



Remarks With Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini After Their Meeting

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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SECRETARY RICE: Good afternoon. I have just had the pleasure of welcoming to the Department of State my colleague, Franco Frattini, the Minister – Foreign Minister of Italy. It is the first visit by a member of the new Italian Government, although our President has been already in Rome with the Italian Government, Prime Minister Berlusconi. But it is not the first time that we have met.

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: Yes.

SECRETARY RICE: We knew each other in another life. We also have met a couple of times on the margins of various multilateral meetings. We had a very wide-ranging discussion that is befitting close allies, allies that work together through the very important work that Europe and the United States do together, as well as the work that we are doing with Italy in a variety of ways. We talked about Afghanistan. We talked about Iran. We had an extensive discussion of the Middle East, as well as a number of other issues.

But the United States really is very, very fortunate to have such a good friend in Italy and such a good ally in Italy. And indeed, we have worked hard on a range of issues already. We look forward to working on those issues into the future. And Franco, it is really just a great pleasure to have you here. Welcome, and the floor is yours.

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: Thank you very much, Condi. It's indeed a great pleasure to be here. I confirmed once again the Italian Government's commitment to work together with United States, that we consider our first international partner and ally. It's also very important to reaffirm once again the Italian commitment towards cooperating within EU, because we consider that Italy and United States, Europe and United States should be closer and closer. It's simply not possible to forget that United States and Italy form part of the same international coalition of shared values. We have to translate our shared values into action.

We have been talking about very important issues. I confirmed the Italian Government's commitment to work together in Afghanistan, where Italy is making a bit more flexible the – I would say our troops' operations, including reducing or removing the existing (inaudible) as Prime Minister Berlusconi announced during the last visit of President Bush to Rome, but also our recent decision to cooperate even more on training Afghani police by sending an additional number of Carabinieri that are broadly appreciated. We discussed also about the incoming role of the new representatives of NATO and EU civil reconstruction in Afghanistan, that our two Italian compatriots that will play a very important role in the interest of the coalition and Europe as well.

We discussed about the Middle East. I confirm and I'm very happy with the appreciation of United States on the role being played by Italy in Middle East to – by, I would say, encouraging and bringing closer two sides after the recent visit of President Abu Mazen to Rome, and my visit to Israel and Ramallah, and meetings between Prime Minister Berlusconi and Prime Minister Olmert of Israel. We reaffirmed the Italian commitment to work towards peace, and it is particularly important today, in a day where the two negotiators will come to Washington to discuss again about peace.

Also, we'll continue to talk with the Lebanese Prime Minister, Mr. Siniora, and to confirm our full support to consolidate Lebanese Government, as well as talking with the Syria, because we do want to get Syrians on board in a coalition of people working for peace, prosperity and reconciliation in the broader Middle East.

Of course, we talked about Iran. You know that at last Council of Foreign Ministers in Brussels, Italy was among the main European states insisting on deciding for the full implementation of 1803 United Nations resolution concerning sanctions against Iran. Iran should understand one day that it's simply not possible to keep a negative role by continuing the enrichment of uranium. Prospective of Iran making a nuclear bomb is simply not acceptable. This is the Italian position which is very firm. We believe in the double-track strategy; on one hand, putting up a table, a generous offer, on the other hand, standing very firm on confirming that if Iran does not take seriously negotiations with Europe and with the international community, we cannot accept to stay inactive and we will have to implement in full.

These are the main arguments. Of course, we briefly mentioned the situation in Western Balkans as well as the relations between Russia and NATO. And I said Italy is ready to continue to encourage Russian Federation. We have excellent relations with the Russian Federation to play a positive role and to cooperate with Atlantic alliance and to play a positive role also while discussing about Caucasus and the delicate situation that is there. Thank you.

MR. MCCORMACK: We have time for two questions a side. We'll start with Anne Gearan from the Associated Press.

QUESTION: Yes. Madame Secretary, on the Mid-East, yesterday, Prime Minister Olmert said that he does not think a deal is possible on all the core issues by the end of the year. The Palestinians have been pessimistic in public prior to that. Are you feeling a little lonely out there as the only one who thinks a deal is still doable this year? How will you press that with both sides this week?

And Mr. Minister, is there something you think the United States should be doing or doing differently – doing that it isn't doing, or doing differently to try to get a deal in short order?

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: What – excuse me, and the last part?

