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Briefing on Meeting with Prime Minister Blair

Background Briefing by a Senior Administration Official on the President's Meeting with United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair
Media Center
Sea Island, Georgia

9:04 A.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good morning. The President and Prime Minister Blair just had a bilateral meeting, over breakfast. It ran from about 8:10 a.m. to 8:50 a.m. I think the two of them would have been happy to keep going, but it was time for them to break, as the morning sessions of the G8 summit are about to start.

The meeting was colored, and the background of the meeting was influenced by yesterday's vote at the U. N. That 15-0 vote was a great achievement for the people of Iraq and an important signal that the international community is coming back together behind a common vision of Iraq's future, a vision of Iraq at peace with itself, at peace with its neighbors, and Iraq taking responsibility for its own future, taking increasing responsibility for its own security, but supported by the multinational force, supported by the U. N. on the political side.

The two leaders discussed Iraq and the way forward. They also discussed the broader Middle East initiative. Yesterday's success on Iraq sets the stage for movement and adoption of the broader Middle East initiative by the G8 leaders. I believe the documents are to be issued later today, and today's events also include an outreach session from leaders of the region and also the Prime Minister of Turkey who is here.

The President and Prime Minister discussed the broader Middle East initiative. They also discussed Israel-Palestine issues, and discussed ways in which progress could be made. They grappled with some of the problems, talked about possible ways forward.

They talked about the upcoming NATO Summit briefly, but they did discuss it. They discussed the fact that NATO is in Iraq right now, and NATO should play a role in the future in Iraq. They both understand that there are constraints on NATO's role, both in terms of number of troops and constraints in the form of the

continuing French and German hesitation about supplying additional troops. But nevertheless, NATO is in Iraq. It is supporting the Polish-led multinational division, and there may be things that NATO can do in addition to its current supportive role.

This was a good meeting. Obviously, they're very pleased with the developments of the past week in general, and the past 24 hours in particular. They're looking forward to today's meetings. And I would say they are both in excellent spirits, as one could imagine.

Now, with that short statement, I'll be happy to take all questions.

Q Can you elaborate a little bit on the discussions between the two leaders on the Arab-Israeli situation -- I'm sorry, the Israeli-Palestinian situation?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President has said many times that Arafat has become an obstacle to progress, and that's an obstacle we have to deal with for the time-being. On the other hand, the prospect and possibility of an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza opens the door to significant progress and unblocking the peace process and getting the peace process not just back on track, but to get it moving in the direction outlined by the road map.

If the Israeli withdrawal takes place, the immediate challenge will be establishment of a competent Palestinian political structure in Gaza to take responsibility for the territory, to take responsibility for actual governance. It's important that the Palestinians, if this take place, be helped with security -- their security responsibilities. And it's important that the international community get behind this effort, as it gets going. Prime Minister Sharon is obviously pushing this forward as best he can. The President and the Prime Minister discussed next steps on how the Quartet, how the international community can advance this process.

Q Were there any discussions either about the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or about Iran's nuclear program?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This did not -- neither topic came up during this breakfast, although the two leaders have discussed both issues in the past.

Q Was there any discussion of President Bush's wish to write off Iraq's debts to the international community?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This is also in the category of issues the two leaders have discussed before, but it did not come up during this breakfast.

Q Were there any discussions about whether or not there's the possibility of contributions, financial contributions, or military contributions, or even the argument that can be made to Russia, France, and some of the others who have not made those type of commitments? Is there a strategy that they talked about in trying to win some of those concessions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the two leaders talked both about political support for the new Iraqi government, and they talked about a possible NATO role, and these are two different things. The

French and the Germans have spoken about their support for the Iraqi -- have spoken of their support for the new Iraqi government. The Germans have said they're prepared to do more. This came up yesterday in the President's discussion with -- came up yesterday in the President's discussion with Schroeder.

The security issue is somewhat different. The French and the Germans have always expressed strong reluctance about any of their troops going to Iraq. They have not been quite as categorical about NATO's role in Iraq. And NATO, of course, already is playing a role in Iraq. So the two, the President and the Prime Minister discussed this in general terms and really discussed the need to move ahead so that the decisions coming up at NATO in the end of this month will allow for a greater role and more international support.

Q Can you be a little more specific about the kind of role for NATO that the two leaders have in mind? Will there be more training Iraqi troops, or involvement in Iraq's military operations?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we had not tried to be too specific within NATO councils about what precisely NATO could do because we wanted to wait for a Security Council resolution. Any discussion of an expanded NATO role in Iraq prior to a Security Council resolution would have been pointless, because, clearly, I think, for almost all NATO members, a Security Council resolution was an important first step. The other step is some expression of interest on the part of the Iraqi government. The new Iraqi government has expressed strong support for the international community and the multinational force remaining in Iraq.

