



Closing Remarks at the Annapolis Conference

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Annapolis, Maryland
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(6:45 p.m. EST)

SECRETARY RICE: Good evening. The Annapolis Conference, which President Bush called and convened, has been the first Middle East peace event of this kind ever held on U.S. soil. The focus here has been on the obligations not only of the parties, but of the international community to achieve our shared goal of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Meeting those responsibilities is now the urgent work that must proceed immediately after Annapolis. The conference began with the joint announcement by Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas that they will begin negotiations to establish a Palestinian state and to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace with the goal of concluding an agreement by the end of the year 2008. President Bush has invited them both to the White House tomorrow to inaugurate those negotiations, and the two sides have agreed that they will return to the region and meet on December 12th to continue the process.

The parties also agreed to immediate implementation of the Roadmap, to improve conditions on the ground for both sides and to lay the foundations for a two-state solution. In their negotiations, the parties will address all of the core issues, including borders and refugees, security, water, settlements and Jerusalem. This is an incredibly significant achievement for them to agree to do this because meaningful discussions on core issues have not been held in seven years. To be sure, the issues to be resolved between the parties are very challenging. If they were not, peace would have been made a long time ago. But difficult to resolve does not mean impossible to resolve, especially with constructive engagement from regional states and the international community that we witnessed here today.

I want to applaud those attendees at today's conference who shared their views seriously and soberly, not always agreeing, but seeking to build understanding through discussion and dialogue. In addition to members of the Quartet, we also heard very important comments today from the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, the current President of the Arab League. He reaffirmed the goal of the Arab League Peace Initiative, of reconciliation not only between Israelis and Palestinians, but between Israel and the larger Arab world. And although the focus of today's conference was, of course, on the Israeli-Palestinian peace, there was a discussion of steps that could lead to a comprehensive peace, including comments by the Syrian and Lebanese representatives.

With Annapolis behind us, we will now focus urgently on the next steps that are necessary from the international community. This will be one of the topics that we will discuss in upcoming meetings with our Quartet partners, the first of which will be held on or around December 17th. On or around that same day, the French Government will host a donors conference in Paris to support Palestinian reform and institution building. We heard today from former Prime Minister Tony Blair, Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad and Defense Minister Barak about this important work.

This conference will be an essential opportunity for the international community to pledge tangible and generous assistance to the economic development of Palestinian society and to provide maximal resources for the Palestinian Authority's program of institutional building in preparation for statehood. We expect broad international attendance at this meeting and I want to thank the French Government for its willingness to organize the conference.

The Annapolis conference has thus been the beginning, not the end, of a new, serious and substantive effort to achieve peace in the Middle East. This work will be hard. It involves risks and sacrifices for all concerned. But today's events have demonstrated unambiguously that the international community will fully support the path the parties have chosen. President Bush and I have pledged the unwavering support of the United States to realize this goal. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is a national interest for the United States, and we now have a real opportunity to make progress. Success is vital for securing a future of peace, freedom and opportunity in the Middle East, and no one believes that failure is an option. We must succeed. The parties today showed their strong commitment that they intend to do so.

Thank you very much.

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