

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Dana Perino

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MS. PERINO: Hi, everyone. Okay, I have a few announcements, so if you'll bear with me. Today, obviously, is a very exciting day. For the first time in over 27 years, all living U.S. Presidents will meet together at the White House in what will certainly be a historic gathering. These former Presidents have experienced something that, as I said yesterday, very few of us can even imagine. And President Bush is happy to welcome President-Elect Obama to lunch today, because he will soon be a member of this small group.

And although they may disagree on some policy prescriptions in order to solve problems in America, they're obviously all rooting for the same team. And they will have a chance today to have a rare opportunity of being together in one room to share ideas and viewpoints, war stories and experiences here at the White House.

The last such meeting at the White House was on October 8, 1981, when all living former Presidents — Nixon, Ford and Carter — met Ronald Reagan before departing for the funeral of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

The President will also meet with — our President, 43, will meet with President-Elect Obama for 20 to 30 minutes prior to the lunch today. That will be a one-on-one meeting. Earlier this morning, or in just about an hour, the President and his father, President George H.W. Bush, will have an interview with Brit Hume of FOX News Channel. And FOX decided to run that on Sunday as part of FOX News Sunday.

The President will also make remarks to presidential appointees today at the Constitution Hall. He will also make remarks at a reception tonight in honor of the Points of Light Institute. The President and Mrs. Bush will host a program in honor of President George H.W. Bush's contributions to the

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Points of Light Institute, which focuses on redefining volunteerism and civic engagement for the 21st century by putting citizens at the center of community problem-solving.

Also this morning, Steve Hadley, the National Security Advisor, will speak to CSIS at 10:30 a.m. He will talk about core convictions that have formed this presidency when it comes to foreign policy, what this administration has accomplished in key regions in the world, and what the next administration will face. Those remarks have been delivered to you, I believe, as prepared, and then he will also take questions. So I know obviously we'll talk about the Middle East here, but I'm anticipating that he will be asked that then, as well.

Also today, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism official Ken Wainstein will deliver remarks on the threat of global terrorist organizations acquiring weapons of mass destruction and using them against the United States and our allies. He will discuss the progress made by the administration in addressing this problem. And it will take place at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and it's scheduled to begin at noon. Scott Stanzel in our office will have more for you if you need that.

Also I have a scheduling update for you for the 20th, which will be, obviously, our last day, Inauguration Day. President Bush will depart from Andrews Air Force Base and head to Midland, Texas, where he will participate in a welcome home event in Centennial Plaza, which is the town square. And you'll recall that Midland is where the send-off event for President-Elect and Mrs. Bush took place in January of 2001.

Following the event, the President will fly to Waco, Texas, and then will spend the night at his ranch in Crawford. And as we get more details on that I'll be happy to provide them for you.

Ben.

Q: Hi, Dana. Two questions. Israel has apparently ordered a pause in its offensive in Gaza, but has not yet fully embraced a cease-fire negotiated by the Egyptians and the French. What, if anything, is the U.S. doing to encourage Israel to accept that full cease-fire?

MS. PERINO: Well, there are two different things here. As you know, Secretary Rice went to New York yesterday. She spent all day long meeting with foreign ministers and talking with the Israelis. She was working through the night on the phone, into the early hours of the morning. The pause in the activity was for humanitarian assistance to be able to make its way to the people of Gaza. This is something Secretary Rice worked with the Israelis on overnight. The Israelis made a formal announcement today. And so I think that that will happen from time to time, that there will be a pause to allow some humanitarian aid, but I'll let the Israelis describe that more.

When it comes to what the French and the Egyptians talked about yesterday, as I understand it, the Israelis are open to the concept, but they want to learn more of the details — so do we, and

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that's what Secretary Rice is working on right now in New York.

Q: And as it relates to the meeting of the Presidents today, specifically the one between President-Elect Obama and President Bush, obviously this is a time of transition, a lot of symbolism there, but it also comes at a time of deep strife in the Middle East and the economic crisis. What would you expect President Bush would like to get out of that meeting? Do you expect the two leaders to talk about some sort of way forward in the waning days?

MS. PERINO: President Bush and President-Elect Obama have developed a good relationship, and I'm sure that it will be deepened today. But one of the reasons that they've developed that good relationship is that they've been able to keep their conversations private, and I leave that, as well.

