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Remarks

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell
And German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer
After Their Meeting

May 11, 2004
C Street Entrance
Washington, D.C.

(11:40 a.m. EDT)

SECRETARY POWELL: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Minister Fischer and I just finished a meeting where we covered bilateral issues as well as spoke about a number of regional issues of interest to both of our nations. We talked about the Middle East, the opportunities presented by Prime Minister Sharon's plan for disengagement from Gaza and West Bank settlements. We spent quite a bit of time talking about Iraq in the context of a new UN resolution that will be required as we move forward to returning full sovereignty.

I assured the Minister that it is still the United States' plan to move aggressively to return full sovereignty to the Iraqi people by the end of June, recognizing that there are some functions that they will still ask us to perform for them with respect to security and with respect to helping them with their reconstruction effort. But that plan remains very much on track and will require new UN -- new UN resolutions and we look forward to working with Minister Fischer, the German Government and other Security Council members as we move forward.

Both of us are looking forward to the G-8 ministerial meeting, which will be held here on Friday, where we can spend more time on matters of common interest to the G-8 ministers.

As you would expect, the Minister and I also spoke about the prison issue. We exchanged views with one another about how deplorable a situation this is for all of us, how painful it is for the United States to see that our soldiers were involved in such behavior. And I assured the Minister that all Americans were shocked by these images as were people throughout the world.

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And as he has already seen through congressional hearings, through investigations that have been launched by Secretary Rumsfeld, through the actions of the President, we are going to get to the bottom of this and make sure that justice is done. The President has expressed his apology to the individuals who suffered under these kinds of conditions and were abused in such an awful way.

But we also have to make the point that tens upon tens of thousands of young American soldiers are serving proudly and nobly and meeting the highest standards of the Armed Forces throughout the world today, and especially in Iraq. They're rebuilding schools, they're helping people put their lives back together. Above all, they are working hard to restore a sense of security for the Iraqi people, to put down these terrorists and former regime elements who are trying to deny the Iraqi people a new life under a democratic system of government.

This is the third time the Minister and I have had a bilateral meeting in the last ten days and I look forward to having him here again on Friday.

So, dear Joschka, welcome. It's a pleasure to have you here again.

FOREIGN MINISTER FISCHER: Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure to be here. As you said, it's the third meeting within ten days. This reflects the excellent level of our relations as good friends and allies. And we are moving forward now to the 60th anniversary of the end of Normandy invasion of -- and the liberation, beginning of the liberation of Europe and we are moving forward next year for the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. And since then, we are close allies and friends and we will never forget what American troops did for us, for our freedom, for democracy.

And let me say that as friend and good ally, I mean, we are really shocked and deeply appalled about the news we heard, the humiliation and abuse of Iraqi prisoners, and we think that those who are responsible must be brought to justice. But we need the United States -- we need the moral leadership of the United States. It's important for the West, for all of us, and therefore, we are looking forward that this situation will lead, I think, to a restoration of the leadership, of the moral leadership of the United States because this is crucial for all of us.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you said yesterday that you had met with Kellenberger every time he was here. You weren't asked how often that might be. And did you see any photographs earlier than when they became public to all of us?

SECRETARY POWELL: On the second question, no, I didn't see any photographs before they became public after the 60 Minutes show.

I met with Jacob Kellenberger three times over the last year and almost a half. I met with him in January of 2003 in Switzerland. I think it was at the Davos conference. And then he visited me last year and then again early this year. So three times since January of 2003.

And on each occasion, I expressed our support for the work of the ICRC and he reported to me on his work with respect to our detention facilities and we talked about our detention facilities in Guantanamo, some of our detention facilities in Afghanistan and our detention facilities in Iraq.

He reported to me on the findings of the various inspections. And as you know, the ICRC works by presenting those findings at the lowest level possible to the command that they have been inspecting or doing their inspections within. And so he has kept us informed, and whenever he came here, I made myself available to see him, as did other members of our team. He's been to the Pentagon. He's been over to the White House to see Dr. Rice. And we kept ourselves informed and we also kept the President informed that the ICRC was looking at our facilities and that from time to time they had concerns.

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I spoke to Mr. Kellenberger last week when this story broke and reviewed the bidding with him, and he reminded me that we should let the world know that we're responding to many of the concerns that were raised by the ICRC. And there are still some outstanding issues that, of course, we're working on, but it is not as if we were ignorant of the concerns raised by the ICRC or were not acting on those concerns.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, your name has been mentioned this morning along with Mr. Bremer in the testimony of General Taguba in the Senate Armed Forces Committee. And, basically, they ask what information did you give to the Pentagon. Is it you question that you raised alarm about the treatment of the prisoners or you were merely concerned by the numbers of the prisoners in Abu Ghraib.

