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PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
May 5, 2004

President Bush Meets with Al Arabiya Television on Wednesday

Interview of the President by Al Arabiya Television
The Map Room

10:33 A.M. EDT

Q Mr. President, thank you for giving us this chance here in Al Arabiya. Regarding the alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners, six U.S. soldiers are being reprimanded. Do you think that's enough?

THE PRESIDENT: First, I want to tell the people of the Middle East that the practices that took place in that prison are abhorrent and they don't represent America. They represent the actions of a few people. Secondly, it's important for people to understand that in a democracy that there will be a full investigation. In other words, we want to know the truth.

In our country, when there's an allegation of abuse -- more than an allegation in this case, actual abuse, we saw the pictures -- there will be a full investigation and justice will be delivered. We have a presumption of innocent until you're guilty in our system, but the system will be transparent, it will be open and people will see the results. This is a serious matter. It's a matter that reflects badly on my country. Our citizens in America are appalled by what they saw, just like people in the Middle East are appalled. We share the same deep concerns. And we will find the truth, we will fully investigate. The world will see the investigation and justice will be served.

Q And you just -- you've said this is reflected badly here, in the United States of America. How do you think this will be perceived in the Middle East?

THE PRESIDENT: Terrible. I think people in the Middle East who want to dislike America will use this as an excuse to remind people about their dislike. I think the average citizen will say, this isn't a country that I've been told about. We're a great country because we're a free country, and we do not tolerate these kind of abuses.

The people of the Middle East must be assured that we will investigate fully, that we will find out the truth. They will know the truth, just like the American citizens will know the truth, and justice will be served.

Secondly, it's very important for the people of the Middle East to realize that the troops we have overseas are decent, honorable citizens who care about freedom and peace; that are working daily in Iraq to improve the lives of the Iraqi citizens, and these actions of a few people do not reflect the nature of the men and women who serve our country.

Q After these pictures came out, some people in the area started talking about another alleged abuse. Could you tell us about what's being done to prevent this from happening and just to improve the situation?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely. I have told our Secretary of Defense, and I have instructed him to tell everybody else in the military, I want to know the full extent of the operations in Iraq, the prison operations. We want to make sure that if there is a systemic problem -- in other words, if there's a problem system-wide -- that we stop the practices.

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Again, it's very important for people, your listeners, to understand, in our country that when an issue is brought to our attention on this magnitude, we act -- and we act in a way where leaders are willing to discuss it with the media. And we act in a way where, you know, our Congress asks pointed questions to the leadership. In other words, people want to know the truth. That stands in contrast to dictatorships. A dictator wouldn't be answering questions about this. A dictator wouldn't be saying that the system will be investigated and the world will see the results of the investigation. A dictator wouldn't admit reforms needed to be done.

And so the people in the Middle East must understand that this was horrible. But we're dealing with it in a way that will bring confidence to not only our citizens, which is very important, but confidence to people of the world that this situation will be rectified and justice will be done.

Q We are going to Fallujah -- the way the situation is being resolved, is being considered in some parts of Iraq as a defeat to U.S. How do you address that, or do you have anything to address --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, of course. The strategy in Fallujah is to empower Iraqis to step up and take control of the security situation; that we're on our way to the transfer of sovereignty. And people who feel like that they can wreak havoc on innocent Iraqis will be brought to justice in Iraq, either by Iraqi citizens and/or by coalition forces.

And we're making progress. There are a few people there in Iraq that want to claim credit for any situation on the ground, but the people in Fallujah are tired of foreign fighters and radicals and extremists preventing them from living a normal life. And those who remain in Fallujah will be taken care of. And the Iraqi forces that have been stood up are now in the process of patrolling the streets and bringing law and order to the streets.

Q June the 30th is approaching. How do you think -- still Mr. Sadr in defense with U.S., how do you think this person should be dealt with?

THE PRESIDENT: I think he ought to be dealt with by the Iraqi citizens who are getting tired of him occupying the holiest of holy sites. And we are very respectful for the holy sites in Iraq, we understand their importance to the Iraqi citizens. Mr. Sadr is occupying those sites as if they're his, and I think the Iraqi citizens are getting tired of that.

We will deal with his militias, as will the Iraqi forces deal with these militias. Militias are people who are willing to kill, intimidate and try to take matters into their own hands, which is not the way democracy functions. Free societies do not allow thugs to roam streets and hold people hostage to their whims. The Iraqis will deal with Mr. Sadr.

