Secretary of State John Kerry Remarks on Implementation Day

January 16, 2016

U.S. State Department

http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/01/251336.htm

SECRETARY KERRY: Good evening, everybody. Thank you very much for your patience. And I apologize for the fact that I can’t stay to take questions, which I would like to do. But we are operating under some very tight constraints on the rest period the law allows for our pilots, because of some of the delays. So as a result, I need to get to the airport and get on the plane. But I will make a statement before doing so, and I hope it will cover much of what you’re concerned about.

This evening, we are really reminded once again of diplomacy’s power to tackle significant challenges. And thanks to years of hard work and committed dialogue, we have made vital breakthroughs related to both the nuclear negotiation and a separate long-term diplomatic effort. I’m very happy to say that as we speak, we have received confirmation that five Americans who had been unjustly detained in Iran have been released from custody. And they should be on their way home to their families before long – shortly.

The President will have more to say about their release later. But I can tell you one thing: While the two tracks of negotiations were not directly related – and they were not – there is no question that the pace and the progress of the humanitarian talks accelerated in light of the relationships forged and the diplomatic channels unlocked over the course of the nuclear talks. And certainly in the time since we reached an agreement last July, there was a significant pickup in that dialogue.

We have also reached a critical and auspicious milestone on the nuclear issue as well. Today, more than four years after I first traveled to Oman at the request of President Obama to discreetly explore whether the kind of nuclear talks that we ultimately entered into with Iran were even possible, after more than two and a half years of intense multilateral negotiations, the International Atomic Energy Agency has now verified that Iran has honored its commitments to alter – and in fact, dismantle – much of its nuclear program in compliance with the agreement that we reached last July.

I want to thank the IAEA and Director Amano for their significant efforts in this regard, and I know that he will go tomorrow to Tehran to begin the process of the full implementation.

To get to this point, ladies and gentlemen, Iran has undertaken significant steps that many – and I do mean many – people doubted would ever come to pass. And that should be recognized, even though the full measure of this achievement can only be realized by assuring continued full compliance in the coming years. In return for the steps that Iran has taken, the United States and the EU will immediately lift nuclear-related sanctions, expanding the horizon of opportunity for the Iranian people. And I have even tonight, before coming over here, signed a number of documents over those sanctions that the State Department has jurisdiction over in order to effect that lifting.

In the words of the agreement itself, today – January 16th, 2016 – we have reached implementation day. Today marks the moment that the Iran nuclear agreement transitions from an ambitious set of promises on paper to measurable action in progress. Today, as a result of the actions taken since last July, the United States, our friends and allies in the Middle East, and the entire world are safer because the threat of a nuclear weapon has been reduced. Today we can confidently say that each of the pathways that Iran had toward enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon has been verifiably closed down.

That begins with the uranium path. Before the negotiations began, Iran was adding rapidly and without constraint to its stockpile of enriched uranium. As it committed to do back in July, Iran has now reduced that stockpile to less than 300 kilograms, sending the rest of it out on a ship which has gone to Russia to be processed there. That means that their current level of enriched uranium is 2 percent of what it was before we completed the agreement, and the rest is shipped out of the country.

Iran has also removed a full two thirds of its centrifuges from nuclear facilities, along with the infrastructure that supported them. They’ve literally taken it out, dismantled, stored. That includes nearly all of its advanced centrifuges. And the removed hardware is sealed up under around-the-clock monitoring by the IAEA. Iran has now ended all uranium enrichment at its Fordow facility, disconnected all related centrifuges, and removed all fissile material from the site.

The second path open to Iran was the plutonium path. Before we sat down at the negotiating table, Iran’s heavy water reactor at Arak had the potential – when and if it became operational – to produce enough weapons-grade plutonium annually to fuel two nuclear weapons. Iran has now begun the process of modifying the entire Arak reactor so that it will only be used for peaceful purposes. It has removed the reactor’s core and filled it with cement, ensuring that it can be never used again.

Finally, the third path – the most troubling path, in many respects – was the potential for Iran to pursue enough fissile material for a weapon covertly, using a facility not publicly declared. Now, before the talks started the IAEA did not have assured access to investigate locations at which undeclared nuclear activities might be carried out. It also lacked the ability to track uranium as it was mined, milled, and then turned into yellowcake. Today, the IAEA has put in place every one of the extensive transparency and verification measures called for in the agreement. That means in addition to the 24/7 monitoring of all of Iran’s declared facilities, the IAEA now has visibility and accountability of the entire supply chain that supports Iran’s nuclear program, from start to finish – from uranium mines and mills to centrifuge manufacturing and operation.

