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THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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Interview of National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice by Al Jazeera Television

Arab Television Studio
Washington, D.C.

(Questions Asked in Arabic and Translated for Dr. Rice Off-Camera, Written Translations Provided By Al Jazeera)

12:10 P.M. EST

Q First, let me ask what's new in the President's announcement today? Some were surprised to find the President talking about the Palestinians and Israelis after we thought that you had forgotten them and had focused on Iraq. Why this timing?

DR. RICE: The President has always said that he remains focused on the Middle East peace process and on the moment when it would be possible to make progress in the Middle East peace process. On June 24th, the President laid out a comprehensive vision for a two-state solution in the Middle East in which Palestinians and Israelis could live together in peace and in prosperity.

We then developed with the Quartet -- the United Nations, Russia, and the EU -- a road map that would take the President's June 24th vision and put in place steps toward the conclusion of that goal. We really do believe, and the President believes, that now with new Israeli government just recently elected and formed, and with the Palestinian Authority's very admirable decision to create a prime ministership with real authority, that there is a new opportunity to push the peace process forward. And so this is really on the timing of the peace process and nothing else. And the President said today that when the Palestinians have selected and confirmed a prime minister, that we will be ready to give to the parties the road map and they can begin the work of beginning to get this done.

(Videotape of President Bush's Remarks.)

Q There are two things I'd like to discuss with you in regards to the President's announcement. First, confirmation. Dr. Saeb Erekat, Palestinian Minister of Local Government, told Al Jazeera that the confirmation is basically complete. Most Palestinian entities have confirmed: the Palestinian Central Committee, et cetera. What do you mean by confirmation?

DR. RICE: Simply waiting for the naming of the prime minister. By confirmation, the President only meant that, as we understand it, there has been a nomination of a prime minister. There's still discussions going on. And when that person is in place and ready, the United States will be prepared and ready to release the road map to the Palestinians and to the Israelis. We expect there to be comment, by the way, back from the parties.

After all, this needs to become their document -- not just the document of the Quartet. Because it's the road map, the pact for peace for the parties. And so that's what the President was saying, when there is a person to work with, we will be ready.

Q Of course, the person is here. He is Mahmoud Abbas, who was also welcomed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who congratulated him on his new post. What's worrisome is the talk of subjecting the road map to renewed negotiations. The Quartet has come up with a road map, and now it should be implemented, not renegotiated and renegotiated, et cetera.

DR. RICE: This is not a matter of renegotiation of the road map. It's simply a matter that the parties themselves ought to have an opportunity to comment. We believe that if this is going to work, it has to be a solution that the parties can live with. After all, they are the ones with everything at stake here. But we believe that it's a very good road map. And it is a faithful recollection of the President's June 24th speech. It is the way forward. But there's certainly nothing wrong with asking the parties to work on the road map, to work together on the road map. It may well be that some of these things can be done more quickly than the road map even envisions. And so we think comment from the parties is a very good thing.

Q Is this also supposed to happen as a war begins with Iraq? Some would say it is just to clear the air, that it's a carrot to the Arab world, but a very humble one compared to the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991, and that it is not a big achievement. How do you view it?

DR. RICE: We believe that the chances for a Middle East peace have been improving significantly with changes in Israel and especially with what we see as very positive signs of reform in the Palestinian Authority. To have a prime minister who has real authority to run the day-to-day affairs of the government, to have someone who is a respected leader among the Palestinian people is a very big plus for peace. And with the new Israeli government, what we're saying is, it's time to make a new start -- for the parties to make a new start.

Now, it's just fortunate that all of this work had been done on the road map so there is a way to get started. But it does not mean that there might not be other things that could be done, as well. And we will be looking for those. We are encouraging the Israelis, for instance, to do something about the fate of the Palestinian people. I think that no one can be unmoved by the daily problems of the Palestinian people. The President has said in past statements that the Palestinian people should not have to live with the daily humiliations that they go through.

