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PRESS BACKGROUND BRIEFING
BY A SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL
TO THE TRAVEL POOL
Dunbar House
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4:01 P.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Really just outstanding meeting between the President and Sheikh Ghazi Al-Yawer. It was an opportunity for the President to reaffirm to the Iraqi President our commitment to help the Iraqi people through this next phase and on to elections. It was an opportunity for the Iraqi President to state his government's commitment to making certain that Iraq gets on a democratic path. This particular President has emphasized the unity of Iraq, which is an important message.

They talked in some detail about what could be done to continue to accelerate the reconstruction efforts so that job opportunities and infrastructure development can take place. They talked about the region and how a stable Iraq could be a really important linchpin of a different kind of Middle East. But even more importantly, a good strategic partner of the region going forward. And they talked specifically about relations with Iraq's neighbors, the need for Syria to be more responsible along the Iraqi border.

The Minister for Humanitarian Affairs Displacement was here, one of the six women ministers. She talked about some of the problems of internal displacement that have come out of Saddam's regime, which moved people around, Arabization, the fact that some people are now trying to return home and how she is planning to try to cope with that.

So it was really a very interesting meeting and the commitment of this President and his team is really quite remarkable.

I should just mention also the Foreign Minister was here, of course, and talked about the importance of the U.N. Security Council resolution and moving forward with their neighbors.

So it was all in all kind of wall-to-wall discussion about the future.

Q What was the answer on Syria? What do you do about Syria?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, they made the point that they will continue -- that, you know, a lot of them have long-standing relations with Syria, some

people actually lived in Syria during the time of exile. So they're going to do everything that they can to get the Syrians to be responsible on the border, to get the Syrians to return frozen assets. The President made clear that the United States, of course, has recently sanctioned Syria, but that, of course, we're open to improved relations always, with everyone. But the Syrians need to step up and do some of those things.

Q You mentioned unity as a central issue. There's been a lot of confusion lately about the future of the TAL, the temporary administrative law -- transition administration law, with Sistani and others seeming to suggest that on June 30th or July 1st it goes out of business and that with that goes out this careful balancing with the Kurds. Did this come up? What's your sense of what happens to the TAL? Does it go out of business on that day?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It is not our sense that -- you know, that you just throw over the work that has been done. But I do think that this is going to be one of the more difficult issues that the Iraqis are going to have to deal with. You heard the President say "federal Iraq." And so I think everybody understands that this is going to be a state in which there is considerable decentralization. I think that's one of the principles that was embodied in the TAL. And whether it's the TAL or the preparatory work for the constitution or however it gets embodied, minority rights is obviously an important element of whatever goes forward.

I think, David, the Iraqis are now about to have sovereignty. And one thing that we have to start to do is to step back and have Iraqis solve a number of these problems on their own. When the negotiations were going on about the TAL, you found a lot of cross work being done with the Sunnis trying to help to bridge the differences in the gap. I think you're going to see over the next period of time a lot of up and down about exactly what the structures are going to look like. It's the normal business of politics. I would not be surprised if there's some drama, that, you know, there are people who say, we're done -- we had this during the negotiation of the TAL, people walked out, but they came back.

These people want to live together in a unified Iraq. The Kurds have a particularly difficult history that they want to have acknowledged and accommodated in any structures that go forward. But everybody has been very clear, and the United States especially clear, that independence is not an option, you don't hear the Kurds really talking about independence. And so I would just caution everybody to have some tolerance -- and by "tolerance" I mean accordion-like -- (laughter) -- for a lot of up and down and negotiation and discussion and compromise that is only natural to the process of creating new institutions. And if we could get all of you not to write a headline every time somebody says, you know, this is the end, it would be probably really helpful.

Q But you, yourself, said that a goal going in before the war was keeping a single Iraq together. Would --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's right, and it is --

Q -- it be considered a successful overall operation if you emerged from this without Iraq together?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: David, we're committed to a unified Iraq. Iraq's neighbors are committed to a unified Iraq. And you've just heard repeatedly from not just the President, but from other members of the Iraqi interim government that they are committed to a unified Iraq.

