

**STATE DEPARTMENT REGULAR BRIEFING**  
**BRIEFER: ADAM ERELI, DEPARTMENT DEPUTY SPOKESMAN**  
STATE DEPARTMENT BRIEFING ROOM, WASHINGTON, D.C.  
1:37 P.M. EST, TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 2006

**On the U.S. position on the Jericho operation:**

**Q** On the prison raid, the Israeli prison raid, I can't grasp whether -- you know, we have some facts from the U.S. government, the State Department, but I can't grasp whether the U.S. has any qualms about the -- whether they approve of the raid, have no position. I don't understand what the U.S. position is, if there is any.

**MR. ERELI:** The U.S. position is that the foremost issue was the safety and security of the monitors who were at the prison. I'd refer you to a statement by British Foreign Secretary Straw which was presented to the House of Commons today, in which he laid out our joint concerns -- because as you know, it was a joint British-U.S. monitoring mission -- and the decisions and actions that were taken that led to the events of today.

You'll note in his statement that what we saw happen today in terms of withdrawing the mission really goes back to over two years ago, where we started -- where we began to raise with the Palestinian Authority our concerns that it was not doing enough to ensure the safety and security of the British and U.S. monitors who are in the prison pursuant to the Ramallah agreement of -- of 2002 to make sure that the prisoners -- six prisoners of concern at the prison were being held in secure -- in a secure way.

So for at least the past two years, we've been telling the Palestinians, "Look, you've got obligations to provide for the security of these monitors. There are threats to their safety; we need you to take certain actions." We continue to press that over -- at various points over the course of the last several years. And finally it got to the point last week where we sent a letter to the Palestinians saying, if you don't take really effective action, we're going to have to withdraw. And we took that step, I think reluctantly today but necessarily, since, frankly, they -- we had to do what was necessary to protect them.

In the wake of the actions following the withdrawal of the monitors, obviously we'll work closely with the Palestinians and the Israelis to ensure calm, to ensure restraint, and we'll continue to be doing that over the course of the next days as events develop.

But I think the focus on this issue needs to be first and foremost on why we did what we did, which was to protect our people and because the Palestinians weren't able to do that.

**Q** But the Israelis walked off with the -- I mean, the Israelis have taken over the prisoners. I mean, is that what you want to happen? Weren't they under Palestinian --

**MR. ERELI:** I think what we -- what we wanted to happen was to be able to fulfill our mission, which was to implement the -- to do what we were supposed to do under the terms of the Ramallah accord. We weren't able to do that. That's unfortunate. It's unfortunate for what it says about the ability to follow through on that agreement, and it's unfortunate for what it says about security of prisoners or the security provided for prisoners under Palestinian -- under Palestinian control. These individuals are now, apparently, if the news reports are correct, under Israeli control. We will continue to be in touch with both sides on the matter.

It's certainly not an outcome -- or the events are certainly not what we would have wished for. We would have wished for the Ramallah agreement to continue and the Israelis and Palestinians to have been able to, pursuant to the Ramallah agreement, to work out modalities for dealing with these guys. They weren't able to do that.

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**Q** Well, what's your reaction on the Israeli operation on Jericho prison?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, as I've said, we think it's important that all sides exercise restraint and calm. We made that clear to the Israelis.

We made it clear to the Palestinians. It seems from the press reports that the Israelis have taken certain prisoners. We will continue to consult with both sides on next steps.

### **On accusations of collusion between the U.S., Britain and Israel:**

**Q** I mean, one reason for asking is -- you've probably seen the accusations, even from someone like the head of the Arab League, the suspicion there was some kind of collusion, that somehow the American-British mission knew that the Israelis planned this operation, so the timing was done deliberately; you got people out knowing the Israelis were going in. Is there any truth to that?

**MR. ERELI:** Such accusations are baseless and ignore the facts, quite frankly. And that's, again, why I think it's important to look at the statement for the record that the British secretary of state for foreign -- the Foreign and Commonwealth Office put before the House of Parliament, because that outlines for you in very detailed, chronological way what led up to today's action. And it points out to you that this was -- that this has been an issue that we've been engaged with the Palestinians on quite seriously for some time.

And so what happened today was the result of a -- frankly, a consistent and painstaking effort on our part and on the part of the British to work with the Palestinians to get them to hold up their end of the bargain. And it was only -- it was only after lots of trying and numerous representations at very senior levels that we came to the conclusion that they were going to be unable to fulfill those obligations and that therefore we had no choice but to take these steps -- again, to protect the safety of our personnel.

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**Q** So, just to -- just to confirm -- I'm sorry, so just to confirm, you did not coordinate this with the Israelis, that as soon as the monitors would be gone, the Israelis would be given enough time to secure the prison. Is that what you're saying?

**MR. ERELI:** What I'm saying is that we took the steps we needed to, we let people know what we were doing. There were certain things that we didn't say for operational reasons, and that -- and that we took the steps we needed to to protect our people. I can't speak for steps that other -- that others took. But the notion that somehow there was -- you know, it was a joint operation are patently wrong if you look at the facts.

### **On U.S. knowledge of the Jericho operation:**

**Q** So when did the United States know Israel was going to do this operation?

**MR. ERELI:** The Israeli -- the United States -- what the United States knew was what it was going to do. And pursuant to the Ramallah agreement, we told the Palestinians, we told both sides what we were going to do. It was in the March 8th letter. And we took actions that we were responsible for. I can't speak for other countries taking the actions that they took.

**Q** There's a small problem when you're dealing with the PR element of this in the Middle East. You're saying the accusations are baseless and ignore the facts.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**Q** The problem is there's not necessarily enough facts out there for the suspicion to be allayed. We're asking --

**MR. ERELI:** Why?

**Q** Well, because you can't answer that question. You're not saying when the United States knew there was an Israeli operation going on.

**MR. ERELI:** The United States didn't know.

**Q** Ah. Well -- so you didn't know until the bulldozers turned up.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah. This was -- again, what the United States knew was the Palestinians aren't living up to their obligations, our people are in danger, we've got to pull them out.

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**Q** But you can say for sure that the U.S. did not know about the Israeli raid before it happened.

**MR. ERELI:** You know, what I can say is that the United States took the action that it took to protect its people and worked with -- and informed, along with the British, as the foreign secretary outlined, the steps that we were going to take pursuant to the terms of the Ramallah agreement, and that this was a -- this was a question of being very clear and systematic.

### **On the presence of U.S. monitors:**

**Q** When was the last time American monitors were in the prison?

**MR. ERELI:** I'd have to check for you.

**Q** Because I think what you said was that there was a decision to withdraw today. So I'm just wondering --

**MR. ERELI:** To withdraw the monitors and to not go back.

**Q** Right. So there were American monitors in there today.

**MR. ERELI:** I don't know if they were in there today. My understanding is actually today there were British monitors. There are -- just to get you the numbers -- I think there are something like eight American monitors and 12 British monitors. I'll have to check and just make sure on that. But on any given day, only a certain number of them are actually at the facility, so today those monitors that were at the facility were withdrawn and there won't be others returning to do their shifts in subsequent days.

**Q** So --

**MR. ERELI:** And when was the last time there were American monitors there? I'll check and see if I can get that for you.

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**Q** Can you speak a little bit to the actual -- to put this in context with the timing of what's going on in the region? I mean, the Palestinians are saying that, you know, you chose this particular moment in time to do it right in advance of Israeli elections to kind of give Olmert a boost. At the same time, you have a Hamas-led government coming in which has already said that it didn't recognize the Ramallah agreement. And obviously, there would be some issues about implementing it. So what is it about this particular moment in time?