We work very hard with the relief organizations and are prepared to work harder with relief organizations to do something about the humanitarian situation. So there is much that can be done there. The Palestinians, for their part, need to do more to improve the security environment. And, frankly, all of the states of the region need to fight terrorism, to say those few who would keep the hopes of the many wrapped up and unable to be fulfilled, to say to those rejectionists that it is not going to be acceptable. Peace is going to be at hand.

So it's not just the road map. There are responsibilities that all of the parties have. We've said to the Israelis, as this progresses, we expect them to freeze settlements and to recognize that a Palestinian state has to be viable

in its composition. So there's a lot for all of the parties to do. The road map is just a set of specific steps, an articulation of how to move forward. But it's not the only tool that we have. The timing is very clearly tied to this new chance for peace -- given the appointment of the Palestinian prime minister; and we look forward to his acceptance; and we're ready to go -- and to a new Israeli government.

Q And would you accept to host him in the White House?

DR. RICE: I think there would be nothing better, at some point in time when it is appropriate, for a Palestinian prime minister to visit the White House. But the timing will be important and we will be in touch with them about this.

But the key here is, on June 24th, the President gave a speech in which he asked all parties to be responsible. He asked the Israelis to be more responsible in the way that they created conditions for a Palestinian state to emerge. He asked the Palestinian leaders to have at the core the desires and wishes of their people, and to create a reformed government that was democratic and transparent and open. A lot has been going on in the time since June 24th. And it's time to try and deliver on that.

Q We want to move to the main issue of Iraq, but we don't want to miss the opportunity to bring up one thing. In every statement from President Bush and top U.S. officials, whether yourself or Secretary Powell, and in a way that creates discomfort among the Arab viewer or listener, whenever Israeli civilians are killed, there is a clear and harsh condemnation. This is a duty. but very simple and vague terms are used when Israel kills Palestinian civilians in a cold blood and in broad daylight, like the term, "[the U.S. is] worried." Fearing the ramifications of that upon the peace process, why aren't clear condemnations issued whenever innocents are killed on either side?

DR. RICE: The President has said that any innocent life that is taken in this terrible conflict that has gone on very, very long -- any innocent life -- is a tragedy. And what we've said is that terrorism, which takes innocent life in large numbers, bombings where you take children, really, and ask them to become suicide bombers against other children, that cannot be tolerated. But I want to be very clear, the loss of innocent life -- whether Palestinian or Israeli or Arab or American -- is too much. And we are very, very sad at what goes on in the Middle East every day. It is why the President has spoken so forcefully for the need for peace, why he has spoken so forcefully for a need to the end to terrorism, and why he has spoken so forcefully for the need for a two-state solution so that innocent life is not longer taken for anyone.

Q What do you hope to achieve in the Azores summit, the U.S., UK and Spain? And will the next road to Baghdad be through the Azores, instead of New York?

DR. RICE: The President and everyone else is working very, very hard with the U.N. Security Council and with others to see if we cant' find a way forward -- diplomatically forward in the U.N. Security Council to see if we cannot get to the place where the Security Council takes its responsibility seriously to uphold its Resolution 1441.

The problem is that Saddam Hussein has not disarmed. He has had 12 years to disarm. He lost a war of aggression against his neighbors, against Kuwait. He has used weapons of mass destruction on his own people and on his neighbors. He has continually violated U.N. resolution after U.N. resolution after U.N. resolution. He represses his own people. This is a regime that no one should shed tears for. This is a regime that needed to be told in the clearest possible terms, either disarm or we will disarm you. And that's what Resolution 1441 said, it said one final opportunity to disarm.

Now, we are in the endgame for U.N. diplomacy. And the President and President Aznar of Spain and Prime Minister Blair of Great Britain and Prime Minister Barroso of Portugal will get together. Prime Minister Barroso is hosting them in Portugal, in the Azores, which is, of course, Portuguese territory. And they will discuss the way forward. They will look to see if there's anything more than can be done to bring the U.N. to take the decision that it needs to take. But we are reaching the final stages. This cannot go on for very much longer.

Q So there might be a need to go back to the U.N. because you still don't have the necessary nine votes, and the French veto threat still stands?

