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The President's News Conference With Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany

June 26, 2009

President Obama. Willkommen. It's my pleasure to welcome Chancellor Merkel to the White House. We had a very productive discussion in the Oval Office, and our meetings will continue this afternoon.

Chancellor Merkel's visit is the latest chapter in the long partnership between our two countries: the service of our men and women in uniform, who stood together through a long cold war and who serve today in Afghanistan; the innovation of our entrepreneurs, who helped to sustain our economies; and the bonds of friendship and trust between our people, which are unbreakable.

In recent months, I've come to appreciate these bonds through my partnership with Chancellor Merkel. We've worked closely together at the G–20 summit in London, the NATO summit, and the EU-U.S. summit in Prague. I value her wisdom and her candor, and I admire very much her leadership and her pragmatic approach to getting things done. She and the German people have welcomed me to Germany twice, during the NATO summit and again this month in Dresden, and today I'm pleased to return the hospitality.

Chancellor Merkel shares my belief that no single nation can meet the challenges of our time alone. Today we reaffirmed that the United States and Germany, one of our closest allies and an indispensable partner, will continue to play a leadership role across the range of challenges.

We're building on the bold steps we took at the G–20 summit by aggressively confronting the global economic crisis. I underscored our commitment to strengthening financial regulations, and I welcomed Chancellor Merkel's commitment to reform. As we prepare for the G–8 summit in Italy and look ahead to the G–20 summit in Pittsburgh, we agreed on the need to avoid protectionism and to embrace concerted, collective action that creates sustainable growth and shared prosperity.

I reiterated America's commitment to stand with Germany and lead in confronting the energy and climate change crisis. And let me say, Chancellor, that I've been very impressed by Germany's foresight and commitment to clean energy, which I saw in the many wind turbines as I traveled over the German landscape. And it's my hope that the United States will match that commitment today when our House of Representatives votes on a critical energy bill that will promote a new generation of clean, renewable energy in our country.

The Chancellor and I discussed the tragic situation in Iran. Today we speak with one voice: The rights of the Iranian people to assemble, to speak freely, to have their voices heard, those are universal aspirations. And their bravery in the face of brutality is a testament to their enduring pursuit of justice. The violence perpetrated against them is outrageous. Despite the Government's efforts to keep the world from bearing witness to that violence, we see it, and we condemn it. As I've said before, the Iranian people will be the ultimate judge of their Government's actions. But if the Iranian Government desires the respect of the international community then it must respect the rights and heed the will of its people.

The Iranian Government also has other responsibilities. Working with Germany, our other European partners, as well as Russia and China, we're working to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capacity and unleashing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. We will encourage Iran to take a path that respects international norms and leads to greater security and prosperity for the Iranian people.

We also discussed the broader Middle East and the need for all parties to redouble their efforts to achieve lasting peace, including two states, Israel and a Palestinian state, living side by side in peace and security. And during our recent visit to Buchenwald, Chancellor Merkel spoke eloquently of Germany's everlasting responsibility to the safety and security of Israel. Going forward, Germany will remain a critical partner in our efforts to bring safety and security to Israelis, the Arab States, and Palestinians, who must reject violence and recognize Israel's right to exist.

We agreed that confronting violent extremism and preventing terrorist attacks demands our continued commitment and a comprehensive strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This includes dismantling and disrupting, defeating Al Qaida and its allies. Germany has been a strong partner in the NATO mission in Afghanistan, and we honor those who serve there, including American and German soldiers who gave their lives there this week.

As I prepare to visit Moscow, Chancellor Merkel and I reaffirmed our commitment to a more substantive relationship with Russia, working with the Russian Government on issues where we agree and honestly confronting those areas where we disagree. In Moscow, we will continue to explore ways in which the United States and Russia can advance our common interests, including our joint commitment to reducing our nuclear arsenals and strengthening the global nonproliferation regime.

