

Ambassador Anne E. Derse
Comments to the Press
U.S. Embassy Baku, Azerbaijan
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Ambassador Derse: As you know, I just recently returned from the United States. I was on vacation with my family over the holidays. But it was a particularly exciting time to be in the United States, because, as you know, in this period we have launched a new administration. A transition in government in the United States is always an exciting and interesting time, but this transition is historic. For that reason it was especially exciting.

As an American I was very proud, I was very humbled; I was very happy to be in the United States for the inauguration of the first African-American president because it was a vindication of our system and our model which is an open one in which people of talent and dedication and patriotism and commitment can succeed.

I think you know that President Obama was inaugurated the day after Martin Luther King Day in the United States, the day when we celebrate the life and the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, a great civil rights leader. And I am sure that in Azerbaijan you know about the famous speech of Dr. King in which he said, "I have a dream." He said, "I have a dream that the day will come when people will be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin." And that day has clearly come in the United States.

I think all Americans, whether they're Republican or Democrat or Independent, were very proud of the fact that a major step has been taken in the development of our democracy in the United States.

Now I expect as a foreign country and a partner of the United States, Azerbaijanis are interested in what the Obama administration will mean for policy issues and for our relationship. It's early for me to give you details on specific policy issues, but I think we can see from some of the early steps that the President has taken and from some of his statements in the early days of his administration some of the directions.

First and foremost let me mention that he has underscored his commitment to American leadership in the world. He has said that under his administration the United States will lead on the important global issues. But the United States will do that in a spirit of engagement and partnership.

Domestically the United States has long had a tradition of bipartisanship in foreign policy, which means whatever differences our parties may have amongst themselves on policy directions, when it comes to facing international challenges we will work to have a common platform. President Obama has taken some important steps at home to reach out to diverse constituencies in the United States. For example, he's included in his administration Republicans, although he's a Democrat. Secretary Gates is a good example of that. He has reached out as the executive to the Congress very early on, to the bipartisan leadership of our Congress. He has invited his former competitor for the Democratic nomination to be the Secretary of State, a very important step.

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He's said that our foreign policy will be based on diplomacy, development and defense. He went to the Department of State on his second day in office in order to underscore the importance that his administration will put on active and proactive diplomacy, engaging with the world. He has emphasized the importance of addressing issues of development, the global challenges of development – poverty, disease. And of course defense; he sent a very strong, clear, unequivocal message to those who would consider themselves enemies of the United States, that the United States will defend its security.

So those are the modalities, or how we will conduct our foreign policy, in a spirit of leadership, engagement, bipartisanship. But with respect to the content or the substance of foreign policy, President Obama has made clear that we will promote our interests and our ideals, and our values. This should not come as a surprise. Whether Republican or Democrat, it's an integral part of U.S. foreign policy to promote our ideals and our values as well as our interests.

I was just reviewing the remarks he made at the State Department. There are a couple of interesting quotes that you might find of interest. Speaking of American leadership, he said, "We must recognize that America's strength comes not just from the might of our arms or the scale or our wealth, but from our enduring values. We will uphold our fundamental values as vigilantly as we protect our security," he said. And he said that, "We will use all elements of American power to protect our people and to promote our interests and our ideals." So I think that indicates a pretty clear direction overall for our foreign policy.

He took a couple of specific steps when he went to the State Department that show his interest in moving quickly to address some very pressing global problems. He appointed a Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, Senator George Mitchell. He appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to be a Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to deal with that issue. And early in his administration he signed three Executive Orders that underscore our commitment to promote our interests and our ideals, and those were the Executive Orders prohibiting torture, closing Guantanamo, and launching an executive review of how we address the issue of terrorism. All this, of course, in the context of an absolute steadfast commitment to fight extremists, terrorists, and maintain the security of the United States.

I don't have details for you on what his specific policies will be for the Caucasus and for Azerbaijan. But I think we can state with a fair degree of certainty that our interests here remain. They are important. And they will take a high priority in the foreign policy agenda. Energy security is an important issue for the United States and for the world. Our continued cooperation with good partners to fight terrorism, to fight proliferation and other global threats, those interests endure. We'll continue to work with our partners like Azerbaijan on them.

The United States has had a longstanding policy across several administrations of supporting the peaceful and independent and democratic development of the new states in this part of the world. That too is an enduring interest.

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And just to close on this subject let me mention that as you know, President Obama has been to Azerbaijan. He traveled to Azerbaijan, and he traveled here with Senator Richard Lugar. I have seen some of the pictures of his visit to Sangachal and elsewhere, and in connection with his trip to Azerbaijan I'm sure he was fully briefed on all of the important issues for your country.

So given the enduring interests we have in Azerbaijan, given President Obama's familiarity with Azerbaijan, there should be a good basis to strengthen the partnership between the U.S. and Azerbaijan.

