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HEADLINE: Condoleezza Rice discusses Middle East peace and Iraq

BODY:

MR. RUSSERT: But, first, just back from a seven-day, six-country trip with the president is his national security adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice.

Welcome.

DR. CONDOLEEZZA RICE: Thank you, Tim.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This article in The New York Times Friday about Hamas, the terrorist group: "Top Hamas leaders said that the militant Islamic group was calling off cease-fire talks with Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, a move that poses a direct challenge to the current Middle East peace plan. ...Mr. Abbas, commonly known as Abu Mazen, called for an end to the 'armed intifida,' or uprising. Hamas leaders said they rejected this as a 'surrender' to Israel ... Abdel Aziz Rantisi, a senior Hamas official, was quoted by The Associated Press as saying in Gaza: 'We were shocked when we saw Abu Mazen and his new government giving up all the Palestinians' rights. Abu Mazen committed himself in front of Bush and Sharon to very dangerous issues that closed the door of dialogue between us.'"

Last night, Dr. Rice, four Israelis shot by Hamas. Is the new effort for peace seriously jeopardized by Hamas' behavior?

DR. RICE: There is no doubt that there are those who do not want to see peace proceed. They have invested in, and their only purpose seems to be to extend conflict, conflict that has not been in the best interest of the Palestinian people. At Sharm el Sheik, and then at Aqaba, we had the entire Arab world there in--with the Saudis, and the Egyptians, and the Jordanians, with Bahrain as the head of the Arab League. We had a very successful summit in Aqaba in which the parties committed themselves to fight terrorism and to pursue the road to peace.

Now, there are going to be those who try and make this stillborn. But the parties need to stay on track. Prime Minister Abbas understands, and made very clear to everyone at the summit that he understands, that the future of the Palestinian people rests in a two-state

solution in which Israel and Palestine live in peace and security side by side. We believe he's committed to that. We never expected that the rejectionists would find this a welcome development. But it is now time for all of those who stand for peace, and who say that they stand for peace, to reject the rejectionist.

MR. RUSSERT: But can Prime Minister Abbas control Hamas, the terrorist group?

DR. RICE: There is no doubt that the Palestinian leadership, the new Palestinian leadership, has a difficult road ahead. That was very clear. The Israelis understand that. The United States understands that. The Arabs understand that. But this is the best chance that the Palestinian people have had for statehood and for an enduring peace for a very long time. Everyone needs to be supportive of what Prime Minister Abbas is trying to do. It was really a quite remarkable statement, that the armed intifadah needs to end. It was a remarkable statement that he accepts that a two-state solution also has to have a place for Israel. He is a remarkable man. He's put together a remarkable government. And he deserves the support of the entire international community. That is really what Sharm el Sheik and Aqaba were about, is ensuring that support, and we believe that he will get that support, and he will succeed.

MR. RUSSERT: President Bush spoke to the Arab leaders, as you mentioned, and issued this directive, if you will, to Israel. Let's listen:

(Videotape, Tuesday):

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: Israel's got responsibilities. Israel must deal with the settlements. Israel must make sure there's a continuous territory that the Palestinians can call home.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: In order for there to be a permanent peace, Israel will have to give up the settlements in the disputed territories.

DR. RICE: There is no doubt that the Israelis will have to deal with the settlements, yes. The president has said it. It's been American policy for a long time. Prime Minister Sharon made a good start at Aqaba when he promised to begin dismantling the unauthorized outposts. He has also said earlier that it was time to divide the land between Palestinians and Israelis. He made clear to the settler community that some painful and difficult decisions lay ahead.

It is also the case the Palestinians are going to have to deal with terror. The situation in which Israelis are constantly subjected to terrorist attacks is going to be the responsibility of Arab leaders and of the Palestinians to create security forces that can be accountable and transparent and effective in fighting off terror. But what the president did at Aqaba and what he did at Sharm el Sheik was to say to the parties, "Let's talk about what you can do in order to promote peace." Sometimes in the Middle East there's a tendency to

say, "Well, the other guy has to do this or has to do that." The president laid out responsibilities for all the parties, for all the sides. Indeed, he laid out responsibilities for the United States, as well. And if the parties, if the leaders, pursue those responsibilities and pursue them at an accelerated fashion, I think we have the best chance that we have had for peace in quite a long time.

