



Briefing En Route Jerusalem

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Jerusalem

July 29, 2006

SECRETARY RICE: I'll take a few questions and then I'll go back and get some work done. Andrea.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, the President said that you were going to meet with the Israeli and Lebanese governments, which raises the question of what it would take in meetings in Israel to warrant your next steps with the Lebanese government. And there's also a report from Lebanese government officials that Hezbollah has agreed to a peace plan which involves an immediate cease-fire, but it does involve disarming Hezbollah.

SECRETARY RICE: Sure. First of all, let me just explain the context here. I'm now going to go into some fairly intense, I expect, not easy give and take with officials. In Israel, I assume, because we've had people working with both the Israelis and with the Lebanese, there will be opportunities to have give and take on both sides. And I think you'll understand that I don't want to get into what that give and take is going to be about in the media. I -- with all due respect, I think I probably should have the give and take with them.

These are really hard and emotional decisions for both sides, under extreme pressure in a difficult set of circumstances. And so I expect the discussions to be difficult but there will have to be give and take.

As to the statement out of Lebanon, I have to say that I think there are some very good elements in what I've read. I have not seen the full statement, but from the press reports, it looks like there are some very good elements. It is for I think Prime Minister Siniora quite an achievement to have gotten his Cabinet of Ministers to essentially endorse his Rome speech which, if you remember, both talked about 1559 and Taif, which includes the disarmament of militias, and an acknowledgement that an international force will need to be a part of the solution.

Obviously, we are all trying to get to a cease-fire as quickly as possible. So I'll take this as a positive step. I think it is most certainly a positive step. And, as I said, there will be a fair amount of give and take and I'll talk to whomever I need to to try and push it forward.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, what do you hope to come away from this week? Are you hoping that you will have sorted out all of the elements for a U.N. Security Council resolution? And do you have any kind of deadline that you're setting for that?

SECRETARY RICE: Sue, I'm not setting a deadline. But obviously, since we want an early end to the violence, it's increasingly important that we get agreement on the elements. I think the elements of a political framework in which we could have an end to the violence -- that ends the violence but also creates the foundation for movement forward and that does not send us back to the status quo ante, that's really the goal here.

Now, as I look at the outcome of the Rome conference, as I look at what I've seen in the reports of Prime Minister Siniora's Council of Ministers resolution and as I look at what we all know is the framework here, which is Taif, 1559 and an international force, I think there are a lot of elements that are coming together. But I can't really set a deadline. I think there will soon come a time when the Security Council can play an important role in helping the parties to resolve this conflict.

There will be a meeting on Monday, but that is a meeting at the kind of working, political level on troop contributions. So people are also moving forward to trying to design a force. As you know, I left Philip Zelikow in Brussels, who's had discussions. I had discussions, obviously with Javier Solana, which is, by the way, the origin of the picture with -- what's that paper? The International Tribune.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, is it? Okay. And I also have had discussions with Nick Burns, who is in contact with Kofi Annan's deputy, Mark Malloch Brown. So there is a lot going on on the troop contributor side as well as on the political side, where David and -- David Welch and Elliott Abrams have been working in the region.

QUESTION: Some reporters are talking about a five-point plan that you have. Is there such as thing as a five-point plan? Is it as specific as that?

SECRETARY RICE: There are elements and there are points. But again, this is going to be give and take, not -- I don't expect to present somebody with a "here are the five points that you must accept" and have acceptance of that. This has got to be some give and take. This is difficult.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, do the Israelis at this point feel as if they have accomplished enough militarily that they're ready to stand back now? Or have you not gotten any indication on that front from them?

SECRETARY RICE: I'll let the Israelis speak to their military operations. I think they are speaking daily to their military operations and I have no reason to have a different view of what they're saying.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, the Israelis take this indication from Hezbollah of a willingness to talk as a sign of battlefield weakness. Do you have any information to assess if their position is weakening?

SECRETARY RICE: Again, I have no way and I'm not going to try to judge the military situation on the ground. That's for others to do.

I have, I assume, and really do have every reason to believe, that leadership on both sides of this crisis would like to see it end, would like to see an end to the violence, would like to see a way forward that puts Lebanon, the Lebanese government, in full control of its territory with the Lebanese army able to deploy south, with the south stable, with an international force that can help that to take place. That would be a tremendous improvement not just over the current situation but over the status quo ante. So what I'm counting on and we have every indication of is that there is a lot of desire on both sides to have that outcome.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, we have a report out of Beirut from our bureau that, quoting Lebanese people, officials saying that the U.S. is now willing to discuss prisoner exchange as part of these discussions. Is that the case?