Was there an extra specific and credible threat to the monitors right now that caused you to take this step today? I mean, it's a very delicate moment.

**MR. ERELI:** Let me see if I can give you a little bit more background to help you put this into context and see it in a broader perspective. As I said, the agreement governing this was from 2002. (Pausing to consult briefing materials.) Just making sure about that date.

**Q** (Off mike.)

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

In 2005 we had independent reports that noted that the security for the monitors was not adequate, and throughout the course of 2005, it was the assessment of both the United States and Britain that the threat to the monitors was increasing. In late December 2005, we told the Palestinian Authority that unless the safety of the monitors could be improved, we would undertake a withdrawal of the mission. So this has been going on for a couple of years now.

We again raised it in late January 2006. Earlier this month, as I said, we delivered a joint letter to President Abbas on March 8th which noted that if they couldn't come into full compliance and make substantive improvements to the security of the monitors or come to a new agreement with Israel regarding the incarceration of the prisoners, we would have to terminate our involvement with the mission.

So this is the result of a growing and escalating threat to the monitors and a coming to the decision that we had arrived at the point where we could not in good faith and responsibly continue to keep them there if the Palestinian Authority wasn't going to take the steps that, A, they knew they needed to take, and B, the steps that we'd outlined for them.

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**Q** Has the plan been since March 8th to remove the monitors today?

**MR. ERELI:** I couldn't tell you that.

### **On the U.S. notifying Israel of its withdrawal of monitors:**

**Q** Okay. And when did you tell the Israelis that you were --

**MR. ERELI:** We told both -- pursuant to the Ramallah -- and again I'd refer you back to Foreign Secretary Straw's statement on all this -- we told the Israelis and the -- we told the Palestinians on March 8th that if they didn't take action, we'd have to withdraw our monitors. We told -- again, pursuant to the Ramallah agreement -- the Israelis about the substance of that letter.

**Q** Yeah.

**MR. ERELI:** And then we didn't tell that we were withdrawing them until they'd actually been withdrawn, which was today.

**Q** Okay.

**Q** You told them today or they were withdrawn today?

**MR. ERELI:** We told them after they'd been withdrawn.

**Q** Today.

**Q** Everything happened -- you told them today after they'd been withdrawn. You told them after they were withdrawn today.

**MR. ERELI:** We told them after they were withdrawn today.

### **On the timing of the Jericho operation and Israeli knowledge of a U.S. withdrawal:**

**Q** Do you know if this Israeli raid this morning started before or after you called them to let them know that the monitors --

**MR. ERELI:** Ah-h-h -- I couldn't tell you.

**Q** So you -- so, I mean --

**MR. ERELI:** I mean, I don't -- I just don't have the -- I don't have the chronology to be exactly sure.

### **On the U.S. notifying Mahmoud Abbas of its withdrawal of monitors:**

**Q** Over the weekend, Deputy Prime Minister Peres met with President Abbas in Jordan, and also the British Council offices in Gaza were just torched and burnt after the siege concluded.

**MR. ERELI:** Right.

**Q** Obviously, did we tell both Prime Minister Abbas that this would go forth today or did the Israelis --

**MR. ERELI:** No. No. We said we would -- obviously, if they couldn't -- if they couldn't do what needed to be done, we would have to terminate the mission, but for operational reasons, we didn't say when that would be.

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**Q** No, I know you obviously gave them repeated warnings that you were going to do this, but the criticism right now is that it was done in a way that didn't give the Palestinians enough time as this was developing to secure the prisons, leaving -- to secure the prison, leaving the ground completely open for the Israelis to move in.

**MR. ERELI:** Well, look, they've had over two years to take actions to secure the facility. They haven't done it. Waiting another couple of days probably wouldn't have changed that.

**Q** Well, if it wouldn't change it on that sense, why wouldn't you give them a couple of days notice in any event?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, because as I said, you got to remember there were security concerns here. Our first concern was the safety of our people. They had -- the Palestinians had proved incapable of providing for their safety, so we needed to take the steps we thought sufficient to do that. That meant telling them, hey, unless you can't take effective action, we're going to withdraw them, and we're going to withdraw them at a time that we decide, without signaling it, for operational security reasons.

Obviously, the whole point of this is to protect your people, so you're going to want to be careful about -- tactically how you do that.

### **On the safety of U.S. monitors:**

**Q** Just one more on this. Were there any specific credible threats to the monitors that --

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**Q** -- in this particular moment in time that you had to take them out before some kind of attack against them?

**MR. ERELI:** I would say the security environment was deteriorating.

**Q** Do you attribute this to the incoming Hamas-led government?

**MR. ERELI:** Certainly statements about releasing the prisoners or failure to take certain actions, both in the past and now, I think intensified our concern.

**Q** Can you be more specific now that operational security is not an issue about the threats, how often overlooked at a time, or more specific about what --

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah, I just don't have that information.

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**Q** Adam, can you just sort of describe for us the type of security problem that there is or there was at --

**MR. ERELI:** Well --

**Q** -- I really have no idea whether it was that there is, I don't know, firing from outside into the prisons, or is it that prisoners make threats, the prisoners have knives? I have no idea what's on the ground, and what's -- (inaudible).

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah, it's important to note that the monitors are unarmed, so they are in the best of situations vulnerable.

Second of all, they had been continuing information that they are targets of hostile parties.

**Q** Inside the prisons?

**MR. ERELI:** I think by being in the prisons they are vulnerable. I don't know the specific details of those reports, so I really couldn't tell you -- and that we look to the Palestinian Authorities to provide security for them while they're in the prison or while they're doing their job, whether it be inside the prison, frankly, or outside the prison. It's not just inside the prison. It's wherever they happen to be doing their job.

So if you've got unarmed personnel tasked with monitoring an agreement -- and under that agreement the Palestinian Authority has the obligation to protect these guys, and that they're getting threats and that they're vulnerable and that those tasked with protecting them are protecting them -- then you got to do what's necessary. And that's why we withdrew them.

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**Q** But you're saying, then, that you kept the monitors in danger for the past year?

**MR. ERELI:** I said we were concerned about their security. We --

**Q** But you didn't remove them until now.

**MR. ERELI:** We wanted to do everything we could to make this deal work.

### **On the role of Mahmoud Abbas:**

**Q** Okay. One other thing. Can you tell us what role President Abbas played in this or didn't play in this in terms of his assurance or his statement that he didn't see any reason not to let these prisoners go?

**MR. ERELI:** We delivered the letter to President Abbas on March 8th. We took the action today because the concerns that we communicated in our letter weren't acted upon. That's the best way I can answer it.

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**Q** Did you find out why the -- why President Abbas failed to do this?

**MR. ERELI:** You know, I can't speak for the Palestinians. I can just say it was based on our assessment the threat was too great to ignore.

### **On the Jericho operation setting a precedent for Israeli security:**

**Q** Does that mean that every time Israel sees that there's insecurity in the Palestinian territory, that it can go and take whomever it wants?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I think what it means is that both sides have an obligation to provide for the security and protection of both monitors to an agreement and wanted prisoners in their custody, and that it creates a vacuum of sorts when security services are unable to fulfill the obligations and tasks that they have before them.

### **On the current state of Palestinian security systems:**

**Q** Isn't this the same security system -- of course, it's getting to be academic because you have a new government coming in -- but isn't this the same Palestinian security system the U.S. has worked closely with and happily with and apparently -- I don't remember you -- I don't remember the U.S. government badmouthing the Palestinian security system, saying of course they need to be trained, they need to improve.

