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Transcript of Remarks and Replies to Media Questions by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Following Talks with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem, Moscow, March 14, 2006

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Foreign Minister Lavrov: Esteemed colleagues,

Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem and I have held thorough, full-scale talks on the whole range of Russian-Syrian relations. These relations have a priority character for us. They rest on long-standing, good traditions. Today's meeting in the Kremlin, where Russian President Vladimir Putin received Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem, is testimony to this. We have held an overview of our bilateral relations and noted with particular satisfaction that all the agreements reached during the visit to Moscow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are being implemented. Our trade-and-economic ties are growing rapidly, but, what is even more pleasant, investment cooperation is growing much faster. The level of investments last year was the same as it had over all previous five years. Russian companies together with their Syrian partners show special interest in developing joint projects in the oil and gas sphere and in the electric power industry. Today we discussed very promising outlines for the development of such cooperation, including the implementation of joint projects involving third countries.

We noted the development of our military technological cooperation, which is being effected in strict accordance with the national legislation of each country and international norms. The entire range of our trade-and-economic ties will be the main item on the agenda of a regular session of the Intergovernmental Bilateral Commission on Economic and Commercial Cooperation which will be held in Moscow over the next two days.

As to our cooperation in international affairs, the main attention was, of course, devoted to the necessity of taking additional steps to stabilize the overall situation in the Middle East. We examined specific ideas which are designed to prevent destabilization, including that in Palestinian-Israeli relations; ideas which are designed to provide conditions for the resumption of the peace process. Russia and Syria have done and will continue to do everything necessary to ensure the activity of Hamas in the direction of the principles which have been formulated by the international community so that all the previous agreements are implemented and respected and that movement is resumed towards the realization of the goal that was set by the Quartet of international mediators - namely, that two states, Palestine and Israel, should coexist with each other in peace and security.

We are both very concerned about the degrading situation in Iraq. We are convinced that the main thing now is to start, at long last, a national dialogue in that country in order to find a way towards national reconciliation and consensus. We are sympathetic to the efforts which the Iraqis themselves are now undertaking with the aim of trying to create a Government of National Consensus, and we are convinced that these efforts would benefit also from external support, primarily, from Iraq's neighbors, the LAS and UN Security Council. The appropriate Russian proposals are well known. They remain on the negotiating table. We are grateful to Syria for its consistent support of these proposals. In its turn, the Russian side highly assesses the measures which Syria is taking to prevent the use of its territory for the transfer of militants to Iraq. We agreed that we will continue our cooperation so as to maximally curb, and better terminate the illegal movement of arms throughout this region, including Palestine and Lebanon.

As far as Lebanon is concerned, we have actively backed up efforts to develop a national dialogue in that long-suffering country which is extremely important for the achievement of consensus in society, this being a guarantee of its stability. The Lebanese must tackle their problems themselves. For them to be able to do that effectively, such national dialogue and national consensus are highly important.

We also discussed the course of the work by the independent commission of Serge Brammertz inquiring into the circumstances of the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. We noted the Syrian side's cooperation with this inquiry. My counterpart has assured me that such cooperation will be continued. We support this and have agreed to continue a regular dialogue also on the issues of our bilateral cooperation and on the problems of mutual engagement in the Middle East region and on other international issues. Our cooperation in the UN will also be continued.

Question: How is the situation with Transnistria evolving?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: If you mean the economic measures which have been taken by the leadership of Moldova and led to a factual blockade of Transnistria, then, unfortunately, the situation, as far as I know, remains totally unchanged. It still persists, thus aggravating social and economic conditions in Transnistria; people are beginning to experience ever more serious inconveniences. This concerns not only those who live in Transnistria, but also those who maintain trade ties with Transnistria, who simply arrive in Transnistria by rail. There are already reports of enterprises grinding to a halt for lack of supplies, which are blocked by the new methods announced by Ukrainian and Moldovan authorities, by the measures which, I shall repeat it once more, violate the Moscow Memorandum of 1997, which bears the signatures of Ukraine and Moldova among others and which envisages the right of Transnistria to free economic activity. It is clear that the new regime cannot be described as securing a free and unimpeded flow of goods across the border.

Speculation is already appearing that all this has been thought up by the Transnistrian authorities themselves, and that it is they who create the blockade, being undesirous of revealing contraband production on Transnistrian soil, including arms production in individual enterprises. It is very strange to hear this, because only a couple of weeks ago, or maybe slightly more, the representatives of the Security Councils of Russia and Ukraine respectively visited Transnistria, jointly inspected the enterprises which had been suspected of contraband production and found nothing of the kind there. I am convinced that the

Deputy Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine who participated in this trip has reported the results of this inspection. Therefore, to hear such accusations now is strange, to say the least. The main point is that all this is being carried out unilaterally, in the conditions when there is the Joint Control Commission, within whose framework practically any issues can be resolved. Anyway, the present crisis has to be collectively discussed, along with a collective search of a way out of it, if, of course, all the parties to the negotiation process are interested in preserving the peacekeeping formats and mechanisms that have helped to maintain stability in Transnistria over the last fifteen years.

I can also assure you that we won't let it stand that way. We will seek to get all the existing agreements implemented and all the parties to come back to the existing agreements, including the Joint Statement of the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents, which was made on the problem of Transnistria in December last year and which the current situation and the measures undertaken for economically blockading Transnistria run counter to. I hope that those our western partners who have started to welcome in unison the measures taken by the authorities of Ukraine and Moldova will become aware of the real state of affairs, acquaint themselves with the facts and realize that they are welcoming the steps which have led and will yet lead to the suffering of people unless we normalize this situation.

Question: Did you discuss the disarmament of Hezbollah and Palestinian camps? Did you discuss the legal status of the Shebaa territory?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: We touched upon this. The question of Shebaa is an old issue. It has to be tackled comprehensively, with due regard to all the existing resolutions of the UN Security Council and with due regard to the agreements between Syria and Lebanon.

As to the arms of Hezbollah and the arms in Palestinian hands, we agreed with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem that if there are concrete facts showing the illegal movement of arms in this region, then both Russia and Syria will treat that with the utmost seriousness and will be ready to work out measures to ensure that this kind of illegal movements of arms do not take place.

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