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TRANSCRIPT: PICKERING ON US SUDAN, AFGHANISTAN STRIKES

(Nerve gas evidence from Sudan "very persuasive") (6600)

Washington -- The United States has "very persuasive" evidence that a soil sample acquired in recent months from Khartoum's Shifa pharmaceutical plant that the sample indicated the presence of a precursor of the nerve agent VX, according to Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering.

At an August 25 briefing at the USIA Foreign Press Center in Washington, Pickering said an analysis of the sample "shows the presence of a chemical whose simple name is EMPTA, a known precursor for the nerve agent VX and an indicator of a potential to produce VX gas," Pickering said. "The substance is not used in commercial applications. It doesn't occur naturally in the environment, and it is not a by-product of another chemical process."

The US struck the Sudanese plant last week, along with suspected terrorist sites in Afghanistan associated with Usama bin Ladin.

Pickering also stated that the United States has "evidence that we think is quite clear on contacts between Sudan and Iraq. In fact, El Shifa officials, early in the company's history we believe, were in touch with Iraqi individuals associated with Iraq's VX program."

Following is the official transcript of the briefing:

(begin transcript)

US Information Agency
Washington Foreign Press Center Briefing

US Strikes on Terrorist Sites in Sudan and Afghanistan

Thomas Pickering, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
Tuesday, August 25, 1998

MS. RANSOM: Welcome to the Washington Foreign Press Center. I'm Marjorie Ransom, the director of USIA's Foreign Press Centers. I'm delighted to welcome today Ambassador Thomas Pickering, undersecretary of state for political affairs. Ambassador Pickering will brief today on US strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan. He will brief on the record. He has promised us 30 minutes, so please keep your questions sharp. Ambassador Pickering was sworn-in as undersecretary of state --

MR. PICKERING: You don't need to do all that.

MS. RANSOM: You don't need to do all that.

MR. PICKERING: My 30 minutes will be up.

MS. RANSOM: All right!

Ambassador Pickering has served as ambassador in most parts of the world, and as the US representative to the UN. We are honored to welcome him today and we hope he will come back soon.

Ambassador Pickering.

MR. PICKERING: Thank you, Marjorie, very much. And it's very nice to be back with all of you. I have a few opening remarks devoted to the subject as announced.

As President Clinton said last week, we are engaged in a long-term struggle against terrorism. Our goal is to protect life and to hold terrorists accountable for their criminal acts. The bombing of our two embassies in Africa 18 days ago, with the tragic loss of life of Americans, of Kenyans and of Tanzanians, painfully reminded us that international terrorism is a prevalent and pernicious threat to all of our nations and to all of our citizens. We have fought this threat for many years and in many ways; multilaterally and unilaterally, including through the conduct of our diplomacy, promoting the rule of law, working with others to stem the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and serious action such as the military strike that took place last week.

Through international cooperation in intelligence collection and careful investigation, there have been some successes in apprehending terrorists and bringing them to justice, thwarting planned attacks, and isolating state sponsors of terrorism. But there are times when law enforcement and diplomatic tools are simply not enough. The strikes against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan represent an intensification of our battle against terror. They reflect our determination to use whatever means we have to protect against and to deter these threats, especially immediate threats.

The main purpose of the strikes was not retaliation; it was to prevent further terrorist attacks against American targets which we had reason to believe would take place; we had convincing evidence that more attacks were being planned.

We intended to pursue our anti-terror policy using all the tools and all of the resources at our command. On the same day as our military strikes, the president signed an executive order directing the Treasury Department to block all financial transactions between Usama bin Ladin's terrorist network and American persons and companies, and he urged other governments to do the same. And yesterday, Secretary Albright announced a new United States-United Kingdom plan to go forward with a trial in the Netherlands, before Scottish judges and applying Scottish law, of the two Libyans suspected of bombing Pan Am Flight 103 nearly 10 years ago.

We continue to call on Libya to surrender the suspects for trial promptly. Our goal is to bring the suspects to justice. The families of the victims of Pan Am 103 deserve no less.

We do not expect that these various initiatives will in themselves end the terrorist threat, but they are important because they clearly show that we are in this for the long haul. We will act unilaterally when we must in order to protect our citizens against imminent threats, but we invite other nations of the world to stand with us in this struggle because all nations are vulnerable to the threat of terrorism, and all citizens of other countries are equally vulnerable, as the history of this particular event makes crystal clear.

