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Sent: Saturday, August 11, 2012 12:26 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Trip Clip: (Lee) update: US, Turkey plan for worst-case scenarios in Syria

From: Nuland, Victoria J
Sent: Saturday, August 11, 2012 09:43 AM
To: Reines, Philippe I; Sullivan, Jacob J; Mills, Cheryl D; Gordon, Philip H; Jones, Beth E; Abedin, Huma; Ricciardone, Francis J
Subject: Fw: Trip Clip: (Lee) update: US, Turkey plan for worst-case scenarios in Syria

From: PA Clips [mailto:paclips@state.gov]
Sent: Saturday, August 11, 2012 09:37 AM
To: PA-Monitoring-Group-DL
Subject: AP: Trip Clip: (Lee) update: US, Turkey plan for worst-case scenarios in Syria

US, Turkey plan for worst-case scenarios in Syria

By MATTHEW LEE
 Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) -- U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Turkey's foreign minister said Saturday that their countries are creating a formal structure to plan for worst-case scenarios in Syria, including a possible chemical weapons attack on regime opponents.

Clinton and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said their two nations would set up a working group to respond to the crisis in Syria as conditions there deteriorate. They said the group will coordinate military, intelligence and political responses to the potential fallout in the case of a chemical attack, which would result in medical emergencies and a likely rise in the number of refugees fleeing Syria.

"We have been closely coordinating over the course of this conflict, but now we need to get into the real details of such operational planning. It needs to be across both of our governments," Clinton said.

She said the U.S. State Department and Turkey's Foreign Ministry had already been working together on the issue but that the new working group would increase the involvement of the intelligence services and militaries of both countries.

Among the contingencies that the U.S. and Turkey agree on the need to plan for is "the horrible event" that chemical weapons are used, Clinton said.

"What would that mean in terms of response, humanitarian and medical emergency assistance and, of course, what needs to be done to secure those stocks from ever being used or falling into the wrong hands?" Clinton said.

In July, Syria's foreign ministry spokesman threatened the use of chemical and biological weapons in case of a foreign attack, assuring that government would never use them against its own citizens. It was the first acknowledgement that Syria possesses weapons of mass destruction, something that's long been suspected.

Later, the Syrian government attempted to back away from the announcement and revert to its previous position of neither confirming nor denying the existence of unconventional weapons.

Syria is believed to have nerve agents as well as mustard gas, Scud missiles capable of delivering lethal chemicals and a variety of advanced conventional arms, including portable anti-aircraft missiles.

Davutoglu hinted at the possibility of setting up a so-called "safe zone" inside Syria if the humanitarian crisis, which has already claimed thousands of lives, triggers a massive flow of refugees who are vulnerable to attack by regime forces. He said 55,000 Syrians have sought refuge in neighboring Turkey, and that 2,000-3,000 were arriving daily. Recent arrivals came from the besieged Syrian city of Aleppo and surrounding villages, while others have come from Idlib and Latakia. Many more have fled to Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

"If there is a huge wave of refugee migration, then we need to maybe establish a mechanism within Syria in order to ensure humanitarian protection," he said. "Of course, we might try to protect people if they seek refuge in our territory, but if they have to live under continuous bombardment every day, if they are exposed to air strikes every day, and bombardment every day, this might even be considered a war crime."

Davutoglu said without elaborating: "In such a case, the international community can no longer keep its silence and there are certain measures that need to be taken up ... We need to brace for impact."

In addition to planning for potential catastrophes, Clinton and Davutoglu stressed the importance of preparing for a political transition that does not compromise state institutions that will be needed to maintain security and provide key services under a new leadership that would replace President Bashar Assad. Clinton said a new Syria will need to protect the rights of all Syrians regardless of religion, gender or ethnicity.

Both nations are concerned about extremist groups taking advantage of any power vacuum in Syria that could follow Assad's eventual departure. The Turks are particularly concerned about the Kurdish rebel group PKK, which already has bases in northern Iraq, from which it launches cross-border attacks on Turkish targets in its campaign for autonomy for the ethnic minority.

"We share Turkey's determination that Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists whether now or after the departure of the Assad regime," Clinton said.

Before they spoke to reporters, Clinton and Davutoglu met Syrian refugees to discuss their needs and Clinton met separately with six opposition activists, including three who fled the country within the past month. She said she came away from the meeting impressed with their desire to build a democratic society in Syria.

However, some of the recent arrivals in Turkey expressed concern about an apparent lack of unity among opposition leaders outside Syria.

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