Meeting these challenges will be neither quick nor easy. But I'm reminded of a lesson from my recent visit to Dresden. Chancellor Merkel took me to a timeless Baroque church devastated in the Second World War. For decades it lay in ruin, a symbol of war. But thanks to the donations of Germans and Americans and people around the world, it was rebuilt, and its glory was restored. Today, it stands as a stunning symbol of what's possible when countries and friends work together. And in that spirit, I want to welcome my friend Chancellor Merkel.

Chancellor Merkel. Well, thank you very much, and let me say that we very much like to remember—and when I say "we," I mean the whole of the German people. We have very fond memories, I should say, of your visit to Dresden, and also very moving memories of your visit, Mr. President, to the former concentration camp of Buchenwald.

We celebrated on the 23d of May 60-year anniversary of the Federal Republic of Germany, and we're more than aware of the fact that Germany would not stand as it stands today had not our American friends and partners helped us after the end of the Second World War. But we also know that now, in this 21st century, challenges cannot be met by just one nation going it alone. So we need to stand together, we need to do this together, and in this spirit, we conducted our talks.

We had a number of issues on our agenda today. I would like to underline that the Iranian people needs to be given the right to peaceful demonstrations; that the Iranian people has the right to have votes recounted and the election results substantiated; that the rights of human beings, of individuals, of citizens are indivisible the world over, and also apply, therefore, to the Iranian people.

We have to work to it that the Iranian nuclear program is stopped, that Iran does not get possession of a nuclear weapon. In this context, it is very desirable, of course—that also looms large on our agenda—that the peace process in the Middle East gains momentum, that there is progress, visible progress here, because that too might send out a positive message to those forces in the Middle East who are not ready to be peaceful.

Germany and America will work very closely together on this, just as on the questions related to arms reduction and disarmament. We would like to wish you, Mr. President Obama, the best of success during the upcoming visit to Russia. A partnership with Russia is very important for Germany, also important for the European Union. But we have every interest also in seeing a very good relationship between the United States of America and Russia. We need Russia, for example, we need it looking at the problems we have with Iran, and we want to forge a common position wherever possible with Russia, but also with China. We've done that over the years in the format of the United Nations with the number of resolutions that that needs to be continued.

We dealt with the preparation of the G–8 meeting that is upcoming and also the Pittsburgh meeting of the G–20. We're on a good path here. I think there's been progress.

You have made very important steps here in the United States as regards—as to financial market regulation. We and the European Union are also working on that. And in the summer of this year we can then sort of take stock and see where these regulations meet and try to create a level playing field for the rest of the world. It makes it possible to boost competition, but that avoids a future crisis of this magnitude.

We are very grateful that we are also able, together with the United States, to work on principles as to how matters are to be taken into the future after this crisis. But we now have to emerge, obviously, from this crisis and recovery of our economies is a great precondition for further progress.

We talked about climate. Just as I did this morning when I was in Congress, I said that this is indeed a sea change that I see this upcoming bill that was debated today in the House on climate. That this really points to the fact that the United States are very serious on climate. And this has—it should not be underestimated what sort of opportunity this brings to us to come to a good, a sustainable result during the Copenhagen conference.

I have been in many, many climate negotiations and debates in my country, in the European Union, so I know what's at stake when you talk about reduction targets, how tricky that is when you try to come to certain common ground; so I wish you every success. I hope that you will come to a good result when the vote is taken. I think it's so important that we are at one in saying we want a success in Copenhagen. We need to talk to the emerging countries and the emerging economies as to their possible contribution. But the fact that with the United States we stand where we stand today is an enormous success, which I would not have thought possible a year ago, let me be very serious.

Thank you very much for the gracious hospitality offered to me and for the very extensive exchange of views that we were having.

President Obama. We've got time for a few questions, so I'm going to start with Jeff Zeleny of New York Times.

Iran

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. A couple weeks ago on Iran you suggested that there were few differences with Mr. Mousavi and President Ahmadi-nejad. I'm wondering if the ensuing time since you made those comments have changed your view on that? And will you apologize for interfering in Iranian affairs, as President Ahmadi-nejad suggested you should, or does he need to apologize for saying that you are, quote, "someone like President Bush?" [*Laughter*]

And Chancellor Merkel——

President Obama. Well, Jeff, how many questions are you getting in here, brother? [*Laughter*] I think you got two in, and we want to make sure we give some other folks a chance.

