



Interview With Reuters News Agency

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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(11:20 a.m. EST)

QUESTION: Thank you very much for your time.

SECRETARY RICE: Sure. I'll just let you start. I don't need to make a statement.

QUESTION: What is your exact decision on offering incentives to Iran if it gives up its suspected pursuit of nuclear weapons?

SECRETARY RICE: The decision that the President has taken is that the United States will actively -- make an effort to actively support the EU-3's negotiations with the Iranians. So this should be thought of as an effort to support the diplomacy that the EU-3 are engaged in.

What we will do is that we will make clear that we will lift our objection to an Iranian application to the WTO and that we are prepared to license -- or to lift an objection to the licensing of spare parts for Iranian commercial aircraft.

I want to emphasize that the issue here is supporting the European diplomacy. Part of the problem over the last several months has been that the focus has been too much on what the United States would do or what the Europeans are offering, when really the issue is: Are the Iranians prepared to demonstrate that they are willing to live up to their international obligations and not seek a nuclear weapon under guise of civilian nuclear program. And this is meant to give the Europeans' effort to give the Iranians a chance to demonstrate that. That's what this is. So it's a common approach with the Europeans.

QUESTION: So that I understand it precisely on the licensing aspect, that would allow the Iranians to purchase spare parts.

SECRETARY RICE: Spare parts.

QUESTION: But not entire aircraft?

SECRETARY RICE: That's right, spare parts.

QUESTION: And on lifting your objection to allow them to submit an application to join the WTO, that means that you would essentially allow them -- you're not reserving the right --

SECRETARY RICE: No, the way that it works is that they can apply.

QUESTION: Correct.

SECRETARY RICE: But then there is a period of negotiation and they have to meet particular standards. And in fact, we think that meeting some of those standards might have an effect of opening up some aspects of Iranian society. But there is still an accession process to which the United States would have to agree separately.

QUESTION: Why should one not regard this change in U.S. policy as rewarding Iran for what you regard as bad behavior?

SECRETARY RICE: Because the policy here -- and I would not regard it, first of all, as a change in U.S. policy. What I would regard it as is a way to make more concrete the policy and the statements that we have been making for some time. We have been saying for some time we support the diplomacy that the European 3 are engaged in. That's the policy.

Now, in discussions that began when I first went to Europe, on my first trip, it had become clear that somehow the Iranians had managed to make this an issue of what the United States would do or what they would be offered. All of this is an effort to get this back on the grounds that it ought to be on, which is the Europeans are engaged in a diplomacy that we support, we are now actively supporting that diplomacy with these two -- this decision on these two elements, and we will now see whether the Iranians are really serious about living up to their international obligations.

So it's a way to strengthen and further and make more concrete the policy that we have been engaged in, which is to support the European diplomacy.

QUESTION: But you are, in effect, offering them something tangible in exchange for them stopping doing something that you don't think they should have done in the first place (inaudible)

SECRETARY RICE: The Europeans have a strategy, which is to show the Iranians that if they are prepared to live up to their international obligations there is an alternative path to confrontation and there is a path to a better future. And we're supporting that diplomacy. But this is most assuredly giving the Europeans a stronger hand, not rewarding the Iranians.

QUESTION: Why doesn't this give other countries an incentive to pursue nuclear weapons, if only in the hopes that they would be offered similar incentives to cease and desist?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, remember that the Iranians have managed to get themselves into a situation in which they are isolated, in which the entire -- well, large parts of the international community are focused on what they are doing, where they are suspected of activities that are in contravention of their obligations, and where there is also now a statement that if they fail to live up to their obligations they'll end up in the Security Council. I don't think many states want to end up in that kind of state of isolation.

I just want to mention one other thing, that part of the goal here in creating a common strategy with the Europeans moving forward was also to signal that the nuclear issue is, of course, of extreme importance but that there are other concerns, and the European -- we and the Europeans affirmed our concerns about Iranian terrorist -- activities in support of terrorism and also concerns about human rights and democracy. So this is a strategy that addresses not just the nuclear issue but those other issues as well.

QUESTION: But the EU letter has no deadline for negotiations with Iran, no commitment to sanctions and no definition of what will constitute a breakdown in negotiations, in the negotiating process, despite U.S. statements that these factors were critical and that you wanted that.

