



Special Briefing by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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(1:29 p.m. EDT)

SECRETARY RICE: Good afternoon. This morning President Bush spoke with Palestinian Authority President Abbas. He told him that the United States supports his legitimate decision to form an emergency government of responsible Palestinians, and he welcomed the appointment of Salam Fayyad as Prime Minister. The President pledged the full support of the United States for the new Palestinian Government.

I delivered this same message this morning in a phone call to Prime Minister Fayyad. I congratulated him on his new post, and I told him that the United States would resume full assistance to the Palestinian Government and normal government-to-government contacts. I told the Prime Minister that we want to work with his government and support his efforts to enforce the rule of law and to ensure a better life for the Palestinian people.



A fundamental choice confronts the Palestinians, and all people in the Middle East, more clearly now, than ever. It is a choice between violent extremism on the one hand and tolerance and responsibility on the other. Hamas has made its choice. It has sought to attempt to extinguish democratic debate with violence and to impose its extremist agenda on the Palestinian people in Gaza. Now, responsible Palestinians are making their choice and it is the duty of the international community to support those Palestinians who wish to build a better life and a future of peace.

I have worked -- I am working with my Quartet colleagues on ways that the international community can deliver support to the new Palestinian Government. In the meantime, the United States is taking some immediate actions of its own. We intend to lift our financial restrictions on the Palestinian Government, which has accepted previous agreements with Israel and rejects the path of violence. This will enable the American people and American financial institutions to resume normal economic and commercial ties with the Palestinian Government.

We are also reviewing our democracy and development assistance to help the new government build institutions and infrastructure that will improve life for Palestinians that will provide essential services, better roads, and clean drinking water to people in need. We had previously identified up to \$86 million to support President Abbas's efforts to build responsible security forces. Now, in light of the new Palestinian Government, we will be working with Congress to restructure that assistance so that it can be used effectively.

Finally, I would like to make one point absolutely clear. Through its actions, Hamas sought to divide the Palestinian nation. We reject that. It is the position of the United States that there is one Palestinian people and there should be one Palestinian state. Therefore to help ease the suffering of all Palestinians, especially those in Gaza, we intend to contribute \$40 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. We will not leave one and a half million Palestinians at the mercy of terrorist organizations.

In the days and weeks ahead there will be much work to do. I plan to continue working with Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas to clarify a political horizon for a Palestinian state. We're at a critical juncture for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, one at which the choices are ever more clear. We must take hold of this moment to make new progress toward the vision that President Bush laid out five years ago this week: two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

And now I'd be happy to take your questions. Anne.

QUESTION: Can Mahmoud Abbas really negotiate on behalf of all of his people if he's effectively only representing half of them?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let's remember that Mahmoud Abbas is the President of all of the Palestinian people through the Palestinian Authority. He is also the head of the PLO. These are the institutions of the Palestinians as a whole. We are focusing today and in the days to come on helping this new government to find its footing and to begin the work, the very difficult work, of making life better for the Palestinian people and that is our focus today.

Yeah, Charlie.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, how will you ensure that the money that goes to the Palestinians in Gaza gets to the people and isn't siphoned off by Hamas since you obviously have no one there to supervise that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have some experience, of course, working with UN relief agencies and with nongovernmental agencies and we will work through UNRWA in this regard. Obviously, it will be very important and we will do everything that we can to make certain that the monies get to the Palestinian people. But we have a long history of working through agencies of this kind. It's been some time since we had a presence in Gaza in any case. And so we will use many of the same goals -- I would hope that -- as many of the same means. I would certainly hope that the -- that people in Gaza would understand that it is important for the international community to be able to respond to the humanitarian conditions there.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, Fatah leaders have been corrupt in the past. By resuming aid, do you think that there's a danger that you're propping up a system and leaders that have been proved to be corrupt and a system that has been proved in the past not to work?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, we have been very strong advocates of political reform in the Palestinian political space, including Fatah reform. And that needs to proceed and I'm certain that it will, but I think if you look at this government and particularly, if you look at its prime minister, you see someone who has a reputation for integrity, who has a reputation for having accountability.

I remember when he was finance minister even under the old government when Yasser Arafat was still in power. He was the one who went forward to try and publish the budget on the internet so that people could see transparently what was being spent by the Palestinian Authority. So this is someone who has a reputation for integrity,

and I think can be relied on with appropriate controls and appropriate authorities to make certain that funding is used for the good of the Palestinian people.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, different issue?

SECRETARY RICE: I'll tell you what. I'll come back because I think people probably have -- still on this issue.

Elise.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, how much of this is just a return to the situation in -- before January 2005 when Hamas was elected? That situation didn't seem to be helping President Abbas and many in the Arab world say you can support him and give him as much money as you like, but without meaningful progress on the peace process, it's not going to be enough to shore him up and set up the kind of Palestinian Authority you're looking for.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I fully agree that a political horizon for the Palestinian people is critical. It is -- I've talked often about the fact that it is important to improve conditions on the ground. It's important to work on issues of movement and access. It's important for funding to be available to responsible Palestinian leaders.

But the Palestinian people also need to know that there is a viable state that is possible and that the -- their state can come into being. The Israelis need to know that when that state comes into being, it will be a means of helping to secure the region, including Israel, not a means for the furtherance of terror.