But, of course, I can't imagine that there would be a meeting today where they don't talk about the challenges in the Middle East. Every one of these Presidents has dealt with the challenges there as they've evolved over time. And given that the economy is number one on everyone's priority list, as well as here domestically, I'm sure they'll talk about, as well.

Q: There is a report today that the President also met, or is meeting with Senator Biden, in advance of his trip to South Asia, which is being widely interpreted as some sort of signal from the new administration, at least in many parts of the world, in spite of the fact that he's going as the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Was this a coordination of views meeting?

MS. PERINO: I will check. I know that President Bush, 41, he stayed the night here last night. He's actually meeting with Vice President-Elect Biden right now. They're having a chance to get together. Let me check on the meeting with President Bush and see if I can get back to you, because I don't know a lot about that.

Q: Dana, I just have a follow-up to what Ben was asking. I mean, is today's meeting more personal, or more political?

MS. PERINO: I don't think — I think when Presidents meet, they can talk about anything that they want. And I'm sure that there will be time to talk about issues that are facing the country currently, issues that they think might face the country in the future. But I'm sure they'll also have a chance to talk about experiences and memories that they have in the White House, both on the personal side such as raising a family in the public eye and raising a family in the White House, and also what it's like to be in the post-presidency, as President Bush is about to experience in about 12 days.

Q: How long is the lunch slated to go?

MS. PERINO: I think it's an hour.

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Q: An hour.

MS. PERINO: It's in the Private Dining Room, and they will order off of the menu.

Q: And then, at the time of that meeting, is there a time, then, for the senior staff to the incoming and outgoing administrations to meet, during the meeting with President-Elect Obama?

MS. PERINO: I'm not sure what people are planning. I know that I'm going to have a chance to talk to Robert Gibbs. I know that's my personal plan, but I didn't check in with every member of the senior staff. But as I said yesterday, because the Obama team has been able to identify the people that they want to serve in their administration, their counterparts in the current administration have been able to reach out to them. And I think that everything is going smoothly on that front.

Q: A follow-up to the Mideast question. Is there anything more that the U.S. can do to achieve a cease-fire in Gaza?

MS. PERINO: What we are looking — the United States is deeply concerned about the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza. And that's one of the reasons that Secretary Rice has been working around the clock, and especially last night, literally around the clock, to work with the Israelis and also her counterparts around the world.

We need urgently to conclude some sort of a cease-fire agreement that will be lasting, that would endure, and that would make sure that we can identify the three things that we wanted to do yesterday, that I mentioned yesterday, which is stop the rocket attacks, stop the smuggling, and also figure out a way to reopen that border in a way that's consistent with the 2005 access agreement.

Q: Do you have a timeline at all in mind?

MS. PERINO: Look, she worked around the clock. We're working to do it as fast as we possibly can, but there's a lot of other actors here, as well. The easiest thing to stop the situation would be for Hamas to stop sending rockets into Israel. I think there were 35 that were sent from Gaza into Israel yesterday, and if that was to halt, I think a cease-fire would be something that would be achieved much more quickly than if they don't.

Q: — stop the bombarding of the innocent Palestinians. The U.S. has not called for anything and the President gave the green light for this slaughter.

MS. PERINO: First and foremost, the Israelis did not ask the United States' permission. I do not believe that the —

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Q: They didn't ask permission, but they got the backing.

MS. PERINO: I do not believe the that Israelis are targeting innocent civilians. But we do know that innocent civilians have been caught up in this fighting, and that's why we are concerned about it. And they have halted —

Q: They're not caught up, they're being bombarded.

MS. PERINO: I think they are caught up in it. And I — it's a terrible situation. You have one — I think over a million people living in a very small area. The best thing that they could do for themselves is to have their leaders make a decision to renounce terror and violence, and at least, at the very least, to stop sending the rockets right now so that a cease-fire could be put in place that could be lasting.

Q: How about the U.S. vetoing any attempt for a cease-fire?

MS. PERINO: What we are seeking is a cease-fire that would actually last. I think the worst thing that we could have is to have this vicious cycle continue.

Q: Why? Stop the killing.

MS. PERINO: Well, would you say the same, that Hamas should stop the killing of innocent Israelis?

Q: Of course.

MS. PERINO: Okay. Well, it's going to take two to tango here. And we need Hamas to make a decision —

Q: But you won't even to talk to Hamas.