Q June the 30th, do you think your administration is really prepared right now to have a very, very nice day -- in that day to give the power to Iraqis?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely we're prepared to do so. When we say we're going to do something, we're going to do it. As you know, the United Nations, the coalition, as well as Iraqi citizens are preparing the entity to which sovereignty will be passed. There will still be a lot of hard work to do, and we want to help.

The Iraqi citizens must understand America is not going to leave until the job is complete. We want to help Iraq. We've made a commitment. And the United States will keep that commitment because we believe in freedom and we believe the people of Iraq want to be free. We believe they want to raise their children in a peaceful world. We believe they want to educate their children in good schools. We want to -- we believe they want to realize their own personal ambitions. If they're a businessman or a businesswoman, they want to build their own business in peace. That's what we believe.

And, therefore, we stand side-by-side with the people of Iraq who are peaceful. And there's a lot of peaceful people that look for a better day. I'm very proud of the brave Iraqis who've stood up, and I'm very proud of our own men and women in uniform who are helping Iraq to become free.

Q Mr. President, critics are saying that by your action in Iraq actually invited al Qaeda and other terrorists to

do business with you over there. Could you address that?

THE PRESIDENT: Sure. Do you remember September the 11th, 2001? Al Qaeda attacked the United States. They killed thousands of our citizens. I will never forget what they have done to us. They declared war on us. And the United States will pursue them. And so long as I'm the President, we will be determined, steadfast, and strong as we pursue those people who kill innocent lives because they hate freedom.

And, of course, al Qaeda looks for any excuse. But the truth of the matter is, they hate us, and they hate freedom, and they hate people who embrace freedom. And they're willing to kill innocent Iraqis because Iraqis are willing to be free. Iraqis are sick of foreign people coming in their country and trying to destabilize their country. And we will help them rid Iraq of these killers.

Q Mr. President, you went to Iraq as a part of your project in the Middle East, and flourish democracy over there. To which extent you are willing to go further to flourish a democracy? Are we going to see in the future more action against some other countries to flourish democracy over there, like Syria?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I think it's -- first of all, you've got to understand, sir, that military options are always my last option, not the first option, and that we can promote freedom without use of military. There are ways to stand with reformers and encourage reform and hold up examples of where societies are more stable and more free as a result of democracy and freedom.

Secondly, it's very important for the people of the Middle East to understand that freedom doesn't have to look like America. A free society doesn't have to look like an American society. Free societies will develop according to the cultures of the people in the regions and the Middle East. And reform and freedom take time. I understand that. It takes time for a free society to emerge. And so America can affect freedom in different kinds of ways.

But inherent in your question was, you know, am I anxious to use military power? Iraq was a unique situation because Saddam Hussein had constantly defied the world and had threatened his neighbors, had used weapons of mass destruction, had terrorist ties, had torture chambers inside his country, had mass graves. It was a very unique situation. And he was given a chance to meet the demands of the free world in a peaceful way, but he chose -- he chose war.

We can make progress with freedom and peace because I believe deep in the heart and soul of every human being is a desire to be free. And America will continue to speak to those aspirations.

Q My last question, Mr. President. You gave assurance to Sharon government. From Al Arabiya, in these last questions, what kind of assurance are you going to give to Palestinian today?

THE PRESIDENT: I stood up in front of the world and said that the Palestinian people ought to have their own state. I'm the first President to have ever said that. And my assurance is, is that I have not changed my vision of two states living side-by-side in peace. And that -- Prime Minister Sharon made a decision to withdraw from the Gaza and from settlements on the West Bank, which I thought was a very strong decision and an important decision, because it now gives us a chance to move in and to say to the Palestinians, here's your chance to build a state, to put the institutions in place for a state to emerge, that speaks to the aspirations and hopes of the Palestinian people, that is a peaceful state.

And we want to help. And that's why yesterday you saw a statement coming out of the Quartet, which is a part of the road map -- the road map process that says, let's work together to give the Palestinians hope. And my commitment to the Palestinian people is, when peaceful leaders emerge, when people are willing to fight off terror, they will have a great opportunity to see this state emerge. And America will help.

Q Mr. President, thank you so much for discussing. Enjoy your day. It's sunny, so I hope you have a good day.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, sir. It is a sunny day.

Q Thank you.

END 10:44 A.M. EDT

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