can't tell you whether that is going to be next two days, next four days, next six days. So I don't want to pin it down on specific timing.

On another round of Russia – Iran talks:

Q Let's see if we can straighten out a little bit the Iran nuclear situation. There are reports that Russia is going to have another round of talks. Can -- have you -- has the U.S. been informed by the Russians? If you have, do you have a view of this? And what do you suppose Russia's intentions are?

MR. CASEY: Well, first of all, let me just make clear that in New York today there have been another round of consultations among the P-5. Obviously, Russia's been participating in those. We very much believe that the focus of our activities now should be in the Security Council. We certainly have welcomed in the past Russia's diplomatic efforts with Iran, and we've seen press reports that there may in fact be another round of consultations coming.

You know, I think I would refer you as well to some of the comments that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has made expressing his disappointment with the way Iran's been conducting itself throughout the course of the negotiations and certainly being, you know, absolutely not helpful in any efforts to resolve this situation.

And again, I think we also need to keep the emphasis where it needs to be. The international community has made it abundantly clear to Iran what is required of it and what needs to be done. Russia has been very much part of that consensus and very much helpful in that process, and right now, as we move to the Security Council, again, the facts are pretty clear. Iran knows what it needs to do, and what we're waiting to see is whether the Iranians will finally make the decision that's been asked of them and been required of them by the international community for some time.

So certainly, we look forward to continuing our work with the Russians on this and expect that we'll be moving forward again through this consultative process in the Security Council.

**

Q Excuse me. I wanted to focus on Russia because everything else you said has been said by Rice on the airplane or some place, and it's going on to you, and we know that. What we don't know -- at least I don't know -- and you say the reports of Russia wanting to have them, but those reports have been out there for easily eight hours. Has the U.S. determined whether Russia is offering a new round of talks with Iran, because that could presumably detract from the focus being at the U.N.

And if the Russians haven't informed you, do you have -- does the U.S. have a view of whether there should be bilateral talks -- I suppose even while the U.N. is discussing the situation? Or would you have the U.N. put it off for a while to see the outcome of these talks, which may be Russia's aim?

MR. CASEY: Well, Barry, I think if you look at how we have moved about this process -- the IAEA has actively worked on and considered the issue of Iran's nuclear program, even while negotiations were ongoing with the EU-3. Those efforts were joint and were all part of achieving the same international community objective.

The negotiations with the Russians on their proposal -- which again, we've supported -- were done in the same context. Certainly additional consultations between the Russians and the Iranians is not something that is inconsistent with our efforts in the Security Council to take up this issue, to discuss it among council members and, as we've said, as an initial starting point, we'd like to see a presidential statement that reaffirms the decisions made by the IAEA, and that again calls on Iran to take the necessary steps.

Q All right. So I hear that, and that says more about what you think of the proposition. But if I'm correct, the U.S. hasn't been notified by Russia of further talks?

MR. CASEY: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Okay.

MR. CASEY: Unless something's happened in New York just in the last couple of hours.

Q Okay.

On the potential for success in the Russian – Iran talks:

Q If you could just be a little bit more clear about whether you see a potential Russian -- Russia deal with Iran -- is there still a chance for that before you take any action at the council? Or have you kind of made the decision to go ahead, trying to get this presidential statement, trying to get action out of the council regardless of what happens with Russia and Iran at this point?

MR. CASEY: Well, again, **the process is driven by Iran's actions.**

If Iran stands up today and does a complete 180, turns around and says, "We would now agree with the -- agree to abide by all the international community's requirements as laid out in the February 4 Board of Governors resolution," if it wants to return to the negotiating table and work out a real deal with the Russians, as opposed to some of the delaying tactics that we've seen with them, that would be wonderful.

