

Interview With Anne Gearan of Associated Press

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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QUESTION: I guess we'll start with the Iraq elections. In the run-up to the elections, there were a lot of Sunni voices, some thoughtful ones, saying that while they didn't support violence, they also didn't support continued U.S. troop presence; and others saying that even if though they understood the necessity of troop presence for now, they wanted a pretty clear timeline for when they should leave. Does a successful election hasten the day that U.S. forces will come home?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, certainly, the Iraqis taking political responsibility and beginning to build their own country and their own democracy and the way that their security forces are coming along will certainly make it possible for American and coalition forces to step down and have them step up, as the President said. I don't think that it makes sense to have any timeline. I think it's better to have a results-based approach to this, and we're seeing that the political process is moving along, and moving along with a speed and maturity that I believe would have really been unthinkable just maybe a couple of years ago. When you look at the Sunni participation this time, a Sunni community that boycotted the elections in January, this is a sign of a maturing political process. And if you looked around and saw some of the pictures, you saw Iraqi security forces securing their own elections in ways that they were just not capable of doing a few months ago.

So yes, the time is coming; but I think everybody understands that no one wants coalition forces to leave before the job is done so that the terrorists or those who would like to go back to the bad old days win the day.

QUESTION: When you say this process seems to be maturing faster than it would have seemed possible a couple years ago, are you revising your own estimates of when it might be possible to leave?

SECRETARY RICE: I just think that, you know, there's always uncertainty when something this big takes place, historically big. Iraq is a complicated place, and they started on a path toward the election of a permanent representative parliament back at the time of the creation of the Transitional Administrative Law. And I think their ability to meet every deadline, to get more and more people into the process with each phase of this, is really quite remarkable.

QUESTION: You sometimes say that U.S. democracy was born of impatient patriots, I

think is your phrase. Do you see any similarities there? Can you put yourself in the position of an Iraqi who would say, thanks but we want to do it ourselves?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, I think there is no doubt that for a proud people like the Iraqis, nobody wants to have foreign forces on your soil, and they want to take responsibility for their own future. I think that's a healthy thing that they want to take responsibility for their own future.

But I also hear the Iraqis saying and the Iraqi Government saying that they know that they need the presence of coalition forces. They're the ones that requested the UN to give coalition forces a mandate and rolled over that mandate, as a matter of fact, renewed that mandate just a little bit ago. So there's a certain reality to the situation on the ground in Iraq that I think everybody is aware of.

But it will be a great day for Iraqis as well as for coalition forces when they're capable of doing this job themselves. It's something everybody looks forward to.

QUESTION: There's a good bit of hard stuff to get through before then.

SECRETARY RICE: Yes.

QUESTION: And you've said many times that many of the hardest decisions were purposely left for this government to decide; and now there's a possibility that they may have to form a coalition government and the likelihood of some wrangling there. How does Iraq avoid bogging down at this point into either sectarian politics or inertia, and what will the U.S. do to try to keep things moving?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we and a lot of other members of the international community, as well as members of their neighborhood, are encouraging them not to lose momentum, to take the great day that was yesterday and try to push forward and through to formation of a government. Of course, the election isn't going to even be certified for probably a couple of weeks here, so there's a lot of work to do there.

But I sense that the Iraqis know that the Iraqi people want them to get on now with the business of governing. And just because it may be a coalition, that's not necessarily a bad thing. That could be a very good thing because what they're trying to do is to bridge decades, even centuries, of resolving conflicts and political differences by violence or by repression, and they're trying to now do that through politics.

And they're going to have to work together to come to get a representative government, a government that really is broadly based. And I think that government would then have the legitimacy to do some things that perhaps interim governments couldn't do. There's a kind of sense, a sense that for a government that's going to have a period of time now -- four years -- that the stakes are, of course, quite high; but the levers and the influence to do the difficult work will be there.

I think we have to admit that the former government has done a lot of difficult things. They've done some work on removing subsidies or in lowering subsidies on gasoline prices, for instance – not easy to do. They have convinced international financial institutions that they have an economic plan that is worth supporting or they wouldn't have gotten money from the World Bank and from the IMF. So they've done some very good things. But there are limitations to what a government that is clearly an interim government, which is really supposed to be preparing the way for a permanent government, can do. And this government, because the Sunnis voted in the numbers that they did, should also have greater breadth of legitimacy than the former government has had.

