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Manama, Bahrain  
March 17, 2002**Press Conference by Vice President Dick Cheney and His Highness Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince of Bahrain at Shaikh Hamad Palace**

14:15 (Local)

THE CROWN PRINCE: Good afternoon. First of all, I would like to welcome our good friend, Vice President Cheney, to the Kingdom of Bahrain. The visit comes at an important time for the region, and we appreciate the efforts and the endeavors of the United States in consulting with its friends here.

Today, Majesty the King and the Vice President had fruitful and frank discussions covering a range of topics from bilateral issues to issues of regional and international concern. On the bilateral front, we discussed building on the recent assignment of Bahrain as a major non-NATO ally by working, among other things towards a free trade agreement.

Regionally, one of the most important items discussed was moving the Middle East peace process forward. And, in this regard, we welcome the President sending General Zinni back to the region. We, in the Kingdom of Bahrain, believe that the way forward is by having the Israelis withdraw and end their current brutal occupation, and that the Palestinians show the utmost restraint during this time. Both parties need to implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1397 that builds on Resolutions 242 and 338.

On the war against international terrorism, we reaffirm our total support to the continuing international effort both militarily and otherwise. On Iraq, it is our belief in Bahrain that Iraq must comply with all relevant U.N. resolutions without delay, as to avoid potential harm to the region.

In closing, Mr. Vice President, welcome. It is our pleasure to have you here. It is a pleasure to work with you, even in this short trip. And with that, I hand it over to you, sir.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Your Highness. I'm delighted to be back in Bahrain and to have the opportunity today to meet with His Majesty the King, and with His Highness, and the other senior officials of the Bahraini government. I have visited Bahrain many times in the past and, of course, we've got a long and historic relationship that's extraordinarily important to both countries.

I'm on a mission to the Middle East at the request of the President to confer with regional leaders on issues of importance, and we spent a lot of time today focusing on a range of those concerns. We specifically -- I specifically thanked the Bahrainis for their great work and support on behalf of the war on terror and our work against the problems that we've encountered in Afghanistan dealing with the al Qaeda and in trying to wrap up the worldwide terror network.

Bahrain, of course, is a major non-NATO ally of the United States, and we've received great support from a military standpoint as well. Last week, I had the opportunity to visit our fleet, the U.S.S. Stennis, and steaming alongside the Stennis was Bahrain's frigate, the Sabha. A very great pleasure, I think, for both navies that we've been able to work so closely together.

Bahrain shares the same goals the United States does for a lasting peace in the Middle East. President Bush has made clear we will do everything in our power to try to bring an end to the tragic violence between Palestinians and Israelis and to persuade them to resume a serious negotiating process.

Finally, I want to congratulate the King on his intention to conduct parliamentary elections in October of this year, as well as municipal elections in May that will permit women as well to be candidates. America supports the government of Bahrain as it pursues political and economic reform that works to the good of all its people.

Our meetings today have touched upon all of these matters here and throughout the trip, and I've sought open and frank discussion and wise counsel on issues of mutual concern and I have received them.

Your Highness, I want to thank you again for hosting me today. To all of the people of your country, I want to bring the respect and good wishes from the people of the United States and President George W. Bush.

THE CROWN PRINCE: Thank you so much.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think we're going to alternate questions.

THE CROWN PRINCE: All right. Do you want me to go first? I'll go first.

Q Sir, can you tell us regarding Iraq, what is Bahrain's stance towards any strikes on Iraq in the near or distant future in terms of the ongoing war on terrorism?

THE CROWN PRINCE: Well, I don't think that a strike on Iraq has been decided yet. We certainly support U.N. resolutions and we feel that -- maybe the Vice President could answer this probably better -- that the intention is very strong and very clear, to get those inspectors back, among other things. And we strongly encourage the Iraqis to do so. So that is our current position.

As far as the hypothetical question of an intended strike, I think I will defer that until the policy is made more clear to us.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I make it a habit never to speculate about prospective future operations. I don't think that's helpful. The President's made it clear that we are concerned about nations such as Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction. We know the Iraqis have been engaged in such efforts over the years. We know they have biological and chemical weapons. We know they've used chemical weapons against Iran and against the Kurds. And we also have reason to believe they're pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons. That's a concern to the United States. We think it's of concern to people all over the region. And we think it's important that we find a way to deal with that emerging threat.

Q Mr. Vice President, could we ask you something about the meeting last night in Saudi Arabia? You met with the Crown Prince. Is the United States ready to increase its support for the Saudi peace initiative?

