



Briefing on the Middle East and North Korea

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
En Route Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
July 26, 2006

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let me just say a couple of words and then I'll take your questions. What we wanted to achieve today in Rome was international recognition and support for the major elements that will lead to and make possible a sustainable ceasefire and the political framework in which that could be done. The elements that we were seeking were, first and foremost, an acknowledgement that it is in the context of 1559 and the extension of Lebanon's sovereignty throughout its territory that this situation gets resolved. In other words, that's the way to make certain that there's an enduring resolution of the situation.

Secondly, we wanted it to be clear that there was a recommitment on the part of everyone, including the Lebanese, to full implementation of 1559, including the -- that there would be no militias; that all weapons would be in the hands of the government.

Third, it was important to get agreement that there should be a UN-mandated international force that can provide the stable environment and can make certain that there, in fact, is not a return to the status quo ante. So those were the elements that were crucial to now moving forward to try to get the situation resolved.

We also wanted, obviously, to work very hard on the humanitarian side, to get acknowledgement of the importance of the humanitarian side to stimulate some contributions and then to get a pledge to reconstruction. But there is now a very active agenda for getting the pieces in place including, I think you'll see, that the UN intends to hold a troop contributor meeting either at the end of this week or at the beginning of next week. Philip Zelikow has remained behind and is going to work with Javier Solana's people in Brussels on getting that troop contribution underway.

The group at this conference asked if there could be an update for the group on humanitarian efforts and on other aspects of this, on a kind of routine basis as we get into that. And there will be -- also now, David Welch and Elliott Abrams will return to the region to work with Lebanon and to work with Israel to try to get the element of a resolution of the crisis, which might be put into a Security Council resolution that also either accommodates the resolution for a mandated international force or is a part. I say that that way because whether it will be two resolutions or one, I think, is still up in the air. So that was the purpose of today's conference, was to get agreements and a clear international message that that's the way forward.

I have to say that I thought Prime Minister Siniora was eloquent. He is a man of great dignity. He clearly cares deeply about his people. He's also the future of the Middle East. People like Prime Minister Siniora, people like President Abbas; ultimately, people like Prime Minister Maliki are the future of the Middle East. And we are in a different Middle East than we were when the last crisis of this kind broke out. And we have to keep that in mind. We have to keep clarity of what it is we're trying to achieve here and to then set about achieving it. And so I was very heartened by the consensus around the table that -- about what the elements are. And I will now work with the parties to see if we can get this resolved.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.) Doing what they've done in the past, do you intend, in the UN resolution, to include language that would provide essential sanctions (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first -- did you hear the question?

QUESTION: No.

SECRETARY RICE: Okay. The question was, he's noted that the support that Iran and Syria not -- I'm paraphrasing -- not torpedo anything that happens -- this is not on the record because I'm paraphrasing his question, okay. And would we somehow seek to include that in a Security Council resolution.

Look, I think it's very clear to everybody -- now this is my answer. I think it's very clear to everyone that Syria, which we spent a great deal of effort and time as an international community getting out of Lebanon, should not be permitted to get back into Lebanon and influence the support for these innocent Lebanese. It needs to be between Lebanon and Israel with international support. Syria's role is described in Resolution 1559. We already have a resolution. We need also to remember that Syria still needs to cooperate with the ongoing investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. And so there are plenty of resolutions relating to Syria.

On Iran, I think that in some ways, Iran is something of a newer -- new factor in the equation, more active, more supportive of extremist elements that are trying to destabilize the region. And it's therefore very important that it -- that a message go to Iran that they will deepen their isolation if they become an enemy of peace for the Lebanese people and for the Israeli people. I think there are plenty of people to send that message.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) from participants in your meeting today felt like it was you representing the United States against the French representing everyone else. Do you feel like you are isolated and how does that impact your relationship with your allies in the region?

SECRETARY RICE: I think I answered this question yesterday, which is that, first of all, yes, there were a lot of countries calling for an immediate ceasefire; there were several who did not. And I just want to note that it was not, in fact, all countries calling for an immediate ceasefire and the United States saying, no, we need to have an urgent and sustainable ceasefire. The purpose of this meeting was to get agreement on how we move forward.

