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Dr. Condoleezza Rice Discusses Iraq and the Middle East

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Q Dr. Rice, thank you for giving us in Al Arabiya this chance to talk to us. We have to be clear about these pictures and images of abused Iraqi prisoners. The pictures are everywhere in the media. In the street, some people are saying that Saddam's had better than American -- this came in a time that U.S. engaging in heavy, heavy public diplomacy. How do you see this?

DR. RICE: The President spoke about these terrible pictures the other day when he said that he was personally sickened by them. And we all feel outraged at these pictures. I won't speak to the individual cases. People will have their individual rights respected as they are -- as they go through process.

But I can -- I want to assure people in the Arab world, Iraq, around the world, and the American people, that the President is determined to get to the bottom of it, to know who is responsible and to make sure that whoever is responsible is punished for it and held accountable.

And he's determined to find out if there is any wider problem than just what happened at Abu Ghraib. And so he has told Secretary Rumsfeld that he expects an investigation, a full accounting. Americans do not do this to other people. Those pictures were awful because America -- American men and women in uniform, active and reserve, are serving in Iraq at great sacrifice. People are losing their lives. We came there to help to liberate the people of Iraq. We came there to build schools, and to build clinics, and we want very much that the images of Americans should be the images of helping the Iraqi people. It's simply unacceptable that anyone would engage in the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. And we will get to the bottom of it. And those who are responsible will be punished.

Q The American image right now is under heavy -- in the area. The story is developing every day. What kind of strategy do you have right now to manage this crisis? It's getting a crisis, really, in the area, in the Middle East, and still, the story is developing. So what kind of strategy you have right now to manage this crisis coming out of this --

DR. RICE: It's just extremely important that we continue to talk to the people of the region directly. I was just

with the Jordanian Foreign Minister. And we will have other Arab leaders in the United States very soon. It's important for us to go on Al Arabiya and to talk directly to your viewers and your listeners. The President will speak directly to the Arab world. We want everyone to understand that the United States believes in peace. We believe in the ability of men and women to pursue happy lives, to pursue those happy lives in a context in which they can speak freely, and in which they can pursue prosperity for their children. And the United States has tried in the Arab world and around the world to stand for a set of values. We believe that when people hear our story, that they will understand, at least, then for themselves.

Q To prevent this from happening again, to improve the situation inside the Iraqi prisons right now, could you tell us about any procedures being done just to improve the situation, as today, after this happened?

DR. RICE: Well, already, there is a general -- General Miller, who has gone out to take over the administration of the Iraqi prisons. That happened a few weeks ago. He's experienced. He will make certain that the operation is one of which we would be -- really be proud.

Obviously, people have to be incarcerated if they've done something wrong, but they should be treated with dignity. We will also -- the President has told Secretary Rumsfeld that he wants a full investigation of what happened. And he wants to know if there's something that we need to do systemically in the training of our people, in what people are told to do. We want to know the full picture, and so there will be a full investigation.

It will be transparent. The United States is an open society. And one good thing about democracies is that when something like this happens, democracies themselves react. The American people are reacting. The American Congress is reacting. The American President is reacting because no American wants to be associated with any dehumanizations now of the Iraqi people. And we are deeply sorry for what has happened to these people, and what the families must be feeling. It's just not right. And we will get to the bottom of what happened.

Q If you allow me, I'm going to move to another issue, the road map. And this administration endorsed the Sharon plan, and last week the Likud rejected the plan. Are you still stating that you are endorsing this plan? Are you endorsing only Sharon on this? Or what?

DR. RICE: We believe and the President believed that what he is endorsing is an opportunity that if Israel can find a way to disengage, to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza and from the four West Bank settlements, that that gives a new opportunity to Palestinians to begin to build their state. It's not the end of the road -- it's the beginning of the road. We believe that the road map and the two-state solution, and the President's June 24th vision will eventually get us to the point that you have two states -- Israel and Palestine -- living side-by-side in peace.

The President has been very clear that all of the issues have to be negotiated between the parties. It has to be mutually acceptable to the parties, but we have been for three years unable to get everything moving. And we saw in what Prime Minister Sharon was proposing an opportunity to get moving again along the road map. We don't know what will happen inside Israel. It's up to the Israelis and their political system to decide how to proceed. But we still think it's a good idea, and we hope that we'll have a chance to pursue the opportunity.

Q I have last question here. Critics are saying by endorsing Sharon from -- by this administration, like U.S. negotiating with Sharon on behalf of Palestinians -- why are putting their way of just talking about this road map -- how do you react to that?

DR. RICE: The President remains completely committed to the road map as the viable way to get to a two-state solution. But when you have the Israeli Prime Minister come to you and say, we'll withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza and from four West Bank settlements, we believe that that is worth doing, that it is a good thing is Israel begins to withdraw from land, because -- and to tear down settlements. All of the negotiations that we've had over many, many years, we've never been able to see the Palestinians actually recover land. If the Sharon plan or some version of it goes forward, then the Palestinians will begin to recover land. And it's that opportunity to which the President was reacting. We believe that the Palestinians need an opportunity to build the institutions of their state.

The President was the first President to say that there should be a Palestinian state and it ought to be called Palestine. That is really a tremendous change, really. It was a tremendous change in American policy. This President stands for peace. He believes that Palestinians deserve a better future than they have had till now. He believes that Israelis deserve also to live in peace. And he believes that they can live in peace.

Q Dr. Rice, thank you for this time you gave to us. And we'd love to have you again and again.

DR. RICE: Thank you very much. Thank you.

END 1:32 P.M. EDT