DR. RICE: Well, right now we're continuing to work on it. We really do believe that if the Security Council can bring itself to do this, that would be the very best. You know the Security Council could not act in Kosovo when there was really the all-out murder of innocent people -- mostly Muslims -- in Kosovo. The U.N. could not act.

The U.N. Security Council could not act when in Rwanda there was a genocide that cost almost a million lives. There was a very poignant statement by the President of Rwanda recently when he said, sometimes the Security Council is not right when it does not act.

President Bush believes that, too. And so he is -- with his co-sponsors for this resolution -- making a last push to see if we can convince people to take on their responsibilities. But a moment of truth is coming. It is coming soon and that's what the leaders are going to meet to discuss in the Azores.

Q Are we talking about days or weeks?

DR. RICE: Well, we're certainly not talking about weeks because this has gone on long enough. We're talking about 12 years of defiance, not a few months. And even with a very strong, Resolution 1441, on the table, and military force building up around him, Saddam Hussein continues to play games with the international community. He continues to refuse real interviews with the scientists. He continues to hide his weapons to try to deceive the inspectors. We really have to deal with, is the creditability of the United Nations Security Council at stake? Indeed, this a leader, a regime that is at fault for threatening his neighbors and bringing a lot of instability into the region.

We talked earlier about the Middle East peace process, as the President said a few weeks ago, we really do believe that once the region is rid of this terrible regime in Iraq, if we have to use military force, that that will open new opportunities for peace in the Middle East and new opportunities for Arab countries to give greater liberty and greater awareness to their own people. Everybody wants rights. And we really do believe that the people of the Middle East are no different. They also yearn for freedom. The Iraqi people yearn for freedom. They yearn for liberty. And if we have to use force, we will do everything that we can to attend to the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people. We will do everything that we can to put the Iraqi people back on their feet. And we will do everything that we can to give them the opportunity that we know they will seize for a more democratic future.

Q Dr. Rice, I know your time is limited, and perhaps we just have a minute left, so I will move to the last question. But please take as much time as you need to answer. The perception of a post-war Iraq in the Arab world is one of foreign occupation forces returning to an Arab country, and to a city that used to be the capital of the Islamic caliphate. There is a fear of tearing Iraq apart between Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south, and a fear of intervention to change Arab regimes by force. How do you perceive a post-war Iraq?

DR. RICE: Well, Iraq is a special case because Iraq has been a serial abuser of U.N. Security Council resolutions. It's an outlaw regime that the Security Council has sanctioned many times. But let me be very clear, if we have to use military force in Iraq, it is our intention to help the Iraqi people to liberate themselves, to be there, as the President said, as long as we're needed but not one minute longer, and to very early on, put in place with Iraqis -- from outside the country and inside the country -- an Iraq authority that can administer and run the country.

We are thinking of something that we're calling an Iraqi interim authority, kind of like the Afghan Interim Authority, that would be a grouping of Iraqis who could exercise administrative and other authority on behalf of the Iraqi people as quickly as possible. Because we want the governance of Iraq in the hands of Iraqis -- not in hands of Americans or other coalition partners. There will be a period of time in which there are tasks to be done, humanitarian assistance, guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Iraq, being concerned about sectarian violence, being concerned that the resources of the Iraqi people are returned to the use of the Iraqi people. Those are things that, yes, the coalition will have to do. But we are determined that almost from the very beginning, Iraqis will have their own future at hand. And they will be involved in their own future.

Just as we did in Afghanistan, the United States and the coalition will stay as long as we're needed. But we have no desire to stay very long at all.

Q Just to clarify, there will be a Karzai in Iraq and not an American military governor? There will be no American military governor?

DR. RICE: What we really hope to do is, very early on, to establish an Iraqi interim authority. That interim authority would be transitional, obviously until an actual government could be created. But we would hope that it would bring together some of the people who have been outside the country, some of the leadership of the Kurdish territories, leaders of other groups, ethnic groups, and people in Iraq. We know that there are local and other leaders who have a lot of legitimate authority in Iraq. And we would hope that this interim Iraqi authority would bring together Iraqis to start to take control of their own future.

Q Dr. Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor, thank you very much.

DR. RICE: Thank you.

END 12:33 P.M. EST