So that has not changed, Elise; that is certainly the circumstance and we will be trying to continue to press that case forward. I think what you have seen here is a clarification now, that there are those who completely reject that vision and there are those who are committed to that vision. And we intend to support those who are committed to that vision including with an active political track.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, what are your concerns with security in the area and how soon would security assistance be provided to the --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're, of course, very concerned about security. As you know, we've got a major effort at security reform. General Dayton is there and he will be -- we'll be discussing with him how to move forward. But I can tell you that both in his speech and in his conversation with me, Prime Minister Fayyad said that his first and foremost concern was security for the Palestinian people, that he was concerned that law and order, the rule of law be reestablished, that people feel that they can walk the streets safely. And I think he will be a good partner in security reform.

Yeah, Jim.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, I am obligated by the dictates of the news cycle and my assignment desk to ask you about a different subject.

SECRETARY RICE: All right. Let me get --

QUESTION: Will you come back to me?

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah, I'll come back. Yeah, I will, I just want to -- we'll finish the Palestinian issue and then -- Janine.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, can you explain what the U.S. plans here? Is it to work with Abbas to solidify his power in the West Bank or are you going to be encouraging him to try and reassert control of Gaza?

SECRETARY RICE: I think that we have in President Abbas and in the Prime Minister Palestinian leaders who will take a responsible course. We're going to support the course that they develop and that they outline. Now, first and foremost, they needed to form a government. They need resources for that government. They need a way to deal with the unfortunate circumstances that were left by the fact that the international community could not deal with the last government. Those are the issues that we're going to deal with in this period of time. We will have many discussions with President Abbas about how he intends to move forward and what he needs to do.

But I just want to underscore there is one -- just as there's one Palestinian people, we are not going to countenance that somehow this is a -- that Palestinians are divisible. And so we are going to support President Abbas and what he wants to do. We're going to support Prime Minister Fayyad, but we're not going to abandon the Palestinians who are living in Gaza. But this is a fast-moving situation, Janine, and we're going to be in very close contact with President Abbas and with Prime Minister Fayyad and also with international partners.

Helene, you have the last question on this one.

QUESTION: Thanks. Do we have a short window of time now? Doesn't the Palestinian constitution say basically that this government is legitimate for the next 30 days and then there's another 30-day extension and after that it has to go to elections? Are you trying to do any certain amount of things in the next two months or do you feel that you have more time?

SECRETARY RICE: Helene, I think we will leave to the Palestinians issues of how they work through their own constitutional issues. Our view, very strongly, is that what President Abbas has done is legitimate and it is responsible and we're going to support that action.

All right. Two other questions on -- yes. Yeah.

QUESTION: In your meeting with the Iraqi Foreign Minister, did you discuss the PKK problem and potential measures against that?

SECRETARY RICE: We -- in my meeting with the Iraqi Foreign Minister, we did discuss the issues of the PKK. We discussed the importance of not allowing Iraqi territory to be used for acts of terrorism against neighbors, in this case, particularly against Turkey. We discussed the importance of the trilateral security mechanism that Iraq, the United States and Turkey instituted some time ago and the importance of accelerating the work of that mechanism because the Iraqis do not want -- and we do not want -- their territory to be used for terrorist acts against their neighbor.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you very much. We've seen this exchange of letters between the head of the Atomic Energy Organization in North Korea and IAEA Director General ElBaradei more or less paving the way for a return of some IAEA personnel to Yongbyon to begin to monitor the potential shutdown of that reactor there. Do you point to this return, this prospective return of IAEA personnel to North Korea as clear evidence that the North Koreans have indeed made a strategic decision to dismantle their nuclear apparatus? If the answer is, "let's see," doesn't that give some validation to the conservative critics of the deal?

SECRETARY RICE: (Laughter.) Question asked and answered, too. So I don't have to give you an answer.

QUESTION: It's remarkable efficiency.

SECRETARY RICE: (Laughter.) Remarkable efficiency. Look, we have an agreement on February 13th. We know what steps need to be taken to carry out obligations under that agreement. One of the obligations was to have IAEA inspectors come back to North Korea to participate in the work that it will take to shut down the reactor. It is indeed a good step that that has taken place and -- or that that is about to take place -- and we expect North Korea to carry through with its obligations.

QUESTION: Do you think they've have made this strategic decision?

SECRETARY RICE: Jim, when I was here announcing the deal some time ago, I think I used what you would appreciate which was a football metaphor at the time. I said this was the first quarter, we're still there. We will expect the North Koreans to carry out their obligations. And the obligations that they have undertaken are clearly obligations that would -- if they're carried out -- would mean that they've taken a strategic choice to shut down this program, and they're on record and they're not on record just with us, they're on record with the entire region.

Yeah. Last question. I promised to come back to you.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, first of all, as far as dealing with the tough issues so diplomatically you have done a wonderful job.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

QUESTION: My question is here that demonstrations are going outside the State Department and demonstrations are going across Pakistan and in moments you are going to meet with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan. Are you concerned, Madame Secretary about the -- ongoing violence and the U.S. interest in the region?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, of course, we've been concerned about the situation in Pakistan. And any time there is violence, we are concerned about it. I'm looking forward to my conversations with the Foreign Minister. John Negroponte was just in Pakistan. We have a very intensive engagement with the Pakistani officials at this important time. I think we have to recognize that Pakistan has come a very long way since 2001 in its commitment to try and root out extremism, to try to make reforms, educational reforms, reforms on concerns of women and the like. There is an important -- there are important set of events coming up when there will be elections in Pakistan and the importance of those elections being free and fair as a foundation for a more democratic Pakistan, I think is very clear and I will discuss that as well with Foreign Minister Kasuri. But I think you have to look at the last five years and say that President Musharraf has been a good ally in the war on terror. He has undertaken some important reforms in Pakistan. We have been second to none in continuing to press for openness in Pakistan, for the rights of opposition in Pakistan, and for free and fair elections when they are held.

Thank you very much.

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