U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Briefing En Route to Shannon, Ireland

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
En Route to Shannon, Ireland
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SECRETARY RICE: Good morning. Well, we have our more regular group back together. We've been missing a few of you. Welcome back to the road. And we're off to Central Asia, Afghanistan, and then on to Europe, but we can talk about the European portion at some other time.

I think this is an extremely important time to go to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Let me take them separately. Central Asia is a region that is in transition. There are very important developments going on as a result of Kyrgyzstan and the elections that have just taken place there, and I look forward to talking to the new Kyrgyz Government about the importance of continuing political and economic reforms. And I'll have a session on constitutional reform, which needs to take place in Kyrgyzstan.

I also want to talk to the leadership in Kyrgyzstan as well as in Kazakhstan and in Tajikistan about the economic potential of this region because it is a region that will need to develop as a region. They need to lower trade barriers, that is, between their countries. It's a place that has really great potential if it can find a way to move forward on economic reforms, and so I look forward to those discussions.

I'm going to go to Kazakhstan -- and I'll come back to Afghanistan in a moment. I've been to Kazakhstan a number of times. Matter of fact, I think this is my third visit to Kazakhstan since independence and I had been there a couple of times when it was still a part of the Soviet Union. It is a country that, of course, is enormously wealthy in terms of natural resources, in particular oil, but it's striving to try to balance its economic development and so I look forward to having a chance to talk to some entrepreneurs and business people from the non-oil sector because I know that it's one of President Nazarbayev's desires to have the economy develop more evenly.

Kazakhstan is also getting ready for elections. These are going to be extremely important elections. We believe that the relationship with Kazakhstan can be even stronger than it is -- it's already a strong relationship -- that it can deepen. It is important that the elections that take place there are elections that are free and fair and that meet international standards.

I'll also, of course, be going on to Tajikistan and to have discussions there on economic affairs and on political reform as well with President Rahmonov.

This entire region is very important also in the war on terrorism. We have good military-to-military relationships with all of these countries. We are very desirous of continuing our relationships because we need to fight the war on terror and the ability to operate and to have access in this region is important to the war on terror. And we've had very good relationships. The United States is not increasing its base structure anywhere in the world, so questions that sometimes come up about, "Are you seeking permanent bases," I think are misplaced. We are, in fact, downsizing our base structure around the world. This is really a question of being able to operate in this area and we have had very good military-to-military contacts.

I will say to all of the Central Asians that the United States looks forward to broader, deeper, stronger relations; to being a partner as they reform economically, politically and as we fight the war on terror. In no way are the relationships in Central Asia aimed at anyone. In other words, we want these countries to have good relations with their neighbors, most especially good relations with Russia. They have longstanding ties with Russia, economic and other ties, and it's only natural that those relationships are going to continue.

I am looking forward to going to Afghanistan in the wake of the parliamentary elections which there will complete the Bonn process that began shortly after the liberation of Afghanistan. It's almost three years to the day since -- I'm sorry, four years to the day since the liberation of Afghanistan began. And so seeing what has happened in Afghanistan with a successful presidential election, now parliamentary elections, the seating of a parliament which, apparently, will have a lot of women in it -- it's one of the very interesting developments there -- and continuing to work with the Afghans toward fighting the war on terror, rooting out the last elements of the Taliban, fostering national reconciliation, building the institutions of the new state, including the army and police.

And of course I expect to have extensive discussions on how we and the British can intensify our efforts on the narcotics/counternarcotics side because this continues to be a source of potential instability in Afghanistan. But Afghanistan has made enormous progress in these years, particularly for a country that's coming out of almost 20 -- more than 25 years of civil war. It's quite extraordinary that they now have a stable government, a President who represents all Afghans; they're overcoming their ethnic and regional divides; they have a constitution that is really a model in that region. And so while there is still a lot of work to do in Afghanistan, particularly on the economic side and on the counternarcotics side, it's really a tremendously heartening story over the last few years.

I also hope to talk to the Afghans about their role in regional economic development because Afghanistan, which has been a land bridge in its history in Central Asia and a transit point for economic development, will need to develop those elements -- good customs, the ability to move goods, a road network -- if it is to have a fully functioning economy because that's going to be so important to its economic development.

So that's Central Asia and Afghanistan, and obviously this all takes place against the backdrop of the horrible events that have happened in Pakistan and in India, the hardest hit areas apparently being in Kashmir. The United States, as the President said yesterday, is going to stand with the people of this region, and particularly the people of Pakistan as they go through relief and recovery efforts, and ultimately through rebuilding.