MR. RUSSERT: Will the president consider appointing a permanent U.S. envoy to monitor these negotiations?

DR. RICE: The president has decided on a structure at this point which is best to the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. There is going to be a senior U.S. diplomat, John Wolf, who will have a team with him. That team has people who are expert at security, at police matters, people who are expert in economic matters, and it will be their responsibility to help the parties to make the necessary step-by-step steps that they need to make in order to push the peace forward. They will also monitor, and the president made very clear that he expected, that compliance would be on both sides and that he was prepared to assay who was complying and who was not. And that function, that monitoring function, that function of making certain that the parties stay on course, is going to be done by a mission located in the region, a permanent mission, that the president believes is the best chance for now.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me turn to Iraq. This was the article from the Atlanta Constitution, which read as follows: "Six weeks after the war ended, Iraq remains a torn and divided country. Crime still threatens. Hospitals run at quarter-speed. Water, sewer and electric systems remain broken or inconsistent."

What a mess. If someone said to you, "Dr. Rice, we have 200,000 troops in Iraq. We haven't found the weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein cannot be located. Chaos reigns. The radical Shiites are refusing to cooperate with the U.S. representative on the ground"--was this a pyrrhic victory?

DR. RICE: It is certainly not time to make such an assessment. The question is: What was the alternative? The alternative was to have Saddam Hussein in power, oppressing his people, threatening his neighbors, sitting there with weapons of mass destruction programs sitting there 12 years after the Gulf War, continuing to defy the international community. It's going to be difficult to rebuild Iraq--the president has always made that very clear--not because of the war, not because of damage done in the war, but because of the damage psychologically, physically, to the Iraqi people and to their hopes and dreams for the last 30 years.

This has been one of the world's most brutal regimes. It is not surprising that the Iraqi people just now coming to a political horizon after 30 years of--Shall we call it a vertical conversation?--that they now have to have a horizontal conversation in which all Iraqis are represented and in which they try to chart a future. It is not surprising that some pockets of resistance by bad people, the Fedayeen Saddam or Ba'athists, continue.

But it is also the case that the country has already made progress. And six weeks is actually just not very long in this history of Iraq. There are parts of the country that are quite stable. The country is about to begin the flow of oil to the markets so that those revenues can be available to the Iraqi people. Talking with Jerry Bremer, whom the president saw during his recent trip to Qatar, and to General Tommy Franks, everyone acknowledges that there are challenges, but a lot is happening on the ground in the beginnings of a political dialogue among the Iraqi people and the beginning of returning services to the Iraqi people.

Yes, this is going to be very hard. We always knew that it was going to be hard, but the United States has the staying power, the will and the determination to stay with the Iraqi people until they're stable, until they are on a democratic path. As the president said, "We don't want to stay one minute longer than we have to, but we do want to stay until Iraq is stable."

MR. RUSSERT: Since the president declared that the military operations were over on May 1, combat operations, we've lost 42 American soldiers. We're losing more than one soldier a day. How long are we prepared to take that kind of toll?

DR. RICE: Tim, the president has always said that this will take time. If you think about the many fronts in the war on terrorism in which we have to fight--Iraq, Afghanistan, the law enforcement fronts on which we're fighting--and you go back to the president's September 20 speech to the Congress shortly after the attack on September 11, he talked about a long and different kind of war. Iraq is one of those fronts in dealing with a regime that dealt with terrorists, that had weapons of mass destruction, that was a supporter of instability in the Middle East. We've just seen the president take on the problems between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Yes, this is going to be hard.

Now, there are still pockets of real danger in Iraq. There are also large portions of the country that are quite stable and that are returning to normal life. When the president declared major military operations over, he said, "This is still going to be a very dangerous place, because there are still bad people in this country that have to be rooted out and dealt with." The security situation in Baghdad and in places like Tikrit and Fallujah is very high on the list of priorities, in fact highest on the list of priorities, for CENTCOM, for General Franks and for Administrator Bremer. We understand the challenge. American forces are being redeployed in ways that can deal with that challenge. But it is a surprise to no one that this is going to take some time and that it is difficult.