And we understand that the Crown Prince is invited to the United States. What will be accomplished by this visit and is it another attempt by the United States to draw Saudi Arabia both into the peace process and into the planning on Iraq?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: With respect to the Crown Prince's initiative, we think it's a good one. We appreciate very much the fact that he stepped up and put it forward at an important time. And we think it has given some impetus to the peace process. So we have been very supportive and encouraging of what he is attempting to do. And I reiterated that support for the Saudis last night as well. We expect that will be the subject -- one of the subjects focused on at the upcoming Arab Summit in Beirut the end of this month.

And I did last night, in response to the second part of your question, I did deliver to the Crown Prince a personal invitation from the President to visit the United States in the near future. And I think the Saudis will have an announcement later today with respect to their intentions in that regard.

Q Your Highness, can you give us some more information about this free trade agreement, what stage it's at right now, whether it's in discussion stage, and what kind of time frame do you think Bahrain and the U.S. could sign it?

And a question for the Vice President on Palestine. Do you have a target date by which Palestine will be declared? And why this reluctance on the U.S. side to declare the Palestinian state? You did it with Israel. The state was declared first and it was created later. Why are you reluctant to do it in this case?

THE CROWN PRINCE: As far as the FTA is concerned, we are working towards that as a goal. But in order for that to happen, I think there must be a structured dialogue first. And we will be looking at mechanisms to make

that happen. So that is -- I do not foresee it happening within a short time. But we hope it's in not too long the distant future. And getting that process started will be our main goal in the coming months.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: We discussed the question of improving trade relations between the United States and Bahrain. We think it's a worthy objective. And, as we discussed with His Majesty, we think it's appropriate to find a structure we can put in place to begin those discussions so that we can move towards that objective.

With respect to the Palestinian homeland, President Bush was the first President of the United States, just within the last few months, in a speech last fall, to announce that his vision for the future of the Middle East includes a Palestinian homeland.

We think, as many have expressed, that the ultimate objective here needs to be an Israeli state and a Palestinian state that can live side by side in peace and harmony. That's in everybody's interest. Clearly, we have a long way to go to get there. There are a lot of very important issues that need to be resolved. First and foremost is to accomplish a cease-fire so that negotiations begin once again and we can see an end to the loss of innocent human life on both sides.

Following that, we're supporting an effort to implement the Tenet and the Mitchell plans. And, clearly ultimate decisions about boundaries and those kinds of arrangements need to be worked out between the parties to the negotiations. But the President of the United States has made it clear that his vision for the future of the region does include a Palestinian homeland.

Q Mr. Vice President, after your meeting last night, Saudi officials said that the Crown Prince had told you under no circumstances would Saudi bases be allowed in a U.S. military offensive against Iraq. Is that the case, sir?

And, as you answer, in a broader context, the Saudis say they have posed this, the Egyptians said the same, the Jordanians said the same. A bit of a softer tone today but still obviously no one thinks the military option should be the first one. How are we not to judge your discussions as a failure?

And, Your Highness, if you would, if the United States did have a military confrontation with Iraq, could it use its bases in this country as part of that operation?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, as far as the meeting last night goes, the only people in the meeting were the Crown Prince and myself, plus an interpreter. And I have his notes. So I think there has been a lot of speculation both about my conversations as I travel through the region, and I think a lot of it has been uninformed.

I don't choose to ever describe the views of my host; they're perfectly able to speak for themselves. But the meeting I had last night with the Crown Prince, frankly, was very warm and very friendly. We renewed a friendship that goes back many years. We've been through difficult days together; our governments have, and the two of us have, personally.

And last night was one of the warmest sessions I've ever had, frankly, in Saudi Arabia. It was a very good, very productive, wide-ranging discussion, and I wouldn't choose to characterize it further than that. I think the Crown Prince will affirm that.

Q -- on the Bahrain --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I sense that some people want to believe that there is only one issue that I'm concerned about. And/or that somehow, I'm out here to organize a military adventure with respect to Iraq; that's not true. The fact is, we are concerned about Iraq, that's one of many issues we're concerned about. But in all of the stops that I've made so far, we've talked not only about the war on terror, which is, in many respects, more imminent, ongoing current activity. We talked about the importance of our continued efforts in Afghanistan as well as making certain that the Al Qaeda doesn't relocate to any other country in the region; about our mutual military and intelligence and law enforcement and financial efforts to stamp out the operations of al Qaeda. A lot of time, as the Crown Prince mentioned today, on the question of the Israelis and the Palestinians, and in every case, the bilateral relationships that we have in this part of the world.

So I think it would be a mistake to assume that there is only one issue on my agenda, or that it's possible to characterize this trip based upon speculation about what people may or may not have said to me. Thank you.

THE CROWN PRINCE: And, sir, I think as I said before, I think it's a bit early to speculate on a hypothetical. But Bahrain has always honored its commitments. And while we think that people are discussing it out in the open, it is important to recognize that in the Arab world, the way the threat is perceived is quite different.