MS. PERINO: Well, as you know, the Egyptians have been and we've been working with them, and Secretary Rice is talking with all of her counterparts.

We do have, right now, a lull in the fighting, a halt to the fighting, so that more humanitarian aid can get to the people — because it's not just the United States that's concerned about the humanitarian situation. Clearly the Arab world is — but so are the Israelis. And that's why they're allowing humanitarian aid to get there. I think one of the things that they've been concerned about is that Hamas has been known to commandeer this aid and send it directly to their forces and not to the people who actually need it.

Q: They're the elected government there.

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MS. PERINO: They are neglecting to govern there.

Q: They are elected, but the Israelis continue to occupy all the checkpoints.

MS. PERINO: But they — they can be elected to govern, but they are neglecting to do so. And that is why the Gazans have been held hostage for the past year and a half, ever since Hamas decided to take over Gaza in the coup in 2007. And the humanitarian situation there was not great before this.

Q: And the U.S. broke off all relations once they won an election.

MS. PERINO: No, we didn't talk to — well, we didn't break off relations then, we have never had a relationship with Hamas.

Q: All aid, all aid.

MS. PERINO: That is not true. The United States does provide aid through the United Nations for the people of Gaza, a lot of it.

Wendell.

Q: Dana, the '05 agreement on reopening the borders between Gaza and Israel envisions Palestinian Authority monitors. Is that still the goal? And how is that likely to sit with Hamas?

MS. PERINO: Secretary Rice says as much yesterday, that our goal is the stabilization and normalization of life in Gaza, and the return of the authority of President Abbas, who is the President of all Palestinians, for the cease-fire to actually take hold and for there to be any prospect of peace in the future.

Q: So part of our aim in reopening the borders is to extend, if you will, President Abbas' authority to Gaza.

MS. PERINO: He is the President of all Palestinians. He obviously is one that doesn't govern through terror; he governs through a democratic process. And ultimately, yes, that's what we'd like. But our immediate focus is an attempt to try to get Hamas to stop sending the rockets into Israel so that we can have a durable cease-fire.

Q: If I could follow up on that. Apparently, there's a concern about the proposal negotiated by Egyptians and the French that it could confer some legitimacy to Hamas. Is that something that would prevent the U.S. from supporting the negotiated peace plan?

MS. PERINO: I think I just have to repeat that we're interested in learning more about the

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discussions that the French had with the Egyptians, and until we know more, I think I'll decline to comment any further publicly. I think I'll let Secretary Rice do that — or if I have more for you, I'll send around an update.

Sir.

Q: We have heard a lot about President Bush's position on Gaza and Israel. We have heard much less from the President-elect, but you have heard much more than we do. What I had heard in June from him in Israel, or later from that administration sounds to me pretty similar to what the Bush administration is saying. But you have more insight. From your point of view, do you see any —

MS. PERINO: What makes you think that?

Q: Well, you talk to his counterparts, as you explained — to the counterparts in the Obama upcoming administration —

MS. PERINO: Even if I had more insight, it would be highly inappropriate for me to comment on it from this podium. I'll let the President-elect's team speak for themselves.

Q: Oh, I don't want a comment, I just — from your point of view, do you see any indication that there's a significant difference between the positions —

MS. PERINO: So you've been here long enough to know that you don't really want a comment on that, but if I comment on it, it would be a comment on that. So I'm just not going to do it. (Laughter.)

Okay, Goyal.

Q: Two questions, Dana —thank you. As far as Senator Biden's visit to South Asia, which he will be — he'll do as Vice President, and now India — have said that Pakistan had a hand in the Mumbai attacks. Now actions should we take as far as terrorism is going on?

MS. PERINO: And your question?

Q: Do you think this is in connection in some way that maybe he has some kind of consultation from here?

MS. PERINO: I think the best thing for me to do is to let the Vice President-elect speak for himself when it comes to his trip. But I will find out about the meeting today.

Q: And second, as far as terrorism in U.S. or in India or in Israel, have we ever go or do we ever go

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at the bottom where those weapons and rockets and those terrorists get financing come from?

MS. PERINO: I think that terror financing and disrupting it is something that is a hallmark of our administration, something we're very proud of, and something that the next administration will be able to take advantage of because we have all the mechanisms in place.

Q: Thanks.

END 9:55 A.M. EST