Q Can you tell us what the new the President is like? And President Bush also seemed a little moved by the opportunity to sit here. What was that like in the meeting for the first time, with them sitting side-by-side?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, it was very historic and touching. I mean, they had been already in the G8 meeting, so they had been in contact. The President related for those of us who were not in the G8 the fact that a lot of discussion had been about the role of Iraq, a stable and democratizing Iraq as the start of important reforms throughout the region. And that a number of the states who were around the table talked about their efforts to reform, but acknowledged that to have a prosperous and democratizing and strong Iraq in the center of the Middle East -- I mean, one of the most important states historically, culturally to the Arab world -- would make an enormous difference.

And so in that sense, this was a strategic discussion, as well. It was a very warm meeting. I think that the President is obviously very eloquent, you all heard him. But he's also warm, and his commitment and his dedication to the Iraqi people just really comes through very strongly. He spoke eloquently, too, about the fact that this is a long road, not a short one. That he knew that expectations were high among the Iraqi people, but that it's important that people realize that this isn't a one-year plan or a five-year plan, but really that they have an awful lot of work to do over a long period of time.

Q How serious is this -- the plan to have NATO help in Iraq? Chirac is already saying that NATO's mission is not to intervene there.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think NATO would be intervening. Chirac also said that we'd have to see what the Iraqi government asked for.

We'll have a good discussion prior to Istanbul and at Istanbul about what the proper role for NATO is. As the President emphasized, NATO is already doing some good work in supporting the Polish sector and there are 15, I think, countries of NATO who are actually on the ground with the forces there.

So this is something I think that can be worked out. And it is true that NATO has a lot of -- a lot on its plate right now, including making sure that the force generation is there for Afghanistan, for the ISAF, and for the PRTs to be formed. So it is a good point that NATO has a lot on its plate, but I think we'll see some movement on NATO having some role.

Q There's a drive on financial stability for Iraq, among other things. There have been some steps toward debt relief. Has it been enough?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we're not there yet, but I think we've gotten -- when Secretary Baker went out, he got very good response that there should be discussions beginning this year. That was a major step forward. Secondly -- and that's reaffirmed, by the way, in the G8 statement -- that there should be substantial debt relief. Obviously, a lot of this will be worked out ultimately in the Paris Club.

But our view is that Iraq is going to need substantial -- really, the vast majority of its debt relieved because this is a country that has been through one of the worst regimes in a very, very long time, that suffered under sanctions for 12 years because of the activities of that regime, and that a high level of debt is just not going to be sustainable. So we're working on it.

Q "Vast majority" means -- what does that mean?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We've not put --

Q It's been more -- it's more than 50 percent?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: -- an actual --

Q It's more than 50 percent?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It is most likely, but we have not put percentages on this because we are going to look at the debt sustainability analysis that's done by the IMF; we're going to work with the Iraqis as they're working toward an IMF plan to develop -- a macro-economic stabilization plan. And we'll see what comes of it.

But you know that the United States and Great Britain and Canada and Japan and Italy believe that that number is going to need to be very, very high. We will see. The others have said that they understand there is going to have to be reduction, but it's going to take some work to get there fully. And it wasn't really -- this is work that probably now leads to the Paris Club, so I don't think anybody was really anticipating much more movement here.

Q Will the United States be willing to make money available to other third world countries, sort of in exchange for other developed nations loaning -- forgiving more Iraqi debt?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We've heard this idea and of course we are always willing to consider what needs to be done on further HIPC kind of relief. But the Iraqi debt needs to be reduced because the Iraqi debt needs to be reduced. There are also

a lot of other countries that probably are going to need debt reduction. So I think this is not a conversation that's ended about either of those.

Q Was there any conversation about anything more that the new Iraqi government can do, or we can do to make that government look like it's the Iraqi government of the Iraqi people, and the challenge that this was, to some degree, a President that was picked by the United Nations and maybe a lot of Iraqis don't know him, don't feel, sort of, any sense yet of what that government is going to be or how it's responsive to them?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I do think that they are -- the Iraqi government seems to be keenly aware that their role is really to prepare the country for elections that will take place at the end of the year and at the beginning of next year. But in order to do that, it's important that progress be made on security and the training of security forces continue. I think they also understand that they want to do as much as they can to improve the lives of the Iraqi people.

It's not at all unusual, Tamara, that you have a government that is "selected" in this way in a transition -- almost all of them are. After civil conflict or war what you have is a government that is not represented in the sense it was elected, but that represents the broad character of the people. We've done it in Liberia, in Haiti, in any number of places.

