

Ambassador Anne E. Derse
Interview with Jeyhun Asgarov, ANS Television
Regarding 2008 State Department Human Rights Report
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ANS: I have read 2008 Human Rights this morning, and, frankly speaking, if I was not living in Azerbaijan after reading I would have very bad impressions about Azerbaijan. So, why is this so critical?

Ambassador Derse: Thank you very much for the question, and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Human Rights Report, which is an important annual exercise that the U.S. has conducted since 1977. I think that you know we produce an annual Human Rights Report every year with respect to all countries in the world, including developed country partners and others. I think it's important for your listeners to understand that it is a global exercise. It's not a report that we do just on Azerbaijan.

It's also important to understand that it's a report that's done at the request of the US Congress. The US Congress has asked the US executive branch, the administration, to do these reports every year.

I wanted to mention that because I think it is important for people to understand that the Congress requests of the administration to do this every year, it reflects the importance that the American people, the average citizen, puts on democracy and human rights, and respect for human rights. We intend it to be constructive criticism.

We very much believe in the United States that democracy is a dynamic process and respect for human rights is a dynamic process. You can always do better. In the United States, for example, we welcome as an open society constructive criticism of our policies and practices, and then we try to employ the information we gain to improve our system of governance and our policies with respect to human rights.

We also believe and we know that we have affirmative obligations under the universal declaration of human rights in the UN, in the context of the Helsinki commitments; all members of those organizations have an affirmative commitment and obligation to try to promote human rights and respect for human rights worldwide. All countries that are members – or all countries that adhere to the obligations of the UN and in the Helsinki process – have agreed that human rights are universal values. They're the legitimate interests of every country.

The United States takes those obligations very seriously, the obligation to promote respect for human rights, because that is the will of the American people. And every U.S. administration, whether Republican or Democrat, has taken that obligation seriously. And we expect that this new administration, as those in the past have done, will also be

pursuing policies that will uphold our continued efforts to promote human rights and democracy. And we'll do it with respect and in the spirit of constructive criticism.

Now with respect to this year's report, the basic conclusion was that the human rights situation in Azerbaijan is poor and in some areas has worsened. For those who follow this process carefully and have read last year's report or the report the year before, you will see that, unfortunately, there are no surprises. The issues that we raised in years past were raised again in this year's report.

There were areas in which we did see a worsening of conditions: for example, a very important area, media freedom; and with respect to Azerbaijan's obligations on freedom of assembly and freedom of association, for example.

With respect to media freedom, three journalists remain in jail, and many observers, and we talked to all kinds of people in preparing this report – government, non-government, individual citizens, civil society – many observers agree that they're in jail for reasons related to their work.

Organizations that monitor instances of physical or verbal attacks or assaults on journalists have reported that the instances, the numbers of such cases have gone up in the past year. We see no evidence that there has been a strong, sustained effort to investigate or prosecute those attacks of violence against journalists, and that sends a message. It sends a message that such attacks can be conducted with impunity. This has a dampening effect, obviously, on the ability of the press to play the role that it should play in a thriving open democracy: that is to ensure that the government remains accountable to the people, to ensure that the people are informed and have the information that they need in order to engage in public and political life, and to ensure that the government does respect their fundamental human rights.

A free media helps to facilitate, as you know, a vibrant public debate. That brings us to the second area in which we saw deterioration last year, and that is freedom of association and freedom of assembly.

The important political events last year, the election, for example, offered an opportunity for Azerbaijan to make progress in restoring freedom of association and freedom of assembly.

Why is this important? As you know, elections are not just about the technical conduct of the election on election day. It is important that elections be conducted in accord with international standards, and we did see progress in that area this year. It's important to acknowledge that progress in the technical conduct of the elections. There were important changes made to electoral laws: for example, the law of freedom of assembly, which really offered a platform, again, for Azerbaijan to show progress in this important area. But unfortunately the law was interpreted restrictively. The people's right to associate and assemble was not advanced and international observers generally agreed

that while there was progress in the technical administration of the elections, the very important pre-election environment remained restrictive.

So the United States will continue to urge that Azerbaijan meets its international commitments to allow the people the right to assemble, to associate, to freely express their views, and allow the media to play the role it should play, facilitating very open and vibrant debate.

In that connection, as you know, foreign radio stations, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, lost their license to continue broadcasting on FM airwaves in Azerbaijan as of January 1, 2009. This affected most of all the Azerbaijani people, who lost an important source, alternative source of independent information. Many Azerbaijanis have expressed to me their strong hope that it will be possible for us to work out an agreement with the government of Azerbaijan so that the radios can return to the FM airways – and to the TV, in the case of Voice of America.