MR. RUSSERT: Many Iraqis have said that they are still afraid to come forward and participate in a democracy, because they don't know where Saddam Hussein is. How important is it that we find Saddam Hussein?

DR. RICE: Certainly, we would like to find Saddam Hussein if he is, indeed, still alive, and his sons. I will say that as de-Ba'athification takes place, as the country becomes more stable, as services are re-established for the people as the Iraqis begin to take on

their political lives again, this is not Osama bin Laden who's going to hide in some cave and be a mystical figure. He was a brutal dictator who ruled by fear, who ruled by the control over secret police, over an army, over the Republican Guard, over a vast wealth. And this is a different kind of figure. But, of course, it's important, and we are following every lead to see whether he is alive and where he is, if he is.

MR. RUSSERT: Weapons of mass destruction: The president and people throughout the administration said that Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat because he possessed weapons of mass destruction. Here's what the president said.

"Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised." And the vice president: "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction."

Was there truly an imminent threat and where are the weapons of mass destruction?

DR. RICE: There are two separable issues here. What did we have in terms of intelligence estimates before going in and what have we found? In terms of intelligence estimates going in, the October 2002 intelligence estimate, national intelligence estimate, which is the definitive estimate by the intelligence community, said in its key judgments, Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction, for instance, on chemical weapons, 100 to 500 metric tons of chemical agent in the country; a biological weapons program that was being rapidly reconstituted; evidence of efforts to reconstitute a nuclear program. And it was not just American intelligence. There was supporting intelligence from all over the world. There was, of course, the United Nations weapons inspectors talking about unaccounted for stockpiles of VX and anthrax and sarin gas.

And this didn't start in September of 2002 with the president's speech to the United Nations. This goes back to 1991 where we know that he had weapons of mass destruction, 1994 to 1995 where more came out about his biological weapons program after he finally revealed that when a high-level defector left the country and spooked him into revealing. In 1996, a testimony by then CIA director John Deutch saying, "He has weapons of mass destruction." In 1998, after weapons inspectors left the country, President Clinton addressing the country from the Oval Office and saying, "He has weapons that I am certain he will use. That's why we're using military force against Saddam Hussein." There's a bit of revisionist history going on here. The truth of the matter is that repeated directors of Central Intelligence, repeated reports by intelligence agencies around the world, repeated reports by U.N. inspectors asking hard questions of Saddam Hussein, and tremendous efforts by this regime to conceal and hide what it was doing clearly give a picture of a regime that had weapons of mass destruction and was determined to conceal them.

MR. RUSSERT: As you know, others are saying that the intelligence was--Senator Joe Biden used the word "hyped" by the administration to provide a rationale for the war. And this is what has been accumulated over the following weeks. This from US News &

World Report: "For months, the vice president's office and the Pentagon had been more aggressive than either State or the CIA when it came to making the case against Iraq. Veteran intelligence officers were dismayed. 'The policy decisions weren't matching the reports we were reading every day,' says an intelligence official. In September 2002, US News has learned, the Defense Intelligence Agency issued a classified assessment of Iraq's chemical weapons. It concluded: 'There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons.'"

And let me show you some comments of some other people and then give you a chance to respond. "'The American people were manipulated,' bluntly declares one person from the Defense Intelligence Agency who says he was privy to all the intelligence there on Iraq."

And then this. "'The al-Qaeda connection and nuclear weapons issue were the only ways that you could link Iraq to an imminent security threat to the U.S.,' notes Greg Thielmann, who retired in September after 25 years in the State Department, the last four in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. 'And the administration was grossly distorting the intelligence on both things.'"

And then this. "Ray McGovern, a retired C.I.A. analyst who briefed President Bush's father in the White House in the 1980s, said that people in the agency were now 'totally demoralized.' He says, and others back him up, that the Pentagon took dubious accounts from emigres close to Ahmad Chalabi and gave these tales credibility they did not deserve."

