



Interview on the Situation in the Middle East

Karen Hughes, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

Interview on RTM by M. Ganesan

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QUESTION: Good evening. Well, today we have our guest, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes. And without wasting any more time, let's go to the first question. You've kind of, like, been traveling with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice throughout her tour trying to find a solution to the Israeli-Lebanon crisis. What do you think can happen now? There is no ceasefire yet, right? And the U.S. is supposed to be the sole superpower at this time. What do you think the U.S. can do to stop the impasse at the moment?

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: We are working very urgently to bring about an end to the violence. That's why the United States called for and convened and hosted the international conference in Rome. We brought the international community together, that's why we traveled to Beirut. It was very difficult as you might imagine to see, it's heartbreaking really to see that the bustling city was very deserted. It's heartbreaking. Dato' Shahrizat, this morning, shared with me some pictures that appeared in the newspaper this morning of civilians who have been killed; the children particularly; and as a mother, it is just heartbreaking to see that kind of death and the loss of innocent life. And that is why we are working very urgently to try and bring an end to this violence. We went to Beirut to meet with Prime Minister Siniora in Lebanon. We went to Israel to meet with the Prime Minister and to try to urge an end and a solution. And what we found was, in our meeting in Rome, that there is a lot of common ground, but the international community understands that you can't wave a magic wand and expect a situation where a terrorist group basically fired rockets into a -- across an international line, a recognized international boundary -- and fired rockets into, against cities. We are going to probably have to come up with some sort of international force that can go in to help the government of Lebanon, because the government of Lebanon -- when the terrorist group attacked Israel they were also really attacking Lebanon, and they were certainly not acting in the best interest of Lebanon's people while provoking a war. And so the government of Lebanon needs help to be able to control its territory and be able to prevent those kind of rocket attacks which are still continuing. And so we are working very urgently to try to put together an international force. We've got people in Europe right now, the United States does. We also have people in Lebanon and in Israel working to try to bring about a solution that will allow the violence to stop.

QUESTION: Right. But at the same time what seems to be talk of the world community at the moment is, the Rome talks was actually a failure because there was no immediate ceasefire and to add to the misery of that, now Israel is saying that the Rome talks have given a green light for them to go on. And I quote this, he says, The Israeli Justice Minister says, "We have in fact obtained the authorization to continue operations until Hezbollah is no longer present in Southern Lebanon."

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: That is an outrageous statement. It is false, and my understanding is the government of Israel has disavowed it. That was one of their ministers, a justice minister, just as some of the ministers in Lebanon, Hamas - Hezbollah, I'm sorry - launched this attack without the permission of the government of Lebanon. Apparently this statement was made without the permission of the government of Israel, and Israel has now said it does not represent its position. Our Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, has said that's an outrageous statement. I was in Rome and that clearly does not reflect the sentiment in Rome. The sentiment in Rome was, and I have to disagree with the media characterization that Rome was somehow a failure, because actually what Rome did, again, the United States brought the international community together and we got strong consensus to do several things. One is to provide immediate and urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Lebanon, who greatly need it. And I was there when Secretary Rice, again, insisted that Israel allow delivery of those humanitarian supplies and allow -- Prime Minister Siniora had specifically asked that we allow -- that we try to win the approval for the supplies to come in by the airport. And Secretary Rice made that very strong case. The world community agreed that it would supply immediate urgent humanitarian help to the people of Lebanon. The world community also reiterated what the solution is and the solution is to strengthen the government of Lebanon so that it can control its own country, so that it is the one that makes decisions of war and peace and so that it doesn't have a terrorist group deciding that for it. And so the international community also agreed, in what we think is a very important step, to begin putting together an international force that would allow Lebanon to be able to better control its own country.

QUESTION: Right. Coming to international force: What EU's policy chief Javier Solana said yesterday was: "While we agree, the EU -- even the EU -- agrees to an international peacekeeping force, there must be a UN mandated resolution on it."

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: That's correct. And Secretary Rice has called for that to happen urgently; perhaps as soon as next week.