QUESTION: Do you wish that we'd gotten to this point sooner, had a permanent government six months ago?

SECRETARY RICE: I just don't think it was possible. Of course it would have been great to have everything accelerated. But the stages that were set out in the Transitional Administrative Law I think have proven to be pretty wise because at each stage you have had the development of new institutions. I think you're beginning to see that over time the process itself, or the path that they were on itself, gained a kind of legitimacy with the people so that they were looking forward then to the referendum on the constitution, followed by elections, followed by government formation. It lent a kind of predictability to the political process that gave them something of a roadmap to follow against very -- at a time when there were a lot of very difficult circumstances and the violence and the insurgencies and so forth -- the one thing they've really had going for them is this political roadmap. And it's been quite remarkable how well they've done in following it, and at each stage the process I think has become broader, more representative and ultimately stronger.

QUESTION: On these reports today that President Bush authorized the NSA to spy on people inside the United States without going through the FISA court. Can you confirm that that happened and, if so, does it undermine your argument at all that the United States is a country of laws and that the President wouldn't ask his people to violate the law?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I am not going to comment on a newspaper report on supposed intelligence activities. But I can tell you this: the President of the United States took an oath to protect and defend the Constitution, and he has been doing precisely that. And that means both protecting America from another attack of the kind that we experienced on September 11 and doing everything within the law to do that, and to protect civil liberties and to have due regard for the importance of civil liberties as a part of who we are and what Americans are guaranteed by the Constitution. And so this President has operated within the law, within his constitutional authorities, within his responsibilities. And that's an assurance that I think will stand the test of time.

QUESTION: Then I guess I can probably guess how you'll answer the next question, but a couple of things on the detainee torture front. Last week you said over and over that it is not U.S. policy to torture or abuse people in custody; but I didn't hear you or the President sort of take that backward and categorically deny that everything that had happened up to this point would be legal under that policy. Can you offer that assurance?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the President made clear from the very beginning that Americans were not to engage in torture, condone torture; that Americans were to live up to our international obligations and to American law. He made that clear from the very beginning.

I think that what has happened this week with the passage of the McCain legislation is another step in the United States coming to terms with what the demands of the war on terrorism would have us do. It is a good thing from our point of view that the legislature and the executive have engaged in this. And I think we've had a very sober and reasonable discussion of what should be done. But the President wanted to make certain that he could defend the American people within the laws and within our international obligations; and I think that this McCain legislation has taken us another step forward along that line.

QUESTION: Would it have made your life a lot easier if it had been -- had happened a couple of weeks ago?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's not anybody's responsibility to make my life easier. This had to work out. It's a serious issue, and it's a difficult issue. And --

QUESTION: Would your argument would have been stronger in Europe if you'd had --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think that people knew that we were having this debate back at home. People knew that the Administration was working with Senator McCain. People knew that we needed to get it right, that this isn't the sort of thing that you just -- that just happens. It needed to -- we needed to get it right.

I found in Europe that our friends and allies were more than willing to listen to what I had to say to them. I think we had not, frankly, talked very much and that the fact that we were able to go to Europe, I was able to go to Europe and talk about what it was, the dilemmas that we faced, talk about how we were trying to address those dilemmas, give some assurances about American respect for the rule of law, and say to people that, you know, the United States is absolutely going to uphold its laws and its international commitments. I thought that by the end of the trip people were -- understood what we had been through, what they were going through, and were more than prepared to accept those assurances.

QUESTION: Is it incumbent now then on those Europeans governments to go and

convince their own people?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I found European leaders who were prepared to do exactly that. We had a really good discussion of the need to have an open discussion with publics about the fact that you cannot stop an attack without intelligence. I know that in some parts of the world intelligence is viewed differently than it's viewed here in the United States; and yet, given the nature of terrorism, if you allow the crime to be committed, then hundreds or thousands of innocents are going to die. There is just no way to get around that.

And so the question is: how do you prevent these people from committing the act? And the only way that you do that is to get to them before they do. And the only way that you get to them before they do is through good intelligence. Now, you can't depend on luck of just stumbling across a terrorist plot. You really have to have good intelligence in order to make this work. And I thought we had a very good and open discussion of the need to make certain that publics understand that.

