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Briefing En Route Beirut, Lebanon

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
En Route Beirut, Lebanon
February 23, 2006

SECRETARY RICE: I'm looking forward to this trip to Lebanon and the sole purpose of the trip is to express support for the Lebanese people and for the Lebanese Government as they continue to try to recover fully their sovereignty under Resolution 1559 and as they continue their efforts to reform and to democratize their country. I will have an opportunity to talk to the Prime Minister about the need to accelerate the reforms that the Lebanese are undertaking in order to be able to mobilize international support for Lebanon and so we'll have that discussion.

I'm looking forward to meeting the Patriarch. He met the President. I believe I was out of the country at that time and so this is my first opportunity to meet him. He's obviously a man who's revered throughout Lebanese society for his desire for a Lebanon that is tolerant and is a place where all Lebanese feel that it is their country and I very much look forward to talking with him.

And I will also have an opportunity to meet with Mr. Jumblatt and to, I hope, have a phone conversation with Speaker Nabih Berri, so I'll talk to a number of Lebanese officials and, of course, the Patriarch; I'm very much looking forward to that.

I'm then going to go onto UAE and meet with the GCC in UAE. The purpose of that trip is to continue consultations on the critical regional issues that we are all facing together, certainly issues concerning Iraq, and I know that everybody will join in condemning the violent attacks that took place in Samarra and in other places in Iraq yesterday and in calling for calm because obviously there are those who are trying to separate the Iraqi people and set them against one and other. I think Iraqi leadership is -- the Iraqi leadership is demonstrating that they very much want to be one country that is tolerant and reflective of the views of all Iraqis. And I'd just note the widespread condemnation of the attacks and the widespread call for calm on behalf of responsible Iraqi leaders.

And finally, we'll talk about the situation with Iran and with the Palestinian territories. So that's the purpose.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, obviously the Patriarch is also very interested in the presidency remaining in the hands of Maronite Christians. Do you plan on talking with him at all about current or anticipated moves inside Lebanon to replace the current president? And do you have any feeling in advance of the meeting how he views those moves?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm obviously going to seek the Patriarch's views on a wide variety of issues of concern in Lebanon and all of the political issues that are facing the Lebanese because he's a wise man. He obviously knows the situation very well.

As to the presidency, that's something that Lebanese -- the Lebanese will have to decide. It is, I think, the case, as I said a week ago or so on Lebanese television, that it would -- you need a presidency that looks forward, not back, and that defends Lebanese sovereignty. But it's a decision that they'll have to make.

I just want to make a comment that I think the remarkable thing about Lebanon in this period of intense change is that the changes have been constitutional, the changes have been within a legal framework and the changes have been peaceful, whatever those changes have been. And so obviously, as the Lebanese try to chart a course forward and, of course, that is still evolving, I think those are the three most important messages that the United States could take.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, how much are you going to push the Lebanese Government to actually disarm Hezbollah?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the Lebanese Government, I've always found that it recognizes that it has responsibilities under 1559 to have a national army to secure itself and to disband militias. This is a part of an evolutionary process that's going on in Lebanon and we have tried to be supportive of that process that the Lebanese themselves are carrying out. But there's no doubt that 1559 is going to have to be implemented.

The other part of that, of course, of 1559 is that it also anticipates that the Lebanese will really have their sovereignty, that Syria will not be in a position to intimidate or to continue to occupy by self-means Lebanon, and that there should be an understanding that Syria has responsibilities under 1559 too. And one of the things that I think I can do on a trip like this is to just, on behalf of the many members of the international community who want to see a stable and prosperous Lebanon, signal again that the international community stands with Lebanon in all that it needs to do to implement 1559 and with them against intimidation by their neighbor.

QUESTION: On the UAE, apparently you won't have time to meet with any of the UAE officials there because of a scheduled, I understand, bilateral. Maybe on the margins of the GCC meeting? Is that always --

SECRETARY RICE: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

I wanted to ask you -- it seems you've sort of been staying away from the Dubai ports story. I wondered if it's deliberate.

SECRETARY RICE: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: It seems that you've been staying away from the Dubai ports story. And I wondered if it's deliberate and whether you want to use the opportunity in the UAE to express support for the government and for the company for that contract that has been in the news.

SECRETARY RICE: Look, I think I did that last night in response to a question and the President has spoken to this, that the process was a process that was thorough. It was a process in which expert views were sought. I was looking at a summary of the process. It took something like three months to go through this. I have been through CFIUS processes before on other matters and there's a very systematic way of going through them and this was very systematic.