So the two leaders did not discuss specific plans. They discussed their overall -- in having NATO do more. They discussed their overall intention to explore this issue in the two, two-and-a-half weeks remaining before the NATO Summit at Istanbul, and agreed to work on this. But that's really all they discussed.

Q I wonder if you saw Afghanistan, in a sense, as a model for what could now happen in Iraq where there's an independent military force still under U.S. command, and then a NATO peacekeeping force, and whether there's any possibility that the European Union could substitute for NATO in that sort of role in Iraq?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I don't think anyone has seriously considered the possibility of the ESDP taking over a military role in Iraq. The European Union is going to take over the Bosnia mission, which NATO is going to close out successfully, and that's going to be quite enough, I think, for the ESDP to handle for the moment. So I don't think anybody has contemplated this.

Afghanistan is a model only in that it shows that all kinds of arrangements are possible and that we shouldn't be wedded to some kind of cookie cutter formula. All situations are different, all solutions tend to be different, and I think that NATO governments will be -- I suspect NATO governments will be creative in coming up with options for NATO. But I don't want to get too far ahead of where we are.

Q Three things, one is, did they discuss Saudi Arabia? The second is, as you know, the reports that have emerged this week out of the Pentagon and the DOJ covering efforts to ensure that U.S. officials would not be prosecuted on the torture of detainees, did that come up between the two men? And thirdly, listening to your description, it seems as though they ticked all the boxes this morning, but I can't quite see what the business was that they got done. Can you just clarify for us, if you walk away from this meeting, what did they get done? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, they did go into some greater detail on Israeli-Palestinian issues, and they were discussing options for the way forward. They did go into Iraqi issues. But this was a meeting where they were laying out -- they were really laying out the choices and options that they're going to face over the next couple of weeks, rather than making definite decisions about course A or course B. They were mapping out the agenda, as we proceed from Sea Island and on the basis of the U.N. Security Council resolution.

The issue of those press reports that you mentioned did come up in the beginning of their meeting. And I suspect that other briefers from the U.S. side may have more to say on that, so I won't get into that -- to that subset of issues. But it was covered very briefly.

This meeting was basically the two leaders getting together and charting out the way ahead, looking forward over the next couple weeks, and trying to define for themselves, what kind of issues they're going to have to deal with in the weeks ahead, and what kind of choices they're going to have to face. And that was a very useful discussion. It did not produce a list of decisions, it produced a checklist of issues on which the staffs will be working in the immediate period ahead. That's a characterization, but it's my effort to answer your question as best I can.

Q -- on Saudi Arabia?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, didn't come up.

Q When you mentioned the Middle East, what details they have discussed, what plans for the future?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The discussion covered the problem of how to move ahead, which both the President and the Prime Minister very much want to do, when you have the problem of Yasser Arafat, which has been discussed by my government and President Bush many time, but you also have a very promising plan for Prime Minister Sharon to pull out of the Gaza and part of the West Bank. This is promising. On the other side you have problems, and how one fits together the promise and the problems without it getting gummed up is what they discussed.

And they were coming at the problem in different ways, and looking at different ways in which to move forward, which they very much want to do. It's a tough problem. If it were easy, it would have been done. But you have a very promising prospect of an Israeli pullout, which, of course, would be -- if it occurs, would be the first time that Israel has pulled out of territory that everyone considers to be territory that will form part of a future Palestinian state. This is hugely significant. All the more the pity that Sharon's announcement was greeted with such skepticism on the part of many people who are now realizing what an opportunity it is. The two leaders were discussing how to make progress, given those two conditions that I outlined.

Q The resolution yesterday, aside from the multinational force, sets out for a separate force that would be there to protect United Nations operations. Was that discussed this morning between the two leaders? Are they confident that they're going to get enough people to help out on that force?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that wasn't discussed specifically, but we certainly would be pleased if countries were willing to contribute to this force. Look, the absence of a U.N. resolution and the absence of a united international position was cited by many people as one of the reasons that they were

reluctant to provide forces. It's not easy to send troops to Iraq; it's a dangerous situation. Soldiers get hurt, soldiers get killed. Nevertheless, the Security Council resolution demonstrates that the international community, having been divided last year, has put that behind them, without prejudice to any government's position, and now is facing the Iraq problem in the same way. You have rapidly converging positions, not on what should have happened last year, but what should happen this year from this moment forward. And we certainly hope that the Security Council resolution will provide enough political impetus for governments who have been hesitating or on the fence to do more. And we'll see.

Q Can you give some substance, at least more details, about what was discussed about putting Iraq back on a sound economic track?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The two leaders did not go into the details of Iraqi economic reforms. They talked about the overall prospects for the international community to get more involved. They expressed satisfaction that we had come so far; after almost two months of very rough news, we had finally had a series of significant moves forward on the political side. This set the stage to start tackling some of the next problems. And it really is a moment of satisfaction, I think, for both leaders, to see that within Iraq and within the international community, people are governments are coming together. And that's the best way I can characterize it.

Thank you.

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