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Ambassador's Corner

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN BRUTON September 25, 2006

One of the topics I discussed in Georgia recently was the preparedness of the Western world to protect itself against either a bio-terrorism attack or a pandemic of avian flu. The response would be similar to that to other disasters, both natural and man-made. There would be a need to get help to people quickly, to manage travel and to identify locations where people could be treated locally.

The problem of bio-terrorism is not new. It was a concern during the Cold War. The rapid growth of air travel has created new possibilities for the spread of infections.

I discussed some of these issues when I met Dr. Gerberding (left) and Dr. LeDuc on the occasion of my visit to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta.

On the issue of avian flu, I learned that the United States is engaged in intense preparation to ensure that it can deal effectively with it.

If a pandemic occurs it will be the result of a new strain of influenza arising for which no vaccine has yet been prepared. The production of a vaccine could take up to four or five months from the time of the first outbreak. So the important thing is to slow down the spread of the influenza as much as possible, to give maximum time to those developing the vaccine.

Anti-viral drugs will help but there are non-pharmaceutical interventions that will be equally important. Putting an infrastructure in place that would allow people to continue working from their homes rather than travelling to work, at the risk of becoming infected, will be equally important.

Schools are also a place where infection could spread. But if children stay home from school who will look after them if their parents have to go to work to earn enough to buy basic necessities?

Air travel can assist the spread of infections so and it will be important to have medical facilities at airports for screening passengers to minimize risks. The challenge will be to find ways to do this while avoiding the chaos that we saw in airports around the world last August.

I was very pleased to learn that the United States authorities are working very closely with the World Health Organization and with their European partners to come up with practical answers to these questions.

The issue of flu preparedness came up during my meeting last week with one of Georgia's Congressmen, Charlie Norwood of Augusta (R). He also briefed me on his efforts to reform the United States health system so that it will be financially sustainable. He said "managed care" was not proving to be saving as much money as its proponents had expected. Limiting the services was, however, a very difficult alternative.

I met Congressman John Linder of Atlanta (R), Georgia. He is a member of the Homeland Security Committee and has a deep knowledge of what is needed to protect United States infrastructure, to prevent nuclear and biological attack and to maintain the security of the United States economy. I briefed him on the cooperation between the European Union and the United States on terrorism. Prevention is as important as cure. Addressing the factors that lead young people towards radicalization and recruitment to terrorist organizations is vital. It will not be physically possible to prevent every possibility for a terrorist attack. Modern life is inherently vulnerable. So John Linder said that the priority was getting good quality intelligence about the people who might undertake attacks.

I met Congressman Lynn Westmoreland (R), also of Georgia. We discussed his ambition to see Atlanta develop as an even more successful air transport hub. He agreed with me that the open skies agreement negotiated between the European Union and the United States had the potential to help the development of Atlanta greatly. He is also a strong supporter of public rail transport within the Atlanta area and highway investment.

I met Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama (R) to discuss transatlantic investment. Transatlantic investment supports 14 million jobs. As Chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, Senator Shelby is a key figure in the promotion of such investment. He recently visited Brussels to discuss issues with his European counterparts. Previously Senator Shelby was Vice Chairman of the Intelligence Committee of the Senate and earned a reputation as a strong-minded leader. Earlier in his life he was a municipal prosecutor in Tuscaloosa, served for eight years in the Alabama state legislature and subsequently was a member of the House of Representatives before becoming a US Senator for the State of

Alabama.

Congressman Jack Kingston (R) represents the coastal part of Georgia, known as the low country. He is one of the most articulate media spokesmen for the Republican Party. He is a member of the powerful Appropriations Committee, specializing in agriculture, and will have a key role in writing the next US Farm Bill. We discussed ethanol biofuels. He is looking to Georgia pine trees, and imported sugar cane, to provide feedstock for the growing ethanol industry in his state.

Congressman Greg Meeks (D) represents the Queens area around JFK airport in New York and is a strong supporter of free trade. We discussed European investment in the United States. The European Union provides 60% of all foreign investment here. Greg was a prosecutor before being elected to the New York State Assembly and subsequently to the US Congress.

I also met Congressman Barney Frank (D) who represents the suburbs of Boston and part of the coast of southern Massachusetts. Barney is the Ranking Member of the Financial Services Committee and would be likely to become Chairman of that committee if the House majority were to change. We discussed a range of issues concerning transatlantic investment. After growing up in Bayonne, New Jersey, Frank went to Harvard. He worked in the office of the Mayor of Boston, Kevin White, and later won a seat in the House of Representatives where he is now in his thirteenth term.

I met Senator Paul Sarbanes (D) of Maryland. He is currently the Ranking Member of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee. He also serves on the Foreign Relations Committee. He is in his fifth term in the Senate having first been elected in 1976. He is not seeking re-election. He is the son of Greek immigrants and grew up on the eastern shore of Maryland, went to Princeton University and subsequently to Oxford. He was in the House of Representatives for six years before he was elected to the Senate. Please send me your comments about this or any of my weekly messages or other EU matters. I look forward to hearing from you!