



Interview With Martin Fletcher of NBC News

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt
May 3, 2007

QUESTION: You met the Syrians today. Recently, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi met the Syrians too and came under a lot of criticism. Her visit was termed not useful and many other things. What changed?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's one thing to go to Damascus and have broad-scale discussions with the Syrians, and frankly to give the impression of a relationship with the Syrians that's not yet there. It's quite another for the Secretary of State at a neighbors conference at which we are all gathered to talk about how we're supposed to stabilize Iraq to sit with the Foreign Minister of Syria and take advantage of the opportunity here in a -- on the margins of a meeting to deliver the message and to reinforce the message that is being delivered here by the international community and the neighbors that the flow of foreign fighters across that border needs to stop; that the suicide bombings are, we believe, largely a result of foreign fighters coming across its borders; and to tell the Syrians that if, in fact, they believe, as they say they believe, that a stable Iraq is in their interest, that they need to act in that way.

QUESTION: And what was their reaction to that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, they say that they want a stable Iraq. They say that they understand that it is in their interest not to have extremists puddling, gathering in Syria, who could be a destabilizing force in Syria itself. So actions speak louder than words, and we'll see. But this is, I'm quite certain, in the interest of Iraq first and foremost, which is what this meeting is about, but it's also in the interest of the neighbors.

QUESTION: The Iraqi Foreign Minister today told a small group of us that it was in everybody's interests, were the words he used, for the United States to meet with Iran and also to meet with Syria. So you met with Syria. What about Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we haven't come seeking a bilateral and neither have they. If I get the opportunity to deliver and reinforce the same message about the need to stabilize Iraq and that everybody needs to step back, and some of the activities that the Iranians are involved in are clearly not stabilizing for Iraq, I'll certainly take the opportunity to do so. But there are no plans to have a bilateral meeting.

QUESTION: It hasn't come up at all yet today? There's been no relationships in the wider meeting yet?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we saw each other at lunch and exchanged some pleasant comments. But there were several other people there, other foreign ministers.

But this is a meeting not about the U.S.-Iranian relations, not about U.S.-Syrian relations. This is a meeting about Iraq and it's a meeting in which Iraq's neighbors and the international community have said that we all have an interest in a stable Iraq. If that is the case, then everyone needs to start to act (inaudible).

QUESTION: That's why I ask you, because the Foreign Minister said it would be in Iraq's interest very much if the United States would become more involved with all states in the region, including Syria and Iran. How much of a breakthrough would it be if you do have that opportunity to meet with Iran in the next 24 hours?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the real advantage here is that all of the neighbors and the most interested states -- the United States, the UK, the P5 -- we're all here together. And we're all looking at the same problem of how to stabilize Iraq. That, I think, is the breakthrough, not the possibility for bilateral discussions. The real breakthrough is to have all of these interested countries together.

And the international compact today was a breakthrough too because it is an agreement, it is a compact between the international community and Iraq for support for this young Iraqi democracy. That's the (inaudible) challenge.

QUESTION: The concept of benchmarks for Iraq to achieve certain things that are being set forward in advance and on the basis of that and other issues in the area would then be their contributions. Is that a new concept in looking -- in terms of going forward?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the compact is a set of obligations on the part of the Iraqis and a set of obligations on the part of the international community. But it's a long-term compact. It doesn't try to set benchmarks that have to be met next month. It understands that there's a process underway in Iraq and that the international community is going to have to be involved with Iraq throughout that process over as much as five years.

In fact, I thought the best line, really, of the day was when Mr. Gambari, who has been the UN Special Representative for this compact, said "We begin today a process." It's not drying the ink on the compact; it's the beginning of the process.

QUESTION: Has it taken the past four years to begin a new process of this kind?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have to remember that this Iraqi Government has only been in office less than a year. It seems like longer, I know, but it's an Iraqi Government that came into power and that is now -- has set -- has taken the time to do its work in developing its own program. Now it can seek the help of the international community.

And you had in 2006, when this government came into power -- it's a little over a year now -- came into power really just on -- not even on the heels of that terrible Samara bombing in February of 2006, which really change the character of the violence and I think threatened, because al-Qaida intended to turn Sunnis against Shia, threatened to really pull apart the fabric of the society.

What today says to me is that the international community is standing with the Iraqis and saying, "We don't want to see that happen and we're going to work with you, the democratically elected Government of Iraq, to give concrete help to the Iraqi people and also hope.

QUESTION: You've been so deeply involved now in this whole process for a number of years and of course, we all know what's been happening in Iraq. It hasn't exactly been (inaudible). How (inaudible) are you now by this conference in terms of a real change in Iraq, (inaudible).

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm --

QUESTION: How realistic?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes. Well, I'm very encouraged. I'm encouraged because Iraq's neighbors and the international community -- so we didn't all agree on how we got here. And I think we all recognize that it's been a process of coming to terms with (inaudible).

What we have here today is people really saying, "Put all of that aside (inaudible)." We have a young democratic government in Iraq. It deserves our support. I hear people talk about the courage of these leaders who are trying to do the right thing under difficult circumstances. I heard both Japan and South Korea talk about the difficult circumstances with which they had emerged to become prosperous democracies. And frankly, it's encouraging to me and I think to the United States too because yes, we've been at it since the beginning, but we recognize that many people would have rather not had -- they didn't want Saddam Hussein in power, but didn't agree with the decision to overthrow him. Now we are all on the same page, let's help Iraq to move forward and to become stable, democratic and prosperous.

QUESTION: Thank you very much indeed.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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