Now, this government I think feels, given the challenges, that it has to speak to the Iraqi people. And Prime Minister Allawi has already done quite a lot of that about the long road ahead, about the responsibilities that the Iraqis, themselves, now have. But this is going to be a fully sovereign government in a couple of weeks with full responsibility. But the good thing about the U.N. Security Council resolution was that it was really an affirmation that they're not alone, that they are going to have the support of the international government, the support of a multi-national force to help them deal with security issues.

It was a really good day for the Iraqi people, because the international community came together around the goal of a secure and prosperous and democratizing Iraq.

Q Did he talk about the Iraqi security forces at all, and how he'd like to beef them up?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not here, he did not. In fact, I think probably you'll see the Prime Minister and Defense Minister dealing more with those issues.

Q Did Iran come up at all?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Talked some about Iran as a neighbor and the need for Iran to behave responsibly, as well. This is a different Iraq now, and the neighbors --

Q Is Iran not behaving responsibly in regards to Iraq?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, of course, we've had concerns, but I think that the goal is not to have Iran not have good relations -- or not have relations with Iraq, of course it's going to have relations with Iraq, it's a neighbor. And you would hope that the relations would be good enough that you never have another Iran-Iraq conflict. But they ought to be transparent relations with the new Iraqi government, relations that are open and state-to-state and not trying to surreptitiously influence somehow.

The Iranians have a mixed history on this, but so far I would say that there are some signs that they certainly do not want instability on their border.

Q Do you feel any vindication on a day like this, or does the President?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I think for -- let me speak for myself. When the United States and Great Britain and other members of the coalition made the decision, the President made the decision to commit forces, that it was time to enforce the world's demands on Saddam Hussein, everybody knew that it was an historic decision. And contrary to what people sometimes write, everybody knew that historic times are almost always turbulent, somewhat unpredictable, and hard.

This is a really long road ahead because whether it is fighting communism or winning World War II or whatever you're doing that's big, it takes a long time to achieve the goals. But there are milestones along the way. And the President, at the Army War College, talked about a series of milestones that, when completed, will put Iraq at a new phase of its democratic development.

And one of the important parts of that set of milestones was reached with the formation of this government and then with this Security Council resolution. Everybody knows there is still a long way to go, but this has been a really good 10 days or so for the Iraqi people. And I think from our point of view, that's what you keep your eye on -- it's not -- people say, it's a good day for the administration. What's a good day for the Iraqi people on their road to democracy is a good thing for the United States and for those who love freedom, because it demonstrates yet again that when freedom and liberty are moving forward, it is -- then we are all safer. When they're in retreat, we're all in trouble.

Tomorrow, the next day, the next day after that is going to be hard. I am absolutely certain that in the next couple of weeks as we move toward sovereignty, and probably after sovereignty, you are going to have, you know, the face of terror, Zarqawi, and his henchmen trying to -- and the former Saddam types -- trying to derail this process. But they're not going to succeed. And days like today, with reformist states in the Middle East and the new President of Iraq, are just a glimpse of their worst nightmare, because a reformed Middle East, a strong Iraq in the center of that reformed Middle East will expose their ideologies of hatred as hollow and as having no foundation.

Q Thank you.

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MR. MCCLELLAN: Let me update everybody on the President's schedule for tomorrow. When we arrive at Andrews tomorrow night, the President and Mrs. Bush will go to the Capitol to pay their respects to President Reagan --

Q Right from Andrews?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes. Yes.

Q So we're motorcading?

MR. MCCLELLAN: Yes. It is part of their way of honoring a great leader on behalf of the nation. Then later in the evening they will, as Mrs. Bush mentioned this morning, they will visit with Mrs. Reagan over at Blair House.

Q Do you have updates on the President's work on his eulogy? Has he been able to do it at all this week?

MR. McCLELLAN: I mean, he has spoken with his speech writers and kind of given them the broad outline for the eulogy. I expect he will spend probably some time here working on it. But it's still in the works right now.

Q Will there be a pool swap right at Andrews?

MR. DECKARD: The in town travel pool will pick the President up at Andrews.

Q -- he would finish the eulogy here, he would finish the speech here? Or it would be finished here?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we'll see.

Q About 10 to 12 minutes?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes. I mean, I wouldn't expect it to be longer than that. But that's still being worked on right now.

Q And, again, no real personal recollections, personal memories? It's more --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, it's more the President speaking on behalf of the nation. Okay?

Q Thank you.

4:21 P.M. EDT END