Well, first of all, what I said originally was that given the structure of the Iranian Government and that power resided ultimately with Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, and given that there weren't at that point significant differences on the core national security interests that we initially had talked about diplomatically—i.e., nuclear weapons development in Iran, the exportation of terrorist activity—that we could not automatically assume that there would be a huge shift on those particular national security issues depending on who won that election.

I think what's absolutely clear is over the course of subsequent days, that Mousavi has shown to have captured the imagination or the spirit of forces within Iran that were interested in opening up, and that he has become a representative of many of those people who are on the streets and who have displayed extraordinary bravery and extraordinary courage.

I continue to believe that, ultimately, it's up to the Iranian people to make decisions about who their leaders are going to be. But as I said this week, and I've said previously, a government that treats its own citizens with that kind of ruthlessness and violence and that cannot deal with peaceful protestors who are trying to have their voices heard in a equally peaceful way, I think, has moved outside of universal norms, international norms, that are important to uphold.

And Chancellor Merkel and I share a—share the belief that what's happened in Iran is unacceptable when it comes to violence against its own citizens, and we call on the Iranian Government to uphold those international principles.

What was the second part of your question there, Jeff?

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I was wondering if you had a response to his call for you to apologize, or if he should apologize for calling you someone like Bush.

President Obama. I don't think—I don't take Mr. Ahmadi-nejad's statements seriously about apologies, particularly given the fact that the United States has gone out of its way not to interfere with the election process in Iran. And I'm really not concerned about Mr. Ahmadi-nejad apologizing to me. I would suggest that Mr. Ahmadi-nejad think carefully about the obligations he owes to his own people. And he might want to consider looking at the families of those who've been beaten or shot or detained. And that's where I think Mr. Ahmadi-nejad and others need to answer their questions.

Relocation of Guantanamo Bay Detainees

Q. Mr. President, did you talk with the Chancellor about the issue of Guantanamo and the closure? What do you expect from Germany? Do you expect that criminals can come to our country as they can do to Italy, as Prime Minister Berlusconi promised?

[*At this point, the reporter asked a question in German, and it was translated as follows.*]

Interpreter. Madame Chancellor, could you make any commitments on this?

President Obama. Well, first of all, I have discussed in the past with Chancellor Merkel our interest in closing Guantanamo. I think it has become a symbol internationally of the United States straying from some of our core ideals in our very legitimate pursuit of our national security and our concerns about international terrorism. And we are going to be looking for the help of our friends and our allies as we execute that process, one that's going to be admittedly difficult politically.

And so in the past I've spoken not only to Chancellor Merkel, but other European leaders. We're pleased that the EU provided a legal framework for how to evaluate the detainees that are in Guantanamo. And we have seen a positive response from countries across Europe in the general sense of wanting to help.

And I think the particulars, the specifics of what particular detainee might be transferred where, those are still very preliminary discussions. And I think that Chancellor Merkel, she has an obligation, obviously, to make sure that Germany's national security interests come first in these considerations. We understand that, and we expect that we will continue to have constructive negotiations on some of these issues. But there have been no particular requests made about X number of detainees being placed by such and such a date, and Chancellor Merkel has not made commitments that are specific in that sort. The conversations have remained at a fairly general level at this point.

Chancellor Merkel. Well, we did address that issue, as it was said. And I made it very clear that we're not going to shirk that responsibility. Our Minister of the Interior is responsible for looking into the matter, and I said that it might be a good idea to continue to have very close contacts to the Home Secretary here in the United States. These contacts are already in existence because as we've gone through—the question of what is to happen with the former detainees of Guantanamo is one thing; we're at the beginning of a process. We're discussing that.

But let me tell you yet again very clearly, we are not going to shirk that particular responsibility, but it needs to be brought in line, as the President says, with the legal situation we have in Germany. We are showing a constructive spirit, and we will come to a result. I'm confident of that.