We understand that this is a question of Azerbaijani law, and the United States – as a country of the rule of law – of course wants to be in full compliance with Azerbaijani law. So, to that end, we have proposed a bilateral intergovernmental agreement that we hope will be the basis for resolving the problem so the stations can return to the broadcasting waves here.

ANS: From time to time, people who analyze the Human Rights Report consider this a biased report. And their view is that political interests – and not the realities – provide the basis for drafting the report. How would you comment on this?

Ambassador Derse: As you know, as we were discussing earlier, the United States prepares human rights reports on every country in the world. That's the requirement the Congress has put on us. The reason that we do this is because the American people value highly the respect for human rights, and they want their government to be very active, proactive, in carrying out its obligations under the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Helsinki Process and in other international instruments to proactively promote human rights. That's the motivation for the human rights reports.

Now we do, of course, in the United States start from the premise that in democracies governments are accountable to their people and that governments have an obligation to ensure that their people can enjoy universal human rights that all people in the world are entitled to. The United States will continue to stand strongly in support of those principles, and to stand strongly with all those in the world who are working to advance those principles.

ANS: Madam Ambassador, the working group on military cooperation between the United States and Azerbaijan had a meeting this week in Germany. What types of issues were discussed there? And also, given the confirmed closure of Manas air base, was the issue of using Azerbaijan's territory as a support platform for your military troops in Afghanistan discussed?

Ambassador Derse: With respect to Manas air base, we have seen that the parliament voted and the president signed the law, but the base is continuing to operate and will continue to operate for some time under our existing agreement.

We do have many options for continuing to support operations in Afghanistan, which of course is very important not just to the United States but to the world to see Afghanistan succeed.

So we're actively examining the many options for supporting continued operations in Afghanistan. We're talking to many partners. We've talked to partners in this part of the world. Azerbaijan is a strong partner already in Afghanistan. And Azerbaijan has an obvious role as a regional transport hub. It is, I believe, one of the government's goals to help develop Azerbaijan as a strong regional transport outlet between East and West, and, in that connection, we are talking to the government of Azerbaijan, and we have sent some shipments through Azerbaijan of supplies and non-military equipment to support operations in Afghanistan. We greatly appreciate that cooperation.

ANS: What about the meeting in Stuttgart between United States and Azerbaijani military officials?

Ambassador Derse: Maybe I didn't understand your question exactly.

The meeting that took place in Germany was part of a regular series of meetings between our two countries in terms of our military to military cooperation and our support for Azerbaijan's goals of defense transformation, and also in support of your NATO IPAP [Individual Partnership Action Plan] process.

You know the United States has been a strong partner for some years in supporting Azerbaijan's progress under its NATO IPAP, and that we have a joint work plan with specific objectives in specific areas to improve Azerbaijan's military interoperability with NATO and understanding of those processes. That was the focus of this regular meeting that we had in Germany last week.

ANS: How do you characterize the US-Azerbaijani relations after changing of the U.S. Administration? What is the Obama Administration's view on Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Derse: The United States has very important interests in Azerbaijan, and we've been strong partners with Azerbaijan since you first became independent, based on the fundamental principle that I am 100 percent sure the Obama Administration will adopt, as has every other administration since you became independent, and that principle is that the countries in this region have the right to chart their own course. They're independent, sovereign countries. We want them to develop peacefully, stably, prosperously, democratically and independently. In the United States that's the foundation for our policy in this region towards Azerbaijan.

And let me just say, I know in this part of the world, where for many centuries great powers have been engaged in important great games, and smaller countries have been subjected to the will of bigger countries, it may be hard to believe the United States when we say we want Azerbaijan to be as an independent country that bases its policies on its national interests. But we do. That's the U.S. policy. I'm quite sure that the Obama Administration will base its policies towards Azerbaijan on that principle as well.

And I'm quite sure that the Obama Administration will want to continue to deepen the strong partnership we enjoy with Azerbaijan, and I'll tell you why. We have interests in this part of the world that are very important. We have interests in energy security and the important role Azerbaijan can play as a producer country, as a transit country, for energy resources from the Caspian region.

We both share very important interests in continuing the fight against global terrorism. And, in this connection, I want to draw your attention to the very important message that President Obama has sent to the Muslim world; to the whole world, but with particular focus on the Muslim world. The United States, he made clear, does not equate Islam and terrorism. The United States, in fact, wants to have a new partnership – a positive partnership, a productive and constructive partnership – with the countries of the Muslim world.

