



Interview With Sylvie Lanteaume and David Millikin of Agence France Presse

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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(5:30 p.m. EST)

QUESTION: Well, I'll begin very briefly on Baker-Hamilton since I think that's quite a topic of conversation. Has the possibility of opening unconditional direct talks with Syria and Iran, as recommended by the Baker-Hamilton report and many others in the region and beyond, been definitively taken off the table as the Administration finalizes its Iraq policy review?

SECRETARY RICE: I think that we do not think this is an issue of whether you talk to Iran or Syria, but what you're likely to get. The fact of the matter is that Syria is engaged in a policy that is being demonstrated right now in the streets of Lebanon, where there is an attempt to bring down the Siniora government using or supporting extremist forces in Lebanon. There has been no cooperation with the international community's demand for an international tribunal, which is really what an awful lot of this is about. And Syria is engaged in policies that are if not 180 degrees, 170 degrees antithetical to the interests of mainstream forces in the Middle East. And we are not the only ones who recognize this. The French recognize this. Read what Jacques Chirac has said about talks with Syria. Look at the isolation that Syria is experiencing from moderate Arab states like Saudi Arabia and others.

So the Syrians, if they want to stabilize Iraq, if that is in Syria's interest to stabilize Iraq, and I assume that people -- that countries understand their interests. If it's in Syria's interest to stabilize Iraq, then they'll do it. If it's not in their interest to stabilize Iraq, then they won't or they're looking for compensation, and I do not want to get into a circumstance in which we're talking about compensation. And I just want to take one moment here to say something. Our friends in the Middle East, the struggling democratic forces like those of Prime Minister Siniora and the March 14th coalition in Lebanon, need to understand that we are fully and completely, along with the international community, in support of them and their goals and their legitimacy in Lebanon. And we understand what forces are trying to undo that, including Syria and Iran. And in no way is the United States going to get into a situation where it is even a conceivable notion on the part of Syria or Iran that the future of Lebanon would somehow be compromised for other interests of the United States. We're simply not going to get into that situation.

Now, as to Iran, we have said that we will change 27 years of American policy, and I've said to my Iranian counterpart through you and others, anytime, anywhere, once they suspend their enrichment program. And about any subject. We didn't say you can only come and talk about the nuclear issue. The Iranians have not wanted to do that. Why? Because the Iranians are seeking nuclear technology that can lead to a nuclear weapon to strengthen their capacity to carry out a policy that supports extremist forces throughout the Middle East. And if there's any thought that the Iranians are going to talk about Iraq over here and stabilizing Iraq over here, and then the nuclear issue over here, I just don't see it. And again, so you have to ask what is the price and what is the compensation.

Now, in the context of Iraq's neighbors and the international community, if Syria and Iran come to the table responsibly, ready to support Iraqi efforts with their neighbors, we have no problem with that. And the Iraqis are carrying out their own diplomacy with their neighbors. And Iran and Syria are participants in the international compact. So there are plenty of opportunities for Iran and Syria to support a more stable future for Iraq. They don't need us to tell them how they might do that, and I would be concerned that the reason that they would want to have us to tell them that is because there would be some expectation of compensation, and compensation is clearly not on the table.

QUESTION: In Lebanon, Madame Secretary, a compromise seems to be taking shape with Arab League support and it would give Hezbollah and its allies a blocking minority in the government. Is it something that would be acceptable?

SECRETARY RICE: We are following the discussions. I talked with Amr Moussa when he was here. There has to be a Lebanese solution to this problem and I think we have to let the Lebanese deal with it. You know, Prime Minister Siniora is the elected leader of Lebanon and he should not be "brought down" by these forces that are trying to undo what is a democratic process. We would hope that the Lebanese would respond to the desire to find a compromise. But you know, the Hezbollah demonstrations that really, as Siniora called it, were really aimed at a kind of coup need to stop. But if the Lebanese can come to a resolution of this, then you know, obviously they can come to a resolution of it. I trust Prime Minister Siniora to do what's right for Lebanon.

QUESTION: And would -- the Hariri tribunal would be -- would it be a price acceptable

SECRETARY RICE: I'm sorry?