We have called on the international community to renew its commitment to this struggle and to demonstrate that attacks like the recent embassy bombings will not be tolerated. I know that we are all united in this resolve. The reactions we have had from around the world show us this clearly. And I believe that we will prevail.

I would be glad now to take your questions.

MS. RANSOM: Please remember to wait for the microphone. Okay, please.

Q: Parasuram, the Press Trust of India. There are a bit of mixed feelings in India on this attack because, on the one hand, they appear to like the attack on terrorist camps; on the other, there is a feeling expressed by the defense minister, George Fernandes, that there appear to be double standards, one for the United States and one for India. When the home minister of India wanted to strike at terrorist targets, some very harsh words were uttered from the State Department about the project. So I was wondering whether you could kindly clarify what the overall American policy is, and whether the standard applicable to US also applies to India.

MR. PICKERING: Well, I think I commented just a minute ago on overall American policy and the various places that various tools of struggle with terrorism can be fitted into our overall policy. India, Kashmir and Pakistan present a very, very different case than many others around the world. For example, there have been talks, and we hope there will continue to be talks, between both sides to deal with problems of threats across the line of control. We understand that there are very large military forces poised on each side, forces which could be used in the event of attacks which might be understood, or in the event of circumstances getting out of hand. These are all circumstances that need to be clearly related to the situation involved and to the arrangements that are there to resolve the problem.

We of course believe that all terror should cease. We have talked clearly and cogently and directly to both sides on this particular issue under the circumstances that you raise; we will continue to do so.

We believe, in the Kashmir question, any violence could run risks of setting off a wider conflict, and we would counsel against it. We will continue to counsel against it.

MS. RANSOM: George Heshmi.

Q: Yeah. George Heshmi, Dubai News. I'm at a loss to understand US policy on terrorism. In one instance, we are ready to go to court, as in the case of Lockerbie. In the other, we're ready to blow -- to strike at Sudan and Afghanistan. What is the difference in the two cases? Why do you do this or that?

MR. PICKERING: I think you --

Q: If I may, allow just a -- why are you hesitating in publishing the evidence that you had on the Sudan?

MR. PICKERING: First, let me say, George, that with respect to the question at hand -- that is, the reasons why we acted -- we made that very clear. We saw very clear connections to the Nairobi bombing. We knew -- and I just repeated it -- about imminent threats to Americans that were likely to be culminated very, very rapidly.

We clearly have, as I said as well in my opening statement, a panoply of tools, devices, steps, actions, and arrangements to use to deal with terror -- everything from a whole series of United Nations resolutions to the use, when it is required under certain circumstances to meet this threat, of military force. Each of these is best, in our view, in its own arrangements, under its own time. And we will select very carefully and use those that we think has the benefit of producing the best and most useful reaction.

With respect to Sudan, I think that it is important to know and understand that we have been aware for at least two years that there was a serious potential problem at this plant that was struck, that we had related important physical evidence which was acquired by the United States in recent months.

The physical evidence is a soil sample. Analysis of it shows the presence of a chemical whose simple name is EMPTA, a known precursor for the nerve agent VX, and an indicator of a potential to produce VX gas. The substance is not used in commercial applications. It doesn't occur naturally in the environment, and it is not a by-product of another chemical process.

It should be noted that visual inspection of facilities like the El-Shifa chemical plant are often not sufficient to reveal a connection with the production of chemical weapons. I recall, for example, the fact that the Iraqi plant known as Al-Hakam factory was denied by the Iraqis as a facility connected with the production of chemical weapons. And there were many infrequent UNSCOM inspections of that plant. And it was only when Iraq itself admitted the true nature of that facility several years later once overwhelming evidence was available, that it was revealed that the plant was actually so engaged.

And so we believe this evidence from our point of view is very persuasive and very important. And we think that it was this evidence, and evidence like it, which made our decision to carry out this strike on this particular target, the correct and proper decision under the circumstances.

MS. RANSOM: Our next question is from the right with -- (inaudible).

Q: On Sudan also, I have a couple --

MS. RANSOM: Please announce your name.

Q: Yeah. I'm Aimhud Alleli, BBC-Arabic. I have a couple of questions on Sudan.