And last night in Iowa, Bob Graham, the former chairman of the Intelligence Committee, now running for president, said, "Information was essentially politicized, manipulated. Those parts that the president liked became placed in the president's speeches, and those that they didn't like got put in the trash can."

DR. RICE: I just don't understand this argument. As I said, revisionist history all over the place. This has gone on with Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction for the better part of 12 years. Successive CIA directors, successive administrations have known that we had every reason to judge that he had weapons of mass destruction.

Now, the president gets his intelligence from his intelligence agencies, most especially from his director of Central Intelligence, not from all kinds of splinter groups, and I can't really speak to unnamed people who refuse to come forward but quote on--unattributed to the press. But I can tell you that the director of Central Intelligence, the deputy director of Central Intelligence who briefed the Congress, who briefed the president, who oversaw the national intelligence estimate that said, "This regime, we judge, has weapons of mass destruction" is where the president got his intelligence.

MR. RUSSERT: Where are they?

DR. RICE: Well, Tim, the question of where and how we're going to find his weapons of

mass destruction is a separable question from what we knew going in. The fact is this was a program that was built for concealment. We've always known that. We've always known that it would take some time to put together a full picture of his weapon, weapons of mass destruction programs. We've always known that interviews with scientists and with those who were involved in the program would be the most credible evidence as to how this program was put together. In fact, the reason that we pressed so hard to have the weapons inspectors take people out of the country and interview them was because we knew that these were the people who could tell us how this program was put together for concealment.

But I want to go back to the question of what we knew going in. You had a director of Central Intelligence who produced an estimate that said this regime had weapons of mass destruction. That was based on multiple sources. It was based on information from multiple security services. It was based on information that the weapons inspectors said was missing about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program.

People talked in this town a lot about connecting the dots. In this case, you had hundreds of dots to connect that showed that this regime which had had weapons of mass destruction, which had used them in the past, which had gone to great lengths to conceal them, which would never tell the truth about them, which was keeping its own people under tough U.N. sanctions to avoid detection of the program--you had a lot of dots. There is only one way to connect them, and that was that this was a regime that was determined to hold on to its weapons of mass destruction and that that was a danger to the United States and to its allies.

MR. RUSSERT: The Washington Post reported that Vice President Cheney made numerous trips to the CIA and that some people at the CIA felt pressured because of his presence to provide information to the president and vice president that they wanted to see.

DR. RICE: Simply not true. The vice president did make trips to the CIA, although no one talks about exactly how he's briefed or even how the president is briefed. But I can tell you this: This administration has experienced foreign policy people who are consumers of intelligence and who do ask difficult and tough questions of intelligence officials. But the director of Central Intelligence has said and has assured all of us that he has no evidence or any belief that anybody was pressured at any time to change estimates or to change their assessments. We received the best that the intelligence agencies could produce about this very vast program. The assessments that we received in October of 2002 were wholly consistent with the assessments that had gone back into time including during the Clinton administration, assessments that had led President Clinton to attack Iraq, to go after those programs. So this is a long history and we need not revise it.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you a specific comment the president made in his State of the Union message on January 28, 2003, when he talked about uranium from Africa. Let's watch:

(Videotape, January 28):

PRES. BUSH: The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Now, five weeks later, this is what appeared in The Washington Post: "A key piece of evidence linking Iraq to a nuclear weapons program appears to have been fabricated, the United Nations' chief nuclear inspector said in a report that called into question U.S. and British claims about Iraq's secret nuclear ambitions. Documents that purportedly showed Iraqi officials shopping for uranium in Africa two years ago were deemed 'not authentic' after careful scrutiny by U.N. and independent experts... 'We fell for it,' said one U.S. official [who reviewed the documents.]"

In light of that, should the president retract those comments? And should there be a full, open government investigation into our intelligence agencies?

DR. RICE: The president quoted a British paper. We did not know at the time--no one knew at the time, in our circles--maybe someone knew down in the bowels of the agency, but no one in our circles knew that there were doubts and suspicions that this might be a forgery. Of course, it was information that was mistaken. But the--it was a relatively small part of the case about nuclear weapons and nuclear reconstitution. It is also the case that the broad picture about Iraq's programs was a picture that went very far back in time. Let me take for a minute that DIA report that you just talked about because there's a lot of selective quotation going on here.

