

Briefing En Route Baghdad, Iraq

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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SECRETARY RICE: We're on our way to Baghdad and I will obviously link up there with Secretary Rumsfeld. And the purpose of this trip is really twofold: first to talk with those who are about to become the Government of Iraq about their views on what needs to be done to support their government in these initial stages; but also I plan to spend a good deal of time looking at our own operations in the Embassy to make certain that we are fully ready to support the efforts for ministries, for help for the ministries and for the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that we are beginning. And so I'll spend a good deal of time talking about our own operations, our own staffing and what we can do to support because we really want to be ready to hit the ground running with this new government when it's ready to go. So that's the purpose of the trip and I'm happy to take a couple questions.



QUESTION: How much do you view this as a major turning point in terms of trying to get the American people reengaged in the war and back in terms of seeing that they're -- but you know -- (laughter).

SECRETARY RICE: I get the question. Yes, right, exactly. Glenn, you're too young to have those moments.

The turning point here is that Iraq now has its first permanent government and that it is a government of national unity and that it gives Iraq now a real chance to deal with the obviously very vexing problems that it has faced. I do hope that that is recognized by the American people, that this long transition from the Coalition Provisional Authority to an interim government to the writing of a constitution to another interim government and now to a permanent government does mark important progress in the effort in Iraq since the liberation from Saddam Hussein. So in that sense, yes, I think it's an important message to the American people. But the really important point here is that it's the Iraqis who are now in a position to deal with their problems in ways that I think they've not been in the past.

QUESTION: This new video from Zarqawi seems to stick a finger in the eye of the Americans and say this new government is an American stooge. Do you risk sort of furthering that or feeding that in the Islamic world by showing up now?

SECRETARY RICE: I think Zarqawi knows very well that 11 million people in Iraq went out and voted for this government and that what this government is is representative of the broad Iraqi populace. It is a government of national unity and it is in that way the greatest threat to his efforts to separate the Iraqis and to turn them against one another. In fact, the answer to the Zarqawi video is not anything that the United States can say; it's what the Iraqis are saying in having formed this government of national unity despite all the threats and all of the violence that he and those who wish not to have a stable and democratic Iraq, and try to (inaudible). And you know, we're going to go and do the work that we need to do. Secretary Rumsfeld and I are going to be there together because a lot of this is the work that has to be done is at that juncture between political and military. Whether it's the work that we need to do with the Ministry of Interior or the work that needs to be done with the PRTs, it's at that juncture between political and military. But this is the Iraqis' time. This is a time to support an Iraqi government of national unity. It will be up to Iraqis to determine how this moves forward and we're going to be there very much in support of them.



QUESTION: Just on the PRTs, since the announcement last year, they've had trouble getting off the ground. The results, some people say, have been disappointing. They haven't gotten started in most of the provinces, I think. What can you do to get that back on track?

SECRETARY RICE: Steve, I think it is on track. There are PRTs -- now there'll be the fifth one in Baghdad. And it was never envisioned that they were all going to roll out at once. In fact, we are discussing with coalition partners which ones they may wish to do and the process has been that we've stood up three right at the beginning, then a fourth, then Baghdad, and now we're in the process of standing up a series of other ones. So they're rolling out. We have indeed had to work very hard to find the proper staffing for them because this a new kind of arrangement. We had to work through some important details of how security would be provided by the military. I think we've worked through those details. But these are not easy to stand up and we have to have the proper planning for them so that we're certain that we've got the right staffing, so that we're certain that we've got the right protections for them and so that they integrate well with the efforts of the military. And so I'm actually pleased with the progress that we've made, but I'd be the first to say this is a new concept; it's something that takes a lot of work and a lot of planning.

And I don't want the word PRT to be misleading. These are different in many ways than what we were doing in Afghanistan. And so while we were able to use some of the concepts, I think the planning for these has had to be really anew.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, why did you feel necessary to go together with Secretary Rumsfeld today in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, what we're doing now really is at that juncture between political and military. There's been very close coordination and cooperation between Ambassador Khalilzad and General Casey and their staffs throughout this period, but as we move to this new period we really are looking, as we look more at the transfer of responsibilities and authorities to -- or responsibilities to the Iraqis, we just want to make sure that there are no seams between what

we're doing politically and what we're doing militarily. And so this is a good time for us to go out and have joint efforts, joint briefings, joint discussions with our people, so that we can make certain that those political-military links are very strong.

QUESTION: Thank you. Madame Secretary, you've spoken a lot about the need to ensure that the Ministries of Defense and Interior are nonsectarian and that they represent a unified Iraq and so forth. How, as a practical matter, is that accomplished? What do you tell them? Is it a matter of inculcation or reorientation or how is that accomplished?

SECRETARY RICE: I think it's going to begin with leadership for the MOI and the MOD and that's something that Iraqi -- the new Iraqi leaders have been saying to Zal Khalilzad and to General Casey. So I think they understand that the importance of appointing ministers and subordinates who have a reputation for technical competence and a mindset that is nonsectarian will be very important. And yes, there are also elements of training, elements of the inculcation of values, but again these are going to be Iraqi ministries and they understand and they want ministries that are not sectarian because they know that that's the only way that they can govern the country. And so we will be helpful in any way that we can, but we've heard very loud and clear from them that they understand it begins with the leadership, and then obviously with inculcation of certain values within a kind of professionalism and technical competence into the ministries.

QUESTION: Thank you. During the conference call on Saturday I asked you about the Embassy and I'm happy to see that you've taken it so seriously and talking about the Embassy. Are you planning to reorganize the operation? What exactly is it that you're going to spend quite a little time on during the trip to talk about with the employees there?

SECRETARY RICE: I have been holding weekly, sometimes as much as two-hour meetings with our Embassy staff for now a period of, what, three or four months, I think, to -- videoconference, right -- in order to make certain that we have the right staffing, that we have the right skill sets, that we are properly linked up with the Iraqis. And so this is an opportunity to go out and work some more on those issues. I think the organization is just fine and I'm convinced of that, but this is going to be a very critical and important time to link up with the Iraqis and to make sure that we are able to provide the right skills to them. So I'll go out and spend some time on that, but as I said, I've been doing this, you know, once a week, sometimes as much as two hours in those sessions with the Embassy.

Okay, thanks.

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