So today, Iran would need far more than one covert facility in order to try to break out. It would need to develop an entire covert supply chain, from start to finish – which experts around the world agree is not possible without early detection.

As I said, the steps that Iran has taken to fully implement the nuclear agreement have fundamentally altered the country’s nuclear program. Two years ago we assessed that Iran’s breakout time, the amount of time it took to go from producing fissile – enriched uranium to have enough for one bomb – that amount of time has gone from two to three months, where it was; now, today we are confident that – based on the reductions in its stockpile, reductions in its centrifuges – it would take Iran at least a year to try to break out of the agreement, kick out the inspectors, accumulate the amount of fissile material needed for a single bomb.

And if Iran ever did decide to do that, because of the steps that are in this agreement, we would know it almost immediately, and we would have enough time to respond accordingly.

Let me underscore: Verification remains, as it always has been, the backbone of this agreement. We welcome that Iran has followed through on the promises that it made. It has kept its word. And we will continue to do the same. But we will also remain vigilant in verifying Iran’s compliance every hour of every day in the years ahead.

Now, I emphasize: Today’s announcement gives us even more hope, more confidence in the possibilities about this effort going forward. Thus far, Iran has taken every step that it committed to take, dating back two full years – not just back to July, but dating back to the interim agreement that we announced in Geneva, in Switzerland. And we have now two years of compliance already under our belt with another 13, and then another 15, and then another 20, and another 25, and then the lifetime of this agreement under the Additional Protocol and the Modified Code 3.1.

Now, obviously past performance does not guarantee future results. We know that. Furthermore, while we welcome implementation day, we understand that this marker alone does not wipe away all of the concerns that the international community has rightly expressed about Iran’s policies and actions and choices in the region. But we also know without doubt there is not a challenge in the entire region that wouldn’t become much more complicated, much worse, if Iran had a nuclear weapon. And that is why this agreement is so important. With the agreement fully implemented, the international community can finally work to address the other regional challenges without the looming threat of a nuclear-armed Iran – including the crisis in Syria, on which we have made important progress in recent months.

Before I close, I want to thank a few important people who brought us here to this day, who have been critical to this process throughout the negotiations. And that starts with the person I work for, President Obama, who has been resolute in insisting that Iran must never have a nuclear weapon, and equally strong and courageous in asserting that diplomacy should be given a fair chance to achieve that goal. His courage to pursue a path that many people deemed impossible and some people deemed inadvisable is the reason we are where we are, marking implementation day – not alone, not bilaterally, but with France, Germany, Britain, China, Russia, all of us joined together in an effort to create this accountability.

I also want to thank the delegations representing all of our P5 partners. All of them have worked unbelievably hard and have set a standard for international cooperation, and I particularly want to thank Dame Cathy Ashton for helping to lead this process for two and a half years, and her successor, Federica Mogherini, for expertly coordinating international efforts during the final stage and helping in these last two days to bring us to this announcement.

I also want to express my gratitude for the superb efforts of my own delegation, led by Steve Mull and previously by Wendy Sherman, all of whom from the State Department, from the White House, and throughout the interagency system that we work with in the United States, all of them – the Justice Department, the Energy Department, Ernie Moniz and others have done an extraordinary job and they richly deserve the gratitude of our nation, and I believe other nations who benefit from this.

Let me also thank the government of Austria, Switzerland, and Oman for their continued and enormously generous hospitality at times, for their assistance all the time, and for the international work that they have helped to make possible here. And I’m particularly grateful to the Government of Switzerland, to Didier Burkhalter and all those who have worked in the last days as our representative in Tehran in helping us with the mission regarding the release of the Americans, which you will hear more about from President Obama later.

Finally, I want to again express my deep respect for the serious and constructive approach that Iran’s delegation brought to this effort. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and his team from day one demonstrated their deep commitment and seriousness of purpose, and Dr. Ali Salehi has worked diligently with Secretary Moniz to find creative solutions to difficult technical challenges. And we’ve been able to approach every step of this process with professionalism and mutual respect.

The hard work will continue, no question. And the tough politics surrounding this issue in many countries, including the United States and Iran – that’s obviously not going to get easier overnight. But the fact is that today marks the first day of a safer world, one where we believe it is possible to remain safer for years to come, and particularly with the compliance of this agreement.

I think we have also proven once again why diplomacy has to always be our first choice, and war our last resort. And that is a very important lesson to reinforce. We have approached this challenge that the – with the firm belief that exhausting diplomacy before choosing war is an imperative. And we believe that today marks the benefits of that choice.

Thank you. (Applause.)