So, what, are there two security systems? There's one that does a slipshod job in this prison, and another that the Israelis should depend on to protect their lives? Is that the point?

**MR. ERELI:** I think the point here is that those responsible for living up to their obligations under the Ramallah Agreement in this prison didn't fulfill their obligations, didn't do what they were supposed to do, and left us no choice but to withdraw our monitors.

There -- under the PA, there was and there continues to be a broad-ranging program of security reform and training that the United States is involved in and the Egyptians and others are involved in, and I think what this incident shows is that there clearly is a need for that. I don't know if I would jump to the conclusion that, you know, the whole system should be indicted completely. I think that's maybe a bridge too far. But clearly in this instance at this location, they didn't live up to the job.

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**Q** Well, but the Palestinians have said that they're not -- like, throughout this whole process and that you've been warning them, they've said, they've been saying to you that we don't have the capability to do that. And since you've been working --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, they hadn't been saying that on this case.

That was not what they've been saying on this case.

**Q** That's not what they've been saying.

**MR. ERELI:** No.

**Q** Well, that's what they're saying today --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think this is --

**Q** -- that we didn't have the capability to secure the prison.

**MR. ERELI:** Well, in the -- that was --

**Q** Did they ever ask -- at any point in time, when you said to them, "Listen, you know, these security situations for our monitors are not good; you need to secure the prison," did they ever come to you and say, "Well, we'd like to, but we really don't have the capability. We could use extra help."

**MR. ERELI:** That -- look, I don't have all the back-and-forth over --

**Q** Well, what was your excuse?

**MR. ERELI:** Excuse me. I don't have all the back-and-forth over two years. But **it doesn't take two years to do what you signed up to do.**

And the reason we are in the situation today is not because the Palestinians needed help and didn't get it. **The reason we're in the situation we are in today is because the Palestinians didn't take action that they undertook to take. And it was only because of the Palestinian failure to do what was necessary that we were, frankly, forced to take the actions we took, reluctantly. I think that it's a little too late now to go -- to do the Monday morning quarterbacking and say, "Oh, if we'd only had this and if we'd only had that." The fact of the matter is, we've been at them -- we've been with them -- we've been engaging with them on this since 2000 -- since the beginning of 2005.**

**Q** And they keep saying –

**MR. ERELI:** So it's hard to understand, after the fact, why, if you need this, or why, if you were lacking in this area, you would have just let it go and not done anything about it. The fact of the matter is, we were clear about what needed to be done. We worked with them to do it. **They continued to fail to meet the bar. And so we frankly had no other choice.**

### **On American hostages:**

**Q** Is there any American hostage in the Palestinian territories today?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I was -- I'd seen reports that somebody had been taken hostage, but I think we've looked into them and all Americans are safe and accounted for, that we've been able to determine.

### **On General Dayton:**

**Q** When is General Dayton returning to the -- to the Palestinian territory?

**MR. ERELI:** I don't -- I don't know what General Dayton's plans are, frankly.

**Q** Can you check on that?

**MR. ERELI:** Let me check.

Yeah.

**Q** Isn't this the responsibility of General Dayton to coordinate such --

**MR. ERELI:** No. It's really the responsibility of the Palestinians here. General Dayton has the broad mission of working with the Palestinian Authority to effect security reform, to improve capability and to improve training.

Now, clearly, as I said, in this instance they fell down on the job. But this particular case was -- I don't -- I'm not aware -- was what General Dayton was focusing on, because he didn't really need to focus on it. This is a discreet -- a discreet facility with specific obligations that don't relate to broad systemic reform and training. I mean, look, it was clear what the problem was, it was clear what needed to be done, and it was clear that it wasn't being done. And that was something that we raised through the consulate with the Palestinians and was really not -- I mean, General Dayton's focus was elsewhere, as it should have been, and as is within his mandate.

### **On Secretary Rice's contacts with FM Livni and President Abbas:**

**Q** Can you just give us an update on the secretary's phone calls on this matter?

**MR. ERELI:** The secretary has talked to Israeli Foreign Minister Livni. I think she tried to reach -- she's trying to reach President Abbas. They haven't been able to get together. We've been working at senior levels through our consulate and with our assistant secretary and deputy national security adviser on both sides.

**Q** And she talked to -- (off mike).

**MR. ERELI:** I'll have to check.

**Q** (Off mike.)

**MR. ERELI:** Okay.

### **On the U.S. position on parties joining a Hamas-led government:**

**Q** So -- yes, this is still the Palestinian territory, slightly different topic. Yesterday it was made clear from the podium that the position of the United States is, it will not have any contacts with any member of a Hamas-led government. Just going beyond that, what message are you delivering to any parties that are considering joining a Hamas-led government? Are you going to lay out or have you already laid out the consequences for a party if it did so?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think this issue was dealt with pretty extensively yesterday.

**Q** Not that one. In fact, we were told on that issue, you know, "I haven't got anything for you, might back to you."

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah. On the issue of the future government of the Palestinian Authority, that's something the Palestinians are going to have to work out themselves. I think we've made it clear what our position is, that we're not going to deal with a foreign terrorist organization; we're not going to meet with members of Hamas, we're not going to give assistance that can go to Hamas; and that we are conducting a comprehensive review of our assistance programs and what kind of assistance we could continue that would meet both the criteria of not supporting a foreign terrorist organization and the criteria of wanting to help the Palestinian people in meeting their humanitarian needs; and that we'll develop guidance on those points and apply it against a future Palestinian government, which has not yet been formed.

So let's just -- you know, we're working it now. A lot of the answers to your questions will depend on who comes to power in a Palestinian government.

**Q** But you (haven't ?) just said that the U.S. will not have contact with a member of a Hamas-dominated government.

**MR. ERELI:** Let's see what the government is. I'm not -- I'm going to say what we've said before, which is we will not have contact with Hamas or provide assistance to a foreign terrorist organization.

**Q** So you're not delivering any message to the parties other than Hamas about what the consequences for them would be if they were to join a Hamas-led government.

**MR. ERELI:** It's up to them to decide what government they want.

**Q** Yeah. And so you're not delivering any message.

**MR. ERELI:** And we will -- well, the message, I think, is clear. The government of -- it's up to the Palestinian people to decide and the elected representatives of the Palestinian people to decide who they want to be members of their government. The position of the United States is, our relations with that government will be determined by three things: our law, our policy, and the policies of the government of the Palestinian Authority.

So if you're looking at the government of the Palestinian Authority and you've got members of Hamas, by law and by policy we're not going to deal with them and we're not going to give money to -- in ways that could benefit Hamas.

Third, their policies are going to make a difference. I mean, let's be clear. The guidelines on this were laid out pretty well by President Abbas in his speech to the Palestinian Legislative Council on January 18th. He said, "Hey, I was elected on a platform of peace. I was elected to bring about a Palestinian state through negotiations with Israel. I expect the government of the Palestinian Authority to support that program." And frankly, so do we.

We agree with President Abbas on that, and we will be looking at the Palestinian government that comes about through this formation process and judge it according to its policies and how it does that. I think that's the best way I can answer it.

**Q** Okay. So the way to conclude is Fatah so far doesn't yet know whether joining a Hamas-led government would mean the United States cuts off contact with it?