SECRETARY RICE: No, we didn't. I don't know who you were talking to, because we didn't talk about the need for sanctions, language about sanctions at this time. We have not tried to put a timeline on the negotiations. We have been very clear that the outcome here has to be an Iran that cannot build a nuclear weapon, and that means certain objective guarantees, as the Europeans call them, but it really means the issues about the fuel cycle.

And we sought with the Europeans to do two things: to have a joint approach that made very clear that Iran cannot get a nuclear weapon, made very clear that the suspension in which they are currently engaged until a final arrangement is made had to be maintained; that if they failed ultimately to do this that there would be a referral to the Security Council; and that there were also concerns about their human rights and terrorism activities.

QUESTION: Just on the question of deadline, there was a paper circulating in Vienna that was supposedly -- had supposedly come from the Americans which talked about a June -- some sort of June deadline.

SECRETARY RICE: There was, I think, in the IAEA discussions some question of whether we should bring this to a deadline in June. In our discussions, remember that this track for this set of discussions that ended up in this initiative took place in capitals between me and the foreign ministers and the political directors. And the Iranians have been put on notice that they're not going to be able to split the allies on this issue, and that's what they're trying to do.

QUESTION: Are you confident that the Europeans will support sanctions if it comes to the Security Council?

SECRETARY RICE: I am confident that the -- that we will go to the Security Council. I think we have to decide what the best course is if it goes to the Security Council. There are a lot of hypothetical questions about will you do this, will you do that. Negotiations, in and of themselves, create a particular dynamic to which you have to respond, so I don't think it's time to talk about what we'll do when we go to the Security Council.

QUESTION: Do you mean, though, to leave it open that sanctions may not be something that you would look for?

SECRETARY RICE: We will cross that bridge when we get to it.

QUESTION: Just to be clear on one thing --

SECRETARY RICE: I mean, obviously, sanctions are available to the international system if you go to the Security Council, but I think we have to see where we are. My view is that once you're in the Security Council, that is clearly one of the tools available to us.

QUESTION: I'm not sure if you cut yourself off or this was the definitive statement: "I am confident we will go to the Security Council," you said?

SECRETARY RICE: I am confident that if the Iranians fail to live up to their obligations and that if these -- if this track does not work, that there will be a referral to the Security Council.

QUESTION: Can we --

QUESTION: Just a little bit more on Iran, though. Are you contemplating any broader shift in U.S. policy towards Iran, or under what circumstances might you do that?

SECRETARY RICE: No, we are not contemplating -- you mean beyond what we've just done?

QUESTION: Beyond what you've done.

SECRETARY RICE: The goal here is to support the European diplomacy. We've made very clear that we have a lot of other problems with the Iranians. We've also made very clear that we don't intend to do anything to legitimize the Iranian regime. And so what we're looking at here is helping the Europeans in their diplomacy, not shifting policy toward Iran.

QUESTION: How about easing U.S. sanctions to allow NGOs to do work in Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: That is an idea that has been out there, but at this point, this is what we're prepared to do.

QUESTION: Nothing further?

SECRETARY RICE: Nothing further.

QUESTION: Just one more on this. Bush has now shifted his approach on both Iran and North Korea, or at least some -- you know, that is the perception of some people -- towards more engagement. Why didn't you do it sooner?

SECRETARY RICE: First of all, this is not engagement with the Iranians. This is giving to the Europeans more cards to play in their negotiations with the Iranians. This is about unifying the international community so that it's the Iranians who are isolated, not the United States.

On North Korea, it's a negotiation in the six-party talks and so it makes sense that at times you want to make new initiatives within the context of that negotiation. So, again, that's what we did at the last round of the six-party talks.

Diplomacy is a matter of finding common ground, particularly with your allies, so that you are operating from a stronger position in order to achieve what you're trying to achieve. And that's what we are doing in this case today.

QUESTION: On the North Korea nuclear issue, the United States has repeatedly looked at Beijing to bring North Korea to the negotiating table. Why do you think Beijing has been either unable or unwilling to deliver North Korea to the table?

