

Rice warns Syria to steer clear of Lebanon's internal politics

Contributed by AP, State Department
 Sunday, 04 November 2007
 Last Updated Sunday, 04 November 2007

"repeated US demands that Syria steer clear of Lebanon's internal politics"

By ASSOCIATED PRESS
 DAMASCUS, Syria - November 4, 2007

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeated US demands that Syria steer clear of Lebanon's internal politics during a rare meeting Saturday with her Syrian counterpart, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, on the sidelines of a conference on Iraq in Istanbul, Turkey.

"I made quite clear that ... it was expected that Syria was going to adhere to its international obligations not to interfere, to allow Lebanon to have a constitutional process for the ... election of a president, and that it was also the expectation of everyone that there would be no intimidation," Rice told reporters after leaving the conference.

In response, al-Moallem said Syria supported Lebanese attempts to elect a new president without foreign interference, according to the official news agency SANA.

 Syria, US Spar Over Lebanon

Sunday November 4, 2007 3:01 AM

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) - The U.S. and Syria sparred over Lebanon Saturday, warning each other not to interfere in the country's upcoming presidential election.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had a rare meeting with her Syrian counterpart, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, on the sidelines of a conference on Iraq in Istanbul, Turkey. She repeated U.S. demands that Syria steer clear of Lebanon's internal politics.

"I made quite clear that ... it was expected that Syria was going to adhere to its international obligations not to interfere, to allow Lebanon to have a constitutional process for the ... election of a president, and that it was also the expectation of everyone that there would be no intimidation," Rice told reporters after leaving the conference.

In response, al-Moallem said Syria supported Lebanese attempts to elect a new president without foreign interference, according to the official news agency SANA.

Despite marathon discussions between pro-government and opposition leaders in the parliament, the two groups have made no headway in electing a new president to prevent a power vacuum or the formation of two rival administrations.

With time running out, the election has become a showdown between Iran and Syria, who back the opposition, and the United States and its European allies, who support the parliamentary majority and Prime Minister Fuad Saniora's government. The U.S. accuses Syria and Iran of interfering in Lebanese affairs and backing attempts to topple Saniora.

Syria dominated its smaller neighbor for nearly 30 years before it was forced by international pressure to withdraw its tens of thousands of troops from Lebanon in 2005.

Parliament is scheduled to make another attempt to elect a president on Nov. 12, but as with the two previous attempts in September and October, the government and the opposition have been unable to reach a compromise ahead of the session. Failure to pick a leader to replace pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, whose term expires Nov. 24, could throw the country into further political chaos.

SANA quoted al-Moallem as saying that "any attempt to tailor make the new president will be considered an interference in the domestic affairs of Lebanon," an apparent reference to comments Rice made Thursday outlining U.S. and European requirements for the next Lebanese leader.

Rice said Lebanon's next president must be committed to constitutional order, support U.N. Security Council resolutions aimed at ensuring the country's sovereignty, and commit to seeing through a tribunal for the suspects in the 2005 killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Syria was widely blamed for the assassination but denied it.

Syria's state-run Tishrin newspaper explicitly criticized Rice for these statements earlier Saturday.

“Condoleezza Rice speaks about Lebanon as if it is an American state,” said the paper, which reflects government thinking. “The immoral and blunt U.S. interference in Lebanon's internal affairs has been clearly demonstrated,” it added.

From the State Department

On-The-Record Briefing
Secretary Condoleezza Rice
Tel Aviv, Israel
November 3, 2007

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QUESTION: In your conversation with the Foreign Minister today, did you speak to him quite firmly about Lebanon and what you think Syria should be doing?

SECRETARY RICE: I spoke to him quite firmly about Lebanon. I made very clear that everybody was watching, that it was expected that Syria was going to adhere to its international obligations not to interfere, to allow Lebanon to continue to have a constitutional process for the election of a -- election of a president, and that it was also the expectation of everyone that there would be no intimidation and, as I said, interference.

And by the way, we then met the group -- which was Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the United States, France and the Arab League -- and we prepared a statement that says essentially what I just said to you. That statement will be releasable pretty soon. We'd like to deliver -- it's going to be delivered to the Syrians on behalf of all of us. We had hoped that the Syrians were still around; we would have liked to have delivered it in person.

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2007/T18-6

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/11/94584.htm>