SECRETARY RICE: First of all, what the U.S. is willing to discuss is not the issue here; it's what are the parties willing to discuss. And I'm not going to get into what the elements might be.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, this Lebanese plan that came out was the result of a six-hour cabinet meeting and you've got anti-Syrian cabinet members and Hezbollah members actually speaking with one voice, which is very unusual. At the same time though, you've got the U.N. that it appeared you were sort of marching towards perhaps a unilateral resolution without necessarily bringing the Lebanese into this. Well, it seemed like the U.N. was kind of working together, but towards a U.N. resolution, not necessarily with some of the parties involved having their own version of events.

So how much daylight is there between what you're working on and what the Lebanese have come up with? And what does it do for the process here?

SECRETARY RICE: The most important thing that this does for the process is that it shows a Lebanese government that's functioning as a Lebanese government. That is, in and of itself, extremely important. This has not been easy for Prime Minister Siniora. Everybody knows it's a very complicated coalition, but that he is able to go back and bring his government together around a way forward is very encouraging.

I want to note that I think, in that sense, Rome was helpful to him. He knows that he has some backing from the international community and I think that that has been helpful to him. But again, this is a matter of give and take. I am not going to have such an articulated view of these elements that there can't be give and take with the parties. But I think it's a very good sign that Prime Minister Siniora has been able to bring his government together around some of these elements, many of which, by the way, are common to the broad agreement in Rome.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SECRETARY RICE: Not going to comment on that.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, without going into the elements specifically, is it fair for us to assume that the Israelis, even before the international force deploys, wants some sort of setup in southern Lebanon that will ensure this doesn't happen again? Some kind of buffer zone, something like that?

SECRETARY RICE: I'm not -- again, I really don't want to comment on what the Israelis may or may not want. I think everybody wants and everybody understands that the outcome here has to be a situation in which there cannot be a return to the status quo ante, we cannot be in a situation where we have this happen again in several weeks or several months. And so that's the goal. The Israelis understand that and have made that clear. The Lebanese understand that and have made that clear. And, indeed, if you notice in Rome, the international community said that and made that clear.

So, yes, one of the -- one of the elements has to be a circumstance in which you can't have a return to the status quo ante. I don't want to talk about timing of how that might take place.

QUESTION: Do you trust Hezbollah when it says it's willing to agree? And, secondly, it takes time to deploy troops, to recruit them, to get their equipment down on the ground, to get them out in the field. Can you give us just a sense of how long you think it might be once there's an agreement on the nature of a force to actually get it into Lebanon and viable?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm very glad that we're having the Monday troop contributor meeting, because I think that will start to answer some of the questions that you're asking, Robin. One of the issues is how many ready forces, where can you get ready forces. Ready forces can deploy actually quite quickly, forces that can carry their own lift and their own communications and planning. We know that for a full scale, blue-helmeted force, it takes some time. I mean, we have that experience around the world.

But I think that we're not going to have a good sense of the timeline here for deployment until there are these troop contributor meetings. Which is why we pushed very hard to have this troop contributor meeting on Monday, not mid-next week, not the end of next week, but on Monday, because neither of the parties can have any sense for when a force can deploy until people have gotten together to talk about when a force can deploy.

QUESTION: Hezbollah?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, Hezbollah. Again, I'm just -- I've noted several times, the importance here is a Lebanese government that is able to function as a Lebanese government. Very good outcome for Prime Minister Siniora that the Lebanese government functioned as the Lebanese government in this cabinet meeting.

I would sincerely hope that everyone is now making clear to all parties that this has to be an agreement between the Lebanese government and the Israelis. That clearly is what the Lebanese themselves are pressing for. And there are Hezbollah ministers in that government.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, one of the things we haven't heard in the last few days is anything on the release of the Israeli soldiers. Can you tell us if that's going to be -- is that still on the table, or is there a possibility that there will be a deal that does not see that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, certainly, the international community's call for the release of the Israeli soldiers stands. And I think people have reiterated that several times and I'm reiterating it now.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, do you have any plans to try to bring together Prime Minister Olmert and Prime Minister Siniora any time in the near future, to try to get them together and have them talking across the table?

SECRETARY RICE: There really hasn't been any expectation of that or any discussion of that. I do hope that, as time goes on, that the democratic government of Lebanon and the government of Israel will be able to establish means to deal with the outstanding issues between them. I mean, I think the Siniora government is potentially the answer to the question that has been on people's minds for so long about Lebanon, which is can Lebanon function as a stable, democratic government rather than one in which either its neighbors are constantly interfering or where it's a kind of -- as Prime Minister Siniora put it, a battleground for other people's grievances. And so I sure would hope that at some point there might be direct contacts, but I don't think that's really anticipated right now.

Thanks everybody.

2006/T19-11

Released on July 29, 2006

