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BODY:

The vice president knows this region very well. He knows the leaders of the region very well. He has many long-standing relationships with senior officials of these countries. The vice president will hold wide-ranging discussions on matters of mutual interest, including our ongoing campaign against terrorism and other regional security issues.

The trip builds on earlier visits, for example, that the president directed the secretary of State to make and the secretary of Defense to make. It's one of the things that vice presidents do at the president's request.

Q Ari? Ari?

Q There's no reason for this -- for the timing right now? I mean, is there some shift going on or some particular reason why he would go at this particular time?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, just as Secretary Powell has visited the region, Secretary Rumsfeld has visited the region, it's appropriate for the vice president to visit the region.

There is a timing issue involving the fact that the president will be out of the country for a period of time in February. There's also the importance of scheduling the event to be respectful of the Hajj. And so there are a series of reasons that the trip is the week it is taken, reflective of the president's schedule and other regional important matters.

Q Ari?

MR. FLEISCHER: Goyal?

Q Two questions, please. One, going back to al Qaeda terrorists, the Wall Street Journal reporter is still held against his will in Pakistan. (Inaudible) -- figured that his captives are asking that F-16s should be released to Pakistan, and also Pakistanis that are held in Cuba also should be released.

Now, what I'm asking you, what is the president doing for his release, using his -- (word inaudible) -- power to get his release? And also, if General Musharraf comes next week here, if he's going to bring him on his plane?

MR. FLEISCHER: Obviously, this is an issue that is very troubling to all Americans and to the president. The president is very concerned about what has happened with the kidnapping of Mr. Pearl. It is the long-standing policy of the United States government, and that remains in place, that the United States government does not and will not negotiate. But the United States has worked very productively with Pakistan. Pakistani authorities are doing all they possibly can to obtain the release of Mr. Pearl. The United States is fully

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satisfied with the actions of the Pakistani government. And if there's any one thing that the kidnappers need to know is that they should release Mr. Pearl unconditionally and immediately.

Q Does the president believe that or agree that terrorism is still there in Pakistan, whether they're al Qaeda or whether they're Taliban-backers or whoever they are, they are still in Pakistan, despite the border security.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, clearly, the president has designated several -- two entities in Pakistan as terrorist organizations and has frozen their assets, and has found good cooperation from President Musharraf taking action against these groups.

Jim?

Q Ari, yeah, on the Geneva Convention, one clarification. A decision to apply the Geneva Convention to Afghanistan and to Taliban fighters would not, I believe you were saying, would not have any effect on the decision to declare them as non-POWs?

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