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Remarks by Ambassador John R. Bolton, U.S. Representative to the United Nations, on Burma, Sudan, Iran and other matters at the Security Council stakeout, September 15, 2006

Ambassador Bolton: The Security Council just took a very significant vote, with 10 votes in the affirmative, four against, one abstaining. The Council has decided to put Burma formally on the Council's agenda. This is a major step forward for President Bush's effort to bring to the attention of the international community the situation inside Burma, and its effects in its region and around the world -- what we see as a threat to international peace and security because of the flows of refugees, illicit narcotics, HIV/AIDS and the human rights situation inside Burma. Obviously, we had hoped that we could put the item on the agenda unanimously. But there was very strong opposition from China. And you can see the votes of the other countries as well.

The occasion for seeking this vote was we have also requested a formal briefing of the Council by Undersecretary General Gambari. This would be the third briefing by Undersecretary General Gambari or senior secretariat officials, and we will consider, in light of that briefing, what further steps we might take in the Council. But for those who are not familiar with the arcane practices of the Security Council, which I have endeavored to explain somewhat unsuccessfully, I suppose, this makes it plain, beyond dispute -- beyond dispute -- that Burma is now a formal item on the Council's agenda. What action the Council takes is a different story, but you can see the significance in the U.N. context by the fact we had to have a contested vote in an open session. The Council were very pleased with the result, and we intend to press ahead vigorously.

Reporter: Ambassador, now that you've got, on the agenda, you're going to get the briefing. You have a prepared draft resolution on the subject. And, we are told, this was formally circulated to some members of the Council. What are you going to be seeking in that resolution? Will it have Chapter 7 authority? And when are you going to move ahead on that front?

Ambassador Bolton: We're moving one step at a time. We told Council members that the first step was to get the item formally inscribed on the agenda and follow it with a briefing. We're going to watch developments in and around Burma very carefully. And we'll make a decision on what our next step will be on that basis.

Reporter: Ambassador, are you worried that this may -- a couple questions here -- are you worried that this may sort of close off the in-roads that the Secretary General and Undersecretary General Gambari had made, the opening that they've created?

Ambassador Bolton: OK. Can I do these one at a time, then? Absolutely not. It's fundamentally important that the regime in Burma recognize that it's the other member-governments of the U.N., other nations in the world, that are concerned about their practices. We think the action that we've taken today will support the efforts of Undersecretary General Gambari and many others who are trying to remedy the situations that lead us to conclude that Burma is a threat to international peace and security.

Reporter: If I may, Japan has in the past been very reluctant to step on ASEAN's toes in this topic, in this issue. And now, today they vote yes to include it on the agenda. Is there some shift in their attitude?

Ambassador Bolton: I don't think it's stepping on anybody's toes to recognize reality. And I think that's what this vote does today.

Reporter: Ambassador, were you surprised by the strength of the opposition, and how much will this set you back in your future efforts?

Ambassador Bolton: No, this was about the vote we expected. And I'll just to you again: The United Nations Security Council is not the council of the League of Nations. One of the reasons the Council of the League of Nations failed was the requirement of unanimity. It is a triumph for the Security Council that it has divided votes and that we have the opportunity to see this division. I still hope that the countries that voted no will see sweet reason and support our efforts. But we're going to press ahead. We only needed nine votes to inscribe this on the agenda, and we got 10, although not exactly the 10 we expected.

Reporter: Ambassador, on a different topic, on U.N. peacekeeping...

Ambassador Bolton: Hang on a second. I wanted to see if there are any other Burma questions here.

Reporter: Yes. One in-favor vote from Asia -- do you see the significance on that? Or is it the result of the friendly persuasion from your government?

Ambassador Bolton: I think it's an enlightened vote on the part of the Japanese government. It's certainly welcome and it will aid, materially I think, in having an impact on the region.

Ambassador Bolton: But I think this is the kind of public action that you have to take to show to the regime in Burma how it's regarded by much of the rest of the international community. And that is, as a potential threat to international peace and security.

Reporter: Yes. About the international peace and security, by putting it underneath this label, is that not what is bringing opposition to your request for this to be on the agenda?

Ambassador Bolton: The charter of the U.N. makes it clear that the jurisdictional threshold for the Security Council to take action is that it must deal with threats to international peace and security or breaches of international peace and security or acts of aggression. So this is a jurisdictional threshold that we have to cross. And I think that the issue, really, was resolved as far back as Resolution 688 dealing with the flow of Kurdish refugees into Turkey and elsewhere caused by Saddam Hussein's repression after the first Persian Gulf War. So I see the procedural vote we've taken today as being entirely consistent with 688 and other resolutions subsequently adopted by the Council. Anything else on Burma here?

Reporter: Mr. Ambassador, as you told us, China's position on this issue is so firm, how could you persuade Chinese counterpart to, you know, get the move ahead?

Ambassador Bolton: We're persuasive people. We're going to keep at it. Anything else on Burma?

Reporter: The Chinese ambassador had made this point that the word "Burma" is of one tribe in the country. I mean, he made that -- so I don't know, what's your position on that in terms of the naming...

Ambassador Bolton: You will see in the letters that I submitted to the president of the Security Council that I asked that the Council take up the question of "the situation in Myanmar," comma, "known to the United States as Burma." And the agenda item itself will say "the situation in Myanmar." We refer to it as Burma, which we think is the correct appellation. Anything else on Burma?

Reporter: Yes. Mr. Ambassador, is this meeting going to take place before Gambari's visit to Myanmar? And what effect do you think that will have on the visit?

Ambassador Bolton: The procedural step that we took requested the president of the Security Council to convene this meeting before the end of September. So I understand the dates of the Gambari visit are not set, but it's certainly after that. I think that a briefing in the Security Council, a discussion in the Security Council, will strengthen Gambari's hand. And I think that's an important step for us to take as member-governments. After all, it is the member-governments that run the organization and give direction to the Secretariat. Any other Burma questions?

Reporter: Yes, you've been quite critical of some aspects of U.N. peacekeeping, procurement problems, sexual misconduct scandals. Why do you think that the organization is now fit to undertake an extremely ambitious expansion of its operations, initially East Timor, Lebanon and possibly Sudan? I mean, are you concerned that they have the sort of managerial capacity to handle this larger responsibility?

Ambassador Bolton: The requirements to establish or change existing peacekeeping missions are dictated by circumstances in the world. And that's why we have responded as we have. But there's no doubt that the problems that have been uncovered in the oil-for-food scandal and the questions of sexual exploitation abuse remain, and it will require considerable management attention. It's one of the reasons why, both in the case of Sudan and the expanded UNIFIL in Lebanon, the United States has offered to provide logistical planning, operational support, logistical support to try and help alleviate some of the problems that we've identified.