I have been in touch with our Ambassador in Pakistan. He has been in constant contact back to Washington. General Eikenberry, who is the commander from Afghanistan, is going to go to Pakistan to -- I think he may already be on the ground. He's already on the ground in Pakistan to try and help with coordination of relief efforts. We are making available assets, lift assets, C-17s, helicopter lifts.

One of the things that the President determined very early on, and Secretary Rumsfeld is now executing, is that we would not confine the assets available to Pakistan just to General Abizaid's area of operation, but assets will be flown in from other parts of the -- from U.S. military assets in other parts of the world because we want to be as supportive and responsive to the Pakistani needs as possible. This is a terrible tragedy. We've made $50 million available in cash, but right now I think the most important thing that we can do is in terms of military assets for lift and in terms of helping relief and recovery efforts as early as we can.

I talked to the Foreign Minister. We've also been in touch with President Musharraf.

Questions? Yes, Saul.

QUESTION: When you're in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, will you ask -- sorry, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, will you ask them for the use of an air base to compensate for being ejected from Uzbekistan?

SECRETARY RICE: We are working in this entire region on issues of access. We have had good access. I don't think we believe we are much in need beyond where we are. But obviously, we can continue these discussions as needs arise.

We have found Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to be strong allies and strong fighters in the war on terrorism. Again, this is about the war on terrorism and this is a question of access and operations. And I'm sure we'll have those discussions, but I don't expect to have detailed discussions because we have continuing military-to-military contacts about whatever is needed in fighting the war on terrorism.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you mentioned the elections that are upcoming in Kazakhstan in December. What levers, what kind of incentives, do you have to offer the Kazakh Government to move forward? Because some are really afraid that there are signs that it's actually backsliding a bit.

And on the work that you said you and the Brits are going to try to do on drug eradication, what ideas are you bringing, what assets might you be bringing on that front?

Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on the drug eradication issues, we have had an extensive program on counternarcotics for some time now that rests on several pillars: first of all, actual eradication, which has to be carried out in conjunction with Afghans; the interdiction, which is an important part of the program; but also, the building of Afghan capabilities to deal with the criminal element that engages in this, and so law and order, justice, police training have been important elements of the program; and of course, alternative livelihoods so that when people agree not to plant that they have some means by which to keep a livelihood; and then finally, there's been an extensive public relations campaign. I'm going to have a meeting that will have all of the Afghan ministers there who are involved in this effort, and it's a long list of Afghans who are involved in this effort, and I expect we'll have extensive discussions about how to improve this.

But the United States and Britain have already put enormous resources in this. In the supplemental we had additional money for the Afghan counternarcotics program. So the thing that we are looking for now more than anything is the continued strong leadership, and really even stronger leadership, from the Afghan Government because what is needed is the kind of thing that they're doing, saying to people this is wrong. People have been growing poppy in Afghanistan for a very, very long time. There has to be a de-legitimation of that process and there has to be an effort to give people a livelihood. So that's what we're doing.

QUESTION: If I could just follow on that very quickly, because the Interior Minister, Jalali, just resigned and many saw him as the guy who was really trying to fight the good fight within the government. He complained that there were some in Karzai's government who were involved in the drug trade.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Afghanistan is a complicated place, and as the President looks at all of the issues concerning counternarcotics I'm sure that they are also trying to get to the bottom of issues of corruption that may be continuing to support the counternarcotics -- the narcotics problem in Afghanistan.

But I'm going to sit with the Afghan Government and we'll have an honest discussion about what needs to be done because the war on terrorism in Afghanistan is going well, the reintegration of people into the society is going well, the political process is going well, but the narcotics effort is not sufficient. And a lot has been done, a lot more has been done over the last several months, but there's still a lot of work to do. And so I'm looking forward to a detailed discussion with the Afghan Government.

And then you -- Kazakhstan. Well, the Nazarbayev government has a chance to be a real leader in Central Asia on both economic and political reform. They've made a lot of changes on the economic front. And I remember President Nazarbayev as actually one of the reformers at the time of *perestroika* when he was a part of the Politburo in the Soviet Union. A lot has changed since that time, but I believe that this is someone who can be persuaded to use his leadership, his considerable stature, his considerable popularity among his people, to move Kazakhstan to the next level, to have free and fair elections, elections that will meet international standards, and then will then lead this region, given what's happened in Kyrgyzstan, lead this region to stronger elections.

