

THE WHITE HOUSE

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PRESS GAGGLE
BY
ARI FLEISCHER

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

9:34 A.M. EDT

MR. FLEISCHER: Good morning. The President began this morning with his intelligence briefing, then had an FBI briefing. At 10:40 a.m. this morning the President will tour a Head Start Center at the Highland Park Elementary School in Washington, and then he will make remarks on early childhood development. He will urge Congress to take action to reauthorize the Head Start program. This is something that the President feels very strongly about as an important way to help children get on with early development and early learning, particularly with early reading.

He wants to make sure that in addition to giving children the right nutrition and regular medical care, that Head Start serves as a platform from which students can begin to read and learn at a very young age. Based on science, he knows it can be done. He wants to make sure we're doing everything we can to improve education for our children. That will be the tenor of his remarks.

Then he will return to the White House. Then he will depart this evening for his trip to Africa. That's it on the President's agenda. So, with that, I'm all yours.

Q What is the President's thinking at this stage about sending peacekeepers to Liberia?

MR. FLEISCHER: The assessment team has landed on the ground and the President awaits their reports. They will engage in a number of conversations with regional -- with nations in the region. And we have not yet received their reports back. We will await their reports before the President makes any call.

Q Do you think it could be a number of days?

MR. FLEISCHER: I am going to try to get you some type of update on timing later. What I will try to do is we'll let you know if something can be ruled in or ruled out, in terms of today, at least. I don't know the answer to that yet, I've asked -- I anticipate I will have a handle on that shortly, and we'll spread the word.

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Q How quickly the team expected to file its report, or is there a deadline for its report?

MR. FLEISCHER: You need to ask DOD for how much time they anticipate it will take. These are DOD officials, they are DOD experts and the President did not impose a timetable on them. He will allow them the time that they think is necessary to do it right.

Q How quickly does he want the information to come back, given the gravity of the situation inside Liberia?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, he wants it to come back in a way that makes certain that it's accurate and it is thorough. So, again, he has not imposed a timetable on the team.

Q Will this be primarily a strategic mission, to put peacekeepers in Liberia, that we have strategic worries? Or is it a moral mission that we have an obligation to Liberia, given the history of the country? Or is it both?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's both. The President said that during his roundtables last week.

Q Are you still talking about peacekeeping, per se, or have you -- is the sense that perhaps they would go on more of a humanitarian -- to help assist in humanitarian needs?

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, I'm not going to speculate about what the mission will be for a force that has not yet been decided on whether it will or will not be sent. So I think this is why the assessment team is on the ground, to determine what is necessary and I can't predict what the outcome will be.

Q On Taylor's statement yesterday, is that encouraging to you or -- and do you have any sense from --

MR. FLEISCHER: In recent days he's now twice indicated that he will leave. This remains encouraging, but at the end of the day it still remains essential that he leave, that actions follow words -- this is a question of deeds.

So it remains encouraging, but the President will still wait and see to make certain that he does, indeed, go. That is a vital first step in order for stability to be maintained.

Q "Wait and see" meaning wait and see before any troops could go in? Is that what you mean by "wait and see"?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President has always said what is essential is for, first, Mr. Taylor to leave, so that stability can be achieved.

Q Ari, three more soldiers, American soldiers have lost their life in the last 24 hours. What can be done? It seems to be a daily occurrence.

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MR. FLEISCHER: What can be done is the continued dedication to fighting these elements that are loyal to Saddam Hussein or who are interested in bringing harm to the American military.

It's important to recognize that these people are the worst enemies of the Iraqi people. Those who engage in the murder of American military personnel, who are there to help reconstruct Iraq, do great harm to the Iraqi people. There are a number of them operating in a limited area. Their actions are at odds with the situation in most of the rest of Iraq, where the reconstruction efforts are accelerating, where conditions are peaceful. But there are certain very bad neighborhoods in one particular region where it is a dangerous, dangerous place. And the American military is there in a dangerous mission to help bring stability to the Iraqi people, and they will remain dedicated to achieving that mission.

Q Ari, Senator Warner said yesterday that he'd like an up or down vote in Congress before the President commits troops to Liberia. Is that something you all will seek or think is necessary?

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, the President has made no decision. The President will, as required by the law, engage in all the appropriate consultations. But the President has not made a decision about sending anybody yet so I can't, again, speculate about every action that will or will not happen. But the President will consult.

Q Ari, a little bit more on Charles Taylor. In the discussions with the President of Nigeria, is the asylum that is being talked about -- and apparently awkward -- temporary? Was there a deal made where he will not be tried as a war criminal? And did he give the President of Nigeria and President Bush any definitive timetable as to when he is going to step down?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm still working off of the media reports about what Mr. Taylor has said. I don't know, Michael, if we did get official confirmation from the embassy in Liberia about Mr. Taylor's statements. But, nevertheless, I have no reason to doubt the media reports, let me put it that way.

And, again, these are encouraging reports that have to be followed by deeds.

Q No deal cut on not trying him as a war criminal?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, the first step is for him to leave. He hasn't left yet, so let events take their course.

Q Going back on Iraq, what is the President's thought on -- realizing, of course, that the military is conducting a review of whether more troops are needed -- but what is the President's position if they should say more troops are needed? Would he rule out the possibility of calling up more reserves or --

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, General Myers addressed this yesterday and his statement was that he's in regular contact to make sure that they have every resource that they need. It's an ongoing part of the mission to

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constantly review needs and General Myers did not indicate there would be any changes at this time. So the President delegates these matters to the Department of Defense. They review it on a regular basis to make certain that they're doing everything necessary.