SECRETARY RICE: I think if it were easy to deal with North Korea, we wouldn't have the problem that we have. It's obviously not easy to deal with North Korea.

What we've achieved in the six-party talks is that there is a common message to the North Koreans that they cannot have their nuclear capability and have good relations with the international community. And that, again, puts North Korea in a position of isolation, not the rest of the parties.

We will see when and if the North Koreans decide to come back to the six-party talks. They, frankly, ought to come back to the six-party talks because it's the only means available to them to deal with the international community. But I do think the Chinese have been trying to convince them of that. It's just not an easy thing to do.

QUESTION: The Chinese have the most leverage. They're the Communist neighbor, they have historic ties. What can the United States do to get China to do more?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've been quite impressed with the fact that we've come to this common view of what to do about North Korea. And I'm going to have discussions with the Chinese and the South Koreans and the Japanese when I go out to the region next week, and I think at that point we'll see where we are and what other steps need to be taken.

But a lot of this is continuing to confront states that are out of compliance with their international obligations with clear choices, and the choices are not very clear if it appears that you can get one deal from one part of the -- from one set of actors and another deal from another set of actors. So it's very important to keep pulling this together into a common position.

QUESTION: When you say on your trip, you'll see what other steps might need to be taken?

SECRETARY RICE: We'll see where we are in the six-party framework.

QUESTION: How about pulling the plug on the talks? How endless can your patience --

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not going to get ahead of myself. We will talk to the parties and see where we are.

QUESTION: Will there be any message that at least U.S. patience can't be endless with nuclear programs development?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think it's quite obvious that the North Korean situation needs to be dealt with, but it is also the case that when the North Koreans do take -- make moves like they did on February 10th, that they just increase their own isolation.

QUESTION: You know, I'm sorry, I just have to jump in. Arguably, though, they're not that isolated because China and South Korea continue to provide assistance, trade, the kind of economic leverage that North Korea is able to sustain itself with.

SECRETARY RICE: But this is not what the North Koreans have signaled that they want, they need, in order to pursue any kind of economic improvement in that circumstance, as opposed to barely hanging on. They have talked about the need for normalization with the Japanese. They have talked about normalization with the Russians. They have talked about a much more integrated economic policy with the South Koreans. All of that is not available to them at this point.

QUESTION: One thing they always say is that -- they complain about the U.S. hostile policy. Is the Administration contemplating issuing some kind of written statement to say we don't have a hostile intent toward North Korea?

SECRETARY RICE: The North Koreans have heard the President say, and I think they've heard me say, that we don't have and the United States doesn't have any intention of invading or attacking North Korea. And in fact, they've been told that they can get security guarantees on a multilateral basis if they're prepared to take a strategic decision. So they know the circumstance.

QUESTION: They haven't heard you say you don't have any hostile intent; yes, you won't attack, you won't invade, but they still complain that it's a hostile policy --

SECRETARY RICE: The North Koreans are throwing up smokescreens. All right, let's be realistic here. This isn't an issue of what we say or what we don't say. This is an issue of whether the North Koreans come to the table prepared to make a strategic choice that could give them entry into the international system and the benefits thereof, or whether or not they're going to continue to sit over there, isolated with their nuclear ambitions, unable to pursue any betterment of their situation and the situation of their people. That's the issue, not what anybody says about them.

QUESTION: You wouldn't even use the phrase just now.

SECRETARY RICE: What?

QUESTION: You wouldn't even use the phrase "no hostile intent" right now?

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not going to play the North Koreans' game about this. This is -- the North Koreans are trying to change the subject, just like the Iranians were trying to change the subject. And to a certain extent, when you say, "We're not going to let you change the subject," you put the focus on what really should be the focus, which is, "Are you prepared to make a strategic choice or not?"

And if you're -- let's not -- because I can assure you, if we say something tomorrow, there will be another condition later on and then there will be another condition and another condition. So it just isn't worth it. The thing is, make the strategic choice or not and then we'll see where we are.

