



Remarks With Haitian Prime Minister Gerard Latortue

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Port-au-Prince, Haiti
September 27, 2005

PRIME MINISTER LATORTUE: (*Via interpreter*) Madame Secretary, ladies and gentlemen, in the name of the Haitian people and of the government of the Republic, I wish to express how happy we are to greet on the land of Haiti Dr. Condoleezza Rice, whom we admire and love. We are very happy that she is here in Port-au-Prince so that she can see directly the problems of the country.



Both the President of the Republic and I have had very direct and frank discussions with Dr. Rice on a number of specific questions, particularly elections, economic and social development, security as well as justice. These exchanges have been fruitful. We spoke honestly and frankly, and I hope that during this press conference the Secretary will make clear -- will express her positions and I will also answer questions if necessary.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much, Mr. Prime Minister. I did indeed have very productive talks with the Prime Minister, with the President and also with the members of the Provisional Electoral Council, who are the Haitian citizens who are arranging the elections here.

I am here because I want to express on behalf of the American people and on behalf of President Bush our backing and our support for the Haitian people at this very important time. I am very pleased to be accompanied on this trip by five members of the United States Congress: Senator DeWine, Congressman Watt and Congressman Meek, also Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen and Congressman Shadegg. Thank you very much for coming also to express the desire of the American people that this should be a positive experience for the people of Haiti.

The people of Haiti, of course, have a long road ahead of them to prosperity and democracy, but the elections that they are about to hold can be a very important, vital and crucial step along that road. In my conversations today, I noted that all Haitians must accelerate preparations for the elections. I underscored also that these elections must be open and inclusive and fair.

The international community is also supportive of the people of Haiti and I want to thank the members of the international community, in particular MINUSTAH of the UN under Brazilian leadership, which is here to try and provide security for Haiti and security as the elections are prepared and progress. And to the Prime Minister, to the Provisional Electoral Council, to the President and to all members of the Haitian Government, I want to say that we know this is a time when Haiti can have a new start and we look forward to working with you.

And Mr. Prime Minister, if I may, I would like to just say a word to the Haitian people. I know that many of you have registered to vote. I hope that when the day comes that you will exercise that vote. To those of you who have not registered, please go and register and reclaim your right to choose a democratic leader for Haiti.

Mr. Prime Minister, throughout history, people have fought for the right to vote. Some have indeed died for the right to vote. There is no more powerful weapon in the hands of a citizen than the vote. And so to the people of Haiti, I urge you to use that powerful weapon, the vote, in the days ahead.

Thank you.

MR. MCCORMACK: The Prime Minister and Secretary Rice will now take a few questions from the press.

QUESTION: I would like first of all to give my salutations to the Prime Minister and to Madame Secretary of State. Welcome to Haiti.

My question is I know that support has been expressed by the Bush Administration for the transitional government and for the elections, but I would like to know if there is a clear message sent by the Bush Administration to the Haitian Government in the electoral period?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, thank you. In fact, the message from the Bush Administration and also from the international community, with which we have been working very closely, is that this is a chance for a new day for the people of Haiti. These elections must be free and fair and inclusive. The international community stands ready to help in the preparation of the elections, the conduct of the elections, in trying to provide security along with the reformed national police of Haiti. But the real message is to the people of Haiti that this is an election that could be a turning point, and each and every citizen of Haiti should take it as his or her personal responsibility and personal obligation and personal honor to vote. And so that has been the message here to the government and, as I said, also to the Haitian people. This could be a very important turning point and could bring a different day here in Haiti.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you said Haitian authorities must accelerate preparations for the election. Could you be more specific? What must the authorities do?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I have gone over with the Provisional Electoral Council some of the concerns. I was in a meeting with what we call the Core Group for Haiti, that is, the international community members who are particularly involved here in Haiti: Brazil; France; Jordan, which has forces on the ground with MINUSTAH; the OAS; with the UN representative. And there is a concern that there are certain decisions that need to be made about where polling places will be, for instance, and the registration of those polling places, the registration of electoral workers so that they can be fully trained. The electoral calendar itself needs to be finalized so that there can be predictability about when these elections will take place.

Everybody with whom I spoke focused on the fact that there must be a transfer of power by the 7th of February and that everybody believes that that is necessary for stability here in Haiti. But in order to get there, you have to have elections and there are successive elections that have to take place. And so they are really in many ways, George, just technical matters that need to be dealt with, like the registration of polling places. And I said to the members of the Electoral Council, I said to the Prime Minister and to the President, there is a good deal of international help and support that is available through the UN, through MINUSTAH, through the OAS -- very experienced people in carrying out elections -- and that I hope that there will be full use of those. The Prime Minister also told me that he is working on a more supportive structure for the Council. And so this is on everybody's mind, but the decisions simply have to get made.