QUESTION: Right, but at the same time they say there must be an immediate ceasefire because of the incident of the UN observation post being where UN -- four UN observers were killed. They require -- France, Italy, and all -- they have agreed to send, but they want an immediate ceasefire.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, obviously there will have to be a ceasefire before the international force can come in, because the international force would need the cover of being able to come in without being fired upon. So there obviously has to be an agreement, and that's what we are working very urgently to obtain. Again, you have to remember that in Rome and with the United States you don't have the parties represented. The parties are the government of Lebanon -- which had difficulty controlling its own territory as seen in the fact that Hezbollah started all this, even though it's a part of the government of Lebanon -- and the government of Israel. And I don't think you are going to see a situation where the government of Lebanon is able to control its territory or the government of Israel is able to agree to an agreement with the government of Lebanon until you have assembled some means of stopping these Hezbollah attacks. And that would be through some sort of international force there that is able to help the government of Lebanon control its territory. And so there's no magic wand here. We wish there were a magic wand, and we are working very urgently to bring about a stop. And that's why the conference in Rome actually made great progress, because it brought the international community together to try to put together the elements that will be required to actually achieve success. The other thing is that in all of our conversations -- in Lebanon; with the Prime Minister; Kofi Annan recognized this at the conference in Rome -- the people of Lebanon have seen too much war. They have seen too much war for a period of years and they want a real and lasting solution. They want a solution that is going to, actually require that what the international community has said it wants to happen, will happen. And that is that the government of Lebanon which is elected by the people of the Lebanon is able to control their own country's own future.

QUESTION: Then again there was template where the US could have worked on the, probably the, the U.S. brokered a kind of ceasefire in 1996 between the Lebanon government and Hezbollah.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: We called for Hezbollah not to fire rockets against Israel and that's been now violated.

QUESTION: Right, right, but still why is there a lack of willpower on the part of the US this time around?

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: I disagree strongly with that statement. There is urgent willpower. I just came from Beirut. I was in Beirut because we are working urgently to bring about a solution. I just came from Israel. I was in Israel with Secretary Rice. I was in Rome at the conference that the United States convened because we thought this was urgent. And so we wanted to bring the international community together urgently to put in place the thing that we think will be successful in actually achieving an end to the violence. So we are absolutely working very hard and I would disagree strongly with that characterization.

QUESTION: Right. But at the same time now if you look at the number that has been killed, over 400 killed in Lebanon, and I think its about 50 killed in Israel, there is a

large need or a big need for the world to act....

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Absolutely.

QUESTION: ...on a humanitarian basis.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Absolutely. Again this is why we went to Israel and worked very hard to get -

QUESTION: This is where they are saying that how can you have humanitarian aid when the US, even today it was reported, that two planes are going to go via Britain to deliver arms to Israel. So while you have on one side you are promising a \$30 million dollar US aid, at the same time there are arms being delivered to Israel where they can use it to bomb the Lebanese. So if you look on this core how do you balance both of it?

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, the United States has certain commitments and obligations with countries around the world who are our friends and allies. We have friends and allies. Israel is a strong friend and ally. We also have many friends in the Arab world with whom we work and many governments who we support and help provide supplies and assistance to. What the United States is working to do today is urgently attempting to bring the international community together, to bring a sustainable ceasefire and end to the violence in Lebanon. We are working to put together an international force that would allow that to happen. Secretary Rice stands ready to leave Malaysia and to go back to the region or go wherever she is needed to work to bring this about. She is absolutely concerned -- as is President Bush, as all of us are, we are heartbroken, by the loss of innocent life. After all, you know, my country was founded on the belief that every life matters and every life counts. That every life is precious; that every life is important and equally valuable. So we are working very hard to bring about a situation where we can get the violence to stop and we are doing so very urgently and we hope this is matter that can go before the UN Security Council, perhaps as soon as this week.

QUESTION: Right. The other point is I know that Israel is an ally of the US. We look at it from this point of view. If you are looking at the US rejection of the criticism of Israel to have *[inaudible]* that killed the four UN observers. This left the UN not passing resolution to criticize the bombing so on that score it is like the US is blatantly aggravating the situation in the UN. When you talk about UN resolutions -- but you don't want to criticize the Israeli action, which has killed UN observers.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, I just criticized what I called an outrageous statement made by an Israeli justice minister, so I think that is not the case. We strongly expressed our condolences and concern about the loss of the lives of the UN observers. I just came from a meeting where I saw a report out of Canada where one of those UN observers was basically reporting that Hezbollah was burying in using locations right around them to try to launch its attacks. And when you have a situation where a terrorist organization is willing to basically try to shield itself and surround itself with civilians and with innocent international observers it's a very difficult situation. And I would hope that the world community would also strongly condemn Hezbollah burying itself in communities and amongst civilians and perhaps close to UN observers and therefore drawing fire in what I think, is a very cowardly way, towards innocent human lives.