And I think the point that the President underscored is that this is supposed to be a process that raises security concerns if they are there but does not presume that a country in the Middle East should not be capable of doing a deal like this. And we don't have -- we have a really strong ally in the UAE. I mean, our naval activity with the UAE is probably more active and more intensive than almost anywhere else in the region. This is a very good ally. This is a thoroughly vetted deal. And, you know, if more details need to be made available, then I'm sure they will be, but I think the deal itself is simply recognition that this process turned up no concerns.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, did you speak in Cairo or Riyadh about an Arab initiative to make the UN inquiry into Hariri assassination move forward and do you intend to speak about this in Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: We did talk about it in -- I did talk about it in Saudi Arabia as well as in Egypt and just urging that there be a common voice urging complete and total cooperation with the investigation. And I think everybody is on exactly the same page about that. I think there will be more messages delivered to Syria about the importance of cooperation.

Did you ask about -- were you asking about the UN investigation? Is that what you were asking? Yes, right, yeah.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY RICE: Of course, yes, I will also talk about it in the UAE as well.

QUESTION: Did the Egyptians and the Saudis express to you at all, also, a desire to kind of rebalance the regional situation to increase -- look for a way to increase Sunni power in Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: We -- nobody raised this in sectarian terms. Everyone is concerned about the situation in Lebanon and about potential instability there. I think there's a recognition that the way to a more stable Lebanon is: first, that Syria will seek good relations with Lebanon and carry out its obligations under 1559, which means not to stir up trouble in Lebanon; secondly, that all elements of Lebanese society, all elements -- (inaudible) elements of the society, need to work together across their lines for a Lebanese government and society that works; and then third, that Lebanon needs to move forward on the economic reforms and on improving its security forces and its security situation. And that was the course of the discussion that we had about Lebanon.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, when you were in Beirut in July, you met with president -- the president. He's not on your schedule today. Does that mean it's no longer worth meeting with him?

SECRETARY RICE: I've met with him. I will -- I also met at that time with Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri. I'll talk to him. But I've met with the president.

QUESTION: There doesn't seem to be many contacts between the United States and a pro-Syrian government right now. Obviously, you're doing a lot of discussions with Prime Minister Siniora and his government, or it does seem as if President Lahud is kind of PNG with the United States. If you could speak to this particularly, are you moving forward with the new government of Prime Minister Siniora?

SECRETARY RICE: My view is that the United States ought to be supporting the pro-Lebanese government and the -- that's the government of Lebanon. And so we're meeting with Prime Minister Siniora, which I've had the opportunity to do before. Prime Minister Siniora, by the way, is the principal interlocutor, also, with the Core Group. And in our relations with -- where we've had particularly strong relations with France, as the sort of center of the Core Group, and particularly strong relations with the Arab members of the Core Group. It's always been with the Prime Minister Siniora. He's the one who has responsibility for the program moving forward, for the economic program, and he's the one who really is, in a sense, at the center of trying to keep this government stable and moving and progressing.

You know, we obviously have good relations with a number of figures in Lebanon and I now will have met almost all of them, but I'm not going to try to meet everybody every time I go.

QUESTION: Is Lahud an obstacle to that progress that you've just outlined?

SECRETARY RICE: The Lebanese people will have to decide what the obstacles are to their progress, but I think they do want to look forward.

QUESTION: Overnight, there's been a lot of grim news coming out of Iraq about the violence out of the bombing of the mosque. Have you reached out to leaders in Iraq to try to see what they can do to keep this from breaking out? Do you think we're getting close to a civil war?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't think we do the Iraqi people any good, or really that we are fair to them, in continually raising the specter that they might fall into civil war, when it seems that the only people who want a civil war in Iraq are the terrorists like Zarqawi. Iraqis want to be a stable and unified country and I think the statements of all responsible Iraqi leaders over this last 24 hours demonstrate that, if you look at the statements of Ayatollah Sistani, if you look at the statements of the Prime Minister, if you look at the statements of any number of people. I think you're also getting that from around the world, the statement of Foreign Minister Saud al-Faysal last night in Saudi Arabia.

So the Iraqi people are working under extremely difficult circumstances to bridge sectarian differences that were always bridged by -- or that were always dealt with by repression and violence, and they're now trying to deal with them through a political process and there are clearly people who want to try and stop that. I talked this morning to Ambassador Khalilzad and he reports that there are meetings of Iraqi leaders going on. They themselves are working with local officials as well as with national figures to try and provide calm.

And of course, we'll be -- we will reach out to Iraqi leaders, probably people who are in Washington. It's a little harder for me on the road. But there's no doubt that a lot of contact is being had between Iraqi officials and the United States, but most importantly among themselves, about how to deal with the situation.