President Obama. Don Gonyea [National Public Radio].

Iran/Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, Mr. President, Madame Chancellor. A question for each of you. On Iran, do the events of the past few weeks and even of the past couple of days indefinitely stall your ability to have any kind of meaningful dialog with them on the nuclear issue? And frankly, are you just losing precious time on that issue?

And then on Iraq, an upsurge in violence—a lot of bombings, a lot of deaths—does that give you any second thoughts on the coming deadline to pull the combat troops from the cities?

President Obama. Well, on the Iranian issue, I think that we are still waiting to see how the situation in Iran plays out. Obviously, I continue to be deeply disturbed by reports of violence that are taking place there. I continue to call on the Iranian Government to deal with people who are peacefully protesting, wanting their voices to be heard, in a way that respects international principles.

There is no doubt that any direct dialog or diplomacy with Iran is going to be affected by the events of the last several weeks. And we don't yet know how any potential dialog will have been affected until we see what's happened inside of Iran.

I will tell you—and this was the point that I was making earlier in response to Jeff's question—we have a continuing set of national security interests that are going to have to be dealt with because the clock is ticking. Iran is developing nuclear capacity at a fairly rapid clip; they have been doing so for quite some time. Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would trigger an arms race in the Middle East that would be bad not just for U.S. security, it would be bad for the security of the entire region, including, by the way, Iranian security.

And so even as we clearly speak out in a unified voice in opposition to the violence that's taken place in Iran, we have to also be steady in recognizing that the prospect of Iran with a nuclear weapon is a big problem, and that we've got to work in concert with the international community to try to prevent that from happening.

So my expectation would be—and we did discuss this—that you're going to continue to see some multilateral discussions with Iran. There is a structure that exists, the P–5-plus-1 talks that include Russia and China. There are going to be discussions that continue on the international stage around Iranians'—Iran's nuclear program. I think the direct dialog between the United States and Iran and how that proceeds, I think we're going to have to see how that plays itself out in the days and weeks ahead.

On Iraq, obviously, any time there's a bombing in Iraq we are concerned. Any time there's loss of innocent life or the loss of military personnel, we grieve for their families and it makes us pay attention. I will tell you, if you look at the overall trend, despite some of these high-profile bombings, Iraq's security situation has continued to dramatically improve. And when I speak to General Odierno and Chris Hill, our Ambassador in Iraq, they continue to be, overall, very positive about the trend lines in Iraq.

I think there's still some work to do. I think the Maliki Government is not only going to have to continue to strengthen its security forces, but it's also going to have to engage in the kind of political give-and-take leading up to the national elections that we've been talking about for quite some time. And I haven't seen as much political progress in Iraq, negotiations between the Sunni, the Shi'a, and the Kurds, as I would like to see.

So there are always going to be—let me not say "always"—there will continue to be incidents of violence inside of Iraq for some time. They are at a much, much lower level than they were in the past. I think the biggest challenge right now is going to be less those attacks by remnants of Al Qaida in Iraq or other insurgent groups, and the bigger challenge is going to be, can the Shi'a, the Sunni, and the Kurds resolve some of these major political issues having to do with federalism, having to do with boundaries, having to do with how oil revenues are shared. If those issues get resolved, then I think you will see a further normalization of the security atmosphere inside of Iraq.

Chancellor Merkel. On Iran, over the past few weeks, we have seen horrifying scenes, looking at how, for example, the security forces there dealt with demonstrators. We will not forget this. And let me say that we shall do everything in order to identify the exact number of victims, who those victims were, how they dealt with those demonstrators.

In this day and age of the 21st century, Iran cannot count on the world community turning a blind eye to this. We are able to see this through images. My own experience from the GDR

tells me that it is so important that one knows when one is in such a situation that people somewhere else in the world are knowledgeable of what is happening to you.

And irrespective of that, the question that Iran must not be allowed to regain the possession of their weapon is even more important, without bringing, on the other hand, those in Iran who would like to have a different system, bringing them into difficulties. I mean, we would like to have a diplomatic solution to preventing Iran from gaining possession of a nuclear weapon.

