



March 24, 2002

The Vice President Appears on Late Edition (CNN)

WOLF BLITZER, CNN ANCHOR: It's noon in Washington; 9:00 a.m. in Hollywood; 11:00 a.m. in San Salvador; and 7:00 p.m. in Jerusalem. Wherever you're watching from around the world, thanks for joining us for Late Edition.

We'll get to our special interview with the vice president, Dick Cheney, in just a few minutes. But first, a news alert.

(NEWSBREAK)

BLITZER: As we just saw live here on CNN, President Bush has arrived in El Salvador to meet with President Francisco Flores. He'll be holding a joint news conference with the El Salvador president in about two hours or so. We're looking at live pictures now of the arrival ceremony in San Salvador. When that news conference occurs, we will bring that to you live.

Meanwhile, while the president is turning some of his attention to the United States' southern neighbors, the war against terrorism, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, remain very much at the top of his agenda.

Earlier today I spoke with the vice president, Dick Cheney, about his recent trip to the Middle East and much more.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

BLITZER: Mr. Vice President, thanks so much for joining us.

DICK CHENEY, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: You're welcome.

BLITZER: Are you going back to the Middle East? That's the key question right now.

CHENEY: Well, I imagine I will at some point, but there's nothing currently scheduled.

BLITZER: What about this meeting that's going right now between General Zinni, the special U.S. envoy, the Israelis and the Palestinians? Is it possible that as early as today or tomorrow you could be going back?

CHENEY: Well, remember what the proposition here is, Wolf. General Zinni is there as our emissary. He's presiding over what are called trilateral security meetings. This is an effort to get the two sides to come together and agree upon a specific plan for the implementation of the so-called Tenet work place, if you will.

What we've said is that if Arafat will get actively into that plan, actually implement and begin to make progress, put out the kind of effort that we haven't seen up until now, in terms of the provisions that are required in Tenet, then I'd be prepared to meet with him. But to date, they have not gotten to that point yet.

BLITZER: But you're still waiting for a final word from General Zinni?

CHENEY: Well, I talked with General Zinni as recently as last night. General Powell and I talk daily on the subject. This is just one more piece, if you will, of the whole proposition. I wouldn't overdo it, in the sense that somehow everybody is focused in on this is the be all and end all of the process; it's not. It's a part of the process.

If, in fact, Arafat will do what he's, in the past, said he will do, if he'll actually deliver on the Tenet plan, if he'll move to put a lid on the violence and do what's required in Tenet -- for example, sharing of intelligence information,

taking responsibility for securing their own area so attacks can't be launched against the Israelis and vice versa. If, in fact, those steps are actually implemented, then at that point I'll be prepared to meet with Mr. Arafat. To date, that hasn't happened, and therefore there's no meeting currently scheduled.

BLITZER: How much of a pressure point is the fact that the Arab summit occurs in Beirut later this week, Wednesday and Thursday, and Arafat certainly would like to go?

CHENEY: Well, he would like to go, but that's really independent of whether or not he meets with me.

That summit's been scheduled for some time. There will be an issue, obviously, of whether or not he is allowed out by the Israelis to attend the summit.

BLITZER: Should they let him go?

CHENEY: Well, the Israeli government's apparently split on it. Peres is quoted this morning as saying he thinks he should be allowed to go. I think Prime Minister Sharon has some reservations.

It's our general view that the summit has the potential to make a positive contribution if they can focus on the proposal put forward by Crown Prince Abdullah from Saudi Arabia that talks about basically land for peace, retreat to the '67 borders and normalization of relations of all the Arab nations with Israel. If that's the focus, we think it will be a positive event. If Arafat's not there, one of the concerns is that that will mean that the focus will be on the fact that he's not there, and you won't get as much done that's productive as would otherwise be the case.

BLITZER: So you would like him to go, basically?

CHENEY: I think the general view is that we'd be better off if he went than if he didn't go.

BLITZER: There's some speculation in Israel, if Sharon lets him go, he might not let him come back in to the West Bank or Gaza. Would that be an obstacle if that were (OFF-MIKE)

CHENEY: Well, I -- let's, you know -- we aren't at that point yet where we have to address that issue. I've seen the speculation. I can't obviously can't speak for the Israeli government on that.

BLITZER: Getting back to your potential meeting with Arafat, as you know, the president and you have refused to meet with him so far. Fifty-two senators signed a letter the other day urging you not to meet with him, among other things. Democrats and Republicans said, "Until Mr. Arafat and the Palestinian Authority demonstrate their commitment to end the violence, we urge that the vice president reconsider his offer to meet with Mr. Arafat."

CHENEY: That's exactly what we said. Obviously they didn't watch the press conference where we announced this proposition. The potential of a meeting for me with Arafat is something that was worked out in conjunction with both -- and signed up to both by the Israelis and the Palestinians.

CHENEY: And was announced at a press conference in Jerusalem, where we laid out all those conditions.

