



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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Press Gaggle with Ari Fleischer

2:10 P.M. CST

MR. FLEISCHER: I heard some people had some questions.

Q Colombia. Has the President authorized 150 additional military personnel?

MR. FLEISCHER: We have an ongoing relationship with Colombia to help them in both counter-narcotics and counter-terrorist area. I'm not going to describe any additional deployments, but suffice it to say that we work together closely with Colombia. We have before, we will continue to do so.

Q What does the President think of the rebels' claim that they now have the three Americans and if there's a Colombian military search, that that could jeopardize their safety?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, actually, that's the -- the fact of them having the Americans has been well-known. That's been reported publicly for at least a week. This is a reminder of how FARC is a terrorist organization, how dangerous they are, and how they are well-known for hostage taking and for trying to bring harm to the civilian population of Colombia. And that's why the United States stands shoulder to shoulder with the people of Colombia in their effort to rout the FARC.

Q Do you have anything on -- they claim that they shot the plane down, and I think the U.S. government is saying it had engine trouble. Do you --

MR. FLEISCHER: We have no evidence to support that claim.

Q That it was shot down?

MR. FLEISCHER: We have no evidence to support the claim that it was shot down. All our information is that it was engine trouble.

Q They say they are CIA agents, the people they're holding.

MR. FLEISCHER: DOD contractors, just as we've reported all along.

Q They were not government employees, they were contractors. Private industry, but under contract?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's precisely correct.

Q Would the President have to notify Congress if additional U.S. forces went into Colombia, since isn't there a ceiling on how many can go in?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, any actions are taken in accordance with the congressional statutes. And of course, Congress did revisit this issue last year, where they authorized a more robust counter-terrorism effort to go hand-in-hand with the counter-narcotics effort.

Q On Thursday afternoon, your office released a letter from the President to the Hill with numbers for the number of Americans deployed in Colombia. Was that release from your office reflecting the number of personnel who are in Colombia right now?

MR. FLEISCHER: On the numbers, you need to talk to DOD about it, anything dealing with the specific numbers. What I'm indicating to you is we have, and we will, continue to work closely with Colombia and its government and its military and its police on how to combat the FARC. And in that, we stand together with the people of Colombia. We work together closely because it's important to Colombia, it's important to America. DOD can tell you anything more specific on numbers, et cetera. So I'm trying to give you some body language that I'm not going to get into numbers.

Q Can you give us some color from the Aznar meeting? Did he get a tour of the ranch? What did they have for lunch?

MR. FLEISCHER: They did have a tour this morning, the President driving his pickup truck. And similarly, on the way to the news conference, the President drove his pickup truck. It's one of the few times he gets to drive; he relishes it. He wishes the drive could be as long as the news conference. And he drove back. Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Aznar were seated in the backseat of the pickup truck. And in the bed of the pickup truck was Blake Gottesman and Eric Draper.

Q You mean in the open part?

MR. FLEISCHER: In the back open part. The last I looked nobody had scratched behind their ears. (Laughter.)

Q But did they have fleas?

MR. FLEISCHER: They did not have fleas. I did not get to see if their tongues were wagging. (Laughter.)

Q Was the lunch a working lunch, or a sort of social thing?

MR. FLEISCHER: I do not have a read on the lunch, since I've been here while the lunch took place.

Q You don't know what they had then for lunch?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I think we can get the menu for you and release it. We gave you last night's dinner menu; hopefully that was helpful. But we'll get you a lunch menu.

Q Did they do --

MR. FLEISCHER: I think he's already gone.

Q Ari, do you really not know which day the resolution will be introduced?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President said, early next week. I'm your echo of the President. (Laughter.)

Q I am a mere echo -- (laughter.)

Q So am I. (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, you have to put a little "r" after --

Q When you said they were working on the resolution and the strategy, does that mean that they're literally working on the text of it, they were this weekend, line by line, or throwing language around?

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, they are talking about specific language, specific words.