We, however, have no indication that Iran is prepared to accept Russia's proposal or its conditions, and again, that is why Iran finds itself in the place it is. **Iran has repeatedly refused to meet the requirements and the demands of the international community, and it really is up to the Iranians to make the determination to do so. What we're doing in the Security Council is again taking that next step in our diplomatic process to try and convince Iran to do exactly that.**

But if they would like to change their minds, if they would like to come around, if they would like to end their two years of defiance of requirements and requests from the international community, we would certainly like to see it. But unfortunately, we have no indication that that's going to occur.

On Iranian diplomacy:

Q You mentioned the negotiating table. Repeatedly, we've heard Secretary Rice and others in the State Department say that the report to the Security Council just opens up another forum for diplomatic negotiation. With whom should the Iranians be negotiating if they were of a mind to do so seriously?

MR. CASEY: Well, there's an established process, and there is an established requirement in that February 4 Board of Governors resolution. And what it does is requires Iran to go back to full suspension of all uranium enrichment-related activity, go back to that agreement that they'd made with the EU-3, and then return to negotiations with the EU-3.

The Russian proposal's been part of that. If they'd like to pursue that Russian initiative, accept the Russian proposal along the lines acceptable to the international community, that would be fine.

Q To whom should they be making such indications if they're of a mind to do so?

MR. CASEY: Well, they certainly have an open and active engagement with the Russians. They've certainly been in consultations with the EU-3. **I don't think the Iranians lack for people they can discuss this issue with. I think what they lack is the will to make the decisions necessary to come into requirement with the demands of the international community.**

On P-5 negotiations:

Q The P-5 negotiations -- or the P-5 discussions, I should say, you said there was a third round, I guess today, that's already taken place. What actually can you tell us -- you get a better readout than we do, presumably -- what's been going on at those discussions? Any practical outcome of them so far?

MR. CASEY: Well again, as we said, this was -- as normally happens with a U.N. discussion, this was part of our efforts to have a preliminary discussion about how we intend to proceed in the Security Council, certainly about what we would like to see in a presidential statement, and it's basically been a discussion focused on that, on these initial steps that we'll be taking in the Security Council to address Iran's nuclear program.

On U.S. policy on parties joining the Hamas government:

Q New subject, on Hamas. You have made clear that you're not going to have any contacts with Hamas and you wouldn't give any aid to a Hamas government. It's probable or possible that other parties will join or are considering joining a Hamas government. Do those rules about no contacts/no aid apply to any parties that would join a Hamas government?

MR. CASEY: Well, you know, as you know, we're conducting a review of our assistance programs to see what we will be able to provide under a Hamas-led government. I honestly can't break it down for you, Saul. I think we need to see what that government looks like, who is it -- who is in it and what the nature of that participation is. But again let me just make clear the United States cannot, by law, and will not provide any funding that will go to Hamas. It's a foreign terrorist organization, it's been designated as such, and we're strictly prohibited from doing so.

Again, though, as Secretary Rice has said, and said again today, we believe it's important that we take into consideration the needs of the -- the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people. We're committed to supporting those humanitarian needs, and we're going to be looking to see how we can do that, and in fact, even how we can step up our assistance for the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people, even while making sure that we do not violate U.S. law and do not provide any financial support for a terrorist organization.

Q So is there no particular message to another party, let's say Fatah, that's considering joining the government that if they join the government, then they would cut themselves off from contacts with the U.S.?

MR. CASEY: Saul, listen, I think the United States is going to leave it up to the Palestinians themselves to determine who will or will not be members of the government. As we've said, the policies of that government, though, are going to have consequences for how we will be able to interact with them, and certainly, we obviously cannot and will not interact with members of a terrorist organization.

Q Well, that doesn't answer the question. You say you won't have contacts with members of the -- of Hamas. You're not choosing the government, but you've got to tell parties who are joining it or possibly joining the government whether or not you will continue to have contacts with them. Is there a consequence of them joining the government or not?

MR. CASEY: I would need to see what the government was before I could tell you the answer to that question, and I'm not prepared to speculate on it, Saul.

Q But --

MR. CASEY: Pam?