In that connection I should mention that it was particularly disappointing for me as I went around to talk to my colleagues in Washington at the White House, in the Congress, at the State Department, to hear of the decision to take the radio stations off the air. It was a surprising and very disappointing decision that reverberated very negatively in all corridors in Washington. It was especially disappointing given that the United States had indicated our willingness and interest in resolving any technical or legal problems and given the important contribution that these stations have been making to the development of the media environment and to the development of the press in Azerbaijan as a strong institution of Azerbaijan's developing democracy.

I know that many Azerbaijanis listened to the stations. They were very popular. They were pioneering new forms of media engagement, call-in talk shows that promoted debate of ideas. And the fact that they reached out to government officials, to opposition, to independent analysts, to foreign observers, brought a wealth of diversity to the media environment that otherwise doesn't exist in Azerbaijan yet.

So, given our willingness as a partner of Azerbaijan to solve any legal problems that might exist, of course we want to observe the rule of law. The United States is a country of rule of law. We were disappointed that the radios were taken off the air and we've urged our Azerbaijani colleagues to consider finding a way that we could put them back on the air in the public interest while we negotiate any necessary intergovernmental legal arrangements.

It's unfortunate that this is one of the first things that will come to the attention of the new administration, but we are prepared to work in a constructive way to resolve the problem. And we think it's particularly important at this time that the stations are allowed to resume their broadcasting given that Azerbaijan is facing some very important national issues.

These important issues are not just international issues of developments in the region. They're also domestic issues. There will be a referendum held on the 18th of March with respect to some significant changes, proposed changes, to Azerbaijan's constitution. And let me start by saying that with respect to changes in the Azerbaijani constitution, only the people of Azerbaijan can make the decision, can make the judgment, as to whether these changes should be made or not. It's a matter for the Azerbaijani people to decide.

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So I'm not going to comment on the substance of the proposed changes, but I would like to note that for international partners who are interested in Azerbaijan's democratic development, the process by which these amendments are considered and decided is very important.

For Azerbaijani citizens to make an informed decision about the proposed amendments, they need to have the benefits of informed debate. They need to have the people who support the amendments outline their position and why they support them. They need to have the people who oppose the amendments outline their position and why they oppose them, so that they can weigh in their minds the pros and cons and make a decision.

An independent media facilitates this kind of debate and exchange and examination of ideas. Importantly, citizens need to be able to exercise their rights to assemble and associate and express their views. And in that connection some of the reports that we have seen that government officials have interfered in the process of citizens signing petitions in order to establish advocacy committees are very troubling.

In our view, any time that a country is contemplating fundamental changes to its most important document of government like a constitution, it's important to do it with the full participation of the population – with the population being able to engage fully and in a fair and transparent process of rigorous examination of pros and cons.

So as a strong supporter of Azerbaijan's development, we would hope that the government would look into any questions about interference in this process and that the government will support a transparent and fair process.

Unless Terry tells me I've forgotten anything, I'll stop there and take a few questions before I have to go.

Question: Well, what we have witnessed for a long time is that when any kind of a wrong turn happens in Azerbaijan, the attacks on the media, physical attacks on the media or any kind of wrongdoings during the elections, the United States of America limits itself only to expressing concerns. Remember when the American University was closed down in Azerbaijan, then the U.S. simply expressed concerns. So, instead of that university, now we have the branch office of Moscow University operating in Azerbaijan. As well as we're not just speaking about the educational spirit, some 25 percent of the educational field is now practiced in the Russian language. Do you think that simply by expressing concerns the U.S. facilitates Azerbaijan losing the democratic institutions?

Ambassador Derse: I think the thrust of your question is really to what extent is the United States willing to remain engaged in Azerbaijan in helping to develop a strong democracy and strong democratic institutions. I want to assure you and all those in Azerbaijan who are working to develop Azerbaijan as a democratic and independent state that we are interested in remaining engaged and we will remain engaged.

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Even in the area of education, we signed last year a new MOU on education and we're working now to develop some further engagement at all levels of the education system. Terry can give you more information on that later. And we'll remain engaged with our assistance programs in the area of democracy and governance, support for the media, and we are always looking for new ways, new ideas about how those programs can be made even more effective.

Question: USA has signed a charter with Ukraine and Georgia. Is the USA planning to sign such a contract with Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Derse: I don't have any details about a specific initiative at this time, but that may just be because we have a new administration and they'll be defining their policy towards Azerbaijan.

As you know, we have cooperation across a range of issues from support for Azerbaijan's economic and political development to our energy cooperation to our cooperation on economics, to our cooperation on security. All of those things are the pillars of a strong relationship.

As I said before, the best partners, however, are those who share not just our interests, but also our values.

Question: Actually I have two questions. First, concerning the radio stations closing down, you already said the United States of America has offered its assistance in solving the legal issues for the government of Azerbaijan. Would you please just tell us a little bit in more details about what kind of proposal did the U.S. make? And then to whom was this proposal made?