Q Is it fair to say that Aznar's visit is more designed, and that his visit to Mexico is more designed to find out what kind of language they needed in the resolution, than to specifically ask for votes from President Fox or any other world leaders?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the time will come to ask for votes, but this is now the time to consult, the diplomacy.

Q So far there isn't an official vote tally? It's more consultation on the text of the resolution, and then you'll go shopping around for votes?

MR. FLEISCHER: Precisely. As the President said, it's impossible to ask somebody for a vote before something is even introduced so they can have a solid understanding of what they're voting on. And then, as the President indicated, if you take a look at the process last November, many similar issues were raised where people have a habit -- some people -- have a habit of underestimating President Bush, and they said, how can you possibly get this done, you have a lot of opposition ahead of you. But the President always believes that through leadership, through adherence to principle, and by fighting for the right thing, logic and diplomacy will prevail.

And this is why, again, the President has put this in New York. The United Nations would have no role if President Bush didn't ask the United Nations to take a role. And the United Nations is now taking the role, and the world will watch. Taking its role, and the world will watch.

Q Were you present for the four-way conference call?

MR. FLEISCHER: I was not.

Q When did that take place, exactly?

MR. FLEISCHER: It took place immediately prior to the news conference at the President's home on the ranch.

Q Did you get any sort of readout from that call as to how the President spoke to the leaders in terms of expressing his gratitude for them taking their stands with him?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President talked about his meeting with President Aznar, and again, they were

talking about the language of the resolution.

Q But he didn't say anything like, hey, guys, I really appreciate you being on board with me here -- anything like that, or was it just --

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't have any verbatims for you.

Q -- echo the President. (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: This is a distant echo, since I was sitting on the other side of the wall.

Q Aznar sort of went out of his way to emphasize that this should be done within the Security Council. Does that suggest that Spain would not be part of the coalition of the willing?

MR. FLEISCHER: This will be done in the Security Council. The question is, will the Security Council do anything with it once it's there.

Q Do you want a vote -- your intention is to force it to a vote, up or down, either way. Even if it appears that the resolution will lose?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to make any I'm not going to make any predictions about whether it will win or it will lose, other than what the President said, which is that he is confident that in the end, this will be agreed to. So, clearly, the President expressing his opinion that this will be agreed to. And the only way to get to that point is to introduce it and let the debate begin and call the vote.

Q Was the four-way conference call scheduled in advance of yesterday's dinner, or was it an idea that came up as a result of their discussions last night at dinner?

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, that was set up yesterday afternoon, I think.

Q Aznar also called for quick action in the Middle East. Is that something that they discussed? Is there anything new on that?

MR. FLEISCHER: Most of the -- the entire meeting was on Iraq. Of course, on the Mideast, the two see it eye to eye, in terms of the need for two states, Israel and Palestinian living side by side. If you recall, the Quartet has met in Madrid. And so they play an important role.

Q Is it accurate to say that this amounts to Spanish co-sponsoring the resolution, or is this just supporting and willing to negotiate?

MR. FLEISCHER: I have to leave that to Spain to characterize what their own role will be. But the President is very proud to call Spain an important friend and ally in this.

Q Spain wouldn't say. I mean, he kind of sidestepped the question of whether they would actually be one of the sponsors. It's still U.S.-British at this point, is that fair to say?

MR. FLEISCHER: We have not indicated who it will be at this time. But if Spain has not said, it would not be my place to say it for Spain, although I appreciate the opportunity.

Q But Zel Miller will be on board. (Laughter.)

Q -- opposition in Spain, the people in Spain, their opposition to a war, or is --

MR. FLEISCHER: The background official took all the questions about the specific meetings.

Q Ari, the differences on language, is this a matter of nuance, or are there substantial differences on provisions like deadlines, whether a deadline should be explicitly stated or not? Can you characterize it in some way?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to be able to get into any of the specific wording. It will be plain soon enough. But this is a serious diplomatic endeavor that is designed to allow the United Nations Security Council to express its will and to disarm Saddam Hussein. And the wording will be clear soon enough.

