

Earthquake finds US energy secretary in Turkey

What was Bill Richardson up to in Istanbul?

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Tuesday morning's earthquake near Izmit, Turkey roused US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson from his bed on the twelfth floor of an Istanbul hotel. He told reporters that the building rocked back and forth for 45 seconds, during which time he was terrified.

The scare, however, did not prevent him from going about the business of Washington and the big multinational oil companies hours later. On Tuesday Richardson continued a set of "serious discussions" begun the day before on a proposed pipeline that would move oil from several Central Asian countries through Turkey for export to the West.

Richardson held meetings in Istanbul—only 40 miles north of the quake's epicenter and hard-hit by power outages—with his Turkish counterpart, Cumhur Ersumer, regarding their joint efforts to ship oil from the Caspian Sea Basin through Georgia to a terminus in Ceyhan, Turkey on the Mediterranean.

At stake in Richardson's diplomatic maneuvers are not only the 100-200 billion barrels of oil estimated to be located near the Caspian, but also the entirely military and strategic balance of forces in the Central Asian and Caucasus regions. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the US has aggressively sought to expand its authority in this area.

Though rival proposed routes for Caspian oil export (south through Iran or north through Russia) are more economically attractive to the oil companies, Washington has been pushing for the Baku-Ceyhan route in order to block Russian and Iranian influence in the region and foster the dependency of the Central Asian states on US economic and military power. As Richardson told Stephen Kinzer of the *New York Times* last November, "We're trying to move these newly independent countries toward the West. We would like to see them reliant on Western commercial and political

interests rather than going another way. We've made a substantial political investment in the Caspian and its very important to us that both the pipeline map and the politics come out right."

A sticking point in securing the Baku-Ceyhan route has been finding enough oil to fill the pipeline. Oilfields operated by the Azerbaijan International Oil Consortium (AIOC, owned jointly by the Azerbaijani state oil company and 10 oil firms from the US, Britain, Norway, Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) are presently producing 100,000 barrels per day, though output is expected to climb eight-fold in the coming several years. The increased rate, however, still falls short of the one million barrel per day capacity of the proposed pipeline.

Richardson is urging other oil producers to link into the Baku-Ceyhan route. These are reported to include Chevron and Texaco, both of which operate fields in neighboring Kazakhstan. With the added oil from these fields, the proposed pipeline could be filled to capacity.

Richardson secured the backing of Turkish President Suleyman Demirel for another big petroleum project during his visit. Demirel affirmed that Turkey would buy natural gas from Turkmenistan, an announcement that will boost the fortunes of Royal Dutch/Shell. The oil giant announced plans last month to construct a gas pipeline which will run from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan, underneath the Caspian Sea, then follow the route of the Baku-Ceyhan oil line. Arranging political backing for the gas pipeline occupied Richardson during stops in Baku and Ashgabat, Turkmenistan later in the week.

Richardson had only arrived in Istanbul on Monday, after a stop in Nigeria. There he had "ironed out," with President Obasanjo, the last details in a proposed \$400 million natural gas pipeline project to ship Nigerian gas

to Benin, Togo and Ghana; a joint venture between Royal Dutch/Shell and the state gas company.

Richardson's trip received little attention from the press. Only the coincidence of a natural disaster prompted the few reports that did appear. No reporter or commentator pointed to the obvious contradiction between the unending claims of the Clinton administration that standing up for "human rights" is its guiding principal in foreign policy and its relations with the Turkish, Azerbaijani and Nigerian governments. Even as the collapse of substandard housing demonstrated the criminal venality of the Turkish ruling elite in the eyes of the masses of people, Washington offered nothing but statements of support and praise for its "strategic ally," Turkey. Nor was Richardson's visit adversely affected by the death sentence the government has handed down to Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

No question was raised about US relations with the military-backed regime of Obasanjo, the former military ruler who came to power in a February 1999 election widely regarded as fraudulent. Nor was attention drawn to corruption and inequality in Azerbaijan, another US ally, described as follows by a reporter for the *New York Times* in an October 1998 survey:

"Baku is a city of the artfully delivered bribe and the brute shakedown, of florid corruption and baroque greed.... Of course, the oil money is still just a trickle, and the people of Azerbaijan, two-thirds of whom live in poverty, are said to be unmoved by the Government's promises to lift living standards. Out in the countryside, far from the oil fields, almost a million refugees from the disastrous war with Armenia scratch by in abandoned rail cars and corrugated tin huts. But a paper thin layer of Baku society is housing itself in limestone palaces built high above the sea."

Tuesday's earthquake found another US official in Turkey. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Henry Shelton, the highest ranking officer in the US military, was visiting the US air base at Incirlik at the time. The base continues to be used for US attacks against Iraq. More than 1,100 missiles have been fired at the country since four days of heavy US bombardment last December. A US State Department assistant secretary, Marc Grossman, told reporters on Tuesday that the

earthquake would have no impact on US flights over (and, presumably, attacks on) the so-called "no-fly zone" in the north of Iraq.



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