QUESTION: The existence of the Hariri tribunal.

SECRETARY RICE: The Hariri tribunal has got to go forward. First of all, it's under Security Council resolution. Secondly, it's a matter of justice. Third, it's a matter of showing that people who assassinate leaders can't do so with impunity. The Hariri tribunal has got to go forward and I've heard no one in the March 14th coalition suggest anything to the contrary.

QUESTION: On the Middle East, President Bush and Tony Blair both spoke last week about the need for a renewed push on the Israeli-Palestinian front. You've gone to the region seven times, I believe, as Secretary of State in the last two years, but the situation has deteriorated over that same period. What do you plan to do differently now to make -- to get this thing moving?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let's look at this question of deterioration. But in order to do so, if you don't mind, I have to go back a little bit. And I'm going to confine this to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. I won't speak to the questions of the broader Middle East and the importance of democracy there, although it is extremely important.

But let's go back to 2001. This Administration came to power. The Camp David accords -- or the Camp David process had collapsed. The second intifada had been launched. Ariel Sharon had been elected. And we went through more than a year and a half of really unrelenting violence. You'll remember the Dolfinarium. You'll remember the Passover massacre and so on and so on. You remember the siege of the Muqataa. And we went through a period that was really a crisis period.

The President in the midst of all of that, at the beginning of all of that in 2001, declared that there would be a Palestinian state, that that was the goal of American policy. He even said it's going to be called Palestine. Now, lest we think that what now easily rolls off our tongues -- oh there should be a two-state solution, oh there should be a Palestinian state -- that that was kind of always the consensus, no American President had dared say it before President Bush said it.

And by 2003, not only did you have the President of the United States saying it, but you had the Likud Prime Minister himself, Ariel Sharon, talking about the need to share the land, and launching shortly after that a Gaza disengagement plan which, for the first time, actually took Israeli settlers out of land and returned land to the Palestinians.

You also had in that same period an election which brought Mahmoud Abbas to power, but shortly, not too long after that, an election that brought Hamas to power, then a period of time in which the international community united around a set of principles to say to the Palestinian Government, the Hamas government, you must recognize Israel's right to exist, you must renounce violence and et cetera. And the international community and Mahmoud Abbas came together around that set of principles.

So yes, there have been ups and downs. But if you look at where we were in 2001 and you look at where we are now, you have consensus on a Palestinian state, you have consensus that any Palestinian government must accept those principles even though Hamas has actually gone the electoral route, you have an Israeli leadership that has been willing to give up territory and actually dismantle settlements. And I think as a result of now a broad center around that set of principles, it is possible to make a push toward the creation of a Palestinian state. And that is what we will try to do.

But you know, we shouldn't just facetiously throw away what's happened in the last four years because a great deal of it has moved us closer to the day when we can realize a Palestinian state, not further away from it.

QUESTION: Well, if I can just carry that forward a bit, I mean, President Abbas has been given the green light by his movement to --

SECRETARY RICE: Can I just say one other thing?

QUESTION: Sure.

SECRETARY RICE: How long have American Secretaries of State been shuttling back and forth trying to get a Palestinian state? Has it ever worked? You have to ask: Are the fundamentals better now than they were at a time, another time in history? I think the fundamentals are now better and I think we've got a better chance because certain fundamentals are in place.

QUESTION: Okay, just to follow up, that he's been given the green light to call early elections. Now, are you -- if that goes ahead, are you willing to accept whatever the result is of those elections?

SECRETARY RICE: We always are going to accept democratic results of democratic elections.

QUESTION: Are you confident this time you'd have a different outcome?

SECRETARY RICE: I've talked to President Abbas several times. I know that he and his advisors and others in the Palestinian political class are trying to find an answer to the political crisis that attends Hamas's unwillingness to govern from a position that is internationally acceptable. That's what they're trying to resolve. I think they have not fully settled on a course yet of how they might do that. But we obviously want to support the moderate Palestinians who are represented by Mahmoud Abbas, those that are committed to the internationally accepted principles. And once they come to a way to resolve the crisis, I am sure we'll be there to support them.

