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Secretary Rice Travels to Israel and the... | Daily Press Briefing | What's New

KEYWORD SEARCH

[Subject Index](#)

BOOKMARK

[Home](#)

[Issues & Press](#)

[Travel & Business](#)

[Countries](#)

[Youth & Education](#)

[Careers](#)

[About State](#)



You are in: [Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice](#) > [Former Secretaries of State](#) > [Former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell](#) > [Speeches and Remarks](#) > [2004](#) > [September](#)

Foreign Press Center Briefing on the U.S. and the UN General Assembly

Secretary Colin L. Powell

New York, New York

September 23, 2004

(12:52 P.M. EDT)



SECRETARY POWELL: Well, good afternoon or good morning, everyone. In the interest of time, I won't have an opening statement. You've been following the statements coming out of Washington from President Bush and Prime Minister Allawi, and I have to leave shortly for a UN event. So we'll go right to questions and I'd be delighted to turn it over to Richard to take a questioner.

QUESTION: Secretary Powell, Thomas Gorguissian of An Nahar, Lebanon. Yesterday my colleagues flooded you with questions about the Syrian talks with the U.S. From your point of view, what is next regarding two things: first the cooperation, military cooperation regarding the border with Iraq, and of course the withdrawal of the forces and U.N. Resolution 1559? What are the next steps? And do you think the Syrians are trying to gain time or playing with the time factor?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we are pleased to see that there is underway a withdrawal of forces from Lebanon and from some camps south of Beirut that we had not previously seen withdrawals from, so I think that's encouraging. I hope that the Syrians are taking the UN resolution very seriously, and certainly in my conversations yesterday with Foreign Minister Shara and when Assistant Secretary Burns went to Damascus a few weeks ago, two weeks ago, and spoke to President Assad, we got the impression that the Syrians are taking the resolution seriously and are trying to be helpful.

Conversations are taking place between the coalition and the Iraqi Interim Government and Syrian authorities with respect to the border and people going back and forth across the border.

The next steps, of course, are spelled out in the resolution. There will be a report coming from the Secretary General in

due course with respect to Syrian compliance with the resolution and we will measure it at that time.

And so let us give the Syrian Government time to reflect on the resolution, see what other actions they plan to take. I must say that I found my conversation with the Foreign Minister of Syria yesterday to be rather candid and ended on a positive note. We've seen some positive actions, but we're looking for full action and not just statements or claims to action. So we'll follow up.

QUESTION: I'm Kelly Ro from Phoenix Satellite Television, Hong Kong. My question is about the North Korea issue. Do you still see hope in the six-party talks?

SECRETARY POWELL: I think the six-party process is still very much alive and I think it was important to hear from President Putin yesterday that he encourages North Korea to participate in the process. North Korea is finding reasons to delay getting on with the next round of talks. You can speculate as well as I can the causes of that delay. Maybe they're waiting for the United States election to be over. Maybe they are reflecting on the information that's come out of South Korea with respect to some of South Korea's experimentation of a very benign nature over the last several years or in an earlier period of time.

But it's hard to predict what the North Koreans are waiting for. But what is absolutely clear, the six-party talks are the way forward. There is no other plan. There is no substitute for the six-party talks. And the six parties have previously, to include North Korea, indicated a desire for a denuclearized peninsula. That remains our goal and we hope that the North Koreans will realize that the sooner they return to the six-party format and begin discussions again at the fourth round of the six-party meeting, the sooner we will be able to help North Korea deal with its very serious economic problem.

QUESTION: Sir, the Quartet -- yes, my name is Talal Al-Haj with Al Arabiya TV, sir. The Quartet declaration that you are ready to engage with an accountable and reformed Palestinian Authority, it gives the impression, sir, to also the Middle East that the peace process and the roadmap is frozen until there is such a change in the Palestinian Authority. And the suffering is continuing, and absent such a requested change in authority or in power in the Prime Minister Abu Alaa, what are the Palestinians -- what light can they see at the end of the tunnel?