Now, the United States -- I, on behalf of the United States, believe very strongly that it doesn't do any good to raise false hopes about something that is not going to take place immediately. I walk out of the room and there's a ceasefire, it isn't going to happen. It isn't going to happen. What can happen is very urgent work, very immediate work, which is the way that this document was worded to get a ceasefire on a sustainable basis, but on a sustainable basis means that you cannot allow the conditions that created this to be recreated so that we're back here in three months or four months or five months calling for another ceasefire, another immediate ceasefire that won't happen.

I don't know -- I did say this to the group: when will we learn? There has been -- the fields of the Middle East are littered with broken ceasefires. And every time there's a broken ceasefire, people die, there's destruction, and there's misery. We need to try, this time, to put together an international effort that sustains an end to the violence. The key to that is a Lebanon that can control its own territory, a Lebanon that has -- the government has a monopoly on arms, so you don't have armed militias crossing the blue line and provoking attack, and a Lebanon that is then sustained through economic assistance and reconstruction. That's the path.

QUESTION: (Off-Mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: All of that was my message in the room. That's what we need to do, because we need not to just say something for the sake of saying it. We need to say what needs to be done. And I want a ceasefire as much as anybody. I looked at -- in the Prime Minister Siniora's eyes. He's somebody I respect enormously. I know what this must be like for him. I talked to Prime Minister Olmert. They've got a million people in bomb shelters. I know what this must be like for him. And so yes, we want

a ceasefire urgently, but let's create the position this time and let's create them quickly and urgently that will make the end to violence finally come out.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, Kofi Annan said that Iran and Syria need to be involved. Do you see any role for the United States with Iran or Syria or do you anticipate the use of --intermediaries would be carrying this message. What would you like to see Iran and Syria do? Are there specific steps?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I -- first, let me be very clear that the terms should be between Lebanon and Israel. Those are the sovereign states. I would not expect other states to involve themselves in trying to determine what the terms are that are acceptable to the elected Government of Lebanon and to the elected Government of Israel.

With Syria, 1559 makes very clear what Syria's responsibilities are. And if Lebanon -- if the Government of Lebanon and the Government of Israel can come to agreement on the basis of what the international systems -- the international community said today, then the role for other states is to support that and to not undermine it. And that goes for both Syria and Iran.

As to the United States, the United States is sending very -- is sending a very clear message, probably as we have time and time again, of what we expect of Syria and what should be expected of Iran. I am very pleased that Kofi Annan wants to use his good offices to try and make sure that Syria and Iran behave responsibly. It has not been our experience that they do.

QUESTION: I don't understand how Lebanon and Israel can negotiate an agreement that would bind Hezbollah. How do you expect the Lebanese Government to (inaudible) Hezbollah?

SECRETARY RICE: Hezbollah has been (inaudible) in the Lebanese Government, but Hezbollah can't have it both ways. Hezbollah ran for elections. Hezbollah is a part of the government. Hezbollah is a part of a government that is committed to Resolution 1559. So yes, this is evidence of why it's a problem when you have a group that has one foot in terror and one foot in politics.

But the international community should say to Hezbollah, you're a part of the government, act like a part of the government. And by the way, they did not act like a part of the government when they crossed the blue line without the knowledge of their government. So you know, yes, everybody needs to work to make sure that the -- that any agreement can, indeed, endure. But the Middle East is different now and we do not want to undermine the new -- the different Middle East by the way that we resolve this situation. This needs to strengthen the elected Lebanese Government and everybody needs to keep that in mind.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, when we were in London last February for the Palestinian conference, you remember Syria was a big topic -- Syria in Lebanon was a huge topic. And there was really almost, at least in the last few years, unprecedented cohesion between us and the French and the United Nations and the EU and everybody. That made a big difference. Do you feel like since then, since the Syrian pullout, that we and the French and the international community, in general, kind of dropped the ball and that maybe we wouldn't be here today if we had done things differently?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, you're right, there was a really unprecedented unity around the need to implement 1559. You know, let's not -- because we all have such short memories, let's not forget what was achieved: Syrian forces are out of Lebanon. We're talking about something that people tried to do for 30 years. Now Syrian forces are out of Lebanon. Now the next step, which is assuring that the Lebanese Government is in fact able to control its own territory and that it has a monopoly on arms. That means more energy and perhaps it has needed more energy than it has been given.