Q -- can you just be more clear about whether -- is it a Hamas-led government that you have a problem dealing with or just members of the group?

MR. CASEY: Well, there are two issues --

Q I mean --

MR. CASEY: Yeah.

Q -- feasibly, President Abbas, passed this interim period, will still be president. Are you going to --

MR. CASEY: That's correct, and we've said we continue to have contacts with him, and I expect we will do so in the future. What I have -- what we have also said, though, is two things. The first is that we have laws dealing with foreign terrorist organizations, and Hamas is a foreign terrorist organization -- means that there are certain requirements that we have to follow, including not providing any support or funding for them, as we've said, as a matter of policy. We do not have contact Hamas. It's a foreign terrorist organization.

The issue of Hamas and the issue of the government that is formed out of this process, we need to see what that government is. We all presume it will be Hamas-led, but maybe it won't be, and maybe it'll be different. **Part of the review of our assistance is designed to determine exactly what we can or cannot support, and how we can or cannot engage with such a government.**

I don't want to try and prejudge either the shape and scope of that government or what our decisions will be coming out of the review. It is clear, however, that the international community, through the Quartet statement on January 30th, who's made it clear exactly what we want to see from that government, including a recognition of Israel's right to exist, maintenance of all existing agreements that the Palestinian Authority has signed with Israel -- and I think it's important that whatever government emerge from this process heeds those requirements and heeds that call.

On U.S. policy on dealing with Abbas if Fatah joins the Hamas government:

Q There was story today that the Bush administration intends to curtail contacts with President Mahmoud Abbas faction if it joins a Hamas-led government.

MR. CASEY: Sorry, say again?

Q The Bush administration intends to curtail contacts with President Mahmoud Abbas faction if it joins a Hamas-led government.

MR. CASEY: I think we've been through that as much as I can possibly do today, Michel. I don't have anything additional for you, other than the conversation we've already just gone through.

FULL TEXT

MR. CASEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the start of another exciting week at the State Department. I don't have any statements for you.

So, Barry, why don't we get right to your questions.

Q Let's see if we can straighten out a little bit the Iran nuclear situation. There are reports that Russia is going to have another round of talks. Can -- have you -- has the U.S. been informed by the Russians? If you have, do you have a view of this? And what do you suppose Russia's intentions are?

MR. CASEY: Well, first of all, let me just make clear that in New York today there have been another round of consultations among the P-5. Obviously, Russia's been participating in those. We very much believe that the focus of our activities now should be in the Security Council. We certainly have welcomed in the past Russia's diplomatic efforts with Iran, and we've seen press reports that there may in fact be another round of consultations coming.

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So certainly, we look forward to continuing our work with the Russians on this and expect that we'll be moving forward again through this consultative process in the Security Council.

Yeah, Elise?

Q No, I'm --

MR. CASEY: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead, Barry.

Q Excuse me. I wanted to focus on Russia because everything else you said has been said by Rice on the airplane or some place, and it's going on to you, and we know that. What we don't know -- at least I don't know -- and you say the reports of Russia wanting to have them, but those reports have been out there for easily eight hours. Has the U.S. determined whether Russia is offering a new round of talks with Iran, because that could presumably detract from the focus being at the U.N.

And if the Russians haven't informed you, do you have -- does the U.S. have a view of whether there should be bilateral talks -- I suppose even while the U.N. is discussing the situation? Or would you have the U.N. put it off for a while to see the outcome of these talks, which may be Russia's aim?

MR. CASEY: Well, Barry, I think if you look at how we have moved about this process -- the IAEA has actively worked on and considered the issue of Iran's nuclear program, even while negotiations were ongoing with the EU-3. Those efforts were joint and were all part of achieving the same international community objective.

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Q All right. So I hear that, and that says more about what you think of the proposition. But if I'm correct, the U.S. hasn't been notified by Russia of further talks?

MR. CASEY: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Okay.

MR. CASEY: Unless something's happened in New York just in the last couple of hours.