The first one is: The Sudanese are asking for a committee to investigate, and they are asking for former President Carter to head that. What's wrong with having a committee to investigate? If you have the evidence, you could give it to the committee.

The second thing; they are saying today that through a third party, you asked them for security cooperation. Is this true? And they are asking for a public apology from the United States. And Mr. Turabi said today that the relationship hit bottom, and it can only go up. Could you please comment on that?

MR. PICKERING: Well, I would think that it is difficult to characterize our relationship with Sudan as very good these days, given in fact what Sudan has been engaged in and the practices that Sudan has followed in its own country, particular with respect to the support of terrorism and its steps recently to deny the United Nations and other organizations the opportunity to bring adequate food relief, particularly to the people of southern Sudan. And so I think that that characterization is probably not out of place. It would be hard for me not to join it.

Whether in fact we have reached the actual nadir and things can only go up is a different judgment. I will reserve on that particular point. I've just presented the evidence very clearly, I think, on why this was a target. I don't believe that an international investigative committee needs to have an additional role. The evidence, in our view, is clear and persuasive.

Q: What about the security cooperation?

MR. PICKERING: Security cooperation? I believe that was addressed by the State Department spokesman. I really don't have anything further to add on that.

Q: Raghbir Goyal, India Globe and Asia Today. Ambassador Pickering, a two-part question. Number one, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan helped Taliban to regain or to gain most of Afghanistan. And today Taliban is not helping to capture Bin Ladin, but how much the Taliban you think helping the United States?

Number two, first Pakistan said US missiles landed on their territory and several Pakistanis were killed. But when President Clinton spoke with Prime Minister Sharif, then the statement was changed by Pakistan. And today now Pakistan again blaming the United States and telling in the UN that several of their people were killed and several US missiles landed in their territory. Who to believe?

MR. PICKERING: Well, I think that in the respect of the latter question -- let me address that first -- you're mixing up a lot of reports and apples and oranges. In effect, the only thing I'm aware of is press statements that a missile has been found somewhere in Beluchistan, and I'm aware of press statements of a letter to the Security Council. But I don't have anything further to add with respect to confirmation of that particular issue.

On the question of U.S., Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, it is of course true that we all worked closely together to defeat the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. There were certainly people among those that we helped and assisted who later became part of the Taliban movement. I think that it would be a serious mistake to conclude that the United States was either a sponsor of or, indeed, a supporter of the Taliban movement, particularly given its religious views toward women and other very, very important issues of human rights concern.

It is true, however, that we have said that the attack on Afghanistan was not an attack on Afghans or on the government of Afghanistan or of the people in authority; it was an attack on the individual and his organization -- Usama Bin Ladin -- that was supporting terrorist activities in the particular camps that were identified there.

MS. RANSOM: Your next question is on the right.

Q: N.C. Menon, Hindustan Times. Ambassador Pickering, in the wake of the missile strikes in Afghanistan of the terrorist camps and the casualties of Pakistani trainees there, is there any change in US views about Pakistani support for terrorism in Kashmir?

MR. PICKERING: Well, that's a question, of course, that we have been looking at, but there is no change in views. What I can tell you is that the organization which has come forward to talk about casualties calls itself the Harakat ul-Mujaheddin. We believe that that organization is closely related to or maybe even part of the Harakat ul-Ansar, which as you know, appears on the terrorist list that Secretary Albright determined some months ago, and as a result, is subject to serious limitations with respect to money collection, the activities of individuals, and so on, here in the United States.

MS. RANSOM: Jim has the next question.

Q: Jim Anderson, DPA, the German Press Agency. Ambassador Pickering, do you know of any connection between the so-called pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum and the Iraqi government in regard to production of precursors of VX?

MR. PICKERING: Yeah, I would like to consult my notes just to be sure that what I have to say is stated clearly and correctly. We see evidence that we think is quite clear on contacts between Sudan and Iraq. In fact, El Shifa officials, early in the company's history, we believe were in touch with Iraqi individuals

associated with Iraq's VX program.

MS. RANSOM: Okay, your next question is on the right.

Q: Japanese newspaper, Sekai Nippo, Akira Yamamoto. There are also in Sudan, capital of Sudan, Khartoum, there also other more active chemical factories, but you didn't attack these factories, only you attacked factory which they can find some element of VX gas. But on the other hand, you attacked Afghanistan in six terrorist camps. It means you want to attack terrorists to kill them rather than prevent from being produced the chemical weapons. How do you think about it?

