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Remarks With Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora After Their Meeting

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
Beirut, Lebanon
February 23, 2006

PRIME MINISTER SINIORA: Friends, I am very happy to receive today Secretary Rice. This is her second visit to Lebanon within a matter of five months. And this trip is another affirmation Secretary Rice and the United States support the independence and the sovereignty of Lebanon. And as well, the support of the United States to the reform program of Lebanon and the clear determination and intention to give Lebanon the support through the participation in the forthcoming conference that will be held support to Lebanon. We've had very fruitful discussions with Secretary Rice together with her team and my team. And we went through on a few important issues and all were glad to hear from Secretary Rice that the United States and Her Excellency are so keen to save Lebanon of the risks of the region and so that Lebanon will not become (inaudible) for others or becoming involved on the on the battlefields as well. So that's something very encouraging and I'd like to thank Secretary Rice for all that she's doing (inaudible) for her (inaudible) support she's extending to Lebanon in various forms and on a regular basis and the support that has been given to us on the international arena through the issuance of the various resolutions that were issued. So really I appreciate as well the show of patience that the Secretary has been showing to Lebanon and the observation that she is really giving in order to see how things are developing positively in Lebanon despite all the risks that we are facing. So if I may introduce Secretary Rice, I'm very glad to have you in Beirut.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, thank you very much, Prime Minister Siniora. I want to, first of all, thank you for your tremendous leadership of the Lebanese people and the leadership that you're truly providing in reform. Thank you, Foreign Minister, for being here and for meeting me earlier at the airport, and we've also had discussions. I'm delighted to be here in Beirut for the second time as the Prime Minister said, in a very few months. This is part of my regional tour. I've been in Saudi Arabia and in Egypt and I will soon be in the UAE. And I think it's important to come and discuss the issues of the region in this very crucial and circumstantial time. It is also a time to reiterate and to affirm the firm support of the United States of America for the Lebanese people as they work to have a fully sovereign and democratic Lebanon that can be a prosperous Lebanon for all of Lebanon's people without regard to background or ethnicity or religion, and I know that that the dream of the Prime Minister and the dream of the Lebanese people.

I think that the demonstrations last Tuesday in Martyrs' Square were a reminder to us all of the great passion of the Lebanese people for justice, for peace, the great passion of the Lebanese people for their country, for their sovereignty, for their democracy. We were all inspired again as we have been inspired by the Cedar Revolution. And while we know that the course ahead is a difficult one and we recognize that there are hard things to do, we recognize that the resolutions of the United Nations, like Resolution 1559, will need to be fully implemented. We recognize that economics reforms are going to be difficult, but not (inaudible) implemented. But the spirit of the Lebanese people is so obvious and so clear and so inspirational to the world, I wanted you to know, Prime Minister and your team and your leadership, but also the Lebanese people to know that they will have a friend in the United States and in the international community as they go forward in this very important work. Thank you.

QUESTION: What do you think about the agreement that has been signed between General Aoun and Hezbollah? Is this -- do you think that this is against the full implementation of 1559? And could it be a reason that you will not support General Aoun to be the next president of Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it is up to the Lebanese to decide who will lead Lebanon. I know that the Lebanese people want a democracy. They want a sovereign state. They want a state that is in full conformity with international laws and international responsibilities. And they want a state that looks forward, that can look to Lebanon's future. While I have confidence in the Lebanese people and what they will -- what they will do in this regard, and I also have confidence that within the context of the transition that is going on here that the Lebanese leadership truly understands the responsibilities to the full implementation of Resolution 1559 and that includes the disbandment of militias.

I'll pick one American.

QUESTION: Mr. Prime Minister, there is a new Iraq initiative promoted by Egypt and Saudi Arabia to continue to tell the Syrian regime to cooperate with the UN inquiry on Mr. Hariri's assassination. What are the (inaudible)? Do you support it?

And to you as the Secretary, of course, Madame Secretary, would U.S. support (inaudible) in which President Assad will testify in a less than open way?