PRIME MINISTER LATORTUE: Just to point something out, these concerns that were expressed by the United States and by the international community are the same concerns of the Haitian Government. These technical problems need to be resolved. After the President returned from New York, the Council of Ministers met specially to create support committees for this CEP so that measures can be taken for the CEP to make these technical decisions so that elections take place in a timely manner and that power is transferred by -- on February 7th. So the concerns of the United States are the same concerns of the Haitian Government.

QUESTION: My question is I know that several close collaborators of former President Aristide have been incarcerated for questions of drug trafficking and I would like to know if the same is being done for Mr. Aristide. Is there any progress being made either to find out if he has been involved in drug trafficking or any other matters?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, in terms of the situation here, I have talked to the Prime Minister and to the President about the importance of the justice system accelerating the consideration of the cases of high-profile people like former Prime Minister Neptune and now Father Jean-Juste because, as I've said to the Prime Minister, justice has to come in a timely fashion and it should not be the case that anyone can interpret that there is some kind of political motive here. And so it is extremely important that these cases be dealt with in a timely and, indeed, quick fashion.

As to Mr. Aristide himself, I am certain if there are any issues there that the international community will be prepared to cooperate. But it seems to me that the Haitian people seem very focused right now on moving on to their future. I am led to understand that this is an election in which candidates are registering from a wide variety of political perspectives, including from Lavalas. That's important. And the key here now is that those who want to participate in this election should be allowed to participate.

QUESTION: This question is for both of you. Back on the issue of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, there were reports of protests here and many of the protestors, what we're hearing, are calling for Jean-Bertrand Aristide to return to Haiti. What safeguards or guarantees are there from the United States to keep Jean-Bertrand Aristide from returning to Haiti to commit some of the issues of foul play that he's done in the past, and also wreak havoc with the elections and things of that nature and incite violence here?

And also, why is there not parity for the Haitian refugees as well to pair them with the Cuban refugees? And I would like both of you comment on those questions, please.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, in fact, the international community is of one mind that it would not be a good thing for Mr. Aristide to return. I think that is very clear. The Haitian people are moving on. Mr. Aristide is being hosted by the South Africans, who are clear that they would not be supportive of any activities of his that would somehow interfere in the Haitian elections. And I think they are carrying out those responsibilities very well.

This is going to be an election in which there will be broad representation. And as I said, I think anyone who wants to run in these elections should be allowed to run in these elections because there is no reason to fear any candidacy in a free and open election. And the most important issue here is that the elections be free and open and inclusive.

As to U.S. policy on immigration, it has not changed. The United States has to be clear about its policies on refugees, both for the safety of refugees and for the integrity of our refugee policies. And that has not changed.

PRIME MINISTER LATORTUE: I am in total agreement with Madame Secretary of State on her response, but I would like to add two things. First of all concerning the deportation, I have raised the question several times with the embassy because we discovered that there is a link between deportations and security in Port-au-Prince. We saw that several cases of kidnappings and auto theft have been perpetrated by individuals who were deported. Sometimes they were people who didn't even know Haiti, who had been raised in the United States, committed crimes in the United States, and after having served their sentences there were sent back to Haiti. I asked for at least a moratorium for the electoral period and this would be the contribution of the United States to security in Haiti for this period. We talked about it. We were unable to agree on this point but we continue to talk about it.

My second point concerns the elections. All political parties are able to participate in the elections. Any exclusions are due to constitutional or legal reasons. Proof of that is that out of the 54 candidates who presented themselves, 32 have been accepted and perhaps there will be two or three more. There was one who was not accepted, for example, because he is no longer a Haitian citizen. We have proof that on the 12th of February 2005, he came with an American passport to Haiti, signed the sheet saying that he was a U.S. citizen. And anyone can understand that he's not allowed to take part in the elections. There were also legal objections that have to do with the fact that some candidates might have managed government funds, and in these cases you need to get special authorization after an audit of your administration proving that you did not steal government funds.

So I would like to reaffirm that this government has no concerns whatsoever as to who will be the next president. Whoever that is, we will greet that person with open arms and pass power on to him or her.

MR. MCCORMACK: Thank you.

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