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MR. CASEY: Yeah?

Q If you could just be a little bit more clear about whether you see a potential Russian -- Russia deal with Iran -- is there still a chance for that before you take any action at the council? Or have you kind of made the decision to go ahead, trying to get this presidential statement, trying to get action out of the council regardless of what happens with Russia and Iran at this point?

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But if they would like to change their minds, if they would like to come around, if they would like to end their two years of defiance of requirements and requests from the international community, we would certainly like to see it. But unfortunately, we have no indication that that's going to occur.

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Q You mentioned the negotiating table. Repeatedly, we've heard Secretary Rice and others in the State Department say that the report to the Security Council just opens up another forum for diplomatic negotiation. With whom should the Iranians be negotiating if they were of a mind to do so seriously?

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Q To whom should they be making such indications if they're of a mind to do so?

MR. CASEY: Well, they certainly have an open and active engagement with the Russians. They've certainly been in consultations with the EU-3. I don't think the Iranians lack for people they can discuss this issue with. I think what they lack is the will to make the decisions necessary to come into requirement with the demands of the international community.

Q And just a moment ago you urged us to consult the remarks of Foreign Minister Lavrov. Why did you do that?

MR. CASEY: Well, I think because he made very clear today -- the quote that I saw attributed to him was, "We're disappointed with the way Iran has been conducting itself in these negotiations. It's absolutely not helping those who want to provide for finding peaceful ways to resolve the whole situation surrounding the Iranian nuclear program." We couldn't agree more. That's been the actions that Iran has taken. And again, this is about not words but actions. Iran knows what it needs to do, and it needs to go forward with that if it wishes to actually have a resolution of this situation.

Q Last question for me on this subject.

MR. CASEY: Yeah.

Q The P-5 negotiations -- or the P-5 discussions, I should say, you said there was a third round, I guess today, that's already taken place. What actually can you tell us -- you get a better readout than we do, presumably -- what's been going on at those discussions? Any practical outcome of them so far?

MR. CASEY: Well again, as we said, this was -- as normally happens with a U.N. discussion, this was part of our efforts to have a preliminary discussion about how we intend to proceed in the Security Council, certainly about what we would like to see in a presidential statement, and it's basically been a discussion focused on that, on these initial steps that we'll be taking in the Security Council to address Iran's nuclear program.

Q Is it -- go ahead.

MR. CASEY: Go ahead, Elise.

Q Are there drafts floating around at this point? Has anybody introduced -- have you introduced language that you'd like to see, or right now is this just a theoretical discussion of the ingredients --

MR. CASEY: I think they're discussing elements of it. I'm not aware that a text has been circulated at this point.

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Yeah?

Q Is it the U.S. expectation to have a presidential statement this week?

MR. CASEY: It's our expectation that the result of the first Security Council meetings on this will be a presidential statement. I don't know that there's -- since it's not on the council's calendar at this moment, I can't tell you whether that is going to be next two days, next four days, next six days. So I don't want to pin it down on specific timing.

Yeah, Saul?

Q New subject, on Hamas. You have made clear that you're not going to have any contacts with Hamas and you wouldn't give any aid to a Hamas government. It's probable or possible that other parties will join or are considering joining a Hamas government. Do those rules about no contacts/no aid apply to any parties that would join a Hamas government?

MR. CASEY: Well, you know, as you know, we're conducting a review of our assistance programs to see what we will be able to provide under a Hamas-led government. I honestly can't break it down for you, Saul. I think we need to see what that government looks like, who is it -- who is in it and what the nature of that participation is. But again let me just make clear the United States cannot, by law, and will not provide any funding that will go to Hamas. It's a foreign terrorist organization, it's been designated as such, and we're strictly prohibited from doing so.

Again, though, as Secretary Rice has said, and said again today, we believe it's important that we take into consideration the needs of the -- the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people. We're committed to supporting those humanitarian needs, and we're going to be looking to see how we can do that, and in fact, even how we can step up our assistance for the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people, even while making sure that we do not violate U.S. law and do not provide any financial support for a terrorist organization.