And I do know that we and Kazakhstan seek a strong and deep relationship, and one of the elements of a strong and deep relationship with the United States these days is forward movement on democracy.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you say you don't want -- the U.S. doesn't want a permanent military base in the region. Can you give us an indication of how long you think there must be a military presence given that you're saying Afghanistan, the situation, is improving democratically?

And also just one other question on Syria. It's been reported that you vetoed a suggestion to carry out attacks on training camps there. I just wondered if you could comment on that.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, I'm not going to comment on comments made by people who are on the outside of meetings and still feel empowered to come and tell you what happened in them. And so I would just say don't believe everything that you read, and other than that I'm not going to comment on internal deliberations of the Administration.

We've been very clear about what we need from Syria. We need the Syrians to stop the flow of insurgents into Iraq. We need the Syrians to live up to their obligations under Resolution 1559 on Lebanon, to cooperate fully with the Mehlis investigation, to make certain that in terms of 1559 they are not encouraging Palestinian rejectionists, some of whom are in Lebanon, to try and harm the process that's going on in the Palestinian territories. It's a little difficult to understand why the President of Syria would have a press conference with people who are talking about destabilizing the peace process in the Palestinian territories.

So we've been very clear about what is needed from Syria and we, by the way, are not the only ones. The international community is expecting Syria to live up to its obligations under Resolution 1559.

As to what we seek, as I said, we seek cooperation with these states, we seek access for fighting the war on terrorism. We have been fortunate to have good military-to-military relations where operations can be -- operational support for the war on terrorism can be carried out. And I think we're in very good -- in a very good position with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan and indeed Kyrgyzstan. We've had very good cooperation.

I said the United States is not enhancing its base structure around the world; in fact, what we're doing is we're drawing down our base structure. And so our issues have been to maintain our ability to move and to be flexible and to fight the war on terrorism, and that's the kind of conversation that Don Rumsfeld has had with these folks when he's out here and that we'll have as well.

QUESTION: To follow on that, how much of a blow, though, is the loss of the base in Uzbekistan? And how concerned are you about the way in which this country seems to be moving back into a Russian orbit and certainly not following any kind of democratic path?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm certainly concerned that they're not following a democratic path and I'm certainly concerned that Karimov is not listening to the international community when it tells him he needs an international investigation of what happened at Andijan. And Uzbekistan is out of step with what's happening in this -- even in this region as a whole. And the ability of Uzbekistan to progress economically, politically is going to depend on eventually on freeing the creativity of its people, and that's not happening and it's unfortunate.

As to the issues that we've had with Uzbekistan about military access, about K-2, we've been very clear that we will continue to fight the war on terrorism. We'll continue to do it effectively. We have many ways to do it. We continue to have good relationships with countries all over that region.

And by the way, in terms of a pro-Russian orientation, as I've said, we expect the Russians to have strong relations with these states. There are economic ties, there are political ties, there are linguistic ties that are very strong, and that's going to continue and we have no problem with that. We have good discussions with the Russians about this region.

But in terms of fighting the war on terrorism, we're going to continue to do it and we're going to continue to do it effectively. What we have not been willing to do is to make a choice between our objectives in terms of the immediate concerns about military access and our objectives in terms of democracy because we see that there is an inextricable link between our strategic goals of democratization and fighting the war on terrorism, as the President made clear in the speech that he gave at the National Endowment.

QUESTION: A quick question on Iraq. The vote is only -- the referendum is only five days away now. What are you hearing from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and what are your own thoughts or analysis on whether there's going to be Sunni participation, how much, and is it possible that the three provinces will vote to reject this referendum?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm not going to try to second-guess the outcome of the Iraqi referendum. Clearly, our goal is to have as many people participate as possible, whatever their views, because that's the democratic process. And when the TAL was set up, the process set out a process by -- set out a set of steps by which this referendum would take place and people were told to vote their conscience, and we have not wavered from that.

There are efforts underway between Shia and Kurdish and Sunni leaders to give the Sunnis some confidence that the constitution, as it stands, would indeed represent their interests. Those are going to continue, I am sure, till the eleventh hour. But whatever the decisions that are made, we do know that there are next steps in the process ahead. There will be elections in December and that's how the process was laid out and it's going to continue.

The good news is that you're getting very heavy debate and interest in this entire process. People clearly want to carry out and resolve their differences within a political process. And the Sunnis are registering in large numbers. They are going to pursue their political interests in this way.