But what you're seeing is serious action of diplomacy. And the President has been a successful diplomat in the past, particularly in large, multilateral forums, by working privately and quietly and seriously about the language, and then making it public. But in order to have success, the President believes deeply in working quietly and privately. That's the best way to show respect for the nations with whom we're dealing and underscores the seriousness of the diplomatic endeavors. He does have a strong track record in being successful in these forums.

Q Is the fact that the President is not dealing with France and Germany a sign that he agrees with Rumsfeld that that's old Europe, and he doesn't need them?

MR. FLEISCHER: Au contraire. (Laughter.)

Q Pardonez moi.

Q Can you say that in German, too?

MR. FLEISCHER: Bien sur. No, as you know, the President had a conversation with President Chirac just some 10 days, two weeks ago.

Q Yes, but they're not in on this last-minute sorting out the language thing.

MR. FLEISCHER: You will continue to see lots of levels of diplomacy. We will keep you informed about phone calls the President makes. And you can presume that those calls will continue to many nations. So you will continue to see diplomacy exercised; you'll continue to see the President talk to other members. So just because the call didn't take place Saturday doesn't mean it won't take place Sunday or Monday or in the future.

Q Well, isn't Aznar on his way to Paris to see Chirac?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't have President Aznar's schedule. That very well may be the case.

Q Is he carrying a message for the President to the French?

MR. FLEISCHER: We continue to work this as partners, and I think it's fair to say that many of the discussions that were held here in Crawford will be shared around the world.

Q What are the mechanics for the introduction of the resolution? Is the United States introducing this as calling a meeting and doing it in a very public action? I'm ignorant of U.N. procedures, but how do you

want to go about doing this? How do you want to go about introducing this resolution?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think you will see that the State Department, given the fact that this is a United Nations matter, will be the lead in this issue, and that there will be a sharing of the language, public release of the language. And we'll keep you posted on when.

Anything else? Because I really came here to talk about Colombia.

Q Can I talk about Colombia, because --

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, that's why I came here.

Q Yes, and a bunch of us missed the top. So can we go back to -- the statute that was passed in Congress a couple weeks ago, months ago, said specific numbers in it, did it not? Do you have a number on what was -- I heard you talk about --

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, that came up earlier. I was asked about that.

Q Sorry to ask you to repeat yourself.

MR. FLEISCHER: The transcript will be available on all of this, but what I indicated was that any actions taken will, of course, be within congressional authorization. And anything specific on numbers would have to come from DOD.

Q How about not specific on numbers, but specific on action -- are there specific actions being taken by our government to deal with the situation down there?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, as soon as the plane went down, there was a massive search effort, led by Colombia. And we are there to help Colombia, as well as to help ourselves.

Q Are they asking for more of our help in dealing with this specific situation?

MR. FLEISCHER: We are working together well. And as I indicated earlier, we have every intention of helping Colombia and working closely with Colombia. What they face are terrorists. That's most often associated with drugs, but it's terrorism, nevertheless. There are -- FARC is an organization that has wreaked havoc on the Colombian economy and the Colombian people. And we have common cause, the people of Colombia and the people of the United States, in defeating FARC. And we will do that together.

Q And you said, Colombia is still taking the lead on that.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct.

Q Ari, what about Turkey? Is there a deal there yet, or not?

MR. FLEISCHER: Nothing to report. Continued good conversations with Turkey. And I anticipate they will continue for a little bit longer.

Q And sort of a broad agreement -- is that the United States view, too, that --

MR. FLEISCHER: Good conversations continue. And I think it's fair to say that nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to. Turkey remains an ally of the United States who has taken a very difficult issue seriously, and we compliment them for that.

Q Is \$15 billion a number we're comfortable with?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to get into a specific discussion of numbers.

Okay?

Q Thank you, Ari.

END 2:28 P.M. CST