



Briefing En Route to Islamabad, Pakistan

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
En Route to Islamabad, Pakistan
June 26, 2006

SECRETARY RICE: Okay, we're on our way to Pakistan followed by, as you know but cannot report, a trip to Afghanistan and then on to the G-8 ministerial in Moscow. I'll have some bilateral discussions also in Moscow with my Russian counterpart and a couple of other people. I'm not going to go into any detail here. I'll just take your questions. So who's got the first question?

Anne.

QUESTION: On Pakistan. The Musharraf government says it's doing all it can to go after the Taliban in the tribal region, in the border region, but Afghanistan disputes this. And what's your view? Do you think -- I mean, do you take Musharraf at his word that they really are doing all that they can? And if so, what does the Afghan Government not see?

SECRETARY RICE: I think the Pakistanis are clearly working really, really hard to try to fight this war on terror and I think that includes work on the Afghan-Pakistani border, which has long been essentially an ungoverned region of that part of the world. Obviously, we are all trying to accelerate and extend our efforts. I know that our military people have had discussions with the Pakistanis about what more can be done. The Pakistanis also have a plan that they've been talking about for economic reconstruction and political processes in that region because this is, after all a counterterrorism/counterinsurgency problem and it can't just be defeated militarily.

I understand the Afghans -- seeing, as they have, an uptick in Taliban activity -- are concerned about trying to seal off that border and make it less an area in which -- from which cross-border raids can take place. But I think that's very much also the concern and the desire of President Musharraf. We have encouraged Afghanistan and Pakistan to work together on this issue, to work trilaterally with us on this issue, and I will have discussions with President Musharraf, also with President Karzai, about how we can jointly take on what's a very difficult and somewhat stubborn problem there.

I might just note, though, that the Taliban also, of course, is engaging in that southern region and tends to be taking pretty heavy losses.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, if I can follow up on that. Do you plan to ask the Pakistanis to allow the coalition troops to cross the border in case of the possibility of arresting some al-Qaida people?

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not going to get into how operations might proceed. We have had very good cooperation with Pakistan on issues of how we fight the war on terrorism. We have good intelligence cooperation, good military cooperation and so we're going to continue that. I think the piece that we need to work harder on is the cooperation that is U.S.-Afghan-Pakistani in that region. We've had some good cooperation in some parts of the country. We want to talk about what more we can do together in the southern part of the country.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, the Afghan Government has said that it is considering forming tribal militias to guard places security forces can't reach. U.S. policy has been to disarm the militias. Can you clarify whether you support the return of such irregular armed forces?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I don't think anybody really wants a circumstance in which we walk back from what has been a very successful DDNR process -- demobilization and beginnings of a reintegration process. I think that what President Karzai is talking about is the sense of insecurity of populations in that region given recent events and I think the question is then how do we address that given the forces that are available to us.

Now, NATO forces are moving into that area. They're not fully deployed yet but they're moving into that area. There is the potential for the use of more Afghan forces in that region, police and army forces. And of course, we have to work the other side too to try to cut off the flow. So I think there are many ways to go about this. We're going to listen. I know that General Abizaid and General Eikenberry are listening to President Karzai, obviously. He's the President of the country. He has ideas about how this might be solved.

But when I've talked to him, he's always talked about trying to do things in the context of moving toward regular police and army forces because he is the one who initiated, after all, the demobilization of militias and I don't think he wants to take a step backwards. He's really talking about how they deal with this situation in the south and I think he wants to do it -- he said to me -- in the context of their security force buildup.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, I just wanted to know if you could elaborate a little bit on the reasoning for this part of the trip, what it is that you're hoping to do; but secondly, what your assessment is of the Taliban actions over the last several weeks and whether we are actually seeing a return of the Taliban in some notable way.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let's remember first of all where we started, and we started with the Taliban in power. I don't think that's what we're talking about. We're talking about the continued activity of some forces associated with the Taliban brand who are trying to essentially wreak havoc on the populations of the south, without really a political base, a political plan, without an effort to -- certainly with no plans to make life better for Pakistan -- for Afghan people or to reconstruct the country. We're talking about people who just want to, a large extent, kill innocent people. That's what we're talking about.