**MR. ERELI:** You know, that's again a hypothetical that I'm not going to engage in.

### **On U.S. confidence of success at the UN on Iran:**

**Q** On Iran, the secretary told reporters traveling with her that she's confident the U.S. will succeed at the U.N. I don't know how much detail she went into. But this runs up against accounts from the U.N. that Russia and China won't even go along with a statement by the president of the council. Is her confidence based on -- well, frankly, I'd like to know what her confidence is based on. Has she been in touch and hearing a different story from the Russians and the Chinese? I just can't square the two. I mean, we just --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think you can take what the secretary says to the bank. And she says that she's confident that we'll arrive at an appropriate vehicle to express the international community's concern.

**Q** Are you laying on?

**MR. ERELI:** Pardon?

**Q** Are you laying on?

**MR. ERELI:** I'll lay on on the secretary any day of the week.

**Q** No, laying on, you're going to be a blazing success at the U.N., when you can't even get a statement off the ground relating to sanctions?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think we are -- we are working it. There was a meeting today with the P-5 this morning. We'll be discussing elements of a presidential statement with all Security Council members in informal consultations today and tomorrow. And as I said, I can't say better than the secretary. She's confident that we'll find a way of expressing our concern. There's clearly concern. That's obvious. I think secretary -- Foreign Minister Lavrov's comments the other day underscored that pretty well. So we'll work it out.

**Q** But there will be an expression of that concern in one form or another emanating from the council.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

### **On circulation of a draft presidential statement:**

**Q** He's also confident. He also would put his money on the secretary. He said that he didn't know when a draft might be presented, might be ready, two days, four days, six days.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

**Q** The reports there think sometime this week. Have you got any -- got a handle on it?

**MR. ERELI:** I second Mr. Casey's caution. I'm very, very reluctant to get into predictions of timing when dealing with the Security Council.

**Q** Nor did he know, he said, who might present the draft.

**MR. ERELI:** I believe that the elements have been circulated by the U.K. and French delegations.

### **On another round of Russian – Iranian talks:**

**Q** Just mopping up a little bit from yesterday, from things that were left hanging. Have you received any word now on whether there'll be another round of Russian-Iranian talks?

**MR. ERELI:** No.

**Q** You haven't received any word.

**MR. ERELI:** No.

### **On Israel seeking U.S. permission to fly over Iraqi air space for an attack on Iran:**

**Q** Okay. And while we're in the -- it's been a "wow" day anyhow, might as well ask you about a Jerusalem Post story that the U.S. has been -- Israel has been talking to the U.S. about an attack on Iran nuclear facilities, needing U.S. permission to fly over Iraq. Anything?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I think that's --

**Q** You want to substantiate that?

**MR. ERELI:** That's -- I'm not going to engage in --

**Q** (Off mike) -- the present story out of --

**MR. ERELI:** -- speculation.

Let's go to our Asian friend.

**Q** (Inaudible.)

**Q** Speculation, you say?

**MR. ERELI:** I'm sorry. What?

**Q** It's speculation.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

## FULL TEXT

**MR. ERELI:** Hello, everybody. It's good to see you all again. Don't have any statements to begin with, so we can go straight to your questions.

**Q** On the prison raid, the Israeli prison raid, I can't grasp whether -- you know, we have some facts from the U.S. government, the State Department, but I can't grasp whether the U.S. has any qualms about the -- whether they approve of the raid, have no position. I don't understand what the U.S. position is, if there is any.

**MR. ERELI:** The U.S. position is that the foremost issue was the safety and security of the monitors who were at the prison. I'd refer you to a statement by British Foreign Secretary Straw which was presented to the House of Commons today, in which he laid out our joint concerns -- because as you know, it was a joint British-U.S. monitoring mission -- and the decisions and actions that were taken that led to the events of today.

You'll note in his statement that what we saw happen today in terms of withdrawing the mission really goes back to over two years ago, where we started -- where we began to raise with the Palestinian Authority our concerns that it was not doing enough to ensure the safety and security of the British and U.S. monitors who are in the prison pursuant to the Ramallah agreement of -- of 2002 to make sure that the prisoners -- six prisoners of concern at the prison were being held in secure -- in a secure way.

So for at least the past two years, we've been telling the Palestinians, "Look, you've got obligations to provide for the security of these monitors. There are threats to their safety; we need you to take certain actions." We continue to press that over -- at various points over the course of the last several years. And finally it got to the point last week where we sent a letter to the Palestinians saying, if you don't take really effective action, we're going to have to withdraw. And we took that step, I think reluctantly today but necessarily, since, frankly, they -- we had to do what was necessary to protect them.

In the wake of the actions following the withdrawal of the monitors, obviously we'll work closely with the Palestinians and the Israelis to ensure calm, to ensure restraint, and we'll continue to be doing that over the course of the next days as events develop.

But I think the focus on this issue needs to be first and foremost on why we did what we did, which was to protect our people and because the Palestinians weren't able to do that.

**Q** But the Israelis walked off with the -- I mean, the Israelis have taken over the prisoners. I mean, is that what you want to happen? Weren't they under Palestinian --

**MR. ERELI:** I think what we -- what we wanted to happen was to be able to fulfill our mission, which was to implement the -- to do what we were supposed to do under the terms of the Ramallah accord. We weren't able to do that. That's unfortunate. It's unfortunate for what it says about the ability to follow through on that agreement, and it's unfortunate for what it says about security of prisoners or the security provided for prisoners under Palestinian -- under Palestinian control. These individuals are now, apparently, if the news reports are correct, under Israeli control. We will continue to be in touch with both sides on the matter.

It's certainly not an outcome -- or the events are certainly not what we would have wished for. We would have wished for the Ramallah agreement to continue and the Israelis and Palestinians to have been able to, pursuant to the Ramallah agreement, to work out modalities for dealing with these guys. They weren't able to do that.

**Q** When was the last time American monitors were in the prison?

**MR. ERELI:** I'd have to check for you.

**Q** Because I think what you said was that there was a decision to withdraw today. So I'm just wondering --

**MR. ERELI:** To withdraw the monitors and to not go back.

**Q** Right. So there were American monitors in there today.

**MR. ERELI:** I don't know if they were in there today. My understanding is actually today there were British monitors. There are -- just to get you the numbers -- I think there are something like eight American monitors and 12 British monitors. I'll have to check and just make sure on that. But on any given day, only a certain number of them are actually at the facility, so today those monitors that were at the facility were withdrawn and there won't be others returning to do their shifts in subsequent days.

**Q** So --

**MR. ERELI:** And when was the last time there were American monitors there? I'll check and see if I can get that for you.

**Q** I mean, one reason for asking is -- you've probably seen the accusations, even from someone like the head of the Arab League, the suspicion there was some kind of collusion, that somehow the American-British mission knew that the Israelis planned this operation, so the timing was done deliberately; you got people out knowing the Israelis were going in. Is there any truth to that?

**MR. ERELI:** Such accusations are baseless and ignore the facts, quite frankly. And that's, again, why I think it's important to look at the statement for the record that the British secretary of state for foreign -- the Foreign and Commonwealth Office put before the House of Parliament, because that outlines for you in very detailed, chronological way what led up to today's action. And it points out to you that this was -- that this has been an issue that we've been engaged with the Palestinians on quite seriously for some time.

And so what happened today was the result of a -- frankly, a consistent and painstaking effort on our part and on the part of the British to work with the Palestinians to get them to hold up their end of the bargain. And it was only -- it was only after lots of trying and numerous representations at very senior levels that we came to the conclusion that they were going to be unable to fulfill those obligations and that therefore we had no choice but to take these steps -- again, to protect the safety of our personnel.