So I completely agree with the President here. We have to bring Russia and China alongside in order to see to it that this solution is brought about. The more resolve, the more determination we show in doing that, the better our prospects also for the Middle East peace process. And I think we can be successful also in the Middle East process, and then be successful in our talks with Iran.

President's Impression of Germany/Environment

[*A reporter began to ask a question in German, but the interpreter could not give a translation because of a technical problem. The reporter then continued in English as follows.*]

Q. [*Inaudible*]—where's Germany's place? And I'm asking for two reasons. You have a half-sister, Auma; she studied in Heidelberg, and I wanted to ask it already when I wrote the biography about your life. And what did she tell you about Germany? Has she had any unpleasant experience as an African woman in Germany in the eighties?

And a second question, you visited Germany twice, but you broke with the tradition of your predecessors to give interviews to the media of the host country before. Why is this? And how long do we have to wait—[*laughter*]—before you give—award a German outlet with an interview? Maybe until November 9, or will it be a little bit earlier? I would be very interested in that question.

And to the Chancellor——

President Obama. Would you like that interview? [*Laughter*]

Q. If this is a commitment, I would appreciate that very, very much. [*Laughter*]

Chancellor Merkel. We have to talk about that. [*Laughter*]

Q. Oh, you are coordinating your media policy already? [*Laughter*]

[*The reporter then continued in German, and it was translated as follows.*]

Interpreter. My second question is addressed to the Chancellor. You already made a distinction yourself on climate policy between the House of Representatives and the Senate. But how optimistic are you, after the talks you've had here, that more stringent rules on climate change will be successful, not only in the House but also pass through the Senate? What would be the consequence of that if they are not able to do this before the Copenhagen conference? How, then, would America deal with this situation? Have you received a reply to this?

President Obama. First of all, in terms of my emotional maps—[*laughter*]—the times that I have visited Germany have been extraordinary, and I've had a wonderful time. And the people of Germany have, I think, received me with great warmth and affection. Keep in mind that, obviously, I visited Germany even before I was elected President, and we had a pretty good rally in Berlin. It wasn't bad. And so I will always have, I think, a warm spot in my heart

for Germany, in part because of the response and the reaction that I've received from the German people.

I will tell you that part of the warmth I feel toward Germany is because I like Chancellor Merkel a lot. I've now dealt with a lot of world leaders, and I think that Chancellor Merkel is smart, practical, and I trust her when she says something. And so that kind of approach is exactly what you want from an international partner. And I've very much enjoyed my interactions with her and her team.

My sister, she obviously had a great time in Heidelberg. When I met her, she was going out with a German guy. And I don't want to comment on how that played itself out. [*Laughter*] That may have an impact on how she views Germany right now, but that's—[*laughter*]—I think a little too personal for a press conference.

Even though the question wasn't directed at me, I do want to make this point about climate change. Europe, in many ways, over the last several years has moved more rapidly than the United States on addressing this issue. And I've been very blunt and frank with Chancellor Merkel that we are still working through, creating the framework where we can help lead the international effort. I think that this legislation that we are seeking to pass indicates enormous progress from where we have been. But I think we all recognize that there's going to be more to do, and that the United States is going to have to work with Germany and other advanced economies to make sure that our obligations are clear. And then we're going to have to work with the emerging economies, which have enormous potential for growth, but, unfortunately, also have enormous potential for contributing to greenhouse gases, so that their obligations are clear.

And I'm the first one to acknowledge that the United States, over the last several years, has not been where we need to be. We're not going to get there all in one fell swoop, but I'm very proud of the progress that's being made, and I think that the energy bill that's being debated in the House is an example of that progress. If we can get that framework in place, I'm confident the United States can be an important partner in this process.

Chancellor Merkel. Well, you will understand my refraining from commenting in any way on the behavior of members of parliament who, after all, are free in their decisions. That would be totally counterproductive. But I must say that I'm very gratified to note that the President feels 100 percent committed to this issue, which has become apparent in all of our talks. He wants to see to it that Copenhagen becomes a success.