And so when you talk about the resurgence of the Taliban, has there been more activity, military activity? Certainly. Are we talking about the resurgence of the Taliban as a political movement? I think not. And it's extremely important to make that distinction because what you have now is a government in -- an elected government in Afghanistan, an elected president, an elected parliament that has -- and governors throughout the country that have an incentive to have a stable and unified Afghanistan.

Now, there are parts of the country -- and that's been the reason for the PRTs, it's been the reason for trying to do more to construct road networks to connect the country, the parts of the country. There are parts of the country where central authority has for the entire history of Afghanistan been weak, and so extending that authority is important but -- and of course, the Taliban is trying to probe and push militarily in those areas.

But I really think you have to make a distinction. We're not talking the resurgence of the Taliban as a political force. We're talking about them as a force that is trying to be destructive in a somewhat vulnerable part of the country.

But we have NATO forces. We have American counterterrorism forces. The Afghans have police forces. The Afghans have an army. They now have means and instruments by which to fight back and they are indeed fighting back. And I think the Taliban is learning that whatever weaknesses they thought there might be in that region, particularly perhaps as NATO forces moved in or in the transition to NATO forces, they're taking pretty heavy losses for their trouble.

QUESTION: Just one quick follow-up on all this on President Karzai. There have been reports that a lot of people are perhaps displeased or not very happy with his leadership in the country, outside the country. Are you 100 percent behind him? Is the United States backing him?

And also if you quickly can comment on the situation in Gaza and Israel because it's very serious at the moment. Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: I think, the President thinks, the American Administration believes this is an extraordinary leader. Afghanistan is fortunate to have President Karzai at its helm. We who want to see a democratic ally in the war on terrorism are extremely fortunate that Hamid Karzai is the President of Afghanistan.

Is it hard? Yeah, it's really hard. But this is somebody who has taken his country from civil war and virtually total destruction in four years to an honorable position in the international community, to an international compact in which the international community is supporting his government, to an election of a parliament and his own election as president, who has appointed governors in parts of this country that are now working hard on issues like counternarcotics. This is an extraordinary leader and we're going to back him and back him fully. And when he has problems, we're going to sit with him and we're going to find ways to resolve those problems. But any implication that anybody thinks that he is somehow not up to the job or not living up to his responsibilities is simply false. This is a man who is doing an extremely difficult job well.

Oh, sorry. Yeah, the Gaza. Yeah, a difficult situation. First of all, there is international -- concerted international effort to get the release of the Israeli soldier. Secondly, this kind of tunneling activity that led to this obviously has to stop. And we are working with and asking the Palestinians to do what they can with their security forces, those that belong to Mahmoud Abbas.

I think that Hamas, if in fact this was a Hamas operation, which some have claimed that it was, they are demonstrating that they're not getting the message about what is expected of a group that has now gone into governance and this is not behavior that is tolerable in the international system.

But yes, we're very concerned about it. I've spoken several times with Israeli officials. I've also spoken to President Abbas. There really needs to be an effort now to try and calm the situation, not to let the situation escalate and to give diplomacy a chance to work to try to get this release.

But in the larger picture there also has to be, as President Abbas has tried to do, a coming to terms of the Palestinians with the responsibilities that they have to live up to obligations that have been taken on by Palestinians over the last decade to recognize the state of Israel and commit to a peaceful resolution on the way to a two-state solution.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) which Israeli officials (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: I've spoken several time with Tzipi Livni, with the Foreign Minister. And our Ambassador has spoken to others. And then I spoke with President Abbas yesterday.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, do you expect -- the Bush Administration has made the push for democracy a big tenet. Do you expect that to come up in your conversations with President Musharraf?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes. In fact, I'm quite certain that we'll have a discussion of the road to democracy and the road to the 2007 elections. Look, President Musharraf himself, when he was with President Bush, raised the question. He said, you know, that people are interested in and he is interested in this democratic process.

He laid out several years ago the idea of enlightened moderation and Pakistan as a moderate force in the Muslim world. That's quite a big step from where Pakistan had been at the time of September 11th. A part of that process has to be the increasing and continuing democratization of Pakistan and so, yes, we will have those discussions. I've always had them when I've been there and would expect to have them again.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you said you were going to consult on what more the U.S. could do with Afghanistan in the south, and yet this very tenuous moment is when the U.S. is pulling out most of its troops from the south and handing it. Why not reevaluate that decision?