MR. PICKERING: Well, I think quite to the contrary. I think that we used the best information we had available; we studied very, very carefully the situation. We obviously were taking an act which brought considerable danger with respect to the people who might be in a facility. We felt we had, and I went over with you very strong evidence of the chemical weapons association of this particular plant. It was chosen as the target as a result of those strong associations. I can't comment on our intelligence information on other targets.

MS. RANSOM: Your next question is here.

Q: Ishen Melhem, Radio Monte Carlo. Mr. Secretary, the reaction in the Arab world on the popular level, obviously, has been very negative. Most people do not believe the contention that you have convincing evidence. In fact, the president himself did not use the words "convincing evidence." People believe the Sudanese government, although this is not a government with very great high standing in the Arab world. They point out that you refused international efforts to investigate. At one time the evidence was that bin Ladin has a financial share in the complex. Another time, the Iraqi involvement. Now there's a soil sample. Why not call the Sudanese bluff if they are bluffing, the way you are calling the Libyans' bluff on the question of those two suspects? That's one.

And aren't you running the risk of deepening the alienation that many people in the Arab world feel towards US policy because of the stalemated peace process and the situation in Iraq?

And finally, why building up bin Ladin? Why is it that the president of the United States refers to bin Ladin as if he represents, in the 1990s, a threat equivalent to the threat that the Soviet Union used to represent during the Cold War? Everybody talked about bin Ladin. This was a man that was seen by many people in the region as a renegade. Now you're making -- giving him mythical proportions and building him up, and --

MR. PICKERING: I think we got your question. I think I understand it.

First, with respect to bin Ladin, it became very clear to us, as the information on the bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi became clear, that we had high confidence, and we have used the words "high confidence" to relate his activities to those particular events. Secondly, it was very clear to us that we were under imminent threat, and there was clear information to us, and convincing information -- and we have said convincing information on a number of occasions -- that that was the case.

Secondly, with respect to the Arab people around the world, we're deeply concerned by the threat of terrorism because it affects all people everywhere. And I think it is probably true that Muslims were certainly killed in Nairobi and in Dar es Salaam, and indeed this was an indiscriminate act that in fact attempted to take the lives of innocent people not for any religious or for any political purpose, but to bring about a kind of malign influence on policies, an act of destruction for the sake of destruction; in my view, and certainly in the view of what I know are many eminent commentators in Islam, on Islam, among the people of the Muslim world,

totally impermissible, totally unjustified, totally reprehensible.

And so we would hope that Muslims around the world and in this country would understand that this particular action, the bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, were aimed as much at them as they were aimed at other innocent people in that regard, and therefore, we ask for their understanding of the need for our response under imminent threat and the fact that that response, we hope, will have some effect on those who carry out this kind of terrorism.

I think that the information on the El Shifa plant that I've made clear is from our perspective compelling and convincing. It certainly, in our view, does not need further endorsement or ratification. As I said, in the past, even expert UNSCOM visits to a similar plant in Iraq did not turn up clear and compelling evidence. It was only after the Iraqi government admitted its complicity in using the Al-Hakam plant for chemical weapons production that the truth came out. These are all things that need to be factored into the equation. They all need to be considered.

Q: What about bin Ladin?

MR. PICKERING: I thought I'd answered bin Ladin --

Q: About building him up -- (off mike).

MR. PICKERING: We have certainly no intention of building him up. And I think an attack on his training camps is not designed to do that.

MS. RANSOM: The next question is from Khalid, on the right.

Q: Khalid Monseur with the Middle East News Agency. Yesterday a senior administration official insinuated that November will be the deadline for Libya to answer your proposal to try the Pan American suspects in The Hague. Would you put that on the record? And would you tell us what are the next steps that the US will take in case Libya tries to negotiate this offer or rejects it?

MR. PICKERING: Well, I happen to know the senior official well, and he did not prescribe a deadline. He was being very careful about it. He did say, however, the next time at which a review of United Nations sanctions in the Security Council on the Libyan matter comes to consideration, the council would be November. So November, I think he said, would be an appropriate time to look at for this particular review.