QUESTION: I have two questions, Madame Secretary. One, in the meetings with King Abdallah, did he raise the President's comments in the State of the Union about reliance on foreign oil? Did he ask for clarification on that?

And secondly, your last trip to Beirut didn't seem to significantly improve the situation. You said the Lebanese people have to say what the obstacles are. The U.S. has said Syria is the obstacle. Why aren't you going to Syria to try and effect some change?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think that the Syrian Government is well aware of what it needs to do and it doesn't need me to come there to tell it. It has the entire international community telling Syria what to do.

Janine, thanks for the compliment. I don't think I'm going to change things in Lebanon with one trip or maybe even two. This is a long process of a country that's been under occupation for 30 -- almost 30 years. And now, it's a country that is trying to break out of that foreign occupation and oppression and build a democratic and sovereign future, and that's going to take some time.

But I think it is extremely important that Lebanon and the people who are trying to push Lebanon forward know that they have friends and supporters in the international community. They have made enormous strides in the one year since the death of Rafik Hariri. Enormous strides. In the large historical sweep of what has happened to Lebanon in this period of time, a year is a flash in historical time. It's remarkable that they have held -- they have buried a much-revered prime minister, taken that opportunity to mobilize the international community to get Syrian forces out of Lebanon, begun to rebuild their own security forces, had an election, managed to start moving toward economic reform.

I mean, to say that nothing has changed in Lebanon, I think is just not the case. Had we been in Lebanon one year and two months ago, Syrian forces, Syrian security personnel, Syrian influence would have been on every street corner. I think that's not the case today.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not going to discuss specific meetings, but as you know, we've already told -- clarified for the Saudi Government that the President's comments are completely consistent with the Crawford agenda, which anticipates the Saudis making investment to increase their production over the medium to long term. Obviously, some of the technologies that we are looking to begin to reduce our dependence on foreign oil will take many, many years, but we have to get started.

But I think there's no confusion with the Saudis and I did have a chance to reiterate this time precisely that the President's comments and the Crawford agenda are completely consistent.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you said obviously, you're not going to -- you're choosing not to say anything to the Lebanese president face-to-face, but is there any particular message that you would like to send to him?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, since I have talked to him before, my message was that it's his responsibility as President of Lebanon to be concerned about the sovereignty of Lebanon, and that Lebanese make the decisions for Lebanon and that Lebanon have an opportunity to move forward and to a future in which Syrian influences will finally be removed.

QUESTION: On the Palestinian issue, in your two meetings in -- your meetings in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the governments expressed concern about Hamas, an interest in seeing them meet some of the conditions that the Quartet offered, but they did not show any willingness to change the nature of their individual relations with Hamas or the president.

Does that concern or surprise you?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, I think they expressed a little bit stronger than concern about Hamas. Let's remember that Egypt has made very clear that it believes that the responsibility of any Palestinian government is to live up to the international obligations the Palestinians themselves have undertaken, under the roadmap, under the Oslo agreements, under the various agreements that for more than a decade have governed relations between Palestinians and Israelis.

Because those agreements are between Palestinians and Israelis, the PLO and the PA under it have recognized, obviously, the right of Israel to exist. The two-state solution requires that both parties recognize the right of the other party to exist and I think Egypt has been particularly strong and outspoken about those expectations.

The Saudis told us and said last night that the question is commitment to peace, commitment to the roadmap, commitment to the obligations that the Arab League recognizes. So I think there's a very clear message on the expectations of what it will do for a Hamas government to be governing under the responsible -- governing responsibly within the view of the international community, including the Arab community.

As to precisely what people will do to encourage, persuade, to demand that Hamas, in fact, live up to those obligations or to those responsibilities, I think countries are still assessing their policy. I believe that what Foreign Minister Abu Gheit said to you was that it is premature to determine precisely how to handle questions of assistance to a Palestinian government. And I think people are -- some are waiting to see how Hamas will respond to the expectations that are there.

Our situation is different. Our situation is one in which we -- Hamas is declared by the United States to be a terrorist organization. That means that when there's a Hamas government, we have to be absolutely certain that American taxpayers' dollars are not going to support a Hamas government. But within that context, the other point that we talked at great length about is how to maintain humanitarian

assistance for the Palestinian people and how, in the interim, to support Abu Mazen, who is, after all, still the president of -- the elected president of the Palestinian Authority.

So I found great commonality of views about what needs to be done about the requirements if there is going to be a peace process kept intact and remaining, about how the Palestinian people are going to be able to pursue a peaceful and prosperous life. And I think we're going to continue to have discussions over what is going to be a very fluid period about how to deal with the specifics of getting Hamas to come into compliance, which are -- that are clearly expectations for those who would govern. **2006/T3-5**

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