SECRETARY POWELL: The information that I received from the ICRC is the same information that the Pentagon received from the ICRC, or Ambassador Bremer and the command in Baghdad received from the ICRC. In fact, they got it before we did. And I think the reference in the testimony this morning was to the fact that all of us have been interested in our detainee facilities and how do we make sure that these facilities are being run in accordance with the highest standards expected of the United States under our obligations under the Geneva Convention and other standards of international law.

And so we have had many meetings within the Administration to make sure that we were speedily returning individuals who no longer were -- it was no longer necessary to detain them, making arrangements with countries to take people back from Guantanamo to their home countries. We released a number recently to the United Kingdom, to Russia, to Denmark and elsewhere.

And so we have been following this matter very closely and we have been trying to get the detainee population down. It is expensive to keep people in detention if it's not necessary. And once we have determined whether or not they were responsible for a crime or whether they had any intelligence information that has been useful, it has been our desire to move them out of detention and back to their families.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, when you --

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, there's a report this morning from Salem Chalabi who's in charge of the trials in Iraq and he says that Saddam and the other top officials being detained by the U.S. will be handed over to the Iraqis when the U.S. turns over sovereignty. Can you confirm that? Is that, indeed, the plan?

SECRETARY POWELL: I just saw that press report and I would yield to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad to give a definitive answer. I haven't had any conversations with Ambassador Bremer about it today.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, when the concerns were brought to your attention, either from Mr. Kellenberger or any other source, did you, at any point, go to President Bush and say, as you have said in recent days, this could be very destructive for American foreign policy?

SECRETARY POWELL: We kept the President informed of the concerns that were raised by ICRC and other international organizations as part of my regular briefings of the President and advised him that we had to follow these issues, and when we got notes sent to us or reports sent to us by the ICRC or other international organizations, we had to respond to them, and the President certainly made it clear that that's what he expected us to do; and he expected us to work off the detainee population as quickly as we could, remembering that we are fighting a war -- fighting a war on many fronts: in Afghanistan, in Iraq and Guantanamo was part of that, so we had to make sure that as we worked off this detainee population that we did it in a way that protected our nation and did not release terrorists back out or did not release people who might have intelligence information that could tell us about terrorist activity.

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And so certainly I and Dr. Rice and Secretary Rumsfeld, in the different means we have to communicate with the President, as well as in our principals and NSC meetings kept the President fully informed of the concerns that were being expressed, not in specific details, but in general terms about the problems that we had to deal with and the concerns that were being expressed.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, when you say that justice should be done, how far is the United States prepared to go in punishing the abuse? Will it stay at the level of the individual abusers or will you go after the people who have helped make the system of abuse?

SECRETARY POWELL: This is a matter for Secretary Rumsfeld to deal with, and I think that he is determined to make sure that it deals with those who are guilty for the offense on the scene, and I am confident that he and all of the other investigating teams that he has commissioned will make sure that they get to the bottom of it so that any weaknesses within the chain of command that manifested themselves in this matter will be dealt with and will be fixed as the fixes are necessary.

So I don't think this is -- there's any intention just to single out the individuals. The individuals are responsible for their actions, but we have to look at the entire system, and I know that's what Secretary Rumsfeld and the President intend to do.

We can take -- yeah, we got one for the Foreign Minister?

QUESTION: Mr. Foreign Minister, as you've been working towards the June 30th handover, it does seem as if a lot of the bitterness about the war, people have been putting that beside them and moving on. But do you think now that there's any trepidation on the part of Germany or in Europe as a whole to work with the United States? Is there any concerns about moving forward now in light of the prison abuse scandal?

FOREIGN MINISTER FISCHER: Well, we are working and we still continue to work together in the Security Council. I think it's very important that we move forward, we stick to the timetable and move forward to a transfer of real sovereignty to an Iraqi authority. I think this is very crucial. And as far as we can, we will be constructive. And my impression is that this is not -- this positive or constructive position is not only the position of the German Government but of all members of the Security Council.

SECRETARY POWELL: We'll end it at this point and I'll leave the Vice Chancellor here to answer some questions from the German press.

Thank you, Joschka.

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