**Q** So when did the United States know Israel was going to do this operation?

**MR. ERELI:** The Israeli -- the United States -- what the United States knew was what it was going to do. And pursuant to the Ramallah agreement, we told the Palestinians, we told both sides what we were going to do. It was in the March 8th letter. And we took actions that we were responsible for. I can't speak for other countries taking the actions that they took.

**Q** There's a small problem when you're dealing with the PR element of this in the Middle East. You're saying the accusations are baseless and ignore the facts.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**Q** The problem is there's not necessarily enough facts out there for the suspicion to be allayed. We're asking --

**MR. ERELI:** Why?

**Q** Well, because you can't answer that question. You're not saying when the United States knew there was an Israeli operation going on.

**MR. ERELI:** The United States didn't know.

**Q** Ah. Well -- so you didn't know until the bulldozers turned up.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah. This was -- again, what the United States knew was the Palestinians aren't living up to their obligations, our people are in danger, we've got to pull them out.

**Q** Okay. And when did you tell the Israelis that you were --

**MR. ERELI:** We told both -- pursuant to the Ramallah -- and again I'd refer you back to Foreign Secretary Straw's statement on all this -- we told the Israelis and the -- we told the Palestinians on March 8th that if they didn't

take action, we'd have to withdraw our monitors. We told -- again, pursuant to the Ramallah agreement -- the Israelis about the substance of that letter.

**Q** Yeah.

**MR. ERELI:** And then we didn't tell that we were withdrawing them until they'd actually been withdrawn, which was today.

**Q** Okay.

**Q** You told them today or they were withdrawn today?

**MR. ERELI:** We told them after they'd been withdrawn.

**Q** Today.

**Q** Everything happened -- you told them today after they'd been withdrawn. You told them after they were withdrawn today.

**MR. ERELI:** We told them after they were withdrawn today.

**Q** Adam?

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah?

**Q** Over the weekend, Deputy Prime Minister Peres met with President Abbas in Jordan, and also the British Council offices in Gaza were just torched and burnt after the siege concluded.

**MR. ERELI:** Right.

**Q** Obviously, did we tell both Prime Minister Abbas that this would go forth today or did the Israelis --

**MR. ERELI:** No. No. We said we would -- obviously, if they couldn't -- if they couldn't do what needed to be done, we would have to terminate the mission, but for operational reasons, we didn't say when that would be.

**Q** Can you speak a little bit to the actual -- to put this in context with the timing of what's going on in the region? I mean, the Palestinians are saying that, you know, you chose this particular moment in time to do it right in advance of Israeli elections to kind of give Olmert a boost. At the same time, you have a Hamas-led government coming in which has already said that it didn't recognize the Ramallah agreement. And obviously, there would be some issues about implementing it. So what is it about this particular moment in time?

Was there an extra specific and credible threat to the monitors right now that caused you to take this step today? I mean, it's a very delicate moment.

**MR. ERELI:** Let me see if I can give you a little bit more background to help you put this into context and see it in a broader perspective. As I said, the agreement governing this was from 2002. (Pausing to consult briefing materials.) Just making sure about that date.

**Q** (Off mike.)

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

In 2005 we had independent reports that noted that the security for the monitors was not adequate, and throughout the course of 2005, it was the assessment of both the United States and Britain that the threat to the monitors was increasing. In late December 2005, we told the Palestinian Authority that unless the safety of the monitors could be improved, we would undertake a withdrawal of the mission. So this has been going on for a couple of years now.

We again raised it in late January 2006. Earlier this month, as I said, we delivered a joint letter to President Abbas on March 8th which noted that if they couldn't come into full compliance and make substantive improvements to the security of the monitors or come to a new agreement with Israel regarding the incarceration of the prisoners, we would have to terminate our involvement with the mission.

So this is the result of a growing and escalating threat to the monitors and a coming to the decision that we had arrived at the point where we could not in good faith and responsibly continue to keep them there if the Palestinian Authority wasn't going to take the steps that, A, they knew they needed to take, and B, the steps that we'd outlined for them.

**Q** No, I know you obviously gave them repeated warnings that you were going to do this, but the criticism right now is that it was done in a way that didn't give the Palestinians enough time as this was developing to secure the prisons, leaving -- to secure the prison, leaving the ground completely open for the Israelis to move in.

**MR. ERELI:** Well, look, they've had over two years to take actions to secure the facility. They haven't done it. Waiting another couple of days probably wouldn't have changed that.

**Q** Well, if it wouldn't change it on that sense, why wouldn't you give them a couple of days notice in any event?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, because as I said, you got to remember there were security concerns here. Our first concern was the safety of our people. They had -- the Palestinians had proved incapable of providing for their safety, so we needed to take the steps we thought sufficient to do that. That meant telling them, hey, unless you can't take effective action, we're going to withdraw them, and we're going to withdraw them at a time that we decide, without signaling it, for operational security reasons.

Obviously, the whole point of this is to protect your people, so you're going to want to be careful about -- tactically how you do that.

**Q** Just one more on this. Were there any specific credible threats to the monitors that --

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**Q** -- in this particular moment in time that you had to take them out before some kind of attack against them?

**MR. ERELI:** I would say the security environment was deteriorating.

**Q** Do you attribute this to the incoming Hamas-led government?

**MR. ERELI:** Certainly statements about releasing the prisoners or failure to take certain actions, both in the past and now, I think intensified our concern.

**Q** Can you be more specific now that operational security is not an issue about the threats, how often overlooked at a time, or more specific about what --

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah, I just don't have that information.

**Q** Okay. One other thing. Can you tell us what role President Abbas played in this or didn't play in this in terms of his assurance or his statement that he didn't see any reason not to let these prisoners go?

**MR. ERELI:** We delivered the letter to President Abbas on March 8th. We took the action today because the concerns that we communicated in our letter weren't acted upon. That's the best way I can answer it.

**Q** Adam, can you just sort of describe for us the type of security problem that there is or there was at --

**MR. ERELI:** Well --

**Q** -- I really have no idea whether it was that there is, I don't know, firing from outside into the prisons, or is it that prisoners make threats, the prisoners have knives? I have no idea what's on the ground, and what's -- (inaudible).

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah, it's important to note that the monitors are unarmed, so they are in the best of situations vulnerable.

Second of all, they had been continuing information that they are targets of hostile parties.

**Q** Inside the prisons?

**MR. ERELI:** I think by being in the prisons they are vulnerable. I don't know the specific details of those reports, so I really couldn't tell you -- and that we look to the Palestinian Authorities to provide security for them while they're in the prison or while they're doing their job, whether it be inside the prison, frankly, or outside the prison. It's not just inside the prison. It's wherever they happen to be doing their job.

So if you've got unarmed personnel tasked with monitoring an agreement -- and under that agreement the Palestinian Authority has the obligation to protect these guys, and that they're getting threats and that they're vulnerable and that those tasked with protecting them are protecting them -- then you got to do what's necessary. And that's why we withdrew them.

Yes, sir?

**Q** Well, what's your reaction on the Israeli operation on Jericho prison?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, as I've said, we think it's important that all sides exercise restraint and calm. We made that clear to the Israelis.

We made it clear to the Palestinians. It seems from the press reports that the Israelis have taken certain prisoners. We will continue to consult with both sides on next steps.

Mm-hmm?

**Q** Does that mean that every time Israel sees that there's insecurity in the Palestinian territory, that it can go and take whomever it wants?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I think what it means is that both sides have an obligation to provide for the security and protection of both monitors to an agreement and wanted prisoners in their custody, and that it creates a vacuum of sorts when security services are unable to fulfill the obligations and tasks that they have before them.