We are both convinced that this question of climate change amounts to much more than just numbers and targets. It means that we take a commitment and shoulder a responsibility for those countries in the world that will be far more heavily affected by climate change, but that we also feel committed to ensuring energy security for our own countries. Dependence on raw materials, on commodities, is also something that can bring us into very unpleasant political dependence. So it's always good to look at new technology, to use, for example, when you have finite fuel sources, to deal with them responsibly and economically. And this is something that we've come out very strongly in favor in our own countries, and we do it internationally.

Let me, perhaps, say something on Auma in Heidelberg. The book, "Dreams From My Father", she is telling us a little bit about her own impressions in Heidelberg. You probably read it. I found this very interesting because, on the one hand, she describes us as a country where quite quickly you have the impression that each and every one needs to fend for his or

her self; there is not this big sort of community, the sort of family network that protects you that you have in Africa.

But then, as you go on throughout the book, Auma tells you it was also something good, maybe, because it strengthens people's own sort of awareness of their own self, of their own responsibility. And I think it's very important to look at this when we deal, for example, with Africa—that on the one hand we accept that the way that we live may sometimes be very tough, tough on people, but on the other hand, we should also, perhaps, in our dealings with the Africans, address how certain things can be dealt with more efficiently.

So it was, for me, a very enriching experience to read this book, understand a lot of things about her. And I think Heidelberg, after all, got through this very well—she——

President Obama. Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 11:58 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Iranian Presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi; Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq. Chancellor Merkel referred to Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schaeuble of Germany; and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet A. Napolitano. A reporter referred to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy. Chancellor Merkel and some reporters spoke in German, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Joint new conferences :: Germany, Chancellor Merkel.

Names: Ahmadi-nejad, Mahmud; Hill, Christopher R.; Khamenei, Ali Hoseini-; Maliki, Nuri al-; Merkel, Angela; Mousavi, Mir Hossein; Obama, Auma; Odierno, Raymond T.

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Subjects: Afghanistan : NATO, role; Afghanistan : Terrorism; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Nonproliferation efforts; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, reduction; Civil rights : Freedom of speech ; Commerce, international : Financial regulations, modernization efforts ; Commerce, international : Global financial markets :: Stabilization efforts; Commerce, international : Global financial markets :: Unrest; Commerce, international : Group of Eight (G–8) nations; Commerce, international : Group of Twenty (G–20) nations; Cuba : Guantanamo Bay, U.S. Naval Base, closure of detention facilities ; Energy : Developing countries, energy sources; Energy : Energy legislation, proposed; Environment : Climate change; Europe : European Union :: Relations with U.S. ; Germany : Afghanistan :: German military forces, casualties; Germany : Chancellor; Germany : Energy :: Solar and wind energy ; Germany : Relations with Israel; Germany : Relations with Russia; Germany : Relations with U.S.; Germany : Relations with U.S. ; Iran : Democracy and human rights issues; Iran : Democracy efforts ; Iran : Democracy efforts; Iran : Diplomatic relations with U.S. ; Iran : Diplomatic relations with U.S.; Iran : International diplomatic efforts; Iran : Nuclear weapons development; Iran : President ; Iran : Presidential election, 2009 ; Iran : Presidential election, 2009; Iran : Supreme Leader; Iran : Terrorism, sponsorship; Iraq : Civilian casualties; Iraq : Democracy efforts; Iraq : Elections; Iraq : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Iraq : Iraqi military and security forces ; Iraq : Multi-National Force—Iraq, commanding general; Iraq : Prime Minister; Iraq : Reconciliation efforts; Iraq : U.S. Ambassador; Iraq : U.S. military forces ::

Casualties; Israel : Relations with Germany; Middle East : Peace and democracy efforts ; North Atlantic Treaty Organization ; Pakistan : Terrorism; Russia : Nuclear weapons stockpile, reduction; Russia : President Obama's visit; Russia : Relations with U.S.; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Review and disposition of detainees at Guantanamo Bay; Terrorism : Review and disposition of detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

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