We are already reaching out to countries, including Azerbaijan, who can be good partners with us in this effort. I think that this important role that Azerbaijan can play as a country that has democratic aspirations, as a Muslim country with democratic aspirations, with a history of democracy in the First Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, a secular country, a tolerant country, a country that is developing on the basis of a market economy, Azerbaijan can be a very valuable partner in that effort.

To come back to the reason for this interview, which was to discuss our Human Rights Report, we often hear about the important need for stability in this region, and indeed, it is an important need. We believe that true stability comes on the basis of a strong representative democracy. It's rooted in the mandate of the people. It's very important that we continue to work together as partners on the issues in the Human Rights Report, and that we find a very constructive and positive way to work together as partners.

Let me just say again, the United States views this kind of report as constructive criticism. The United States welcomes this kind of criticism about our system. The United States welcomes criticism and we received a lot of criticism – domestic and international – for some steps that we took, for example, as we were dealing with a very important national threat. As you know, it was a very open and very tough debate and discussion, with a lot of criticism leveled at certain practices, and it resulted in a reexamination and some changes in our policy.

That's the basic dynamic of democracy.

In closing, I'd just mention that Secretary Clinton in presenting the Human Rights Report this year, underscored that what we are really interested in here is working with partners to develop respect for human rights that results in changes in the lives of people: real changes, tangible changes, in the lives of people so they can enjoy their fundamental human rights.

She mentioned the importance of working not just with governments, but with non-governmental organizations, with religious organizations, with businesses, with youth, with women. She has been a very strong proponent of women's rights, as you know, throughout her career in order to develop this broad-based respect for human rights. And she underscored again our fundamental belief that U.S. security and U.S. prosperity is enhanced when people in our partner countries can enjoy their fundamental human rights.

So it's still early for me to give you the detailed specifics on policies on a number of issues. We're still putting key officials in place. But I think even in these early days the kinds of issues I've talked to you about give you an indication of the direction.

ANS: Do you share the optimism of the U.S. Ambassador to Armenia regarding the possible signing of framework agreement on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict this summer? Are you also so optimistic?

Ambassador Derse: We all hope that a resolution can be found to this terrible conflict as soon as possible. But as in the Minsk Group, our negotiators – our facilitators of the process – I think the people who will decide when the time is right, when the conditions are right for concluding an agreement are the two parties. So I would refer you to them with respect to the prospects for an agreement this summer, or any time.

ANS: You talked of Obama's message to Islamic world. Last week Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki in his interview with ANS said that Iran views positively dialogue with the United States, but Iran is waiting to see the real steps of the United States. Official Tehran thinks that the nuclear issue is closed. I wonder what type of steps the U.S. plans to take? And have you accepted their nuclear program?

Ambassador Derse: If I understand your question correctly, it's about prospects for some kind of dialogue between the United States and Iran. Is that correct?

ANS: Yes.

Ambassador Derse: Well, as you know, we have an ongoing review in the United States, a very important review of our policies with respect to our relations, well, with respect to the situation in Iran. We'll have to wait until that review is concluded for me to give you any specifics on what will constitute our new policy. But once again, I think there has already been some indication on directions.

First of all, President Obama, like President Bush before him, has indicated that the United States has great respect for the people of Iran, and we look to the day when we can have a relationship with a democratic Iran, a free Iran, where the people of Iran can enjoy their fundamental human rights like others in the world. President Obama has also indicated already that we should be willing to engage with Iran to discuss both the areas of difference and the areas where we might be able to make progress. But – and this is a very important but – President Obama has also underscored that the policies that the Iranian government is pursuing today – the threats against Israel, the support for terrorism in various places in the Middle East and Iraq, the continuation of what we believe to be a nuclear weapons program that threatens to undermine peace and stability in the region of the world – these things are very serious issues and we have to find ways to address them.

We have opposed and will continue to oppose Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon. The international community cannot have confidence that Iran is not pursuing a nuclear weapons program unless Iran is willing to fully disclose to the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] all of its nuclear activities and it is willing to allow the IAEA to verify that information.

So the United States continues, along with our international partners – as you know there are a number of UN Security Council Resolutions already passed that brings the international community together – we continue to ask, insist, require that Iran cease its uranium-enrichment activities, its heavy water-related processing activities, number one. Number two, that it work with the IAEA to fully disclose all the information the IAEA requires with respect to Iran's nuclear activities. And, number three, it work with the IAEA cooperatively to allow the IAEA to verify the veracity and the completeness of all that information.

I look forward to meeting with you again and talking to you about our policy once our policy review is completed.

ANS: Thank you.

Ambassador Derse: Thank you very much.

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