Q So is there no particular message to another party, let's say Fatah, that's considering joining the government that if they join the government, then they would cut themselves off from contacts with the U.S.?

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Q Well, that doesn't answer the question. You say you won't have contacts with members of the -- of Hamas. You're not choosing the government, but you've got to tell parties who are joining it or possibly joining the government whether or not you will continue to have contacts with them. Is there a consequence of them joining the government or not?

MR. CASEY: I would need to see what the government was before I could tell you the answer to that question, and I'm not prepared to speculate on it, Saul.

Q But --

MR. CASEY: Pam?

Q -- can you just be more clear about whether -- is it a Hamas-led government that you have a problem dealing with or just members of the group?

MR. CASEY: Well, there are two issues --

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MR. CASEY: Yeah.

Q -- feasibly, President Abbas, passed this interim period, will still be president. Are you going to --

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Q I think you just said the U.S. government is looking at the possibility of dealing with a government that has Hamas in it.

MR. CASEY: No, I was asked whether --

Q You were asked if it's not dominated by Hamas, what about it? And you said, "That's what we're reviewing. We're reviewing what we should do about dealing with the next Palestinian government," which of course we all know will have Hamas in it, if not in a dominant role.

So now you've -- unless I'm mistaken -- you've left the door open to dealing with a Palestinian government that has Hamas ministers.

MR. CASEY: No. Barry, let me --

Q I mean, I think --

MR. CASEY: No. Barry, let me make it clear to you.

Our policy is well-known. You have it. We are not going to deal with a Hamas-led government. We are not going to have contacts with members of Hamas. That's a standing-long policy. I'm not trying to change any aspects of U.S. policy here.

Q I know policy has a subtle way of evolving -- particularly Middle East policy -- in this building. I've watched it over many years. You're now talking only in terms of the law prohibiting you from dealing with Hamas?

MR. CASEY: No --

Q I don't hear anything else about Hamas being a terrorist organization. I don't hear that you don't like Hamas' way of doing things.

MR. CASEY: Okay, Barry --

Q You're just sort of hemmed in by some law.

MR. CASEY: No, Barry. Let me make it clear to you, Barry, just in case --

Q Not you. I don't mean you, Tom. I mean, the guidances that are written by the NEA are fairly transparent.

MR. CASEY: Barry, look, in case there's any question of this -- Hamas is a terrorist organization. We do not support terrorism. We believe Hamas needs to change its ways.

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As to whether we might be able to have a contact with an individual member of a perspective government, that might -- that will emerge from this process. What I can't do is speculate for you on that because I honestly don't know the answer.

Q Sure. Okay, so that's clear, that the position of the United States at the moment is there is no decision yet whether the door is open or closed as to maintain -- as to having a contact with X minister, if he's from X party as long as that's not Hamas, even if it's in a Hamas-led government. We were led to -- we may be -- thought that a Hamas-led government, no matter who's in it -- we're not having any contact with anyone in that government. This seems to us different.

MR. CASEY: Well, it shouldn't seem to you as different. I'm not changing U.S. policy, and if anything I've said has led you to that conclusion, I would dissuade from doing so.

Q Can I -- can I -- can I take one last stab at this?

MR. CASEY: Sure.

Q You just said --

Q It might not be the last.

Q You just said we're not going to deal with a Hamas-led government. Does that refer to everybody in that government?

MR. CASEY: That refers to a government that does not meet the conditions that the Quartet has laid out.

Again, I am not in a position to be able to speculate for you as to who -- what individuals within the Palestinian Authority structure we might or might not have contact with, other than to reaffirm our long-standing position in policy that we do not have contacts or conversations with Hamas.