I mean, I'm glad to see so many members of Congress signing on for that, but the proposition they put forward is basically the proposition we laid out: Unless and until Arafat does in fact comply and moves to actually implement the Tenet plan and all that that entails, in terms of moving to a cease-fire and actively engaged in those issues, there won't be a meeting. And that's been true from the very beginning.

BLITZER: And as of right now, there is not going to be a meeting?

CHENEY: As of right now, there's no meeting scheduled.

BLITZER: All right. Let's talk about the control that Arafat may or may not have over Palestinian militants, presumably the Fatah movement al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade which has recently claimed credit for several suicide bombing attacks against Israelis.

Does Arafat control the situation?

CHENEY: No. I think it's important to recall a little history here, Wolf, and that is at the time of following the Oslo accords, there was an exchange of letters between Arafat and then Prime Minister Rabin in Israel. And at that time, a specific agreement was worked out in which Arafat renounced violence, agreed to enter into peace negotiations, agreed to take the responsibility for the Palestinian areas.

And there was arrangements made -- arrangements were made for Palestinian Authority security force, 30,000 strong. It was specified how many men, what kind of weapons they would have. But their responsibilities were to provide security in those areas that the Israelis were not actually occupying with respect to the West Bank and Gaza.

Clearly we've come a long way from that because that hasn't happened. In effect, that accord's never been effectively implemented, certainly not at this stage.

We come back again to the basic proposition: We've got to find some way to end the violence. We've got to find some way to get back on the process of negotiations.

The proposal that everybody signed up to on both sides was the so-called Tenet plan last summer, and what we're trying to do now is implement Tenet plan. And if and when Arafat does not just agree to that, but actually begins to implement it and move toward a cease-fire along with the Israelis -- both sides have obligations and responsibilities under that -- then I'm prepared to meet with Arafat, but not until.

BLITZER: Because, specifically, I want to play for you what the president said on Thursday in El Paso, Texas, on the whole issue of terrorism. Just listen to this. He has said this before but specifically referring to what's happening in the West Bank and Gaza.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: If you harbor a terrorist, if you hide a terrorist, if you feed terrorist, you're just as guilty as the terrorist himself.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Now, the Israelis and many of their supporters say that's presumably -- that's precisely what Arafat is doing. He's harboring terrorists within his own al-Aqsa Brigade.

CHENEY: We made it very, very clear that we expect out of Arafat a 100 percent effort to put an end to terrorist attacks -- suicide bombings, attacks that are sanctioned or authorized or organized by any of those groups.

Clearly, he has more control over some of those groups than he does others. And there's always the possibility that there will be some independent actor launching a suicide or a terrorist attack. And there are organizations, such as Hezbollah for example, which are absolutely devoted to the proposition of trying to destroy the peace process.

But until we've seen real live, honest-to-goodness, on-the-ground performance, there won't be any meetings.

BLITZER: And you haven't seen that.

CHENEY: We haven't seen it yet.

BLITZER: Some of the criticism, Bill Bennett, a Republican, conservative wrote in The Washington Post this week, speaking about the pressure recently put on the Sharon government in Israel. He wrote, "The administration's policy in the Middle East just took a dramatic turn in the wrong direction. This turn at once marks a concession to terrorism and a violation of principle."

Those are strong words coming from a fellow conservative, who doesn't like the fact that you called Sharon's policies "not helpful."

CHENEY: Well, I just disagree with Bill. I think he's wrong. I think, again, that we've got to do the best job we can of trying to facilitate some kind of an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians and getting back to Tenet and Mitchell. It ain't easy. It's one of the toughest, most difficult, impractical problems I've ever seen.

But we've got a very good man out there in General Zinni, who has taken on the assignment, very difficult assignment, of trying to broker actual implementation of the Tenet accords so we can get on to Mitchell. He needs to be supported.

We're doing everything we can to support him. The president's actively engaged. Secretary Powell's actively engaged in talking with both sides. And we need to do everything we can to get on with it, because of course, the loss of life is tragic, and the prospects for peace recede every day that we're not able to actually engage on the Tenet and Mitchell plans.

BLITZER: There's a front-page story in the New York Times today quoting Israeli and U.S. intelligence sources as saying there's a very strong connection between Iran and the Palestinian Authority -- not just the Karine A, the ship with about 50 tons of weapons that were seized by the Israelis, but a lot of other support, money, cooperation going back and forth.

How serious of a problem is that? Is it true, first of all?

CHENEY: Well, first of all, I wouldn't comment one way or the other about an intelligence story or stories based on alleged intelligence sources. That's a -- it would be inappropriate for me to do that.

We do know, based on the incident, the Karine A, earlier, several months ago, that in fact there were arms, acquired in Iran, being shipped through Hezbollah to elements of the Palestinian Authority. That was clear. And we spoke out about it at the time. We made it abundantly clear to Arafat and everybody else involved that that was unacceptable.

Now whether or not there's a deeper level of involvement there, I don't know. We'll have to see. Obviously, it would be of great concern.

The Karine A was of great concern, because it demonstrated that Arafat, at a time when he supposedly is interested in engaging and getting something going on the peace process, was acquiescing at least in the shipment of arms and doing business with the Iranians.