QUESTION: A quick one on Lebanon. Is Syria's withdrawal of troops from northern Lebanon, which was much reported this morning, a positive move? And to your knowledge, how many Syrian troops of the 14,000 that were there are actually now out?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't have a full accounting of what the withdrawal has been. 1559 says all. It says full withdrawal and it says full withdrawal of both troops and police. And so that needs to happen. It's not a bad thing that Syrian forces are moving. It's clearly not a bad thing. But it also is not compliance with 1559, which is what's really being sought there, and I think what Mr. Larsen will try to get clear -- greater clarity about Syrian willingness to comply with 1559 when he's there.

QUESTION: When you go on your trip next week, you will be in --

QUESTION: Sorry. Can we do a quick one on Larsen? Is he going to issue an ultimatum?

SECRETARY RICE: I frankly thought that the language about ultimatum was overdrawn. I mean, if there's an ultimatum, it's 1559. It's get out. I don't know how much more do you have to say than that.

QUESTION: So you don't expect any ultimatum to be issued by him to the Syrians?

SECRETARY RICE: I think that he goes under the mandate of 1559, and 1559 is pretty clear about what has to happen.

QUESTION: Do you think, though, that you have the support for sanctions -- widespread international sanctions against Syria -- if it doesn't adhere to 1559?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've concentrated -- things are happening very fast here and we've concentrated here on making certain that the Syrians hear one voice about getting out. I think that when Mr. Larsen comes back to the UN to report on his trip we will see what whether or not there other steps that have to be taken.

QUESTION: So, to Pakistan. When you were there, the President, President Bush, has made very clear that now in bilateral relations democracy should be more of a central theme. Will you therefore, to help promote democracy in Pakistan, urge President Musharraf to take off his uniform, to stop being the army chief?

SECRETARY RICE: We will certainly -- I will certainly, as the President has done in his discussions -- urge that democratic process in Pakistan be advanced. It's awfully important, though, to look at what has happened in Pakistan in three-plus years. This was a state that was well on its way to extremism having a very deep foothold in Pakistan, and not just not an ally in the on the war on terror but, in fact, when you look at the links to al-Qaida and you look at the links to the Taliban, a state that was really on the verge of being a strong supporter of extremism, a state where the question of whether Pakistan could be both modern and extreme seemed to be saying, yes, it could be.

Now you have a president in President Musharraf who said it cannot be both modern and extreme. And if you look at what is being done in the educational system to try to deal with the madrasas, if you look at what is being done in terms of the way that Musharraf has been dealing even with his parliament, if you look at the way in that they have been fighting not just the war on terror vis-a-vis al-Qaida, but improving relations with India, which is changing the environment considerably in South Asia, you have to say that they've achieved a lot over the last three years.

QUESTION: So forgive me. Would it be right to read between the lines then to say they've done -- they've made all this progress, therefore I'm not going to push Musharraf to --

SECRETARY RICE: I just said that the --

QUESTION: You said democratic process. I asked you specifically about the military post.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah. The democratic process has to continue in Pakistan. Now, we've said that there are going to be a lot of different paths and a lot of different ways on that democratic road, but the need for democracy, the need for free elections, the need for parliamentary elections, those are all discussions that we've had with President Musharraf in the past and we'll have with him again.

QUESTION: Why should one believe that President Musharraf will hold presidential elections in 2007, given that he broken his word to give up his military role?

SECRETARY RICE: The role of the United States is to make the continuation of the democratic process an important part of our bilateral discussions, and that's what we'll do.

QUESTION: Can I ask you a general question on democracy?

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah, one last question on democracy, then we've got to go.

QUESTION: When we referred to Lebanon, just going back to that issue, what is the U.S. doing in terms of assistance for, you know, rooting democracy in Lebanon? Because, as you say, things are moving quickly. What are you doing quickly?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've concentrated thus far on trying to get rid of the artificial barrier to Lebanon being able to deal with its own future, which is the Syrian presence there. I am quite certain that when the Lebanese get ready to go through the electoral process and if there's more that they need after that, that the international community, including the United States, will be prepared to help them.

But the key, really, is that it's going to have to be a Lebanese process. We'll have to see what assistance they wish to have. And after the Syrian presence is out, I think you'll see that the Lebanese are able then to deal with their own political -- the various divisions and the various elements of Lebanese political life. At that point, if they need help in doing it, I'm quite certain there are going to be all kinds of people who are willing to help.

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