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Remarks on the Deaths of American Personnel in Benghazi, Libya

Remarks

Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State

Treaty Room

Washington, DC

September 12, 2012

Yesterday, our U.S. diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya was attacked. Heavily armed militants assaulted the compound and set fire to our buildings. American and Libyan security personnel battled the attackers together. Four Americans were killed. They included Sean Smith, a Foreign Service information management officer, and our Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens. We are still making next of kin notifications for the other two individuals.

This is an attack that should shock the conscience of people of all faiths around the world. We condemn in the strongest terms this senseless act of violence, and we send our prayers to the families, friends, and colleagues of those we've lost.

All over the world, every day, America's diplomats and development experts risk their lives in the service of our country and our values, because they believe that the United States must be a force for peace and progress in the world, that these aspirations are worth striving and sacrificing for. Alongside our men and women in uniform, they represent the best traditions of a bold and generous nation.

In the lobby of this building, the State Department, the names of those who have fallen in the line of duty are inscribed in marble. Our hearts break over each one. And now, because of this tragedy, we have new heroes to honor and more friends to mourn.

Chris Stevens fell in love with the Middle East as a young Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Morocco. He joined the Foreign Service, learned languages, won friends for America in distant places, and made other people's hopes his own.

In the early days of the Libyan revolution, I asked Chris to be our envoy to the rebel opposition. He arrived on a cargo ship in the port of Benghazi and began building our relationships with Libya's revolutionaries. He risked his life to stop a tyrant, then gave his life trying to help build a better Libya. The world needs more Chris Stevenses. I spoke with his sister, Ann, this morning, and told her that he will be remembered as a hero by many nations.

Sean Smith was an Air Force veteran. He spent 10 years as an information management officer in the State Department, he was posted at The Hague, and was in Libya on a brief temporary assignment. He was a husband to his wife Heather, with whom I spoke this morning. He was a father to two young children, Samantha and Nathan. They will grow up being proud of the service their father gave to our country, service that took him from Pretoria to Baghdad, and finally to Benghazi.

The mission that drew Chris and Sean and their colleagues to Libya is both noble and necessary, and we and the people of Libya honor their memory by carrying it forward. This is not easy. Today, many Americans are asking – indeed, I asked myself – how could this happen? How could this happen in a country we helped liberate, in a city we helped save from destruction? This question reflects just how complicated and, at times, how confounding the world can be.

But we must be clear-eyed, even in our grief. This was an attack by a small and savage group – not the people or Government of Libya. Everywhere Chris and his team went in Libya, in a country scarred by war and tyranny, they were hailed as friends and partners. And when the attack came yesterday, Libyans stood and fought to defend our post. Some were wounded. Libyans carried Chris' body to the hospital, and they helped rescue and lead other Americans to safety. And last night, when I spoke with the President of Libya, he strongly condemned the violence and pledged every effort to protect our people and pursue those responsible.

The friendship between our countries, borne out of shared struggle, will not be another casualty of this attack. A free and stable Libya is still in America's interest and security, and we will not turn our back on that, nor will we rest until those responsible for these attacks are found and brought to justice. We are working closely with the Libyan authorities to move swiftly and surely. We are also working with partners around the world to safeguard other American embassies, consulates, and citizens.

There will be more time later to reflect, but today, we have work to do. There is no higher priority than protecting our men and women wherever they serve. We are working to determine the precise motivations and methods of those who carried out this assault. Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior, along with the protest that took place at our Embassy in Cairo yesterday, as a response to inflammatory material posted on the internet. America's commitment to religious tolerance goes back to the very beginning of our nation. But let me be clear – there is no justification for this, none. Violence like this is no way to honor religion or faith. And as long as there are those who would take innocent life in the name of God, the world will never know a true and lasting peace.

It is especially difficult that this happened on September 11th. It's an anniversary that means a great deal to all Americans. Every year on that day, we are reminded that our work is not yet finished, that the job of putting an end to violent extremism and building a safe and stable world continues. But September 11th means even more than that. It is a day on which we remember thousands of American heroes, the bonds that connect all Americans, wherever we are on this Earth, and the values that see us through every storm. And now it is a day on which we will remember Sean, Chris, and their colleagues.

May God bless them, and may God bless the thousands of Americans working in every corner of the world who make this country the greatest force for peace, prosperity, and progress, and a force that has always stood for human dignity – the greatest force the world has ever known. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.

Thank you.

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