**Q** Isn't this the same security system -- of course, it's getting to be academic because you have a new government coming in -- but isn't this the same Palestinian security system the U.S. has worked closely with and happily with and apparently -- I don't remember you -- I don't remember the U.S. government badmouthing the Palestinian security system, saying of course they need to be trained, they need to improve.

So, what, are there two security systems? There's one that does a slipshod job in this prison, and another that the Israelis should depend on to protect their lives? Is that the point?

**MR. ERELI:** I think the point here is that those responsible for living up to their obligations under the Ramallah Agreement in this prison didn't fulfill their obligations, didn't do what they were supposed to do, and left us no choice but to withdraw our monitors.

There -- under the PA, there was and there continues to be a broad-ranging program of security reform and training that the United States is involved in and the Egyptians and others are involved in, and I think what this incident shows is that there clearly is a need for that. I don't know if I would jump to the conclusion that, you know, the whole system should be indicted completely. I think that's maybe a bridge too far. But clearly in this instance at this location, they didn't live up to the job.

Yeah?

**Q** Do you know if this Israeli raid this morning started before or after you called them to let them know that the monitors --

**MR. ERELI:** Ah-h-h -- I couldn't tell you.

**Q** So you -- so, I mean --

**MR. ERELI:** I mean, I don't -- I just don't have the -- I don't have the chronology to be exactly sure.

**Q** But you can say for sure that the U.S. did not know about the Israeli raid before it happened.

**MR. ERELI:** You know, what I can say is that the United States took the action that it took to protect its people and worked with -- and informed, along with the British, as the foreign secretary outlined, the steps that we were going to take pursuant to the terms of the Ramallah agreement, and that this was a -- this was a question of being very clear and systematic.

**Q** So, just to -- just to confirm -- I'm sorry, so just to confirm, you did not coordinate this with the Israelis, that as soon as the monitors would be gone, the Israelis would be given enough time to secure the prison. Is that what you're saying?

**MR. ERELI:** What I'm saying is that we took the steps we needed to, we let people know what we were doing. There were certain things that we didn't say for operational reasons, and that -- and that we took the steps we needed to to protect our people. I can't speak for steps that other -- that others took. But the notion that somehow there was -- you know, it was a joint operation are patently wrong if you look at the facts.

**Q** Has the plan been since March 8th to remove the monitors today?

**MR. ERELI:** I couldn't tell you that.

**Q** Adam?

**Q** Yeah.

**Q** When is General Dayton returning to the -- to the Palestinian territory?

**MR. ERELI:** I don't -- I don't know what General Dayton's plans are, frankly.

**Q** Can you check on that?

**MR. ERELI:** Let me check.

Yeah.

**Q** Isn't this the responsibility of General Dayton to coordinate such --

**MR. ERELI:** No. It's really the responsibility of the Palestinians here. General Dayton has the broad mission of working with the Palestinian Authority to effect security reform, to improve capability and to improve training.

Now, clearly, as I said, in this instance they fell down on the job. But this particular case was -- I don't -- I'm not aware -- was what General Dayton was focusing on, because he didn't really need to focus on it. This is a discreet -- a discreet facility with specific obligations that don't relate to broad systemic reform and training. I mean, look, it was clear what the problem was, it was clear what needed to be done, and it was clear that it wasn't being done. And that was something that we raised through the consulate with the Palestinians and was really not -- I mean, General Dayton's focus was elsewhere, as it should have been, and as is within his mandate.

Yeah.

**Q** Did you find out why the -- why President Abbas failed to do this?

**MR. ERELI:** You know, I can't speak for the Palestinians. I can just say it was based on our assessment the threat was too great to ignore.

**Q** Well, but the Palestinians have said that they're not -- like, throughout this whole process and that you've been warning them, they've said, they've been saying to you that we don't have the capability to do that. And since you've been working --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, they hadn't been saying that on this case.

That was not what they've been saying on this case.

**Q** That's not what they've been saying.

**MR. ERELI:** No.

**Q** Well, that's what they're saying today --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think this is --

**Q** -- that we didn't have the capability to secure the prison.

**MR. ERELI:** Well, in the -- that was --

**Q** Did they ever ask -- at any point in time, when you said to them, "Listen, you know, these security situations for our monitors are not good; you need to secure the prison," did they ever come to you and say, "Well, we'd like to, but we really don't have the capability. We could use extra help."

**MR. ERELI:** That -- look, I don't have all the back-and-forth over --

**Q** Well, what was your excuse?

**MR. ERELI:** Excuse me. I don't have all the back-and-forth over two years. But it doesn't take two years to do what you signed up to do.

And the reason we are in the situation today is not because the Palestinians needed help and didn't get it. The reason we're in the situation we are in today is because the Palestinians didn't take action that they undertook to take. And it was only because of the Palestinian failure to do what was necessary that we were, frankly, forced to take the actions we took, reluctantly. I think that it's a little too late now to go -- to do the Monday morning quarterbacking and say, "Oh, if we'd only had this and if we'd only had that." The fact of the matter is, we've been at them -- we've been with them -- we've been engaging with them on this since 2000 -- since the beginning of 2005.

**Q** And they keep saying --

**MR. ERELI:** So it's hard to understand, after the fact, why, if you need this, or why, if you were lacking in this area, you would have just let it go and not done anything about it. The fact of the matter is, we were clear about what needed to be done. We worked with them to do it. They continued to fail to meet the bar. And so we frankly had no other choice.

**Q** But you're saying, then, that you kept the monitors in danger for the past year?

**MR. ERELI:** I said we were concerned about their security. We --

**Q** But you didn't remove them until now.

**MR. ERELI:** We wanted to do everything we could to make this deal work.

Mm-hmm?

**Q** Is there any American hostage in the Palestinian territories today?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I was -- I'd seen reports that somebody had been taken hostage, but I think we've looked into them and all Americans are safe and accounted for, that we've been able to determine.

Yes?

**Q** Can you just give us an update on the secretary's phone calls on this matter?

**MR. ERELI:** The secretary has talked to Israeli Foreign Minister Livni. I think she tried to reach -- she's trying to reach President Abbas. They haven't been able to get together. We've been working at senior levels through our consulate and with our assistant secretary and deputy national security adviser on both sides.

**Q** And she talked to -- (off mike).

**MR. ERELI:** I'll have to check.

**Q** (Off mike.)

**MR. ERELI:** Okay.

**Q** So -- yes, this is still the Palestinian territory, slightly different topic. Yesterday it was made clear from the podium that the position of the United States is, it will not have any contacts with any member of a Hamas-led government. Just going beyond that, what message are you delivering to any parties that are considering joining a Hamas-led government? Are you going to lay out or have you already laid out the consequences for a party if it did so?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think this issue was dealt with pretty extensively yesterday.

**Q** Not that one. In fact, we were told on that issue, you know, "I haven't got anything for you, might back to you."

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah. On the issue of the future government of the Palestinian Authority, that's something the Palestinians are going to have to work out themselves. I think we've made it clear what our position is, that we're not going to deal with a foreign terrorist organization; we're not going to meet with members of Hamas, we're not going to give assistance that can go to Hamas; and that we are conducting a comprehensive review of our assistance programs and what kind of assistance we could continue that would meet both the criteria of not supporting a foreign terrorist organization and the criteria of wanting to help the Palestinian people in meeting their humanitarian needs; and that we'll develop guidance on those points and apply it against a future Palestinian government, which has not yet been formed.

So let's just -- you know, we're working it now. A lot of the answers to your questions will depend on who comes to power in a Palestinian government.

