



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
October 16, 2001

National Security Advisor Interview with Al Jazeera TV Old Executive Office Building

2:34 P.M. EDT

Q (Introduction in Arabic.) Dr. Rice, we would like to thank you very much for this opportunity that you give to Al Jazeera and to our audience in the Arab and Muslim world. And since we have a limited time, let me start first with the latest developments.

British Prime Minister Blair met with Chairman Arafat. They both emphasized the importance of reviving the peace process. Chairman Arafat called on the Israeli government to start immediately the permanent status negotiations. Would you second him in that appeal?

DR. RICE: Thank you very much for the opportunity to be with you. Indeed, we took note of the very fruitful discussions between Prime Minister Blair and Chairman Arafat. The United States fully agrees that as soon as possible we should get into the Mitchell Process, which lays out a road map toward meaningful political negotiations toward a final status.

The President has been very active in asking both sides to do what they can to make certain that we get into the Mitchell Process. He has asked Chairman Arafat to make 100 percent effort to arrest and deal with terrorism and violence toward Israel. He has asked Prime Minister Sharon to do nothing to make the situation worse and, indeed, to -- the Israelis pulled out of Hebron. We take note of that.

There have been security talks between the two sides that are sponsored by the United States. And so we are hopeful that the two sides will be able to get into the Mitchell Process. We think that that's the way to get back to discussions of a final status.

Q But you know that Prime Minister Sharon imposed a seven-day truce that he wanted to be done before we get into the Mitchell plan. And if the Mitchell plan -- or the main goal of the Mitchell plan is for the cease-fire and the stopping of violence, how come, if we have the stopping of violence before we started, why do we wait for it? Why don't we implement the Mitchell plan now, instead of waiting seven days that is not going to come?

DR. RICE: Well, we would like to implement the Mitchell plan as soon as possible. And we work every day with both parties to get to conditions under which we can implement the Mitchell plan.

It is very important that the level of violence be brought down. And again, Chairman Arafat, in recent days, has made some important steps in that direction. It is very important that the Israelis work to open closures, to relieve the financial and economic pressures on the Palestinian people. We think there are some hopeful signs, and we're going to try to nourish those hopeful signs along so that we can

begin the Mitchell Process.

Q Are these hopeful signs enough for President Bush to meet Chairman Arafat?

DR. RICE: We have been in touch with Chairman Arafat. In fact, Secretary Powell talked with him just last week. And the President has made very clear that he intends to have meetings when he thinks that meetings can contribute to the process. And so while there's nothing planned, we continue to consider the question.

Q President Bush mentioning of a Palestinian state as part of the U.S. vision of the peace settlement has been received very positively in the Arab world. However, nothing has been materialized, or at least U.S. position has not put publicly to recognize and to support such a Palestinian state. Why should we leave that to the parties while one is supposed to be the occupier and one the occupied?

DR. RICE: Well, the President stated very clearly and very publicly that he believed that in the Middle East that there had to be a Palestinian state and it had to be a state that recognized the existence of Israel; there had to be security for all parties. But he's been very clear that he believes that that is an important part of the end state.

We do need to work step-by-step to get back into a process that will lead us to final status negotiations. We believe that that begins with the lessening of the violence, as Mitchell envisions. It then should go to confidence-building measures that both sides might take.

Our goal in the United States has been to make certain that we make steady progress toward getting back into the Mitchell plan. It is a very active administration on this front -- Secretary Powell, the President, himself. It is also important that we work with other Arab leaders. The President is in constant contact with President Mubarak of Egypt, a longtime proponent and active person in the peace process.

So we're doing what we can. But, yes, the President does imagine a Palestinian state as a part of his vision for the future.

Q Would Jerusalem be also the capital -- East Jerusalem the capital of such a state?

DR. RICE: Well, we understand the importance of Jerusalem to the great religions of the world, and we believe that this is something that must be settled in final status negotiations.

Q Dr. Rice, should people in the Arab world look forward for the mid of November as something -- a U.S. plan for the Middle East would be announced then, something similar to the Madrid Conference after immediately the Gulf War of '91?