The people who are dying today on the streets are not only -- are not a result of any Iraqi action; the people that are dying on the streets today are dying as a result of Israeli action. And, likewise, the people in Israel are dying as a result of action in response to those actions that are taken.

So the perception of threat in the Arab world really focuses around that issue, and we are preoccupied by it -- deeply so. And the importance, I think, of reaching a just settlement for both sides has never been more important, because it holds up and it precludes and it confuses all of the other issues which are of concern to all of us -- specifically weapons of mass destruction, which we feel as strongly as the United States does about, and their danger to not only us, but to the world as a whole.

So I reiterate again our call towards the Iraqi government to comply completely with U.N. Security Council resolutions, because it's in the interest of everyone in this part of the world.

Q Mr. Cheney, what's your comment on a report that came out in The New York Times last week talking about moving the American bases from Saudi Arabia to Qatar -- a base in Qatar?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: If I -- let me repeat the question and make sure I understood it -- about The New York Times article speculating about moving U.S. military bases out of Saudi Arabia?

Q To Qatar?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Qatar. We have not made any plans to make any change in our military dispositions with respect to Saudi Arabia. We've been operating in conjunction with a good many countries in this part of the world for many years now. From time to time, adjustments are made, but I'm unaware of any adjustments that we're planning, nor did I discuss with the Saudis last night any modification of our overall force posture.

Judy Keene?

Q Mr. Vice President, the United States has previously made it clear to Prime Minister Sharon that it wants him to pull his troops and his tanks back. His reluctance to do so is now turning out to be an obstacle to talks toward a cease-fire. In your face-to-face meeting, will you ask him again to do so? And could you talk a little bit about the way the situation in Israel and Israel's actions are complicating your mission and making more difficult your mission to build support for the next steps in the war on terror?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think with respect to the impact on my trip overall, I mean, there's no question -- and I don't find it surprising -- I think if we knew this would be a prominent issue before I came -- that the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is a preoccupation for everybody in this part of the world, as the Crown Prince has explained.

It's real, it's happening every day, it's having a decided impact not only on the people of Israel and Palestine who are most directly affected, but also on people throughout the region who have strong feelings about the inability to resolve this very difficult set of circumstances.

The first thing I'll do when I arrive in Israel is to meet with General Zinni. General Zinni is there again at the direction of the President, has re-engaged very aggressively both with the Israelis and the Palestinians, met with Prime Minister Sharon, with Mr. Arafat, and so before I see any Israeli official or Mr. Sharon included, I will specifically sit down and sort of touch base with General Zinni, he'll meet me at the airport and bring me up to speed on the latest developments.

My role in part has been to travel around the region and let all of our friends in the region know the importance of

our commitment to try to resolve this conflict, to talk about the Crown Prince's initiative, to look towards the Beirut Summit to solicit advice and guidance from our friends here in Bahrain as well as every other place I've stopped.

General Zinni is the one who is sort of on the firing line in the midst of the efforts to negotiate a cease-fire between the Israelis and Palestinians, and I hope he'll have something positive to report by the time I arrive.

Q Many U.S. friends in the region have expressed their wishes for the U.S. not to use military force against Iraq. Most, if not all, of the Gulf and Arab states which you have visited oppose the use of military force. With this existing scenario, will the U.S. still go ahead and launch a military strike against Iraq if Iraq does not comply with U.N. resolutions?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Let me reiterate again what I said. I never like to speculate about what we might or might not do in the future with respect to the use of military force. But I think the important issue here isn't this speculative bubble that sort of has built about whether or not the United States might use military force; the important question here is, why hasn't Iraq complied with the U.N. Security Council Resolution 687 that Saddam Hussein signed up to at the end of the Gulf conflict, that said specifically that he committed to eliminate all weapons of mass destruction, including biological and chemical weapons as well as ballistic missiles beyond a certain range, and he has not done so. And we know he's not done so, not only as a result of intelligence that we've collected, but also as a result of defectors, his own sons-in-law who came out some years ago to Jordan and made public a great deal of information about the status of those programs.

And, of course, Saddam Hussein has refused to allow U.N. inspectors in now for several years; with the result that I think we are increasingly concerned and we find others are as well, that he is, in fact, acquired biological and chemical weapons, which we're quite confident of; he used chemicals against the Iranians and the Kurds, but also that he is aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons.

And as long as the current situation continues, then we think the threat will grow, and that threat is, I think, to all of the countries in the region and the peace and stability of this part of the world if a man like Saddam Hussein with his track record is allowed to develop, deploy this capability. That clearly is not in anyone's interest.

Thank you.

THE CROWN PRINCE: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

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