Indeed, I understand there are press reports that there may be an earlier reply from Libya. We hope very much it's positive reply. As you know, we have taken this step because we felt it was high time to bring justice in this particular case, to meet the needs of the families who asked for justice. And many countries -- many that we consider close and good friends -- had asked us to take this particular step. We hope very much that they will exercise their good influence on Libya to bring about an early, positive response to this particular question.

Q: And your next steps, in case Libya rejects that?

MR. PICKERING: I think we want to wait and see -- for the early, positive response, before we begin to predicate what the next steps might be. But we believe in due course that the Security Council should be ready to take further steps, if that's necessary.

MS. RANSOM: The next question is here.

Q: Yeah. Madoud Bushehr , Al Fedjit newspaper, from Sudan. Since 1956, since independence, Sudan has six governments. Some of them were at odds with the United States. However, the only government that has been accused of terrorism is Sudan. And anybody who's following the record -- I think the information that the State Department has put out about Sudan since the beginning, since this government came in, in 1989, shows that this government was supporting terrorism. And in 1993 there was the New York incident. Sudan was put on the list of the seven countries that are sponsoring terrorism. Then we find that in 1995, they participated -- and this is also very well documented -- in the attempt of assassination of President Hosni Mubarak. Then we find that in 1996, the United States went through the Security Council, and three resolutions were passed. In 1997 Sudan was put it in sanctions --

MR. PICKERING: Forgive me, but you sound like you're answering my question.

Q: No, no. You don't know what I am saying. No, no, I am not answering your question.

What I am saying, you have been building all this, and so I think that it is logical what you did. However, I see that you have not been -- when I say "you," I mean the "government" -- you have not been putting a very strong case. And for us, the Sudanese opposition, we really feel that the Sudan government now is having the upper hand. And to the extent --

And I want to bring this to your attention -- the representative of Sudan in the United Nations, Mr. Erwa, has been rejected by the State Department to become ambassador here. Yet in the last two weeks, he has been on TV. As a matter of fact, he was with Ms. Albright --

MS. RANSOM: What is your question?

Q: And he --

MS. RANSOM: Could we please have your question?

Q: And now my question is: Why would you allow Mr. Erwa, for example, to sit with the Secretary of State, when he was rejected by the government to become an ambassador here?

My other question, and this --

MR. PICKERING: I am sorry. I don't know the occasion in which Mr. Erwa sat with the Secretary of State.

Q: On CNN, on CNN. And he called the President a "liar."

MR. PICKERING: It must have been --

Q: Yeah, he called the president a "liar."

MR. PICKERING: Maybe they were in a split screen. We can't control television in this country. You know that.

Q: Anyway, okay. Let me just put my -- okay, my final question to you is -- the opposition now in Sudan, which is fighting for democracy, why don't you give it more support so it can do the job? because no -- you can continue to hit this government, but terrorists will hit back, and the only way is to get rid of this government.

MR. PICKERING: We above all would support democracy in Sudan and all who are in favor of democracy in Sudan and all who are against Sudan's participation in terrorism. You have just recited our record. I believe it is very clear. We have worked very hard on all of these particular cases. And we believe we have made a strong case on the question of bombing, including the information I provided here today.

MS. RANSOM: Your next question is on the right.

Q: Emily Schwarz from Bloomberg News.

I had two questions. One is what type of diplomatic steps is the United States considering at this point? The Arab League and several countries have condemned the attacks or the strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan because they were not preceded by more diplomatic steps ahead of time.

My other question is more immediate. There is a report out that in Cape Town a Planet Hollywood has been bombed, and we would like to know if the State Department believes that there's any connection to the current concern about terrorism.

MR. PICKERING: With respect to the latter, we've seen information that an organization with a kind of new and shadowy name has taken credit. It appears to be claiming itself to be Muslim. We know of no reason to conclude now either that it is connected or is not connected. We'll have to take some time and look into the question very carefully. So I don't want to have anybody jump to conclusions on this particular question.

With respect to the issue, we have had a long and, I think, quite clear history. The gentleman from the Sudanese opposition representing a Khartoum newspaper has just catalogued all of the steps that we have taken, and there are many more, with respect to the regime in Khartoum.