QUESTION: Do you think the United States should be doing something differently to try to get a deal done?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I am quite certain and I have been assured that the government of Prime Minister Olmert remains committed to the Annapolis

vision of concluding this – an agreement by the end of the year. And there is no doubt that it's difficult work, and there is no doubt also that there are a number of issues that would have to be resolved. Now, Jerusalem is a final status issue, so it will ultimately have to be resolved.

But our goal, as the United States, is to work as hard as we can to encourage the parties to resolve the differences between them. They are working very, very hard. They are also working very seriously. But, Anne, as I've said to you many times before, had this been easy, somebody else would have solved it a long time ago. The fact is that this is, unfortunately, a conflict that has been going on for decades. As much as people have said they've come close before, no one has done it. And so it only speaks to the difficulty of the issues that they're addressing.

But there are many things going for them this time, including, I think, the realization that the Middle East is not going to get better without the creation of a Palestinian state to live side by side with Israel in peace, security, and democracy. It simply isn't going to get better. And so the question is, if not now, when. We have to work as hard as we can. I will have the Palestinian delegation here shortly. I will have the Israelis and the Palestinians – the Israeli delegation then tomorrow morning, and the Israelis and Palestinians a little later in a trilateral. I was with Prime Minister – or with Foreign – with Defense Minister Barak a little bit earlier, and I have talked to all of the parties by phone.

So I expect to continue to help the parties find points of convergence, to help them to continue to try to work toward this. But I'm assured that they're all committed to trying to make it happen, but nobody should underestimate the difficulty of doing that.

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: Yes, I fully agree with what Secretary Rice just said. Just a comment. I believe that time is playing against us. We have now a window of opportunity. That's why it's very important to come to an end before the end of the year, because now we have a good window of opportunity. And I think the moral, not only the institutional duty of Israel and Palestinian Authority is to show the international community that negotiations are alive. This is the very important point, that they are taking seriously, as I think they do, the negotiations.

And what United States is doing is absolutely right, try to persuade, try to move, try to go ahead, and, I would say, explaining to the public opinion that option -- failure does not exist. This is the very important point because, otherwise, if we lose hopes, it's finished, not only for Middle East but for the international community which is at stake – its credibility – it's at stake, credibility of international community which is involved for a very long time to get comprehensive and lasting peace would be seriously at stake if we (inaudible) to fail. That's why what is – what Secretary Rice is doing is absolutely right.

QUESTION: Thank you. Secretary Rice, you both spoke about Iran. Recently, your positions seemed a bit shifting. So, first of all, the military option is still there, and Italy could have a role in this, even in the negotiation.

(Via interpreter) And on this last matter, I would like to ask Mr. Minister Frattini whether he asked something specific about our possible role in negotiating with Iran.

SECRETARY RICE: The U.S. position, which is indeed the position of the international community, for the Security Council resolutions, and the position of those who have been negotiating with the Iranians, is crystal clear: Iran needs to suspend its enrichment and reprocessing, come to the negotiating table. No one is questioning the right of Iran to have a peaceful nuclear program. This is something that occasionally they tell their public that people are questioning. Nobody questions that. It is a question of not having the fuel cycle.

And the proposal that was made to the Iranians makes very clear – and by the way, the proposal is public – makes very clear that there is wide-ranging civil nuclear cooperation that would be possible with Iran, trade relations, economic relations. This is a very, very beneficial package for Iran.

But Iran can't have it both ways. It can't, on the one hand, try to have the benefits of the international community and continue to refuse to carry out the obligations of the international community. And so the position of the United States has not changed. The position of the international community has not changed. Bill Burns went to receive the Iranian response to the proposal that I sent by letter, and I have to say that the Iranian response was pretty disappointing – not surprising, I might add, but disappointing. And the Iranians should know that this is not going to be a matter that they can stall. The world is watching to see whether they answer clearly the question that Javier Solana asked them.

I just want to be very clear that we have been in very close contact with Italy throughout this period. In fact, the Minister and I spoke just before the Geneva negotiations. I wanted Italy to give me their views, to be fully informed about what Bill Burns was going to do there. Bill Burns was then immediately in contact with his Italian counterpart, I think within hours of leaving the room in Geneva, because we consider Italy to be an extremely important partner in this two-track strategy. And Italy will continue to be a strong voice for Iran needing to do the right thing. And so we've been in extremely close contact and we had a long discussion of the issue today.

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: Well -- (in Italian). May -- may I answer in Italian? Yeah.