DR. RICE: Well, we are constantly evaluating how we can best push the process of Middle East peace forward. I wouldn't put any time line on what the United States might do next. We really do believe right now that our best strategy is to work with the parties to get into the Mitchell Process.

After all, the Mitchell Process is unique in that both sides have agreed that that is the blueprint going forward. And we do think that we can make progress; we work at it every day. We know that the progress is not coming as fast as most would like, certainly not as fast as we would like. But we think that it's going to be a more stable and, ultimately, fruitful process if we can work steadily toward getting back to Mitchell.

Q If we move to the current crisis that started September 11th and, of course, the military actions since last Sunday. We see from polls and from demonstrations in the street that while governments support the U.S., the public or the streets in the Arab and Muslim world do not do that. Do you think that there is a problem of, is it misunderstanding, or because the U.S. only rely on government support, regardless of the people?

DR. RICE: We, of course, have very good relations with a number of governments in the Middle East. But we care very much also about the people of the Middle East, the Arab populations. And the United States is a place to which many Arabs have looked as a place -- we have a number of Arab immigrants in the United States.

I was a professor at Stanford University; the largest growing population of Stanford University was the Muslim student population. We think that the United States is a place in which religious tolerance and a belief that all people should live together in peace is a message that would resonate with populations in the region. And so we're trying to do a better job in getting that message out to people. We want it to be very clear that the war on terrorism is not a war against Islam. Islam is a peaceful religion. Islam is a religion that respects innocent human life.

So we cannot believe that Islam would countenance the kind of destruction of innocence that we saw on September 11th. Many Muslims in the United States lost their lives in those bombings.

So our view is that the populations -- we believe that there is still a reservoir of goodwill for the United States that we can tap into. We are concerned about the economic prosperity and opportunity for people in the Middle East. And that's a message that we will continue to carry.

Q So is it a problem of perception, an image of the U.S. only, or is it policies that are perceived to be double standards and we need to review the U.S. policies in the Middle East? Are we reviewing it or things going to stay the same only -- in public relation arena will be more active?

DR. RICE: No, we believe that the policies that the United States is pursuing are ones that are good for the Middle East as a whole -- populations that are Arab populations, as well as the population of Israel.

A viable peace process that leads to the kind of world that the President has talked about -- with a Palestinian state and an Israeli state that live together in peace, where Israel can live in peace with her neighbors -- this would be good for the whole region. And it's been the policy of the United States now for years to pursue that.

We have pursued economic development with close partners in the region. We just signed a free trade agreement with Jordan that we believe will bring jobs and opportunity to the population of Jordan. We have a healthy economic dialogue with Egypt. We think that our policies are policies that are healthy for the region. And as so, we look forward to talking more about the policies. This is not just a matter of perception; it is a matter of policies that we think are healthy for the region.

Q Aside from the Arab-Israeli conflict that you talked about -- and that seems that the U.S. policy is not going to change in that regard -- Iraq, as you might have heard in many of the tapes of bin Laden or others, or even other people aren't friends of the U.S., is one of the sources of friction or problems for people in the Middle East toward U.S. policy. However, you are personally perceived as one of the few people in the administration who would like to enlarge the war in terrorism to include Iraq. Correct me, please.

DR. RICE: Iraq has been a problem not just for U.S. policy, but for policy in the region, as well. This is a country that could not even acknowledge the right to exist of Kuwait. This is a country that has threatened its neighbors, that has been harmful to its own people.

And we believe that our policies toward Iraq simply are to protect the region and to protect Iraq's people and neighbors.

Now, we understood when we came to power here in Washington several months ago that we had a problem, for instance, on Iraqi sanctions; that people believed, or that Saddam Hussein was claiming that the sanctions that were in place were somehow harming the Iraqi people. We do not believe that they were harming the Iraqi people because in the north, where the U.N. administers the oil-for-food program, Iraqi people are doing well. It's only where Saddam Hussein administers oil-for-food that there is a problem with the Iraqi people.