PRIME MINISTER SINIORA: Let me tell you something. First of all we are part of the Arab world. We are always welcoming any initiative that can be made by Arab country and we welcome all the initiatives that are being taken by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. So far, there hasn't been a real initiative, but Lebanon is definitely -- when it comes to Arab initiative, is looking forward that the initiative that was taken by the Arabs in the Arab Summit (inaudible) regarding the peace initiative, we are committed to that.

As far as between Lebanon and Syria, Lebanon has expressed its point of view very clearly that we want to have very good relations with Syria, but on the basis of mutual respect and to have a full respect to the sovereignty, the independence and the freedom of the country. So this is the thing that we would like -- we would welcome the initiatives that can be made in this regard.

SECRETARY RICE: As to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as I understand it, are doing what the international community is doing, which is to encourage and try to mediate the Syrians that they must be in -- must have full cooperation with the UN in its investigation of the tragic murder of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and that it must be a truly full cooperation as was envisioned in the Security Council resolution.

And full cooperation means that the Syrians should cooperate in whatever way the investigator, Mr. Brammertz, deems necessary.

QUESTION: Mrs. Secretary, what is your position on the campaign calling for the resignation of President Lahoud and do you have any candidates to propose to Lebanon?

(Laughter.)

SECRETARY RICE: As I said, it's up to the Lebanese to decide.

QUESTION: You will have to (inaudible).

SECRETARY RICE: It is up to the Lebanese to decide who is going to govern this country. The Lebanese will decide how to deal with the various situations which it has inherited, this Lebanese Government has inherited. And the one thing that I want to underscore about what has happened in Lebanon thus far is that the Lebanese have made changes and there have been significant changes in this country over the last several months. They have been peaceful, they have been constitutional and they have been within the legal framework, as is befitting a democracy.

And so I think Lebanon will resolve the situation in ways that are consistent with Lebanon's desire to be a democracy in which all can participate and a democracy that is looking to its future. Lebanon had, at one time, a great democracy that was prosperous and that the world knew for that prosperity. And that was interrupted by almost 30 years of foreign occupation. That occupation is now being -- is now gone and is now being reversed, the effects of it being reversed.

And I know that the Lebanese people want to look forward to their future of sovereignty, of complete respect in the international community who supports them in those aspirations.

QUESTION: Do you support the complaint against President Lahoud?

SECRETARY RICE: As I said, the Lebanese will decide these issues.

QUESTION: Thank you. Madame Secretary, you're going to Abu Dhabi later today and all the foreign ministers (inaudible) to meet with you (inaudible) there's very good reason for that. What exactly are you



going to ask them to do about Iran? So that's my very brief question, but I'm really wondering about what it was like meeting with a foreign minister who was (inaudible) on the existence of Hezbollah.

Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: On the matter of what I will talk about with the GCC, this is a regional forum to talk with the states of the region about all of the complications that are here in the current environment. Iran's situation is one of those complexities and I will simply urge the GCC members to support the international consensus, since I believe that they fully do, that Iran must live up to its obligations to the international community under the NPT, that Iran must not seek a nuclear weapon that Iran's behavior has gotten it into a situation in which people do not trust it with a fuel cycle.

And so it's not an issue of can Iran have civil nuclear power. Yes, there have been several ways that Iran has been given that it could have civil nuclear power. And so we look forward to those discussions and we'll also discuss Iraq, we'll discuss other issues in the region. And as I said, I'm here to meet with Prime Minister Siniora and with his team. The Lebanese Government is in a period of transition and I'm quite certain that this period is going to produce a more democratic Lebanon, a Lebanon that is fully in compliance with Resolution 1559 in all of its aspects, and one that is determined that there should not be foreign influences nor influences of violence, because after all, you really can't have one foot in politics and one foot in the camp of terror. Thank you very much.

QUESTION: One more question, please. Madame Secretary, (inaudible) in Palestine, in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Egypt. Do you expect any change in Syria and how is the American policy towards this area affecting the people of Syria?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes. Well, thank you. There have been remarkable changes throughout the Middle East. In place after place, people are doing what they must do, which is taking the choices before them and having a chance to select those who are going to govern them. That's the firmest and most important principle of democracy.

Every population, every person in the Middle East, deserves that chance, and Syria is no different and I hope that one day Syrians will have that opportunity. The United States is supportive of those who are looking to try and build that kind of Syria. Thank you.

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