SECRETARY POWELL: We would like to see immediate progress, but as the United States has said for over two years now, since the President gave his speech in June of 2002, that we need an empowered prime minister. Chairman Arafat, we do not believe, was the individual who could serve as a responsible interlocutor.

The Palestinian people and the Palestinian legislator -- legislature responded by creating the position and empowering it, but Chairman Arafat will not yield power and authority to that Prime Minister.

So many opportunities lay before us if we could get that kind of empowered prime minister to work with Israel and to work with the international community. The President made it clear in his speech the other day that he is totally committed to his original vision of two states living side by side in peace and in security, the state of Israel and Palestine. And the roadmap is there; it is the only way forward. The Quartet will remain engaged with this, and we hope that circumstances in the near future will improve so that we can get going.

We are convinced that the proposal put forward by Prime Minister Sharon for withdrawal from Gaza settlements and

the beginning of withdrawal from West Bank settlements gives us an opportunity to move forward and into the roadmap, but it requires action on the part of the Palestinian Authority.

In our Quartet meetings yesterday, we discussed the assistance that the Palestinian people continue to need from the international community, but there is a weariness in the international community to continue providing the kind of assistance that the Palestinian people so desperately need unless we see some sort of political reform and determination on the part of the Palestinian Authority to improve itself, and improve itself in the form of having an empowered prime minister who has control over the security forces, can rationalize the security forces, and can put in place a government that is ready to take over political responsibility for Gaza, security responsibility for Gaza, and to engage with the Israelis.

QUESTION: The Palestinians (inaudible) --

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, you tell -- the question is not for me. The question is for the Palestinian people and for Chairman Arafat:

Mr. Chairman, how long can you wait? How long can stay in this position, where the Palestinian people are suffering, where it's difficult to go forward toward the objectives of the roadmap, where it's difficult to achieve what you say is your dream of a state for the Palestinian people? And the whole international community is waiting to engage with you.

And so it is a question, really, that should be put to Chairman Arafat.

QUESTION: Secretary Powell, Maya Mirchandani with New Delhi Television. President Bush met the leaders of both India and Pakistan when he was in New York earlier this week. Did the subject of the Indo-Pak dialogue process come up, specifically with reference to a possible solution along the line of control? And what was President Bush's response to this?

SECRETARY POWELL: It was a good discussion with both leaders, with Prime Minister Singh and with President Musharraf. And we expressed -- the President expressed his pleasure that a dialogue is now taking place. When you think of the challenge we faced two years ago when you had no dialogue and there was this serious threat of war, the world was concerned about a nuclear conflict, perhaps, in the subcontinent.

So we do now have a dialogue. The foreign ministers have met with each other and had a good discussion. We know that there are serious outstanding issues that have to be dealt with as part of this dialogue. Cross-border infiltration remains an issue of serious concern to the Indians, and the issue of Kashmir is on the table.

We did not get into the details, because it was not the appropriate place to do so, of how the problem ultimately will be resolved concerning Kashmir. But we encouraged both sides to continue to talk to one another and to carry this dialogue forward. We are very encouraged that we now have open, honest, candid discussions between the two sides on these very complex issues; and while waiting to resolve these most difficult of issues, a lot of other things are taking place with respect to transportation, links going back and forth, and an extensive series of discussions taking place at different levels between the two governments.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, Kahraman Haliscelik from Turkish Television. My first question is about Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens. If he was very dangerous for national security, why haven't you asked British authorities to take necessary actions? And also, do you know of how many people are on watch lists?

My second question is about Turkish-American relations after the Talafar conflict?

SECRETARY POWELL: We have quite a few people here, so I may have to truncate the answer. With respect to Cat Stevens, as he is very -- as he is very well known, our Homeland Security Department and intelligence agencies found some information concerning his activities that they felt, under our law, required him to be placed on a watch list and, therefore, deny him entry into the United States.