QUESTION: Moving to Iran, given the rhetoric coming from Iran's President and the resumption of some nuclear activities, do you think there's any life left in the EU-3 negotiations, any hope for a negotiated deal?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, everybody continues to hope so; but I haven't seen any evidence that the Iranians are interested in a deal that is going to be acceptable to an international community that is extremely skeptical of what the Iranians are up to. The Iranians -- we forget that one way that we got here was that the Iranians cheated on their obligations to report what they were doing, that this is a country that has had dealings with A.Q. Khan. And A.Q. Khan was not, by the way, in the business of civilian nuclear power.

So I think there are good reasons that people are suspicious of Iranian activities and I think that suspicion is demonstrated in the way that the IAEA reports on Iranian compliance and Iranian cooperation. I think it's evident in the way the Russians have structured their Bushehr nuclear deal with the fuel take-back provision, which would not allow the Iranians to have enrichment and reprocessing capability on their soil.

The Iranians have shown no recognition that they have to deal with those suspicions; and until they do, you're not going to get a deal. And so I'm hopeful that perhaps this will come -- I would hope that it's going to come out. I haven't seen any evidence so far.

QUESTION: But if you're at that point, why not push the Security Council option harder?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we believe that the Security Council option is there and that, in fact, we have the votes. We also recognize that it is important for others to also come to the conclusion that we've exhausted the diplomatic possibilities. But I think it was Mohamed ElBaradei who said that, you know, there isn't going to be -- I don't want to

paraphrase him -- but "endless patience" is something along the lines. And so I think the day is coming when people are going to take a hard look at this and say, "Is there any life left in the negotiating tack?"

QUESTION: If diplomacy fails, is it reasonable to think that economic sanctions could deter Iran from developing nuclear weapons or, I mean, if Iran stays on its present course?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think the question is: does Iran want to find itself in a position of international isolation? Countries get isolated for all kinds of reasons. Syria is really isolated internationally now. And Iran has, because it's a great culture, it's a great people, has tended not to want to be isolated. There's a reason they're working so hard not to go to the Security Council, because they don't want to be isolated.

The nature of that isolation, what tools could be used to impress upon the Iranians that they cannot simultaneously pursue technologies that would lead to a nuclear weapon and play an integrated role in the international system -- what tools you'd use to impress it upon them, I think we'll have to see. But I'm quite confident that Iran will have to take a hard look when it sees how isolated it really could become.

QUESTION: Is the Iranian nuclear program more dangerous, in your view, than North Korea's?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I don't think we have to choose between the two here. They're both problems. The North Koreans have been pursuing this for a really long time, since probably the late 1960s most people believe. And the North Koreans do live in a different neighborhood in that you have a significant deterrent on the North Korean Peninsula -- on the Korean Peninsula. And -- but we are not taking it, by any means, lightly. That's why it's important to have the six-party talks. But an Iranian nuclear program in the midst of the Middle East and all of the volatility that is there, I think has particularly dangerous characteristics.

QUESTION: You saw, I'm sure, what an Israeli Government spokesman said the other day about Israel having the means to bring about an end to the Iranian nuclear experiment. Would you counsel Israel one way or another about launching an airstrike, and under what circumstances might the U.S. do it themselves?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think the speculation is not really very helpful. But obviously, what this points out is that Iran and a nuclear weapon, even the ability to have a nuclear weapon, is simply too destabilizing to the international system in the midst of what is probably the world's most volatile region. It's simply not acceptable, and it was never acceptable. But when you look at the behavior and the rhetoric of the current Iranian President, he has certainly given people many more reasons to worry about Iranian intentions and the Iranian acquisition of nuclear technology. He's certainly sharpened that picture.

QUESTION: Would you expect the Israelis to tell you or ask you before they launched an airstrike?

SECRETARY RICE: Israel is, of course, a sovereign state and we're not in the habit of telling the Israelis how to defend themselves. However, we've said to everybody that this region is very volatile and it's best -- and I think the Israelis have said this, too; Prime Minister Sharon has said this -- it is best to resolve this issue through diplomatic means, and that's where we're all focused.

Diplomacy doesn't just mean negotiation. That's part of diplomacy. But diplomacy also means an international effort, a multilateral effort to impress upon the Iranians the cost of pursuing this course. And so we have a ways yet to go with the diplomacy.