QUESTION: If we can speak about the Iran nuclear program. Is the latest European draft submitted today at the UN acceptable to you?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes, it is.

QUESTION: It is? Nothing is missing? You --

SECRETARY RICE: It's not the draft that we would have drafted. That's called negotiation and diplomacy. But it's a good resolution. It's a first-step resolution. It establishes Chapter 7, which to my mind is the most important element here. It would make very clear to the Iranians that they are not going to be able to pursue this program and remain integrated into the international system, and I would hope would give them pause so that they might consider coming back to negotiations.

QUESTION: So you are still optimistic a sanction resolution can be voted before Christmas?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes, I am optimistic. I don't -- I think it has to be voted soon. I think this has gone on long enough.

QUESTION: The negotiations have been dragging on for a month about this resolution and during this time Iran has continued to develop its capabilities. So when do you think they will pass the point of no return?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, I don't think it ever passes the point of no return. I don't think we're at the point of no return with the North Koreans, and they've tested. I don't think you ever pass the point of no return. I think at any time reasonable people in a government can decide that they've gone down the wrong course and should change course. But I do think that it's time to pass the resolution and to make clear to the Iranians that we can, in fact, do that path or take that path and still leave the other path open to them. But it needs to happen soon. It has been long enough.

To be fair, the resolution said August 31st, but then we wanted to give the Solana efforts a little bit longer. There was also the matter of the North Korean circumstances that kind of intervened for a bit and took attention, I think, toward the North Korean issue. But the time has come.

QUESTION: Just to turn to the North Korean issue, the six-party talks are due to resume a week from today. What will the U.S. be bringing to the table that you believe will help convince North Korea to give up their nuclear weapons this time around?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have -- what we're bringing to the table is the agreed statement of September 25th -- sorry, September 19th, 2005, which makes very clear to the North Koreans that if they denuclearize and support a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, there are a whole -- that their integration into the international community could be begin, including economic assistance and energy assistance and ultimately political relations. It's all laid out in the joint statement.

Now, as to the specifics of how that might go, I think that everybody is looking in the next round or so for the North Koreans to do something that demonstrates that they are, in fact, committed to denuclearization. And we are certainly committed to living up to the terms of the joint statement if they're committed to living up to the terms of the joint statement. So that's the starting point for negotiations and we'll see. But I'm delighted the talks are

going to start again. They have to start to show results pretty soon.

QUESTION: Would you like to see that denuclearization achieved during the life of this Administration?

SECRETARY RICE: Certainly.

QUESTION: Is that a timetable you're taking to the --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's the only timetable I've got because, you know, I'll be long gone in two years. So of course that's my timetable.

Look, I think that this could be achieved in a reasonable period of time. I don't mean the technical elements of denuclearization. It takes a long time, as we're seeing with the dismantling of nuclear infrastructure and weapons in the former Soviet Union. It takes a long time to bring down a nuclear program and to really dismantle a nuclear program. But it shouldn't take very long to take some steps that would clearly be irreversible in terms of denuclearization and we've been very clear that we think at stake is more than just the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but the future of the Korean Peninsula as well as security relations in the region as a whole.

What the North Koreans did do in testing was they got everybody else much closer together. And in addition to the joint statement, we, of course, also go to the table with Resolution 1718, which puts North Korea under pretty stiff sanctions for the first time even though its program has been going on for decades.

QUESTION: In Russia, Madame Secretary, your predilection country, there is mounting evidence that the polonium used to kill the former spy Litvinenko came from Russia. So has this incident, coming after a number of other political motivated murders, heightened your concerns about democracy in this country?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've been very clear to the Russian Government that all of these issues need to be investigated and investigated thoroughly. Our principal role in this latest Litvinenko situation is to try to be supportive of the British Government in any way that we can. I think this is -- principally, the British and the Russians are working on this issue. But you know, it's an investigation; I shouldn't get into anything about it except to say that everybody ought to try and get to the bottom of it because it has dimensions that are quite troubling, given that, you know, there are traces of it showing up in lots of different places. There are lots of dimensions that are just troubling. So our principal role is just to try and help if we're asked and to be very clear that we think total cooperation on this is necessary.

