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Clinton, GOP spar on interrogation, abortion funding

The Boston Globe

Marathon session mostly friendly to top US diplomat

By Farah Stockman, Globe Staff | April 23, 2009

WASHINGTON - House Republicans grilled Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton yesterday on renewed US support for abortion providers overseas and on recently released memos detailing harsh interrogation techniques against suspected terrorists in CIA custody, prompting frank and often feisty exchanges with the nation's top diplomat.

Clinton's first appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Committee was a five-hour, mostly friendly session, but it turned combative at points. Representative Dan Burton, an Indiana Republican, told Clinton that the harsh interrogation techniques - which included mock drownings known as waterboarding - "were cleared with the leadership of both the House and the Senate," apparently referring to classified briefings that some members received about the tactics.

"They knew about them," he said, adding that the CIA officials involved in the interrogations should not be prosecuted. "We need both hands untied with our intelligence agencies to really stop terrorism."

Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican, repeatedly asked Clinton whether the administration would declassify documents that former Vice President Dick Cheney has said paint the CIA interrogators in a more heroic light and show the important information produced from the interrogations.

Clinton said she had no knowledge of such documents. "It won't surprise you that I don't consider him a particularly reliable source," she said of Cheney, to some laughter.

The Obama administration has walked a fine line on the issue, last week releasing the documents detailing the harsh techniques and declaring that those techniques would not be used again. But Obama has said he would not prosecute CIA officials who followed techniques they believed to be lawful, although he left the door open for the investigation of those who went beyond the legal guidance and the Bush lawyers who gave the guidance.

Republicans also repeatedly attacked Clinton for repealing Bush-administration-era rules that prohibited US support for family-planning agencies overseas that provide abortions.

Representative Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican who is staunchly antiabortion, criticized Clinton for recently accepting an award in the name of Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, saying the group had "killed over 305,000 children by abortion in the US and millions more worldwide."

Clinton told Smith she respected his views, but offered a vigorous defense of the new family planning policy, to applause from the gallery. "We obviously have a profound disagreement," she told him.

Representative Jeff Fortenberry, a Nebraska Republican, asked Clinton if "forcing US taxpayers to fund abortion [overseas] is in keeping with the highest values of America," while Representative Bob Inglis, a South Carolina Republican, asked why Clinton had not been more outspoken during her visit to China about forced abortions.

Clinton said that she deeply opposes China's policy on forced abortion, and has been on record opposing that policy since her time as first lady.

"Why didn't you say it as secretary of state?" Inglis asked.

"I just did," Clinton replied.

Clinton also promised not to deal with a Palestinian government that includes Hamas unless Hamas recognizes Israel's right to exist and renounces violence, although she said the administration wants to "leave the door open" for that to happen.

Clinton also said that, while the Obama administration wants to reach out to Iran to solve the impasse over its nuclear program, Tehran would face "crippling sanctions" if such talks do not succeed.

Iran, which denies that its nuclear program is intended to develop weapons, said through its official news agency yesterday that it welcomes a "constructive" dialogue about its nuclear program, but insisted that it won't halt uranium enrichment.

Iran has been invited by the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany, and Russia for a new round of talks.

"We are deploying new approaches to the threat posed by Iran and we're doing so with our eyes wide open and with no illusions," Clinton told the committee. ■

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