Q Listen, there's probably in the Iranian government perfectly nice guys. I mean, you know, maybe the agriculture minister or maybe the -- I don't know -- the social secretary. But you're not dealing with Iran. You're not dealing with anybody in the -- as far as we know -- who knows? You may be sending them Bibles for all I know, but you're not dealing with Iran, as far as we KNOW.

MR. CASEY: Let me make --

Q So you are, Tom -- I don't want to -- it's a pity that you have to be put through all this -- but because policy evolves -- and it's not your doing, it's not your doing and it's like we're hammering you, and we're not -- it's nothing personal.

MR. CASEY: Barry, maybe --

Q You're not ruling out dealing with ministers of a Hamas-led government. That's a fact.

MR. CASEY: Okay, Barry, I'm ruling out dealing with ministers of a Hamas-led government. I'm ruling out dealing with a Hamas government. I'm not changing our policy. Okay?

Michel?

Q There was story today that the Bush administration intends to curtail contacts with President Mahmoud Abbas faction if it joins a Hamas-led government.

MR. CASEY: Sorry, say again?

Q The Bush administration intends to curtail contacts with President Mahmoud Abbas faction if it joins a Hamas-led government.

MR. CASEY: I think we've been through that as much as I can possibly do today, Michel. I don't have anything additional for you, other than the conversation we've already just gone through.

Q Can we try something easy? (Laughter.)

MR. CASEY: Sure, let's try something easy.

Q Is the ambassador to Armenia having his career shortened because he spoke out against genocide in Armenia?

MR. CASEY: Barry, I know we promised you an answer on that one on Friday.

Q Yep.

MR. CASEY: Still don't have it, and I'll get something for you this afternoon.

Q You mean his future hasn't been decided yet?

MR. CASEY: Not that I'm aware of.

Q I think it has.

MR. CASEY: I believe you think it does.

Q No, I do believe it does, and so do -- and I have reason to believe it does, and I know there are least two members of Congress who believe it does.

No, I just think the State Department is having difficulty finding words to announce his premature retirement.

MR. CASEY: Yeah, we owe you an answer on that.

Q Thank you.

MR. CASEY: I'll get it for you.

Yeah, Saul?

Q Do you have a readout on the Eritrea-Ethiopia meetings? I know they were in London, but I believe there was U.S. representation there. Did they make any progress?

MR. CASEY: Yeah, I did check on that before the briefing, Saul, and don't have a full readout for you. And we'll get you something later this afternoon.

Mr. Lambros?

Q On Slobodan Milosevic?

MR. CASEY: Yeah.

Q How his death is going to affect the new round of talks March 17th in Vienna for the final status of Kosovo? Do you expect a kind of postponement?

MR. CASEY: Well, I don't -- do we expect a postponement in the next round of discussions?

Q Mm-hmm. (Affirmative response.)

MR. CASEY: Not that I'm aware of. And obviously you know our policies on this issue. We're supporting the efforts of Special Representative Ahtissari to negotiate a final settlement agreement, a final status agreement. And we look forward to seeing those comments continue.

Q Any communication between Secretary Rice and the chief of the tribunal, Carla del Ponte, on Slobodan Milosevic's death?

MR. CASEY: No.

Q And who is going to be present in the Slobodan Milosevic funeral in Belgrade on behalf of the U.S. government, since it's a political event? Your ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro?

MR. CASEY: I'm not aware that there are any state arrangements being made for his funeral, and I'm certainly not aware of any U.S. participation in it.

Q And one on Armenia.

MR. CASEY: Okay.

Q Representative Frank Pallone, in a strong statement, expressed his extreme disappointment with regards of the Department of State's decision to withdraw finally Ambassador John Evans from Armenia as a retaliation for statements he made in recognition of the Armenian genocide, in Los Angeles, by Ottoman Turks. And it was reported that already you have decided to replace him. Could you please clarify for us what is going on at exactly this particular moment on this issue?

MR. CASEY: That was the question Barry asked. We owe you an answer and we'll get you one.

Q Is the same answer.

MR. CASEY: Yes. It's the same issue; it will be the same answer.