(Via interpreter.) Certainly, Italy is contributing in a very positive way to the cohesion of the international position vis-à-vis Iran. The fact that Italy today is convinced that this double-track approach is the right one, this is strengthening the position of the international community. And it's very true that we are constantly kept updated on the negotiations, not only by our European partners, but also by Secretary Rice, by Under Secretary Burns and their colleagues. What is at stake now, what is very important now is to improve and step up our effort of communications so that sooner or later the Italian – the Iranian public opinion will be aware of the fact that the price of isolation and sanctions will be paid by them. And that's why the Iranian authorities will not be able, given also the position of Italy, try to divide the international community.

SECRETARY RICE: Did I mention that when I go back to Stanford I'd like to learn to speak Italian? (Laughter.) For somebody with a name like Condoleezza, this is beautiful to listen to. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I wish I spoke Italian, too. (Laughter.) Madame Secretary, a follow-up on Iran. You just said that their response in Geneva was pretty disappointing. And you said last week that they did not present a serious response to the P-5+1. But yesterday in an interview with NBC, Iran's President said that there was common ground between the parties. And he said if the new U.S. approach is a serious one, then the response from the Iranians will be a positive response. Do you see this as any sort of serious overture from the Iranians? And if their response is not satisfactory in the coming days, how quickly will you move toward further UN sanctions? And I also have a second question. (Laughter.) Defense – something about defense – something that Defense Minister Barak said today, that talks between the U.S. and Israel are progressing on early warning radar systems and intelligence-sharing; what can you tell us?

SECRETARY RICE: On the latter, I think it's better to let the discussions progress. Obviously, we're concerned about the security of Israel and its ability to defend itself against new threats. And so those discussions are going on. We're also having broad discussions about the security environment regionally -- the broad security environment, including the contribution that a properly constituted Palestinian state could make and the -- Israel's

responsibilities in helping to bring about that Palestinian state. So we're having broad security and regional discussions, including the threats of the 21st century and the opportunities of the 21st century.

In terms of the Iranians and the interview yesterday, look, there's one way for the Iranians to make clear that they have found common ground. It's to come and say we accept the proposal, this is a good basis for the beginnings of pre-negotiations within a six-week period, and then we can suspend our enrichment and reprocessing, and we can begin real negotiations, and the United States will fundamentally be at the table. So that's the way to demonstrate that they believe there's common ground.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: We've been very clear that the – we have two tracks, as the Minister has just said, and if one track is not working, then we're going to have to go to the other. We continue to move along, by the way, in strengthening our ability to designate Iranian entities that are engaged in proliferation activity. We continue to strengthen the steps that we have under 1803. All of these things are going to continue. But nothing would be better than for the Iranians to, in however many days it is now, to come and say, all right, it's time to negotiate and we will accede to the requirements of the international community.

QUESTION: (Via interpreter) Yes, the question for Minister Frattini and also I'd like to ask a comment on the part of Secretary Rice. The American and the U.S. political world, both parties, both Republican and Democratic Party, they are requiring and calling for a greater involvement of the troops of the European allies in Afghanistan. And we know, Minister Frattini, that yesterday you said in interview that Italy is ready in case of need and temporarily to deploy troops in the south of the country where the fight against Taliban is the harsher one. We will like to know whether you have discussed this during the meeting with Dr. Rice, and we would like to have the comments of Secretary Rice.

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: (Via interpreter) First of all, the region where the Italian troops are stationed now in Afghanistan cannot at all be considered as a safe area. Proof of this has been the fact that, unfortunately, we have suffered many casualties and we have been subjected to many attacks.

The reason of the recent political decision of the Berlusconi government was at the aim of making the employment of our troops in Afghanistan more flexible without moving the troops outside of the region where they were assigned to.

If there is a case whereby the U.S. – the NATO command in Afghanistan requests the use of Italian troops to be of support to other military contingents, the responsibility and the decision rests with the Italian commander on the ground -- within six hours.

I think that Italy has the institutional and moral duty to contribute and to cooperate in Afghanistan at the same level with other countries, which does not mean that this would translate into a daily request of moving our troops outside of the Herat region even temporarily.

SECRETARY RICE: My only comment would be that the flexibility that the Italian Government has demonstrated in cooperating with NATO and also, frankly, the dealing with the caveats was just an extremely important step. And so it's greatly appreciated. And we talked about our common responsibility to deal with a difficult situation in Afghanistan, but recognizing the progress that has been made, and recognizing that this is really now NATO's most central mission. And so we will do what it takes to succeed. But I just want to acknowledge how important the steps that Italy has taken really are.

MR. MCCORMACK: Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI: Thank you very much.

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