Ambassador Derse: We understood from the government of Azerbaijan that the law of Azerbaijan can permit foreign broadcasters to broadcast here on FM stations with an intergovernmental agreement, and our reading of the law suggests the same. So our Broadcasting Board of Governors has expressed their interest in negotiating an intergovernmental agreement that will allow the stations to continue operating – fully consistent with Azerbaijani law. We're awaiting a response and hope that we can begin these negotiations soon.

Question: You were also talking about the major changes and amendments to the main document of the country, which is the constitution. You were just mentioning in your earlier remarks that this is the people of Azerbaijan who can finally come up with the decision. However, we have a situation when the decision on scrapping the limitation of the presidency, the two-term presidency, came from the ruling party. So how would you comment on this?

Ambassador Derse: Well, as I said, the people who support this proposal should explain and defend why it's in the interest of the country to do this. The people who oppose it should have the opportunity to explain and defend their view of why it's not in the interest of the country to do it. Then the people of Azerbaijan should have the right to express their views based on their own decision after having heard the pros and cons from both sides.

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There is also a role for independent objective analysts who maybe don't have a position pro or con but can sit down and dispassionately explain from their perspective, from their independent perspective, the pros and cons.

I want to make sure everybody has a chance to ask at least one question before I have to go.

Question: Before the FM was taken from the radio stations, you told to Radio Liberty that this radio forms the integral part of U.S. or Azerbaijani ties. Now FM is taken away. Can we expect some changes in U.S. relations, U.S.-Azerbaijani ties?

Ambassador Derse: I think it's an issue that we need to work together to resolve – we and Azerbaijan.

As you know, the whole issue of media and freedom of the media and freedom of speech has been a sensitive and difficult issue in our relations for some time. It will remain a focus of U.S. policy because freedom of speech and freedom of the press is a fundamentally important value to Americans. So let's hope that we can find a constructive way to resolve this issue soon so that we don't have to see any negative effects over the long run.

Question: Quite recently we've had news in the media that the Russian transport of military weapons to the tune of \$800 million to Armenia. By doing so the Russians are now trying to create a new kind of a hot spot in Nagorno Karabakh as they did in South Ossetia, by keeping the escalation in the region. So, in this regard, I would like to ask a question. What can the United States of America do to help Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Derse: I don't have any information other than what has been in the press on this issue. Obviously the United States goals are for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict to be justly and peacefully resolved. We have worked hard as a member of the Minsk Group for years and we will continue to be committed to working for a peaceful and just solution.

Anything that would serve to disrupt that process of negotiation for a peaceful solution or to destabilize the situation we would look at very negatively. We would oppose. But as I said, I have no information other than what's in the press on that subject.

Question: You must have heard about the latest gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine. This enhances Azerbaijan's role in energy security, European energy security. And is the Obama administration going to a kind of boost energy cooperation with Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Derse: I think this recent dispute simply highlighted what we all knew to be true and what the United States has said for many years – that it is important to have a diversity of sources and routes of supply for energy. And that was graphically illustrated this year as it was in 2006.

So I think that Azerbaijan's role as a potential energy supplier and transit country, which has always been important, was highlighted by this recent incident. And as I said at the beginning,

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energy security will be an important focus for this administration. So I am confident that we will continue to work with Azerbaijan on matters of energy security.

Question: Again to get back to the issue of the radio stations and by asking that question, as you mentioned the United States of America is now waiting for the proposals coming from the Azerbaijani side. In the meantime the Azerbaijani governmental officials keep claiming that they are waiting for the proposals from the American side. Mr. Hasanov in one of his remarks said that within the framework of the intergovernmental agreement the radio stations can continue their broadcasting activities based on the short and medium radio waves. However, Mr. Hasanov completely excluded the possibility of using the FM radio frequencies.

So without using FM, what do you think? Doesn't it lose the whole sense?

Ambassador Derse: I think that there is room, there's scope in the law for us to examine the possibility. There's also a practice generally in the region of radios – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – broadcasting through affiliation agreements. That's sort of the standard in places where Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is operating.

There are a variety of options. I think the real question is: is there good will on both sides to find a constructive solution to this that serves the interests of the people of Azerbaijan in having these stations on the air because they contribute to the development of Azerbaijan's media environment? They contribute to an informed population able to exercise their democratic rights. The United States has expressed its interest in having a good-faith negotiation to conclude an intergovernmental agreement that will allow the radio stations to continue their work for years to come. We really hope that the government of Azerbaijan will find a way to allow them to resume their broadcasting immediately because, as I said before, we're at a very important moment when they're needed.

I think that would send a good signal to the incoming American administration and perhaps would help mitigate the negative repercussions of the preemptory closure of these stations on FM waves.

Thank you very much. I'll see you again.

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