QUESTION: But other -- the fact that all of the traces go to Russia, is it concerning?

SECRETARY RICE: I just -- well, I think it's concerning, period. I mean, when somebody is poisoned with polonium and it starts to show up in lots of places, I think that's concerning. That has to be concerning to everybody; to the police, to law enforcement officials, to political officials. But I -- you know, I don't have any comment on what the investigation is finding.

QUESTION: Turning to Sudan, President Bush once said that following the genocide in Rwanda that it would never happen again on his watch. And yet, the violence in Darfur is soon going to be entering -- it's almost four years long at this point. And still, the Sudan Government is not agreeing to the terms -- the international terms for deployment of a peacekeeping force. Now, do you still feel that -- Andrew Natsios has set kind of a year-end deadline for approval of that. Do you think and feel that that still is a deadline and is there a plan B?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Andrew is out there now and very good work has been done by Kofi Annan and by, really, all of the interested parties: the AU, the Arab League, the Egyptians, the European Union. Everybody is focused and centered around this compromise proposal. And I think the issue is: Is the Sudanese Government willing to take this lifeline that people are trying to give them? Because if there is widespread humanitarian suffering in this region as a result of their unwillingness to take the help of the international community, they're going to be held accountable.

And so this is the time to accept the help of the international community and that's the point that we are making to them. You know, we retain other resolutions in the Security Council, including ones about designations for sanctions and the like that can always be employed, but I think we would like for now to try and see if we can't bring through the fact that everybody is united around this proposal the Sudanese Government to accept this help that the international community is willing to give.

QUESTION: Is action on possible crimes against humanity one of the options?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, that's always an option. I think at this point, the best option would be for Sudan to accept the help that is being offered it.

QUESTION: December 31st, for you, remains an important --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think Andrew was just making a point that there are -- there have to be deepening concerns about the humanitarian situation as we hear from the UN and from others. And so this can't go on forever, but I wouldn't say that, you know, on January 1st, everything changes, no.

QUESTION: Maybe just a quick one on -- Kofi Annan gave a long-awaited speech today towards the end of his time as Secretary General of the United Nations and it was quite critical of U.S. foreign policy, parts of U.S. foreign policy. What's your assessment of his period as head of the United Nations?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let me just say about the speech, I mean, it's a real missed opportunity, because I would have hoped that it would have talked about some of the things that I remember about the work that we've done together with the Secretary General: Standing in the Rose Garden for the launch of the Global Fund for AIDS, which has been a dramatic success for people suffering with AIDS; the Democracy Fund, which is supporting democracy projects around the world; the very good work we've just been talking about about Sudan, which actually brings the world together; the end to the war in Lebanon, where really, frankly, it was the United States -- that ceasefire would not have happened without the United States.

I can go on and on about the positive things that we have achieved in this period of time. And so I'm sorry that those were not the focus of the speech. You know, U.S. support for the United Nations through thick and thin, through budget issues and new building issues and Oil-for-Food scandals; the United States has always been there for the United Nations. So it's unfortunate, but those are the things that I'll always remember about this period.

QUESTION: If we can go back to Lebanon, you said at the beginning that you won't do anything that could harm the future of Lebanon in exchange of anything --

SECRETARY RICE: I want it to be very clear that the future of Lebanon is not an issue for negotiation with anybody.

QUESTION: So who is asking you to negotiate anything?

SECRETARY RICE: I just -- I think it's just extremely important that that be very clear. And we understand who Lebanon's enemies are and those who

are trying to bring down the Siniora government. And Lebanon -- we are committed to standing by those Lebanese democrats who have risked everything in favor of Lebanese democracy and who have faced assassinations -- some successful, some that were close to succeeding -- and who stood in the streets of Lebanon to get Syrian forces out. And there is no way that the United States or the international community could ever countenance a reassertion of Syrian authority in Lebanon.