MR. RUSSERT: But, Doctor, in order to cut through all this...

DR. RICE: Yes.

MR. RUSSERT: ...shouldn't there be an investigation? Shouldn't the president welcome an investigation?

DR. RICE: The president is overseeing, at this point, an intelligence community that is quite busy looking for weapons of mass destruction and putting together a picture of what precisely we know happened in Iraq. The DCI has put together a group to look at what they know and what they knew before and what they find now. I'm quite sure the congressional committees that have oversight for intelligence are going to look into what was known before.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you welcome that?

DR. RICE: Of course.

MR. RUSSERT: And will cooperate fully?

DR. RICE: Of course. But, the key here is that those who want somehow to say that this intelligence was politicized, using selective quotations from a DIA paper, the bulk of which--the selective quotation doesn't even stand up within the context of the DIA paper, let alone within the context of the intelligence estimates on which the president was relying.

MR. RUSSERT: But if the president came to the country today and said, "I have intelligence information that says Iran has weapons of mass destruction, and we want the world to know that, we want everyone in this country to know it, and we're going to have to do something about it; we're going to have to disarm them," do you think that people would be skeptical?

DR. RICE: I hope not. Because the president relies on an intelligence community that was relying on information that goes back years, multiple sources, sources from multiple intelligence sources, U.N. reporting that talked about missing weapons of mass destruction, missing agent. I don't see how anyone can say that there wasn't a true danger here when the weapons inspectors themselves were talking about thousands of tons of missing VX, missing anthrax, missing sarin gas. Now, we are on a mission now to uncover the true nature of this program. No one ever said that we knew precisely where all of these agents were, where they were stored. No one said that we knew precisely how Saddam Hussein was concealing his program. We now have an opportunity, since we're on the ground and we have the opportunity to talk to people, to put together that picture, and we will. But I will tell you that in the days before the war, there were also multiple reports of Saddam Hussein preparing to use chemical weapons. There were atropine injectors and chemical suits found in Iraq.

MR. RUSSERT: You are confident you will find weapons of mass destruction.

DR. RICE: We are confident that we--I believe that we will find them. I think that we have already found important clues like the biological weapons laboratories that look surprisingly like what Colin Powell described in his speech, like the testimony of people that talks about the embedding of chemical weapons in their dual infrastructure program, much like what Colin Powell said in his February 5 testimony to the United Nations. Yes, Tim, we will put together this whole picture and when the whole story is told, we will know how Saddam Hussein managed to deceive the world for the length of time that he did.

MR. RUSSERT: Before you go, I'm told you're thinking of running for governor of California in 2006.

DR. RICE: I think I've got my hands full with national security adviser right now.

MR. RUSSERT: Is that a yes or no?

DR. RICE: I've got my hands full as national security adviser at this point.

MR. RUSSERT: You're not ruling it out?

DR. RICE: Oh, Tim, you know, I'm not a very good long-term planner, but I think I like what I'm doing, and I think I like the foreign policy side.

MR. RUSSERT: If Arnold the Terminator ran, he wouldn't bluff you out?

DR. RICE: Tim, you know, commissioner of the NFL--and you asked me the other day if you can run the AFC. It's a deal.

MR. RUSSERT: But you're willing to take on Arnold Schwarzenegger?

DR. RICE: Tim, I have no plans to run for governor of anything. I plan to be national security adviser for now.

MR. RUSSERT: We'll be watching. Dr. Rice, thanks very much.

DR. RICE: Thank you.

MR. RUSSERT: Coming next, then Democratic view of what happened to Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. And an African-American woman running for the Democratic presidential nomination, former Senator Carol Moseley Braun. And Katie Couric talks to Hillary Clinton, all coming up right here on MEET THE PRESS.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Carl Levin, former Senator Carol Moseley Braun and Katie Couric with Senator Hillary Clinton, after this station break.

(Announcements)

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