We have no charges against him. We have nothing that would be actionable, indeed, in our courts or in the courts of the United Kingdom, I'm sure. But it is a procedure that we have been using to know who is coming into our country, know their backgrounds and interests, and see whether we believe it is appropriate for them to come in. And in this instance, information was obtained that suggested that he should be put on a watch list, and that's why he was denied entry into the country.

With respect to -- I'm sorry I didn't get the second part, but let me go on to someone else because I do --

QUESTION: Turkish-American relations --

SECRETARY POWELL: Turkish-American relations are in, I think, excellent condition, and that's a good, short, direct, fully honest answer. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Hi, Simona Burattini for Italian Television RAI. We have a big concern in Italy regarding our two hostages in Iraq. Do you have any news, good news, for us?

SECRETARY POWELL: I wish I did. I don't have any news. We fully share the concern of the Italian people. Your Foreign Minister and I have discussed the matter twice yesterday -- Franco Frattini -- and we're doing everything we can to see if these two women can be located and returned safely to their families and to Italy, but I don't have any current information.

QUESTION: Ai Awaji from Japanese newswire, Jiji Press. Mr. Secretary, how much are you concerned about the intelligence indicating that North Korea may be preparing missile launch?

SECRETARY POWELL: I don't know if they are or are not doing that. I have seen the intelligence. I have seen some indications of activity. But I can't be sure what it means.

I think it would be very unfortunate if the North Koreans were to do something like this and break out of the moratorium that they have been following for a number of years. It does not change our policy. It would not change our approach to dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem. We would stay very firmly embedded in the six-party framework and we would not be intimidated with respect to our policy.

I think it would be a very troubling matter, though, for China and Russia and Japan and South Korea, who are within range of such missiles, and I think that the neighbors of North Korea would register strong concern to North Korea over such an action.

QUESTION: Russian Television, Vladimir Lenskiy. Will the United States oppose if Russia would try to insist on adding Germany and Japan to the Security Council?

SECRETARY POWELL: We have indicated support previously for Japan's admission to the Security Council, but we think the best thing to do now is wait until the Group of Eminent Persons who are studying this issue provide their report to Secretary General Annan, he has a chance to study it, and then it comes before the members of the United Nations.

We think clearly that it's time to take a look at the structure and functioning of the United Nations and its different bodies, especially the Security Council after this half a century of experience. And the world has changed so much from the 51 nations it might have been in the late '40s to 191 now.

And so we will be studying the Eminent Group's report very, very carefully to see how best to restructure the Security Council and the other institutions of the United Nations, but we're not prepared to make any further judgments now as to who should or should not be added to the Security Council, besides -- beyond those we've already made.

Thank you. I really apologize this has been truncated, so I've got to come back again soon.

QUESTION: Wajd Waqfi from Al Jazeera TV. On Iran, (inaudible) regarding Iran's nuclear program (inaudible) the Security Council?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we, the United States, would have done it previously, but that's not the way it works at the IAEA. And so we work with our colleagues in the IAEA to achieve consensus, and the consensus achieved last week was that we have concerns about their programs, don't believe they're consistent with the obligations that Iran has or the commitments that Iran made to the European Union foreign ministers.

And so when the board, IAEA Board of Governors, meets again in November, if those concerns have not been dealt with and satisfied, then I think it is time for the matter to be referred to the Security Council. That's our position. We'll have to see what the other members think.

But I think, based on the strong statements that came out last week of the IAEA, it would be wise now for Iran to get with the IAEA, to get with the European foreign ministers again and try to clear up these issues. We're not looking for a way to take it to the Security Council. We're looking for a way to make sure that Iran is not developing a nuclear weapons program. That's in the interest of the region and the interest of the world for us to do that, and we will continue to pursue that approach.

Thank you all. I'm sorry it was truncated. I'll be back.

MS. NISBET: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

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 [BACK TO TOP](#)



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