But it is also true that this has been a period in which you have elections in Lebanon, in which the Lebanese informed the government, in which they've been getting together a program, in which they've been engaged in a national dialogue. And so while I think it is good for the international community to refocus on this, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that this time has been viewed in a way that I think provides great clarity now as to where the future of Lebanon really lies. And it lies with a Siniora Government that's able to put its -- bring its authority throughout the country.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, can you give us a little more detail of -- you said there was going to be a troop contribution conference later this week -- next week. What is the U.S. going to contribute to that? And then you say that the U.S. is not (inaudible). But what kind of military support (inaudible) are going to (inaudible)? And how does Iraq play into that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think we first need to get the conference together and look at the mandate, look at what's needed, and see what's required of all participants. We're going to be at the conference. As I said, Phil Zelikow is out at this moment talking to others about what might be needed. But it's really, I think, too early for me to try and judge what might be needed. I said, and I continue to say, I don't anticipate American combat power -- combat forces being used in this force. I think there are any number of reasons that we might want to avoid that in any case.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let's see what's needed and then I think we'll be prepared to talk about whatever is needed.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, who is negotiating with Hezbollah? Siniora has not been able to convince them to cooperate in the past. Are we relying only on Siniora? Secondly, how long do you envision it might before a multinational force is deployed? And finally, you talked about a Broader Middle East as part of (inaudible). How realistic is that? We've been working on that, your Administration, previous administrations, do you really think that's viable as part of this immediate -- to resolve this immediate crisis? What do you envision will happen if you do that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Robin, I didn't say that a resolution of the Lebanon crisis has to solve all the problems in the Middle East. I think that would be --

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: But it is hard. These things are pillar by pillar, piece by piece. That's how you get a Middle East that is more democratic, a Middle East that is therefore more stable, a Middle East in which neighbors don't fight and a Middle East that has a process of peace between Israel and its neighbors. That's how you get it. Now, you have to do that piece by piece; you don't do it all in one fell swoop. There is a piece of that that is a democratic and sovereign Lebanon, free of Syrian and foreign forces and able to extend its authority. That's a piece of it.

Another piece of it is a Palestinian state living side by side with the Israelis in a two-state solution and support for Mahmoud Abbas as he tries to come to terms with the complicated political situation in the Palestinian territories. That's another piece of it. Because you're trying to resolve one doesn't mean you lose sight of the other. But they're all pieces -- you're not -- you can't expect a broader Middle East to emerge full-blown.

Another piece of it is the democracy agenda in the Middle East. And, yes, in places like Egypt there have been some disappointments and some setbacks. But an Egypt that has now held multi-candidate presidential elections with the most open debate ever in Egypt is not going to be able to go back. A Kuwait in which women now vote is a piece of that different Middle East. I'm a student of history, so perhaps I have a little bit more patience with enormous change in the international system and it's a big shifting of tectonic plates and I don't expect it to happen in a few days or even in a year. We are building -- helping to build, helping the people in the Middle East who want that democratic Middle East -- to build it step by step.

QUESTION: What is the question about negotiating with Hezbollah and is Siniora the only person?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Government of Lebanon is going to be a party to this agreement. I think it's extremely important to emphasize that obviously, if there are those who have influence with Hezbollah, that Hezbollah should not be a barrier to an end to the violence which they began. It would probably be useful for people to send that message.

QUESTION: Well, the timing of the MNF.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah, I think we'll just have to -- we'll have to see what it is. It needs to be in place fairly soon. I don't want to try to get out ahead of the troop discussion.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you have said you would return to the region if you thought it would be helpful. Do you have plans to do, perhaps over the weekend that? (Inaudible) the bigger question here, do you see yourself going back to the region in a couple weeks to really this hammer this home and get a conclusion?

SECRETARY RICE: I'm flexible about what I should do. Stay tuned. I think that -- I'm obviously going to go. I have -- this is a longstanding commitment to go to Kuala Lumpur. And I also need to be concerned about Asia and about the good progress that we've made on North Korea and trying to help prevent that and talk about next steps on North Korea. I've left David and Elliott behind in the region and I think we'll just assess it. But I would expect to be in the region many more times and probably many more times in the near future.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you have spoken to all sides in the conflict now -- well, the Lebanon and the Israelis. How close do you think they are to actually having a ceasefire and how committed do you think they are? Maybe if you could talk a little bit more about what Elliott and David are doing. And then if you have time, talk about North Korea and give us a little preview on that.