**Q** But you (haven't ?) just said that the U.S. will not have contact with a member of a Hamas-dominated government.

**MR. ERELI:** Let's see what the government is. I'm not -- I'm going to say what we've said before, which is we will not have contact with Hamas or provide assistance to a foreign terrorist organization.

**Q** So you're not delivering any message to the parties other than Hamas about what the consequences for them would be if they were to join a Hamas-led government.

**MR. ERELI:** It's up to them to decide what government they want.

**Q** Yeah. And so you're not delivering any message.

**MR. ERELI:** And we will -- well, the message, I think, is clear. The government of -- it's up to the Palestinian people to decide and the elected representatives of the Palestinian people to decide who they want to be members of their government. The position of the United States is, our relations with that government will be determined by three things: our law, our policy, and the policies of the government of the Palestinian Authority.

So if you're looking at the government of the Palestinian Authority and you've got members of Hamas, by law and by policy we're not going to deal with them and we're not going to give money to -- in ways that could benefit Hamas.

Third, their policies are going to make a difference. I mean, let's be clear. The guidelines on this were laid out pretty well by President Abbas in his speech to the Palestinian Legislative Council on January 18th. He said, "Hey, I was elected on a platform of peace. I was elected to bring about a Palestinian state through negotiations with Israel. I expect the government of the Palestinian Authority to support that program." And frankly, so do we.

We agree with President Abbas on that, and we will be looking at the Palestinian government that comes about through this formation process and judge it according to its policies and how it does that. I think that's the best way I can answer it.

**Q** Okay. So the way to conclude is Fatah so far doesn't yet know whether joining a Hamas-led government would mean the United States cuts off contact with it?

**MR. ERELI:** You know, that's again a hypothetical that I'm not going to engage in.

Yeah?

**Q** Adam, in a separate Middle East story, with this Dubai shipping port controversy, there's an Associated Press story this morning that the shipping company being partly owned by the government or fully owned by the government of Dubai won't relinquish the port sale in Miami.

And also, do you have any details of a Saudi-led meeting which is -- would assume counter to U.S. policy -- is meeting which, in effect, is possibly a proxy for the Iranian --

**MR. ERELI:** No, Joel, I don't have anything on any of that. I just -- you lost me.

**Q** (Off mike.)

**MR. ERELI:** No -- let me go to --

**Q** I think it's time for our Cyprus question. (Laughter.)

**MR. ERELI:** I defer to you. It could --

**Q** Because if I start down the road of --

**MR. ERELI:** It may be Kosovo.

**Q** -- Iran nuclear, we'll never go home.

**Q** Iran, exactly.

**Q** Yeah. I defer --

**MR. ERELI:** Yes, sir, for the Cyprus question.

**Q** No, an Armenian --

**MR. ERELI:** Armenian?

**Q** Okay.

Mr. Erel, on the DOS website regarding yesterday's taken question about U.S. Ambassador to Armenia John Evans' status, you have put, quote, "genocide," unquote, in quotes. I'm wondering why, if you can say so.

**MR. ERELI:** I think because it was referring to remarks that somebody made.

**Q** Do you know whether John Evans recalled -- nor whether he is being recalled due of (sic) his speech on Armenian genocide?

**MR. ERELI:** I think the question was answered in the -- or that was answered in the question posted. Wasn't it?

**Q** Had DOS employees been advised not to use the term, quote, "genocide," unquote, when discussing the extermination of 1-1/2 million --

**MR. ERELI:** No, I think our guidance on that is the same, and we posted that guidance last week.

**Q** Is it not true that Mr. Evans' 35-year diplomatic career will be shortened because of the remarks he made, saying that Armenians were the victims of genocide, and that the U.S. government -- or the State Department doesn't believe what happened was genocide, doesn't fit the definition of genocide?

**MR. ERELI:** I really don't have anything more to add to what we've posted on the --

**Q** Well, what you posted yesterday, you know -- it was a bit of a dodge.

**MR. ERELI:** We -- no. I think it's the situation as it is.

**Q** I mean, you know, he serves at the discretion of the president.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

**Q** No kidding. I thought he serves at the president of -- you know, the president of the American League.

There is very strong reason to believe in Congress and elsewhere that this man is going to lose out, he's going to be brought home early because of what he said. You can't do that, but --

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah. Look, I don't -- I -- I just don't -- I -- I'd like to be able to let -- I mean, I think -- Ambassador Evans is our ambassador --

**Q** Right.

**MR. ERELI:** -- and he continues to -- he continues to exercise that honor and privilege. And he takes it seriously, we take it seriously. I really don't have anything more to add to that.

Yeah.

**Q** There's a deal between Russia and India over Russia supplying some nuclear fuel, some uranium, for civilian reactors. Because Russia's part of the NSG and so are you, I just wonder is this something that is fine, they can just go ahead with it, do they actually need U.S. approval as part of the NSG process, and what do you think of the deal?

**MR. ERELI:** Well -- and I'm not going to -- I'm not in a position to go into the deal its -- I don't have the details. I haven't seen any sort of official statements of the deal. I think what I would simply say is a couple points.

One is that President Bush has been very outspoken and I think visionary in trying to develop a framework within the international system to ensure the safe and secure supply of nuclear fuel through the Nuclear Suppliers Group. He did it in his NDU speech, he's done it in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly. And specifically, with regard to India, as you know, since you've all been following this very closely, we have a very, I think, forward-looking and -- really, history-making initiative, joint initiative to address the -- India's nuclear program, to separate the military from the civilian, and to bring India into compliance with NPT obligations and work, based on that, with the Nuclear Suppliers Group to give it access to the kind of fuel supplies that it's looking for.

So having said all that and within that broad context, we recognize that they might have need -- that they have need for fuel, and we think that deals to supply that fuel should move forward on the basis of the joint initiative, on the basis of steps that India will take but has not yet taken.

**Q** On Iran, the secretary told reporters traveling with her that she's confident the U.S. will succeed at the U.N. I don't know how much detail she went into. But this runs up against accounts from the U.N. that Russia and China won't even go along with a statement by the president of the council. Is her confidence based on -- well, frankly, I'd like to know what her confidence is based on. Has she been in touch and hearing a different story from the Russians and the Chinese? I just can't square the two. I mean, we just --

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think you can take what the secretary says to the bank. And she says that she's confident that we'll arrive at an appropriate vehicle to express the international community's concern.

**Q** Are you laying on?

**MR. ERELI:** Pardon?

**Q** Are you laying on?

**MR. ERELI:** I'll lay on on the secretary any day of the week.

**Q** No, laying on, you're going to be a blazing success at the U.N., when you can't even get a statement off the ground relating to sanctions?

**MR. ERELI:** Well, I think we are -- we are working it. There was a meeting today with the P-5 this morning. We'll be discussing elements of a presidential statement with all Security Council members in informal consultations today and tomorrow. And as I said, I can't say better than the secretary. She's confident that we'll find a way of expressing our concern. There's clearly concern. That's obvious. I think secretary -- Foreign Minister Lavrov's comments the other day underscored that pretty well. So we'll work it out.

**Q** But there will be an expression of that concern in one form or another emanating from the council.

**MR. ERELI:** Yes.

**Q** All right.

Yesterday Mr. Casey didn't know if -

**MR. ERELI:** Mr. who?

**Q** Thomas Casey. (Laughter.)

**MR. ERELI:** (Laughs.)

**Q** He's also confident. He also would put his money on the secretary. He said that he didn't know when a draft might be presented, might be ready, two days, four days, six days.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

**Q** The reports there think sometime this week. Have you got any -- got a handle on it?

**MR. ERELI:** I second Mr. Casey's caution. I'm very, very reluctant to get into predictions of timing when dealing with the Security Council.