We have been in touch directly and indirectly with the people in Kabul, in Afghanistan. I only recall that Ambassador Richardson visited them and spoke to them, again after a number of other messages and contacts, about the problems of their harboring someone like Usama bin Ladin in their midst, someone who claimed their hospitality, claimed a right of hospitality under Afghan tradition, under Pashtun tradition, but then abused it. It was a little bit like a man who came to visit his neighbors at their invitation and then began shooting out the window at the other neighbors. It was, in our sense, a totally reprehensible position on his part. And we have continued, obviously, to try to persuade them, and we continue and will continue to try to persuade them in every way that we can, directly and indirectly, to bring this person to justice, to do what is necessary to cease the acts that he's been undertaking all around the world, terrorist acts that have affected not only Americans but many other people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

MS. RANSOM: The next question is from the back row.

Q: I'm Fawaz Durkey, columnist for Arab News. Mr. Pickering, my question is: Is the United States government setting a precedent here in respect to the missile -- cruise missile attacks on Sudan? In other words, the precedent being if next time the American government discovers that there is a chemical plant in XYZ country, will it do the same thing? Is the precedent being set here --

MR. PICKERING: I think that --

Q: -- in other words, without -- pardon me interrupting -- without resorting to the United Nations or other appropriate institutions that may be qualified to deal with that issue?

MR. PICKERING: I think that the United States has made clear the reasons why it took the actions and the basis for those, in particular the fact that Article 51 of the United Nations Charter permits states to take actions in self-defense, particularly, I might add, when they feel imminently threatened. In this case, as the United States made clear, it not only had convincing evidence of the linkage to the recent bombings, but it had convincing evidence that there were to be other attacks planned by this organization and its brothers and sister organizations around the world to take action against the United States. Those are the circumstances. They speak for themselves.

MS. RANSOM: Your next questioner is in the back here.

Q: Yes. May I ask you about the further strike against terrorism -- Yes, you were saying --

MS. RANSOM: Could you state your name again, please?

Q: My name is Hiroshi Yuasa from Mainichi newspaper, Japan. And you were saying that your struggle against terrorism is now going on, and Clinton administration doesn't do lots of other strikes. So is there any possibility that you will strike against terrorism -- terrorist facilities either in Iran or Iraq or North Korea or sometimes in Tokyo? Can you clarify about that? So in other words, what is the legitimacy of your attack against --

MR. PICKERING: I thought I had just answered the question here for the gentleman from Arab News in a clear way. Obviously I said there were circumstances that led us to believe that the threat was there, it was real, that the connection was real with the individuals who had attacked us in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. There was a long history of this gentleman's threats, actions, he declared war against the United States and so on. So there were a set of circumstances which were clearly the reasons why we used military force in this case.

We have other tools and other options, as I explained very clearly in my opening statement. We have actions we can take against the finances. We can bring people through indictments, we hope, to justice, as in the Lockerbie case, and we hope very much that that will happen. There are other steps that we can take to deal with these particular problems, sanctions.

In each case, we try to take the step that we believe most clearly meets the needs and most clearly protects our citizens and our interests. We are not taking any options off the table, but we are not going to give you or anyone a road map beyond what we have said about what we are doing, for all the obvious reasons.

Q: May I --

MS. RANSOM: I'm sorry, the next question is here. We'll come to you after that.

Q: Marco Liu with the United Daily News Group, Taiwan. Sir, you're talking about the US expecting all the countries stand together with US to fight the terrorism and terrorists. I'm just wondering, is it the reason why that your envoy in Taiwan called his counterpart at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs right after President Clinton announced the strike? I mean, this is the second time that a Foreign Ministry official in Taiwan ever received a US envoy's phone call during the midnight. I guess the last time was prior to Jimmy Carter announced the normalization with Beijing.

So, I'm just wondering -- what you expect from Taiwan, you know, a country like Taiwan, to participate, to contribute in this fight when you're talking about it?

And then, I'm also wondering that an issue like, you know, transnational crime or international terrorism, is it ever raised up in your meeting with Mr. Mou-Shih Ting. I know that you met with him earlier this year and then later last year. So in the bilateral national security dialogue with Taiwan, is international terrorism also one of the subjects?

MR. PICKERING: Marco, your question is filled with lots of pleasant and wonderful fish hooks. Let me merely say that unofficial relations are maintained between the United States and Taiwan through the American Institute on Taiwan. I'm not going to discuss any of the particular issues that may or may not have been discussed in any particular forum or under any particular circumstances, as is the case with the United States' dealing with others all around the world.

