



Interview With Sheila MacVicar of CBS News

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt
May 3, 2007

QUESTION: Let me begin by asking about the meeting you had this afternoon with the Syrian Foreign Minister. Take us inside the room. What was it like?

SECRETARY RICE: It was very professional and very businesslike. He's a long-term -- well, longtime diplomat. And we had a conversation about what is being said here, which is that it's time for everybody to do everything possible to stabilize Iraq. I made clear that the flow of foreign fighters is a real problem across that border and Syria needs to do more to stem the flow of foreign fighters because we believe that that flow of foreign fighters is one of the principal sources of suicide bombers.

QUESTION: General Caldwell said today from Baghdad that there have been signs over the course of the last month that Syria had taken action. Can you tell us what those signs are, what you've seen on the ground?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I haven't really seen General Caldwell's comments. I do know that there have been -- there's been some apparent reduction in the flow of foreign fighters. That's a good thing. I think if the Syrians are finally recognizing that the (inaudible) of extremists in Syria is actually a threat to Syria and that there are obligations to defend that border, then all the better. And I think it's important to continue to explore ways that Syria might be able to discharge its obligations, but first it's a matter of will to actually act in the way that the neighbors are talking about here today.

QUESTION: Is there a commitment to meet further with the Syrians?

SECRETARY RICE: We will see what makes sense from the point of view of stabilizing Iraq. The meeting that we had today was an opportunity. We took an opportunity on the margins of this meeting because this is a conference about stabilizing Iraq, and to have a chance to reinforce the message that was being said in the hall at the international compact and I think will be even more tomorrow was an opportunity that I thought I should take.

QUESTION: Do you believe that the government of Prime Minister Maliki is doing all that it can to provide stability in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: I do think that the government of Prime Minister Maliki, in very different circumstances, is trying to provide population security working with us, with the coalition, trying to move on national reconciliation although we've been very clear that they need to move more urgently on national reconciliation. But someone said today in the hall that this is in many ways a courageous leadership; they're trying to overcome really decades and decades of suspicion, decades in which Iraq was either ruled by dictatorship or by violence, and they're fighting against very tough extremist forces. And so they're working at it, but they do need to work more urgently.

QUESTION: Some of America's allies in the region, most notably Saudi Arabia, are not at all convinced that this is a government that is really committed to delivering equality for all Iraqis.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have been able to talk some today, we and the Saudis and with others, about the signs that at least as part of the Baghdad security plan the Iraqis have demonstrated that they're trying to act in an evenhanded way. It's not perfect, but certainly I think the Iraqi Government understands that it has to deliver justice for Iraqis whether they're Sunni, Shia, Kurds, (inaudible), whatever.

Now, the Iraqi Government tomorrow with its neighbors will have a chance to make that case, and it's one very important reason to be here, that the Iraqis can talk about what they're doing.

QUESTION: My last question, obviously with regards to Iran. You talked about the importance of stability in Iraq. If Iran (inaudible) actor in the region, a potentially destabilizing force, what will it take to meet with the Iranians?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first, if I have the opportunity here to reinforce the message that's being heard throughout these halls, I'll take that opportunity. But we --

QUESTION: Directly, face to face in a room (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think that we'll see what kind of encounter we have. We have not sought a bilateral with Iran, and Iran has not sought a bilateral with us. But we've offered an opportunity to talk with Iran based only on the conditions that the international community has put forward, which is a suspension of their enrichment and reprocessing effort. We've been very clear that if Iran is willing to live up to this obligation that the international community has put on them, we are prepared to talk and to -- with our partners, the United States would be reversing 27 years of policy to sit down and talk about anything.

And so I think the question isn't why won't we talk to Tehran. The question really is why won't Tehran talk to us.

QUESTION: The Foreign Minister of Iraq has said that he has suggested both to you and to your Iranian counterpart that the issues for Iraq are too great and too much is at stake, and that the best thing -- that both sides should leave aside their differences and concentrate only on Iraq.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've left aside our differences to be here at this conference, first for the international compact and then for the neighbors meeting tomorrow. We're going to be in the same conference, the same room, talking about the same issues and the same problems (inaudible). I think that that is the most important thing and that's the real breakthrough here.

This isn't about U.S.-Iranian relations. This isn't about U.S.-Syrian relations. This is about Iraq and how Iraq's neighbors and those who are involved in Iraq can work to stabilize Iraq. There's no doubt that some of the activities that are being undertaken by Iran are not leading to stability in Iraq; and if I have an opportunity to say that to the Iranians, then I will.

QUESTION: You met him at lunch?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, we had an encounter at lunch. There were several people there: the Oman Foreign Minister, the Saudi Foreign Minister. But of course we're civil people and we had a pleasant exchange.

QUESTION: And no opportunity to say to the Iranians we have to talk about (inaudible)?

SECRETARY RICE: No, this was a largely social lunch among the foreign ministers.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

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