And second, I'm unclear about why we're going now, what your primary objective is, a follow-up to Neil's question earlier.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm tempted to say, you know, I haven't been there in a while and it's important. I mean, it's an important part of the world. I think that now that they're past the presidential and parliamentary elections and we really are trying to help with two parts of this.

First of all, in the south President Karzai has had some concerns about reconstruction in the south, reconstruction efforts in the south, and perhaps doing something to accelerate the connection of the south to the rest of the country through road networks and the like. I think it's a good time to go about and talk about some of that.

We're preparing the '08 budget. I'd like to actually -- believe it or not, we're already beginning to prepare the '08 budget. I'd like to have a discussion with our team out there about how they see Afghanistan in the next phases of reconstruction.

I do think it is an important time also to talk about what more can be done between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States to try and deal with this activity, this Taliban activity. But let me remind that even though it has been somewhat more intense, it's not unknown that you have more activity from Taliban when the spring comes and it's just been more intense this year and so I think we need to get a handle on that.

But as to your first question, NATO forces are moving into the south. We are confident that those forces are fully equipped and capable of dealing with the security situation in the south. The United States retained counterterrorism forces in the region, and by the way we are members of NATO, and the generals are constantly making an assessment of what force structure and what force composition is needed in that region.

But I think that if you look at what is actually happening as NATO forces are moving there, NATO forces are, when they are engaging the Taliban, being very successful in doing that. And so there has not been a drop-off in capability in moving into that region. This was clearly and thoroughly thought through before the decision was made to move NATO forces into the south and I think it's working. When they're fully deployed and when we have an assessment also of what additional Afghan forces may be needed there, I think you'll see that we have the composition that we need to deal with the situation there.

But remember that American counterterrorism forces in the region -- remember, the United States has still more than 70,000 forces in the country and the capability at any time on the basis of conditions, the commanders can ask for whatever force structure they need. They believe the force structure they needed to have NATO forces move into the south, a slight reduction in American forces but it's really from this point on pretty slight, and then counterterrorism forces in the region.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, I think the question about President Karzai was not so much how we support him, but is he on kind of increasingly shaky ground with others there and do we need to show some kind of -- some extra support there?

SECRETARY RICE: You know, I read this article and it's a very interesting thing when "unnamed European and Western diplomats" -- what does that mean? Who are they? So yeah, for whom do they speak? At what level do they speak? I have not heard this from my counterparts. Steve Hadley doesn't hear this from his counterparts. The President doesn't hear this from his counterparts.

And so I would question, you know, unnamed people who wish to authoritatively speak about something that I think they are -- let's just say with which I don't agree and with which the U.S. Government does not agree. And I've had no sense that this is true for our coalition partners either. Everybody understands that President Karzai has an extremely difficult job. Everybody understands that he now, by the way, has a parliament, he now has opposition. There are people who will challenge his leadership and the job that he is doing because that is, let me remind you, in democracies what people do.

And so we have a somewhat different situation now in Afghanistan where with the emergence of free press, emergence of a democratic opposition, there are people who are going to question and ask questions about what the state of security is, what's the state of reconstruction. And there's going to be criticism.

But I can tell you that those of us who work with him every day, and that includes many of our coalition partners, I have heard it said time and time again we are really lucky to have President Karzai and we will help him work through his problems.

QUESTION: Are you disappointed that President Musharraf has not fulfilled his pledge to give up his army uniform?

SECRETARY RICE: Again, President Musharraf himself raised this issue, all right? And so this is something that we can obviously discuss. The important point is there has to be, that the world expects there to be, democratic, free and fair elections in Pakistan in 2007. In that context, all these issues I think will be decided and addressed. But the main thing right now is to remember that they are committed to democratic elections. It's also to remember that this country, Pakistan, has come an enormously long way in a period of four years. Enormously long way. And we are fortunate there too that you have a leadership that is committed to putting Pakistan on a course toward moderation rather than a course toward extremism.

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