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Interview With Margaret Warner of the NewsHour With Jim Lehrer

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Washington, DC

May 31, 2006

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, welcome.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

QUESTION: Thanks for being with us. This is a major turnaround for the United States. Why is the Administration doing this?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the United States has been very clear that it wanted to support these negotiations for more than a year, and in fact we made some moves several months ago to say that we would allow the Iranians to apply for WTO membership, that we would be prepared to give some spare aircraft parts because we wanted to support the negotiations. So the President has wanted to do that. This is simply another way, a more effective way, we believe now, of supporting the negotiations at a different phase, a time when Iran has been moving steadily along with its nuclear program, when by the end of the year the Iranians talk about being at industrial-scale production of centrifuges. And I think it's important that we know whether or not there is truly a negotiating option or not. It's time to give the Iranians a clear choice. If they're prepared to negotiate, then the world should be prepared to negotiate, we should be prepared to negotiate. But if they're not, then we need to get on with the kinds of penalties that can be brought through the Security Council so that we can bring enough pressure on the Iranian regime to make -- can make a different choice.

QUESTION: How persuasive were America's allies, Kofi Annan, all of whom had been urging you all both privately and increasingly publicly to get involved in these talks?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've been thinking for some time the President and I have been talking about what we could do to get the negotiations moving forward if, in fact, negotiations are going to move forward and this was a logical next step. We have been as supportive of these negotiations as we could without being at the table. We've been in the very closest coordination and contact with our allies. Not much has gone on in these negotiations that we didn't know about and weren't involved with. But it seemed like the logical next step. And what we did not want to do is to break

apart which has been a very careful effort to make this a multilateral approach with bilateral talks with the Iranians or in so-called direct talks. We believe that joining the multilateral forum makes a good deal of sense. But we don't want Iran to make this an issue between the United States and Iran. This is an issue between Iran and the international community.

QUESTION: So explain very briefly how this would work. The very first step really has to be Iran. Is that right?

SECRETARY RICE: That's right. The Iranians now have a choice. They can say that, yes, they're prepared to suspend and thereby get into negotiations or they can say that they're not prepared to suspend. And the suspension requirement is not an American requirement. That was a requirement by the Europeans, it's a requirement in the Board of Governors resolution, it was a requirement in the UN Security Council presidential statement.

QUESTION: And this will suspend, what, all enrichment and reprocessing?

SECRETARY RICE: It's enrichment and related activities. We all know what we're talking about because the Iranians -- this is in the Board of Governors resolution. It was also derived from the Paris agreement. They need to stop all of their enrichment and reprocessing activities and then go back to the table.

QUESTION: So if they said, yes, if they did suspend did agree to inspections, then the United States would join these talks?

SECRETARY RICE: The United States is prepared to become a party to the talks with the Europeans, yes.

QUESTION: And how active do you envision the United States would be? Would you be -- would the U.S. be at the table directly talking with the Iranians, which the U.S. hasn't done since before 1979?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've said that we would be prepared with our European partners to meet the Iranian Representative because we are prepared to give these negotiations as much energy and as much push as possible. We need to know if this is a real track or not.

QUESTION: Now if the Iranians say no, then what?

SECRETARY RICE: If the Iranians say no, then we're going to know that they're not serious about negotiation. We're going to know then that the option before the international community is to go to the -- go back to the Security Council where we've been working and we'll continue to work for a resolution and to begin to impose costs on Iran for its bad choice. And hopefully, Iran then facing that kind of isolation will still make a different choice.

But the key here is that the international community is united in its view that Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon; that it has a right to a civil nuclear program but that that civil nuclear program cannot be one that is hiding nuclear weapons development activity. And so we have a consensus about that. What we hope this move will do is to accelerate the moment at which Iran's choice is clear to everyone because we can't let this continue to drag out with the Iranians saying one day, oh, yes, we're interested in the Russian proposal or yes, maybe we're interested in going back to talks with the EU. We need to know and we need to know now.

QUESTION: Now you are leaving for Vienna later tonight.

SECRETARY RICE: Yes.

QUESTION: And that is for talks with all the Security Council Permanent 5 on Iran.

SECRETARY RICE: Yes.

QUESTION: How does that relate to this offer you all are making today?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the package that we are working on and will hopefully finalize when we're in Vienna is a very clear set of incentives that Iran could have, if it's prepared to negotiate and have a civil nuclear program that was acceptable to the international community but also a very clear set of penalties if Iran is not willing to negotiate. And so that has been on a track of development since we had the meetings in New York a few weeks ago. We've made good progress, substantial progress on that package. And once that package is ready, then it can be there for the Iranians to consider. But it is on the basis of that package, of course, that negotiations would have to take place. And so they are related, but we've been developing that package for some time now.

QUESTION: This idea of a package of carrots and sticks in the shorthand everyone uses, the Russians and Chinese at the Security Council have just resisted any kind of resolution that would serve as a pretext for either sanctions or military action. Now when President Bush talked to President Putin yesterday, did he get an indication from President Putin that, in fact, in return for what the United States is offering now that the Russians are prepared to go along with sanctions?

SECRETARY RICE: I think the Russians understand fully and we understand together that the Iranians now have a new opportunity to demonstrate that they're seriously ready to negotiate and if they don't then it is incumbent on the international community to go to the Security Council to get a resolution and to begin to look at what actions we can take that might make the Iranians make a different choice. And that's understood with our European partners and --

QUESTION: But is it agreed? It is agreed by the Russians?