By the way, a number of Sunnis have said that they don't disagree with the entire constitution; there are elements of it that they dislike. But my own view is that these things evolve over time. Obviously, this constitution has a lot to commend it in terms of the protection of individual rights and women's rights and so forth. But it's going to be up to Iraqis to decide how they want to go forward.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, it's quite striking. You're meeting with some civil society officials in the countries you're visiting but you're not meeting with any political opposition. Why is that, particularly given the fact your mission on this trip is to encourage political dialogue and democracy?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, in Kyrgyzstan they just had an election and the opposition to Akayev won, so I think in Kyrgyzstan what I will do is I will sit with the people who are interested in constitutional reforms.

And, Robin, if you've been following this, you know that there are strongly varied opinions in Kyrgyzstan about the next course ahead of them and people within the government hold different views, people in the parliament hold different views. I think it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that in Kyrgyzstan I'm not going to hear a very full range of views about what next steps they need to take. Some are supportive of what the President wants to do and others are not. And so I think I'm going to hear a very full range of views. That's why we set up this constitutional -- the session on constitutional reform.

In terms of Kazakhstan, there will be opposition candidates at the session that I have, the speech that I have, and it's my understanding I may have a chance to at least, at a pull-aside, have a few words with them.

And similarly, I know that Matt is -- Matt Bryza is meeting with opposition in Tajikistan and I hope I'll have an opportunity to say hello to them as well.

But what we're pushing here is a process and these countries are at different stages. In Kazakhstan, the most important issue is that these elections be free and fair. The most important issue is that they meet international standards. The most important issue is that I speak out for a process that's free and fair, not just on election day but before elections.

And I think you'll appreciate that this is a fairly compressed time frame in which to get everything done, but it's going to be very clear to the people of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and indeed Kyrgyzstan where the United States of America stands on the importance of permitting free and open debate and permitting opposition to be fully heard.

QUESTION: Thank you. Did you consider going to Pakistan or flying over the damage? I mean, you're going to be next door.

SECRETARY RICE: First of all, I have considered it and I am still considering it. We're going to reach out to Pakistani officials. I am going to be in the region. I want to be very clear to the Pakistani people that the American people stand with them. On the other hand, I don't want to do anything that gets in the way of the considerable task that the Pakistani Government and people have ahead of them.

When I was working on the Katrina issues, we had numerous offers of high-ranking officials from around the world to come and be there and stand with us. It didn't work in our context, but if it works in this context, if I can do anything to help, I will. But I want to reach out to the Pakistanis and to get their sense of whether it does help. You know, I am going to be in the area and I want it to be fully understood that being the area, I would be most happy to go if that would be helpful to the Pakistanis in any way.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, Bob Joseph, your point man on proliferation, went to these countries last week. Did you have a chance to discuss things with him? Was his trip about a particular issue?

And also on the base issue, not to belabor it, but did these countries not join with Russia and China in July to urge the U.S. to give a timetable for getting out of the region?

SECRETARY RICE: I believe that everyone in the region understands that the United States is fighting a war on terrorism and I don't believe there's anyone in the region who wants the United States to leave the region before the war on terrorism is won, because these are countries that also face terrorist threats from the same sources that are causing difficulties in Afghanistan, indeed in -- you pick a place -- Bali, London, New York or Washington. And in our discussions with these countries, their focus has been on the need to fight effectively in the war on terrorism and to be good partners in the war on terrorism.

As to -- I'm sorry, you --

QUESTION: Proliferation.

SECRETARY RICE: Proliferation. Yeah, Bob Joseph. I talked to him this morning. He's just back. Bob's goal in going out was to talk to these countries about the Proliferation Security Initiative -- a couple of them are members of the Proliferation Security Initiative -- to talk about defensive measures that we can take to safeguard against proliferation and movement of dangerous materials and weapons of mass destruction materials.

He also was able to follow up on some of the work that has been done out of the Nunn-Lugar program. We are continuing, as you read about in Kazakhstan, to destroy the legacy of the old Soviet nuclear weapons systems that were in this region and the material that came from that. So he talked about those issues as well.

But this is an extremely important region given its geographic location and its sort of transit status for proliferation security, for efforts to stem the flow of dangerous materials, for efforts in the war on terrorism and, as the President has noted, for the potential nexus of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. So these are extremely important partners in that whole set of efforts and that's what Bob was out here to discuss.

Thank you.

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