QUESTION: And what do you answer to critics who say that U.S. contributed to the extreme weakness of the Siniora government today because they didn't seek for a ceasefire soon enough during the war last summer?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, this has been a difficult political environment in Lebanon well before the war. I think we forget the resignations of the ministers and the fact that 1559 largely came to a halt. Prior to the war, I accept responsibility for the fact that I think the international community lost focus on 1559. I really do. I think we lost focus. And that didn't help matters, but Lebanon is an extremely complex political environment.

Now, after the war, yes, there were some terrible things that happened in the war that undoubtedly made it difficult for democratic forces. But it is also, after the war, the case that the Lebanese army is, for the first time, in control of its entire territory -- for decades. The Lebanese army is in control of its territory. There is an international force in Lebanon that is helping the Lebanese forces to extend the authority of the Lebanese Government. There is about to be a major reconstruction conference for the Lebanese in Europe shortly after the first of the year to put billions of dollars into the reconstruction of Lebanon on top of the billions of dollars that were put in for immediate relief of Lebanon.

And the Lebanese Government has in Fuad Siniora a strong, dignified spokesman for Lebanese democracy. Now, if I contrast that with 1996 when my predecessor, Warren Christopher, managed to get a ceasefire, he did it between Hezbollah and Syria. Think of that. There is actually a Siniora government in Lebanon with which we're dealing.

See, I mean, part of the problem is that we lose perspective on the broad changes that are going on in the Middle East and how much ground has shifted and how, when changes of this kind start, they are going to -- they are turbulent.

Every day, as I watch what's going on in Lebanon, I'm pulled back in my own mind to the terrible suffering of Lebanese civilians and Israelis during that war. I wish we could have done more so that innocent civilians didn't suffer. But I also recognize that the cause of that was Hezbollah acting like a government within a government, not even telling the Siniora government that it was about to launch an attack across an international line and plunge the entire country into war.

So I think we have to recognize where the fault lies, but it doesn't make any easier the fact that I think frequently about what the Lebanese suffered in that war.

QUESTION: Thank you. David, do you want the last question?

QUESTION: You go ahead.

QUESTION: Okay. Madame Secretary, you said that thousand of mistakes were made in Iraq. What is your biggest personal regret?

SECRETARY RICE: I think I said thousands and thousands. (Laughter.) Look, Sylvie, I think I've said several times I'm enough of an historian to know that the -- history will judge what turned out to be mistakes and what turned out to be right policies. I'm sure that there are many, many, many things that we could have done differently, maybe should have done differently, perhaps didn't foresee; absolutely. It's a huge historical undertaking and that's going to be the case.

Have we made adjustments? Yes. I'll tell you an adjustment that we've made. You know, we started out with a reconstruction program that was probably too centralized and probably too big and maybe focused on -- you know, with large contracts to do things because we really wanted to make an impact on -- you know, the fact that the electrical grid was in the, you know, in the 30s from the Iraqis and that, you know, you wanted to be able to deliver water. And we did a lot of that. But we found that by now having these provincial reconstruction teams, we can actually deliver infrastructure projects in a much more effective and efficient way at the local level than we were ever able to do at the national level. We found that smaller amounts of money to a commander and a provincial reconstruction leader, with the input of a provincial council, can fix a problem right there on the spot.

So yeah, there are important adjustments like that that we have had to make. But I absolutely don't -- it's not that I just don't regret having participated in the liberation of Iraq or the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, but I'm very proud that this country finally helped to liberate 25 million Iraqis from a tyrant who had put 300,000 of them in mass graves, who had used weapons of mass destruction against Iranians and against Kurds and against Shia, who was still fighting us day in and day out with no-fly zones, who had caused two wars in his region.

Yeah, the aftermath and the reconstruction and the fighting, and particularly the sectarian violence, is very bad and it's very hard to take; and if you are at all responsible for the decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein, you feel a personal responsibility for what's going on there every day, a personal responsibility for it. But you also feel a personal responsibility to support and be committed to these people who are struggling out of the ashes of that tyranny to build something new and different in the entire Middle East.

And so I think that, you know, Iraqis have got to take responsibility for their future, but they sure deserve to have committed friends who understand the challenge of what they're doing. And I feel an equal responsibility to do that.

QUESTION: Thank you, Madame Secretary.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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