QUESTION: The 1559 Resolution calls for the disarming of Hezbollah, alright, but at the same time what Siniora has said is that he wants Israel to vacate the Shebaa valley which he feels is occupied by Israel. So if that action is taken by Israel to withdraw and then the Lebanese government will then go forward to disarm the Hezbollah. So it's a catch 22 position where Israel and Lebanon is concerned because of the actions of both parties. So on one score the US is deemed to have a great deal of power to influence Tel Aviv so Washington needs to play a greater role in this.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, we heard that message from Prime Minister Siniora. He made that strong case about the boundary issues. Secretary Rice indicted a willingness to discuss those boundary issues and we feel those ought to be discussed in the context of a political and security solution. That's another reason there is no quick magic wand. We are working very urgently to bring an end to this violence. And it will involve a political solution that will include discussion of Lebanon's boundaries and Lebanon's ability to maintain its sovereignty in all of its country and its ability for it to control the arms, the use of arms in its country, not a terrorist group and it will also involve security; an international force of some sort that can come in to help the government of Lebanon maintain security in its country and make sure that it in fact controls the use of arms in its country. So that's certainly something that is going to be discussed as a part of this, of trying to bring about an end to this violence.

QUESTION: We have now; the US wants to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim communities throughout the world, alright, in *[inaudible]*. But what happens now is that at the same time, it continues to abet and aid this so called aggression.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: But again I have to strongly disagree with you on that. What we are doing now is trying to save innocent lives by using our power to convene the international community, by using the clout of the US to go to Beirut, to go to Israel, and to try to negotiate an end to this violence that is hurting so many innocent civilians. And that's exactly what we are trying to use our clout to do.

QUESTION: Which Al-Qaeda is now using too, now saying that are going to come in as well on a larger scenario. So how does the US feel about the Al-Qaeda? Al-Zawari has said basically that they will come in. You know.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, I believe that the vast majority of Muslims and Islamic communities and Arabs and Americans and Europeans in the civilized world reject the kind of tyranny and violence that is advocated by Al-Qaeda. I believe that we all have a common interest. We believe, people of all faiths, whether you are Muslim or Christian or Jew, all faiths teach that innocent life is precious. Unfortunately, Al-Qaeda and other groups do not believe that.

QUESTION: Coming to the last question here, which is closer to home today. Today there was a huge protest by Malaysians regarding this Israeli aggression. They want to hand a memo to a U.S. representative to be handed over calling for a greater action by the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her mediation. What's your reaction?

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, I can understand, as a mother myself. As I said, I saw the pictures this morning again in the papers here, the loss of innocent children and I can understand, no one likes war. My country believes that every life matters and every life is precious. And we abhor the violence and we are working very hard and I've just come from going to Beirut with Secretary Rice myself, from going to Israel, from going to Rome, and we are staying ready to go back there because we are doing everything we can and we want to urgently bring an end to this violence because we know it is affecting so many innocent civilians, and we don't want that to be the case. And we want to be able to bring humanitarian help to Lebanon. We hope to be able to bring an end to the violence so that we can get about the long-term reconstruction. We are committed to helping Lebanon with long-term reconstruction as soon as we are able to bring that violence to an end.

QUESTION: Well that's exactly what we, what we also want -- Rice to listen to the voice of reason and moderation at this ARF which is currently going on and probably will come to a better solution towards finding a solution to the Israeli Lebanon crisis.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Well, I want to commend Malaysia for the wonderful job you have done in hosting this conference. The facilities here have been fabulous and we had a wonderful dinner last night. And I delighted to be back on my second visit to Malaysia.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES: Thank you so much. Appreciate it very much. Thank you.

QUESTION: OK.

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