Q Is there an ambassador on post in Armenia right now?

MR. CASEY: Yes, there is.

Q Is his name Evans?

MR. CASEY: Yes, it is.

Q Has he got his suitcase packed?

MR. CASEY: Not that I'm aware of.

Q But when you do announce this, would you kindly tell us the difference between what happened and genocide?

MR. CASEY: I think --

Q Because U.S. policy is there was no genocide.

MR. CASEY: Our policy on this issue is well-known. It was repeated in a presidential statement. And yeah, I don't have anything to add to it.

Let's go over here.

Q (Off mike) -- North Koreans are accusing the U.S. again for creating obstacles for the six-party talks process. And so, the South Koreans are sending its top nuclear envoy to Japan trying to jump- start again for this process. I wonder if U.S. is communicating with them, or are you going to join these two countries to make further efforts for this six-party talks process?

MR. CASEY: Well, I think you'll not find it surprising that we're prepared to resume six-party talks without preconditions and to work on a strategy of implementation for the September 19th joint statement. We see no reason for those talks not to start as soon as possible. We certainly encourage the North Koreans to return to the talks. The other five parties are waiting and we're ready to go back at any time. And we certainly encourage all parties that have any influence over the North Koreans to encourage them to do that.

Q Would you entertain -- (off mike)?

MR. CASEY: I think we'll go back here, then Mr. Lambros, and then we'll entertain a "thank you."

Yeah, go ahead, sir.

Q I would like to ask about the realignment, U.S. military realignment in Japan.

MR. CASEY: Yeah.

Q Last Sunday there was a referendum in the western part of Japan, Iwakuni City, where the U.S. Marine Corps base is located. And it had shown the majority, about 90 percent, in opposition against the plan to transfer the aircraft flights from Atsugi base near Tokyo. And this result, how do you look at this situation?

MR. CASEY: Well, I really don't have much to tell you other than the answer I gave you on this same subject last week. Certainly we continue to work with the Japanese government in Tokyo on the implementation of our realignment of forces in the region. We'll continue to do so. Certainly we leave it to the government of Japan to discuss or talk about anything that's happening on this issue within internal politics, but we continue to work this issue with the Japanese government and expect to continue to do so.

I think there was one over here.

Q As you know, the new Canadian ambassador to the U.S., Michael Wilson, arrived in Washington today. How will this new representative of the new conservative government in Canada affect relations between Washington and Ottawa?

MR. CASEY: Well, we certainly have had long and good standing relations with our neighbors to the north.

We look forward to continuing those and deepening and strengthening those ties with him as ambassador as well as with the new government in Canada.

Q Do you think it will change at all from the previous?

MR. CASEY: Well, we always want to keep on working on the relationship and want to work on strengthening it and making it better.

Yeah, Mr. Lambros. Last one.

Q On Cyprus. The International Crisis Group in a report released last week is blaming the Greek Cypriots for the impasse on the island, and Cypriot politicians in Nicosia are reacting, saying that they are the victims of a, quote, "an Anglo-Saxon American conspiracy, and that propaganda tool sells the political interests of the United States in Britain," unquote. May we have your comments since the U.S. government, as we know very well, is trying very hard for the unification of the island?

MR. CASEY: Well, you're correct, Mr. Lambros. As you know, our long-standing policy is to ensure a peaceful reunification of the island along the lines of the Annan Plan or using the Annan Plan as a basis. We're certainly

supportive of ongoing discussions on that issue and would like to see a acceptable settlement reached as soon as possible.

Okay.

Q Hold on just for --

MR. CASEY: Last one.

Q -- the same report claims also that the U.S. efforts to establish trade links with the Turkish Cypriots is a move that the Greek Cypriots are -- is tantamount to diplomatic recognition of the occupied area, recognized only by Turkey. How do you respond to this?

MR. CASEY: I respond to you by saying our policy on this is well known, and I don't have anything additional for you.

Thanks.

END.