SECRETARY RICE: A North Korea question. All right. (Laughter.) First of all, on are they close, I don't think it's fair to characterize the positions of the Lebanese Government or of the Israelis. I will say that I thought that a way forward got a big boost today in the consensus around that table about what the elements are, including the need for an international force on the U.S. mandate. That's an extremely important element of getting this resolved. And so I think it got a boost today, the elements, but I don't want to try to characterize the two governments' positions.

Secondly on the North Korean issue, obviously we're working on now the momentum that was created by the resolution in the Security Council that binds states to take certain actions to prevent any assistance to the North Korean program, that binds North Korea to take some steps. And I do think that it's really important to follow-up those discussions with the other members of the six parties, but also other interested regional things that might be able to help provide some of the capability that we need to make sure, for instance, that the Proliferation Security Initiative is working to deny shipments of what will now be internationally contraband goods to the North Koreans. So that's the kind of conversation that I think we need to have. And while it's important that China, Japan and Russia, South Korea all be there, it's also important that there are some other countries there like Canada, like Australia and others.

I don't anticipate any six-party talks. I don't think the North Koreans. Look, I've said anytime people want to talk in the six-party framework, I'm ready to do it. But I don't have any indication that the North Koreans intend to take up the call that was there in the resolution that they should be engaged.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, I'm having a little bit of trouble getting my head around what seems to be two conflicting points. When you say that Hezbollah acknowledged that -- you believe Hezbollah, in fact, attacked Israel without the knowledge of the Lebanese Government, yet you expect the Lebanese Government to have the influence to stop Hezbollah and to say that the Lebanese Government will be the party to the agreement. Who in the Lebanese Government do we anticipate having to influence to be able to stop Hezbollah?

And the second thing, I would like to know your personal reaction to the statement by Prime Minister Siniora, which you characterize as eloquent, that said that are we children of a lesser God. Is an Israeli teardrop worth more than a drop of Lebanese blood? What will you say to the Lebanese people?

SECRETARY RICE: I'd say to the Lebanese people that no one wants to see the spilling of Lebanese blood or of Israeli blood. And that's why the United States and others are working urgently to try to end this violence. But I also don't want to see the spilling Lebanese blood three months from now or six months from now or one year from now, because we allowed the situation to go back to the status quo ante that produces (inaudible.) And so we are doing everything that we can to alleviate the humanitarian circumstances. We're doing everything that we can to get the parties to a (inaudible) -- the elements of -- to bring about a ceasefire.

But we have to recognize that it's time to do this in a way that extremist forces, in fact, can't do what they did this time around. If, in fact, they go back to the status quo ante -- and by the way, the international force is very important to (inaudible) having to report to the status quo ante -- go back to the status quo ante and you leave the means in the hands of Hezbollah to, at a time of its choosing, again decide that outside of the framework of the Lebanese Government, it can, it's going to attack across the Blue Line and we're back here again. (Inaudible) situation.

And as to the Siniora government, I would expect Prime Minister Siniora's ability to organize his own discussions with the Lebanese Government and to draw on whomever he needs to bring about a unified position in his government. But today, he heard that the international community shared the view of what those elements are. And you might notice that they were, if anything, very (inaudible), very consistent with what the Prime Minister was talking about: the framework of Resolution 1559 and Taif, the framework that Lebanon wishes to operate under and is also the framework that was acknowledged today and (inaudible) today and the fact (inaudible) including an international force that can help Lebanon extend its authority throughout the country.

That's the problem. Lebanon has not -- the Government of Lebanon has not, for a long time, had the capability to extend its authorities throughout its country. At one time, that was also because of the presence of Syria forces. Thanks to the good work of the international community, those forces are now out. But the weakest of the Lebanese armed forces, the presence of armed militias and parts of Lebanon has made it impossible for Lebanon to extend its authority and made it possible for after -- outside of the Lebanese Government to go and cause disruption. That's what we've got to stop and that's what we can't return to.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit more about the (inaudible)? The Europeans are always saying that (inaudible) international force that's not under the third provision, so what's it going to look like on the ground when they go in?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think it goes without saying that one would not expect an international force to enter under constant fire. Now it is also important to note, however, that a robust mandate for that force and the forces that are capable because it will continue to be a situation that is not stabilized. Part of the reason for force is stabilizing, but I think that it goes without saying that they will not be expected to enter under fire.

2006/T19-8

Released on July 27, 2006

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