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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
March 10, 2006

Interview of the President by Diana Moukalled, Future Television of Lebanon

March 9, 2006
The Map Room

10:40 A.M. EST

Q Mr. President, thank you for receiving Future Television. As you know, head of U.N. inquiry, Serge Brammertz, will present his report to the Security Council in a few days. How should the international community respond if the report concluded that Syria did not fully cooperate with the inquiry, as previous efforts did?

THE PRESIDENT: Our position is, is that we want to know the truth and we expect all parties to be forthcoming with the truth. The truth is really important to help Lebanon meet a goal that we want for Lebanon, which is free of foreign interference, democratic and peaceful, so that people can realize dreams, and so the great country of Lebanon can grow and prosper like I'm confident it can.

So the United States will constantly remind all parties that we seek the truth and we expect parties, when asked about the truth, to be forthcoming with the truth. I'm worried about people who stall and hope that the world turns a blind eye to a terrible death. And we're not going to turn a blind eye. We will keep focused on this important issue, because we believe in the future of Lebanon.

Q From what you say, many in Lebanon fear that there might be a deal between Washington and Damascus. In other words, if Damascus complied with Washington demands regarding Iraq, regarding Hezbollah and Hamas, would you let the inquiry not reach its ultimate?

THE PRESIDENT: Part of our desires for Damascus is, of course, to shut down terrorist bases in their country; and is, of course, to stop cross-border infiltration into Iraq; is, of course, to stop allowing people to find safe haven to plot and plan attacks in the neighborhood. But part of our demands was to -- was 1559, which is, completely out of Lebanon. And so there are no deals. We are people who believe that when we say something, we've got to keep our word. And again I repeat to you, I think that the light of truth is very important toward establishing a peace that we all want in the region.

I really do want young boys and girls in Lebanon to be able to grow up in a world free of violence. Lebanon is a fabulous country; Beirut is one of the great international cities of all time. And it's in the world's interest that this democracy survive, and not only survive, but flourish and thrive. And so we don't -- we really aren't going to deal away Lebanon's future.

Q Regarding U.N. resolution 1559, the Lebanese government says that it wants to reach a true result with the issue through a national dialogue --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- and you have demanded repeatedly that Lebanon should implement this resolution. Will you give the Lebanese government a chance to resolve this issue through national dialogue, or you will exercise more pressure?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it's very important that the national dialogue process succeed. The truth of the matter is that peace in Lebanon is going to be achieved by Lebanese leaders, people in Lebanon who are dedicated to the future. The United States can -- we can work, we can help, we can pressure Syria, or we can do things, but what we can't do is to force people to be courageous in the name of peace. That's up to Lebanon's people themselves -- the people of Lebanon themselves. The Lebanese must stand up and say, we demand a open and free and transparent society so we can live in peace.

We'll help, but courage comes from within people's souls. And we have been encouraged by courage being shown by those who believe in Lebanon's future.

Q Are you following the national dialogue that's happening now in Lebanon?

THE PRESIDENT: I am.

Q Many believe that without international efforts, this dialogue will not succeed, where other parties think that the American pressure is keeping Lebanese from reaching an agreement.

THE PRESIDENT: No, I hope -- I believe that an agreement can be reached. I understand the talks have been suspended for a week, but they will be ongoing, and I think it's a very important part of the Lebanese folks putting aside past -- the past, and focusing on a bright future. And we will help and we will encourage, but ultimately the decisions have to be made by the Lebanese citizens that they want something better than violence and war and division.

Q The two controversial items are the ousting of President Emile Lahoud and the disarming of Hezbollah.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q What's your comment? What --

THE PRESIDENT: Our position is clear: 1559, which we strongly support, says that armed militias should be disarmed, and secondly, we believe that the President ought to be independent, ought to be someone who will strongly represent the interests of the Lebanese people.

Q The Lebanese government considers Hezbollah a resistance. What's your comment?

THE PRESIDENT: My comment is, is that armed militias should disarm. And I think it's very important to understand that democracy -- you can't have a democracy if political parties have their own armed force. Our position is that the Lebanese forces ought to be in control of the security of Lebanon, for the good of the people.

Q What's your position regarding ousting President Emile Lahoud?

THE PRESIDENT: Again, I repeat to you, I think the characteristics for the President ought to be somebody who is independent-minded, somebody who focuses on his -- the future of the country, somebody who understands that foreign influences inside of a country can be very negative.

Q Mr. President, as you know, the situation in Iraq is really deteriorating, the country is on the edge of a civil war. The support for U.S. policies among Arab public opinion is -- it's minimal. Many believe that you are focusing on Lebanon to divert attention from what's going on in Iraq, or it's a part of a whole scenario to control the region. Why did Lebanon get so much of your attention in the past year, whereas Syria controlled Lebanon for 30 years?

THE PRESIDENT: Because I believe in democracy. I believe democracy yields peace. That's a historical -- it's been proven throughout history that democracies yield the peace we all want. And I repeat to you: I want young boys and girls in Lebanon to grow up in peace. It's what I want.

I am -- I want the same thing for Iraq. I want Iraq to be a democracy -- not a U.S. democracy, but a democracy that takes into the -- the traditions, the Iraqi traditions and the history of Iraq, just like the Lebanese democracy will reflect the history of Lebanon and the traditions of Lebanon.

I believe there are such things as universal values, and I believe everybody desires to be free. And it's difficult in Iraq, no question about it. But I want -- I want you to remember that the Iraqi people expressed their opinion last December about civil war. Eleven million people went to vote in difficult conditions saying, we want freedom and we want democracy; give us a chance. And I'm convinced, ultimately, the people's will will win out and defeat those who want to try to create a civil war. Our position in the Middle East, and throughout the Muslim world, is that we want to be a partner in peace; we want to help people realize their potential.

And I hear the -- I hear the language about the United States, that United States is anti-Islam. It's just not true. We view Islam as a religion of peace -- or that the United States has got this design. But we'll protect ourselves. But the best way to protect ourselves ultimately is to encourage good relations amongst Muslim people and to encourage democracy. That's what we want. We want people to be able to be free. We want there to be minority rights and human rights; we want there to be women's rights. We believe in societies where women have got a chance to realize their dreams. We want there to be good education and good health care, and to the extent that people want our help, we're willing to help.

Q But so far, you're not winning the hearts and minds of Arab people. Why not?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's -- there's a lot of negative news on TV. There's a -- the enemy to democracy has got one tool, and that is the capacity and willingness to kill innocent people. And that shocks people. People of good conscience grieve when they see innocent life being taken by car bombs or when they read about beheadings.

And it's really important for those of us who believe in peace and the civilized world -- it's not civilized to kill innocent people, nor do I think it's religious. It's very important for us to be steadfast and strong and have faith in the capacity of freedom to help answer people's desires and change society for the better.

My dream is for there to be a Palestinian state at peace with Israel. My dream is for Lebanon's democracy to flourish. My hope is that Iraq's democracy will serve as an example for others, and so people can realize their potential. And I believe this is going to happen. But there are people who want to stop that progress. And I know that. But I'm a firm believer in the future, and we'll continue to work in a way that tries to share our deepest desires to help people, that will try to combat some of the ugly news people see on the TV with positive policies that uplift lives, give people a chance.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Unfortunately, we ran out of time.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you for coming.

Q Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm honored you would come all the way from Beirut to interview me.

Q Thank you.

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