**Q** Nor did he know, he said, who might present the draft.

**MR. ERELI:** I believe that the elements have been circulated by the U.K. and French delegations.

Yes?

**Q** In Iraq, do you have anything on reports that al Qaeda was planning to infiltrate an Iraqi army unit that guards the Green Zone?

**MR. ERELI:** I've seen those press reports. I don't really have any information to substantiate them. I think that clearly Zarqawi and al Qaeda in Iraq are active, that we're always on the alert for operations that they may be undertaking. But if you ask me about specific actions or specific threats against -- for specific targets, I just don't have that degree of feasibility.

**Q** Just mopping up a little bit from yesterday, from things that were left hanging. Have you received any word now on whether there'll be another round of Russian-Iranian talks?

**MR. ERELI:** No.

**Q** You haven't received any word.

**MR. ERELI:** No.

**Q** Okay. And while we're in the -- it's been a "wow" day anyhow, might as well ask you about a Jerusalem Post story that the U.S. has been -- Israel has been talking to the U.S. about an attack on Iran nuclear facilities, needing U.S. permission to fly over Iraq. Anything?

**MR. ERELI:** No, I think that's --

**Q** You want to substantiate that?

**MR. ERELI:** That's -- I'm not going to engage in --

**Q** (Off mike) -- the present story out of --

**MR. ERELI:** -- speculation.

Let's go to our Asian friend.

**Q** (Inaudible.)

**Q** Speculation, you say?

**MR. ERELI:** I'm sorry. What?

**Q** It's speculation.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah.

**Q** Taiwan's President Chen in an interview with The Washington Post suggested that feasibility to actually change the constitution to declare independence is quite limited. Therefore, it is free to pursue the policies for independence, and the U.S. shouldn't be upset by his moves because the status quo is unlikely to be changed anytime soon. Can you clarify the U.S. stance on his assertions?

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah, I'll clarify it. The United States has a one-China policy based on the Taiwan Relations Act and the three joint communiques. We do not support Taiwan independence, and we oppose unilateral changes to the status quo by either side. You know, there's -- I'm reluctant to get into a daily back and forth with Taiwanese officials about things that they said the day before. I think our position is clear. The leadership of Taiwan has made public commitments with regard to its cross-straits policy. Those commitments are well-known. We appreciate them, and we take them seriously. And we expect that they'll be sustained.

**Q** But this daily power play, does it mean that Taiwanese officials are backing away from their commitment, in the U.S. view?

**MR. ERELI:** They've made those commitments. We're going to -- we hold them to them.

**Q** Sure. But are they inching backwards?

**Q** Can I -- I have a follow-up.

**MR. ERELI:** I think that -- our view is that they've been clear on what their commitments are. They need to stick to them.

**Q** So he's committed to the debate on formal independence.

**MR. ERELI:** He's committed in his -- the commitments I'm talking about are the commitments in the inaugural pledges -- the four inaugural -- the four noes, and the commitment made on the National Unification Council earlier. And I'd refer you on all of that to, again, our statement on March 2nd.

**Q** Well, but on the National Unification Council, there are reports that the language that he used was very carefully calibrated between the U.S. and Taiwan so as not to upset the Chinese and that he really feels as if the council ceases to exist; there is no council anymore, but you got these reports anyway -- that you got him to, you know, kind of finesse the language, but that -- his opinion is still that he wants to do away with the council.

**MR. ERELI:** Right. And I'll tell you what our opinion is. Our opinion is that neither side should take unilateral steps, that we have commitments from Taiwan, and that those commitments should be upheld.

**Q** Are you denying that you worked with the language with the Taiwanese so as not to -- (inaudible word) -- the situation any further?

**MR. ERELI:** I think we've made clear to the Taiwanese regularly what our views on these issues are.

Yeah?

**Q** I think if you compare it to his February 27th commitment of assurances to his 2000-2004 pledges, you'll find that those are different.

**MR. ERELI:** Yeah, I'm just not going to parse it. I'll tell you what our position is. I'll tell you what we expect, what we're looking for, what we've heard from the Taiwanese and leave it at that.

Yes, sir?

**Q** A quick follow-up here. Adam, you keep referring to your March 2nd statement. In that statement, you were asking for Taiwan's reaffirmation, that the National Unification Council is not abolished. Have you heard any -- well, you were asking for public reaffirmation.

Have you heard that? We haven't.

**MR. ERELI:** We continue to stand by the March 2nd statement.

**Q** But you haven't got what you want.

**MR. ERELI:** Continue to stand by the March 2nd statement.

Yeah?

**Q** On Slobodan Milosevic, anything to say on the remarks by his son -- the son of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic that his father has been poisoned, poisoned by the tribunal authorities under the office of Madame Carla Del Ponte, and it was not a death by -- (inaudible) -- nature, as it was reported?

**MR. ERELI:** I believe the tribunal has conducted or medical officials have conducted an autopsy and released their findings. Those are certainly credible, and I would -- I think that we believe them to be the facts and therefore dismiss such comments as not right.

**Q** One on Cyprus. One on Cyprus. Senator Olympia Snowe in a statement has applauded the steps that the government of Cyprus or President Papadopoulos have taken to encourage a just and lasting solution to the Cyprus division, noted before the Senate March 9th that Papadopoulos and Annan issued a joint statement agreeing on the resumption of bicomunal discussion on the technical aspects necessary to prepare the ground for full negotiation. Do you agree to the effect that such an (approach ?) is indeed helping your efforts, too, for the unification of the island?

**MR. ERELI:** I'm not aware of those -- you said -- that specific development. I think that we certainly welcome steps by both sides that would lead to more intensified negotiations and discussions on the basis of the Annan plan.

Yes?

**Q** Getting back on Russia, in the area of fuel, informing the U.S. that it plans to -- (inaudible) -- to India, can you confirm that they have informed you that they --

**MR. ERELI:** No. No, I'm not aware of that.

Yes, ma'am?

**Q** Okay. Change of subject. On South America, General Craddock, the head of Southern Command, this morning said he had to stop training programs in 11 of his countries because of the American Services Members Protection Act.

**MR. ERELI:** Mm-hmm.

**Q** Is the State Department working with Congress at all to try and re-write that legislation --

**MR. ERELI:** You know, I don't know -- I think the secretary's addressed that. She addressed it in her trip. I don't have anything more to add to it.

**Q** Okay.

**MR. ERELI:** Joel?

**Q** There is a vigil being held up at the United Nations by Africa Action. It's an NGO. And they are dismayed. They say that the people of Darfur are in a catch-22 as a casualty, and that the very government that's perpetrated this so-called genocide in western Sudan and Darfur are the same group that has the veto power and in this transition from the Africa Union to U.N. troops it leaves this wide open in weeks or days or months where it affects the people of Darfur. Do you have any comments regarding that?

**MR. ERELI:** I think you know how we feel about the issue, what we're doing about it. I mean, obviously, we share the concerns of the NGO community and the international community about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, particularly west Darfur. We think it's -- we think it's unacceptable and cries out for action. We have responded by being the largest aid donor to Darfur. I think to date we've delivered almost 900 million to Sudan and -- 900 million in relief and support for the crisis there and in the rest of Sudan. You know, there's the humanitarian aspect to it, but there's also the security aspect. They go hand in hand. We're working with the U.N., we're working with the AU, and we're working with the EU and NATO and others to address those conditions on the ground that create the kind of suffering you talked about.

Thanks.

END.