But that said, we want to change the sanctions. We want to change the sanctions so that they are aimed at the regime, which is a danger to its neighbors, not at the people.

Q Other than that, there is no military action awaiting Iraq after all the military mobilization in the area as a second stage of this war on terrorism?

DR. RICE: The President has made very clear that the war on terrorism is a broad war on terrorism. You can't be for terrorism in one part of the world and against it in another part of the world. We worry about Saddam Hussein. We worry about his weapons of mass destruction that he's trying to achieve.

There's a reason he doesn't want U.N. inspectors -- it's because he intends to acquire weapons of mass destruction. But for now, the President has said that his goal is to watch and monitor Iraq; and, certainly, the United States will act if Iraq threatens its interests.

Q How about Syria?

DR. RICE: With Syria, we've been very clear that we do not believe that Syria can be against al Qaeda, but in favor of other terrorist groups. But we have had some discussions with Syria. The President, in his speech to the Joint Session, said: those who continue to harbor terrorists. That's an invitation to countries to stop the practice of harboring terrorism.

Q So if Syria does not cooperate against people who are from Jihad or Hamas, they should be targeted also?

DR. RICE: We have ruled out at this point issues that concern making -- that draw distinctions between types of terrorism. We just don't think that's the right thing to do. You can't say there are good terrorists and there are bad terrorists. But the means that we use with different countries to get them to stop harboring terrorists may be very broad. And there are many means at our disposal.

Right now, our discussions with Syria, which are not -- there are not a lot of discussions with Syria, but we have had discussions with Syria that suggest: get out of the business of sponsoring terrorism. We're asking that of every state of the world. You cannot be neutral in this fight; you either are for terrorism or against it.

Q Dr. Rice, you met recently with executives, or at least in a conference call with executives of

U.S. networks not to tape, not to broadcast, or at least review bin Laden's tapes or anything coming from Kabul. It has been perceived in the Arab world as censorship. What is your answer to that?

DR. RICE: My answer to that is that the discussions with the network executives were very fruitful, and I think they have been very responsible, because they understood that having a 15-minute or 20-minute tape that was pre-taped, prerecorded, that sat there and did nothing but incite hatred and, ultimately, attacks against innocent Americans was not a matter of news, it was a matter of propaganda, and it was inciting attacks against Americans.

Now, I understand that Al Jazeera has guidelines of its own on how to handle a tape like this, and we applaud that you would have guidelines of this kind, because what we do not need is to have a kind of free rein to sit and use the airwaves to incite attacks on innocent people.

Q Overall, how do you perceive Al Jazeera as a credible or independent media? And should U.S. government officials encourage that, or try to influence government of Qatar in order to crack down in the only -- what are perceived to be the only independent media in the region?

DR. RICE: Well, if I did not have respect for Al Jazeera, I would not be doing this interview.

Q Thank you.

DR. RICE: I think it's important that there be a network that reaches broad Arab audiences. And the United States believes in freedom of the press. We believe that the press is one of the most fundamental bases for democracy and for individuals to have the kind of dignity that human beings should have. And so I'm delighted to be here on Al Jazeera. I know that you're going to have many of my colleagues on in the future, and I look forward to being back with you.

Q Thank you. And I leave you at the end just with a statement from you without my interference, to our audience in the Arab and Muslim world, whatever you would like to tell them.

DR. RICE: I would like to say to the Arab and Muslim world the following. I would like to say that America is a country that respects religious difference. America is a country that has many people of different religions within it. The fastest-growing religion in America is the Muslim faith.

The President of the United States has said that our war on terrorism is not a war against Islam. It is not a war against the Arab people. It is a war against evil people who would hijack the Palestinian cause.

As Yasser Arafat said today, there is no connection between what al Qaeda does and the Palestinian cause. It is a war against people who take the lives of innocents willingly in terrorist attacks against office buildings or against the Pentagon.

This is a war against the evil of terrorism. The President of the United States understands Islam to be a faith of peace, a faith that protects innocents, and the policy of the United States is to do the same.

Thank you very much.

Q Thank you, Dr. Rice.

END 2:50 P.M. EDT