MS. RANSOM: And we promised the gentleman in the back.

MR. PICKERING: Please. Yeah. You had an urgent follow-up, and I apologize.

Q: Mr. Secretary, in terms of the rights of the --

MS. RANSOM: Please announce your name and organization.

Q: Jesus Esquivel from the Mexican News Agency. In terms of the United States' rights to defend itself from terrorism, is this country ready to accept an action by a country like Cuba taking the rights under Article 51 of the United Nations to attack any group that has just committed acts against the president of Cuba, like the seven Cubans that were indicted today by the Justice Department in Puerto Rico?

MR. PICKERING: I think you've answered the questions. The Justice Department has apparently indicted seven Cubans. I am not involved in the law enforcement side, but I think your question has within it its own answer and speaks for itself.

Q: Are you ready to accept the decision by the Cubans to attack these groups in Miami --

MR. PICKERING: With all respect, sir, you have missed the whole chain of our discussion. The effort on the part of the United States is to try to find ways to bring terrorists to justice -- indictments are such; to end the production of chemical weapons by terrorism. Voluntary actions on the part of countries that are asked to do that are obviously the best answer, and we would accept and deal with those kinds of answers gladly if they were forthcoming.

MS. RANSOM: We have time for two more questions. I think this one.

Q: Yes, Ambassador Pickering, Carolyn Olsen, TV Asahi, Japan. My question is threefold, and I hate to belabor what might be an obvious point by now.

But first of all, on the issue of the soil sample; where exactly on the compound was it gathered from, outside the pharmaceutical site? Does it prove that the site manufactured or stored EMPTA?

Also secondly, that second site in Sudan, do you believe that that is being used in the same capacity as the first site?

And thirdly -- pardon me -- thirdly, it said that there are two steps needed to change that particular chemical into VX. Where do you believe those processes are under way?

Q: Do you believe it's that second site, or is it in Iraq itself?

MR. PICKERING: Okay. I am not going to tell you, obviously, for all of the usual reasons -- where the sample was collected, but we have high confidence that it was collected in a way and under circumstances that leads us to believe -- high confidence -- that the analysis relates to the site.

MS. RANSOM: Okay. Back against --

MR. PICKERING: The other questions, I think, all are in the realm of the undiscussable --

MS. RANSOM: Right.

Q: Okay.

MR. PICKERING: -- the unmentionable, the unthinkable.

Q: Can you tell us what was collected, when the samples --

MR. PICKERING: I said in my discussion, "recently," "in months."

Q: Within --

MR. PICKERING: Let me tell you. I used -- I'll go back to the inimitable words here -- "which we acquired in recent months."

Q: Inimitable words.

Q: You also mentioned in your statement that --

MS. RANSOM: Wait. Would you wait for the mike, please?

Q: Sorry.

MR. PICKERING: Yeah. And then you can tell who you are.

Q: (Name inaudible) --

MR. PICKERING: When you get the mike, you can do that.

Q: -- with Reuters.

You also mentioned in your statement that there had been suspicions about this pharmaceutical firm for two years. Now, in two years, had there been any talks with the Sudanese government, or had there been any diplomatic steps that were under way?

MR. PICKERING: I can tell you that until such time as we withdrew our ambassador and down-sized our embassy, we had very frequent talks. Since then we have had people back and forth visiting Sudan, members of our embassy, the former ambassador, to talk. We talked --

Q: Specifically on this pharmaceutical firm, which you --

MR. PICKERING: I can't tell you the specific subject. But it is very clear that on all the possible occasions when we discussed things with the Sudanese government, we raised the issues of their support for terrorism and our concerns about that.

MS. RANSOM: Okay. The last question back here against the wall.

Q: Michael Ulveman from Jyllands-Posten, Denmark.

Mr. Secretary, can you confirm reports today that Mr. Abu Nidal is under arrest in Egypt? And if that is the case, will the United States demand that he face charges in the United States?

MR. PICKERING: I don't have any determinative information for you on that particular issue. I have seen the news reports, as well. And as far as the law enforcement aspects of that question, I would refer you to the Justice Department.

As far as what's going on in Egypt, I would suspect that the government of Egypt is the best source for that kind of information.

MS. RANSOM: Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much.

MR. PICKERING: Thank you.

MS. RANSOM: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

(end transcript)

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