SECRETARY RICE: The Russians are a part of developing this package that has both carrots and sticks in it. That is also going to be a Russian proposal, not just a European proposal.

QUESTION: There are some reports unconfirmed that the U.S. is ready to modify the language of a Security Council resolution in a way that would-- without getting into all the technicalities -- that would make it clear that military action is not an immediate potential consequence, that it would be under a certain part of the UN charter, which would make that clear. Is that true?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're having negotiations in New York and I don't want to talk about negotiations that are going on. I think we'll leave that to the negotiations. But we've been very clear that the President reserves his option for military force, but that we believe that diplomacy has a long way to go still. People have said to me, "Well, is the diplomacy at an end?" Well, today we demonstrated that there was indeed another arrow in the quiver that could be

put into play. And we believe that the diplomatic track has a lot of life left in it and that we're going to pursue that and pursue it aggressively. But nothing suggests that the President takes military force off the table. A resolution in the Security Council at this point is really not a resolution about the use of force. It's a resolution about how to get the Iranians to change their behavior probably through sanctions or other means.

QUESTION: Will the Russians be invited to join these new expanded talks which we always call the EU-3 talks because it was just the Europeans?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes. Well, there has been some discussion of potentially P-5+1 is a possible --

QUESTION: Permanent 5.

SECRETARY RICE: Permanent 5+1, which Russia, of course, is a member of the Permanent 5.

QUESTION: So China also?

SECRETARY RICE: Possibly. I think those countries will have to make their decision about how they will support the negotiations. Let me just say that they are both supportive of the negotiations and have worked in concert with us in supporting the European negotiations, but it'll have to be up to them how they -- if they intend to join or not.

QUESTION: In the past, members of this Administration said one reason you didn't want to start talking to this government in Iran was that it would legitimize this regime. Do you think this does, this offer -- and if you sit down and have talks with them -- does add legitimacy to this regime?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think a couple points, Margaret. First is the legitimacy here is to the process of negotiation. The United States is supporting this process and we are determined to try to make it work. Secondly, we have no illusions about the nature of this Iranian regime. This is a state sponsor of terror, this is a state who's President speaks about Israel in the most awful ways. This is a country that is causing difficulty in Iraq for the Iraqi people and for our forces. And it's a country that denies basic rights to its own people. So we're not -- we have no illusions about that. That's why we are talking not about a grand bargain here, not about the normalization of relations, not about something that somehow legitimizes activities of the Iranian regime that we find abhorrent and dangerous, but rather, talks that are aimed at stopping a nuclear weapons program for a regime that is dangerous. In fact, I would say that it is the nature of this regime that makes it even more important that we prevent the acquisition of an Iranian nuclear weapon.

QUESTION: Many observers of Iran on why they're pursuing nuclear weapons if, in fact, they are, opined that one reason they are is that Iran feels at threat that the U.S. is encircling them in all kinds of ways and that it feels it needs nuclear weapons to protect itself. And I know your point has been Iran can't protect itself with nuclear weapons. But is the U.S. ready to give as part of this whatever negotiation is held, any security guarantees to Iran that it would not attack Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, I sometimes find it little odd, the Iranians say they want a civil nuclear program and then people talk about security guarantees. Those two don't add up. If they want a civil nuclear program, that they can have. In terms of security, the problems of security in the region are, first and foremost, caused by Iranian behavior. They're caused by an Iranian regime that cannot recognize the right of Israel to exist, they're caused by an Iranian

regime that engages in terrorism, by an Iranian regime that is not transparent in its behavior in Iraq. That's the problem with security, not American threats on (inaudible) Iran.

QUESTION: But if the Iranians say they want security guarantees?

SECRETARY RICE: The Iranians -- we and the Iranians are not in a position to even talk about security guarantees because the Iranian behavior is what is causing the security problem. If Iran would stop its behaviors in the region, then the entire region would be more secure and safer.

QUESTION: Does this Administration want to see regime change in Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: The President has spoken clearly that people all over the world, no matter who they are in what corner, deserve basic freedoms that he calls non-negotiable demands of human dignity. The Iranian people are no different and they are a great people and they deserve that. We are working now to change the behavior of a regime that is seeking, has nuclear ambitions that the world finds dangerous and disconcerting. And we hope over time to change also Iranian behavior on terrorism and towards its own people.

QUESTION: Would you say -- is it fair to say that this offer you're making is Iran's last chance?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I do think it's the chance that we have to find out whether Iran really intends to negotiate. We can't let it go on. If Iran intends to negotiate, it's time for them to suspend and come back and negotiate. If they don't intend to negotiate, then we need to move on. And we need to move on to -- and generate greater pressure on Iran, so that it will change its mind.

QUESTION: One final question. Coming off the intelligence failures in Iraq, how certain are you that, in fact, Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons?

SECRETARY RICE: It's not only the United States that is very concerned about the hidden activities that Iran has engaged in for 18 years hiding their enrichment activities, unwilling to allow the inspectors full access to their program and to their facilities. I would note that whenever the Iranians have been offered a civil nuclear option, it has been whether it was the option Russia offered or the option that the Europeans offered. It was one that did not anticipate the fuel cycle on Iranian soil. That says that it is not just the United States that is concerned about Iranian intentions. And so Iran has a chance to demonstrate that it is not seeking a nuclear weapon. The way to do that is to suspend its current activities, come back to negotiations and to build a civil nuclear program that does not have proliferation risks.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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