QUESTION: Two more. You stuck your neck out a little bit on the Israeli-Palestinian Rafah deal last month. Are you at all irritated or disappointed there hasn't been more progress since then?

SECRETARY RICE: I said at the time that this was not going to be an easy agreement to implement. I think -- they have opened Rafah. By all reports, the agricultural product is moving, which is extremely important. They're working on the bus convoy issue and I -- and we're working with them and we think it'll get resolved. But they now have a framework in which to provide better freedom of movement for the Palestinians.

I have said to the Palestinian leadership that they do need to work harder on some of the security issues. The security issues in Gaza are quite serious. And the continued firing of Qassam rockets, the kind of lawlessness that is there, where Palestinian citizens are concerned, this is something the Palestinian Authority has got to get a handle on.

But I think the agreement will stand the test of time. They've just got to work through some difficult issues, and we're going to be there to try and help them work through them.

QUESTION: You probably knew this was coming. Whenever you're asked about running for President, you always say you've never wanted to run for anything. That leaves the door open a little and I wonder why. Why don't you just say now, for once and for all, "I will not be a candidate for President in 2008"?

SECRETARY RICE: I think I've said that I -- (laughter) -- I don't want to be President and that ought to say it. And I'm flattered that people say these things, and I'm honored that people are thinking of it. But I've got my hands full and I know what my skills, I think, are. And I think my skills, to the degree that I can mobilize them along with others in this Administration, is to try to deliver and to try to build on this extraordinarily new -- the extraordinary new foundation that is emerging in the international system.

There is no doubt that there are huge changes going on. And we sit here and we talk almost casually but with a sense of, well, that's happened, the Iraqi elections yesterday. Just think about whether three or four years ago anybody would have uttered the words "Iraqi elections." Or we talk about the Lebanese and their struggles with Syria. But would we, a year and a half ago, have been -- thought we would have been talking about a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon?

We talk about the Palestinians and the Israelis and the complications of Rafah, or they're going to have elections in the Palestinian territories and the Israelis -- but would anybody have thought that we would be talking about a situation in which the partners for peace are turning out to be the ones that they are?

So this is the time of enormous change, and I am going to stay focused on trying to make certain that that change moves in the right direction.

QUESTION: Can you point to a specific foreign policy accomplishment this year that you're particularly proud of?

SECRETARY RICE: Well --

QUESTION: That you can say was attributable to something that you did.

SECRETARY RICE: I try not to think in those terms, you know. I'm a historian, you know, a political scientist/historian, and I tend to see things in the big sweep of history and hope that at some point somebody is going to look back and say, oh, something that she did then mattered.

In the short term, I'm very pleased that we have been able, I think, on the -- with our European allies to stop focusing so much on whether the transatlantic alliance is well and more on how we are going to mobilize the transatlantic alliance's great union of democracies to further strategic goals at this extraordinary time. And I think we are doing that with our European allies in a way that we were not a brief period of time ago.

I think -- you know, I am pleased about the Rafah agreement, not so much that my personal role in it but that I think, you know, we were able to intervene at a time when -- Jim Wolfensohn had really done a terrific job of crafting an agreement, and what really needed to be done was that they had to have a psychological breakthrough about what really the withdrawal from Gaza meant. And so we were able to add -- to help that.

I think we have created a framework in the six-party talks. The Statement of Principles creates a framework on which we could now move forward to negotiate, hopefully, a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula, a disarmed Korean Peninsula.

So those are some of the things that I think we worked very hard on this year. But the

real accomplishments are going to be these great historic changes. And I think they're more attributable really to the United States, and really the President, having staked its place at -- put a flag at a place that says that tyranny is really not acceptable, is not the natural course for any people, anywhere in the world; that we believe in democratic principles; that yes, it's hard but we've been through many times in our history when what seemed impossible, looking back on it, it seemed inevitable.

And in the President's Second Inaugural, I think what he did was to create a space in which people began to operate in a different way. The conversation is fundamentally different in the Middle East today than it was two years ago or three years ago. It is unrecognizable from where it was five years ago. And the emergence of Iraq and free elections and Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Palestinians and on and on and on, of the Libyan decision to change course -- these are big breakthroughs, and I don't think you can judge any of them in ten-month increments.

QUESTION: Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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