But we need to get on with the Tenet and Mitchell processes aggressively as we know how.

BLITZER: And is that in part because, without that, you're not going to be able to generate the support for action against Iraq, if it comes down to that?

On your most recent trip to the region, most of these moderate Arab leaders with whom you met were not very enthusiastic about a U.S. strike against Iraq. King Abdullah of Jordan said, "To attack Baghdad now would be a disaster." Crown Prince Abdullah said, "I do not believe it is in the United States' interest or the interest of the region or the world's interest to do so."

Those are pretty strong recommendations for you to hold back on Iraq.

CHENEY: But I -- the world's a lot more complicated than that, Wolf. And there's a great temptation to say, you know, "If A, then B." We try to connect these things up in our mind.

There's no question but that there's a high level of concern throughout the region about the situation and the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. It's not surprising King Abdullah of Jordan should be concerned; he lives right next door. He's got 60 percent of his population is Palestinian. His father's regime was almost overthrown by the PLO back in 1970, and there's a long history there.

On the other side, he's bracketed by Iraq and Saddam Hussein. What I would say is that our friends in the region are equally concerned about the problems we see in Iraq, specifically the development of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein, his refusal to comply with the U.N. Security Council Resolution 687, which he signed up to at the end of the Gulf War, which said he would get rid of all his weapons of mass destruction.

BLITZER: Are you still committed to trying to get U.N. weapons inspection teams back into Iraq? Because, as you know, some critics -- Senator Fred Thompson, for example -- said that would be a waste, that they're just going to give a runaround.

CHENEY: What we said, Wolf, if you go back and look at the record is, the issue's not inspectors. The issue is that he has chemical weapons and he's used them. The issue is that he's developing and has biological weapons. The issue is that he's pursuing nuclear weapons.

It's the weapons of mass destruction and what he's already done with them. There's a devastating story in this week's New Yorker magazine on his use of chemical weapons against the Kurds of northern Iraq back in 1988; may have hit as many 200 separate towns and villages. Killed upwards of 100,000 people, according to the article if it's to be believed.

This is a man of great evil, as the president said. And he is actively pursuing nuclear weapons at this time, and we think that's cause for concern for us and for everybody in the region. And I found during the course of my travels that it is indeed a problem of great concern for our friends out there as well too.

So the U.S. doesn't have a choice of saying, well, we're going to worry about Israeli-Palestinian peace or we're going to worry about Saddam Hussein. We've got to do it all.

BLITZER: How much time does Saddam Hussein have?

CHENEY: I can't say, I can't make a prediction on something like that. He knows we're deadly serious. Our friends and allies in the region know we're deadly serious and that we do need to find a way to address this problem.

BLITZER: Is Al Qaeda regrouping, the Taliban-Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan right now, are they regrouping?

CHENEY: Regrouping.

BLITZER: Poised to take action against the U.S. and other...

CHENEY: Well, they clearly would like to. And we see movement. We saw, obviously, a coalescing of a group in the area where we launched Operation Anaconda a couple of weeks ago, and very successfully eliminated a big chunk of the Al Qaeda.

CHENEY: There are still Al Qaeda scattered around Afghanistan. There are, I'm sure, going to be efforts by them to try to organize themselves enough so that they can launch an attack at least on our forces in Afghanistan. We see intelligence to that effect.

This effort's going last for some considerable period of time. There's a temptation, I think, because there's not an active bombing campaign under way on any particular day, for people who want to run out and say, well, it's over with. It's not. This is a long-term commitment. We have to make certain we get a good government stood up in Afghanistan, that it can never again become a sanctuary for a terrorist organization like Al Qaeda.

BLITZER: Is it your best assessment right now that the anthrax attacks late last year in the United States were the work of domestic American terrorists, or perhaps Al Qaeda foreign terrorists?

CHENEY: We don't know. Clearly, there's a robust investigation under way by the FBI, but at this point I don't think we know enough to draw a conclusion.

We're running down every lead. You can find evidence to support a variety of points of view. But at this point I'd

say that, at least as far as I'm concerned and what I've seen, and I get briefed on a regular basis, I don't think we can decide or determine yet exactly where it came from.

BLITZER: And your best assessment where Osama bin Laden is right now?

CHENEY: I think he's still in the area of Afghanistan, maybe across the border in Pakistan someplace, but I think he's still out in the general area.

BLITZER: Still alive.

CHENEY: If he's not dead. But we don't know. But obviously, we'd like to wrap him up; I expect we probably will. But we've had enormous success at taking down the Taliban, wrapping up the Al Qaeda organization. I think the Afghan campaign's been a great success story for U.S. military forces and for the president's leadership.

BLITZER: I'm going to let you go now. But before I let you go, how are you feeling?

CHENEY: Good. You should have been with me on that trip, Wolf. We missed you.

BLITZER: You didn't invite me.

CHENEY: Next time.

BLITZER: All right. Thanks for joining us.

CHENEY: Good to see you.

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