Q But the President wouldn't rule out the possibility of calling out more reserves, if they thought --

MR. FLEISCHER: According to General Myers, yesterday, it's not an issue for today so, I mean, there is nothing to speculate about.

Q Ari, is there any more to report on progress toward getting some other countries to send troops over to Iraq?

MR. FLEISCHER: Into Iraq?

Q Yes.

MR. FLEISCHER: The conversations continue with nations around the world and there are a host of integration issues that get dealt with, with this. And DOD has got the lead on that, as well as State, you may want to check with them.

Q Can I ask you a quick question on Head Start? There have been a lot of critics who say that the President's reforms in Head Start, or changes in the proposals going in, would kind of emasculate the existing program. What do you say to that?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, what's notable is when the President refers to some of the changes that he seeks in Head Start -- the President's changes are bipartisan, they're supported by the nation's governors, Democrat and Republican alike. Any criticism seems to be coming from only one party, and that's a liberal wing of one party.

And so the President is acting in a very bipartisan way as a governor -- as a former governor -- who is experienced in the Head Start program and how to make it the most effective to help children. The President has a long record of being a reformer and a leader in helping children to get the best education for public schools. And the nation's governors, on a bipartisan basis, are working with the President on this. So I dismiss those criticisms as coming from a very small, but liberal, faction. The President is pleased to be a bipartisan education leader and reformer who will continue to work with bipartisan governors to make Head Start do more for our children.

Q Can you give us the White House account of Ambassador Wilson's account of what happened when he went to Niger and investigated the suggestions that Niger was passing yellow cake to Iraq? I'm sure you saw the piece yesterday in The New York Times.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, there is zero, nada, nothing new here. Ambassador Wilson, other than the fact that now people know his name, has said all this before. But the fact of the matter is in his statements about the Vice President -- the Vice President's office did not request the mission to Niger. The Vice President's office was not informed of his

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mission and he was not aware of Mr. Wilson's mission until recent press accounts -- press reports accounted for it.

So this was something that the CIA undertook as part of their regular review of events, where they sent him. But they sent him on their own volition, and the Vice President's office did not request it. Now, we've long acknowledged -- and this is old news, we've said this repeatedly -- that the information on yellow cake did, indeed, turn out to be incorrect.

Q Ari, has it yet been determined whether or not the -- last week Saddam tape did contain the voice of Saddam Hussein?

MR. FLEISCHER: I will have to check with the CIA to get an update. I've received some preliminary information, but let me see if there any more final or more updated information, and if there is I will see what we can do with it.

Q Ari, going back to Iraq and additional forces, a number of lawmakers over the weekend said they wanted to see a sizable force under the NATO umbrella, not just individual commitments from other countries. Can you tell us at this point why the administration is still resistant to bring in NATO? Under NATO, tho -- Lord Robertson indicated he was still willing not just assisting Poland, but willing to go in with a sizable force if Washington would ask.

MR. FLEISCHER: We're having conversations with NATO. We would welcome NATO's participation.

Q A force, though, under the NATO umbrella?

MR. FLEISCHER: You mean putting the 150,000 American forces under NATO?

Q No, no, additional sizeable under NATO.

MR. FLEISCHER: We've never ruled out using NATO.

Q But are you making a request to NATO to use forces?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think we've had conversations with NATO about it. That's how these things develop. We've never had any objections to NATO.

Q But in terms of making an actual formal request?

MR. FLEISCHER: Obviously, NATO is about to take over the ISAF in Afghanistan. NATO has commitments. And we are continuing to have conversations. I was in the Oval Office meeting with the President when he met with Lord Robertson and they discussed whether NATO could have a role in Iraq. It's something that the United States is open to. It's something we're open to. We're talking to NATO about it. So, no, there is no reluctance there.

Q Ari, there is some concern that if there is too large a window between Charles Taylor's departure and the arrival of U.S. peacekeepers that it might embolden rebels in Liberia to charge the capital. Does the

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President have a message for the rebels in Liberia, and what's being done to prevent that from happening?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, there is a cease-fire that is in place and continues to hold. And I assure you that any actions that the President make take here, if he does decide to take, will be taken with an eye toward increasing stability. The President is cognizant of the moving pieces and sequencing of events. And if any action is taken, stability, security will be forefront in the President's mind.

Q I just want to take you back to your answer before, when you said you have long acknowledged that the information on yellow cake turned out to be incorrect. If I remember right, you only acknowledged the Niger part of it as being incorrect -- I think what the --

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct.

Q I think what the President said during his State of the Union was he --

MR. FLEISCHER: When I refer to yellow cake I refer to Niger. The question was on the context of Ambassador Wilson's mission.

Q So are you saying the President's broader reference to Africa, which included other countries that were named in the NIE, were those also incorrect?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think the President's statement in the State of the Union was much broader than the Niger question.

Q Is the President's statement correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm referring specifically to the Niger piece when I say that.

Q Do you hold that the President -- when you look at the totality of the sentence that the President uttered that day on the subject, are you confident that he was correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, I see nothing that goes broader that would indicate that there was no basis to the President's broader statement. But specifically on the yellow cake, the yellow cake for Niger, we've acknowledged that that information did turn out to be a forgery.

Q The President's statement was accurate?

MR. FLEISCHER: We see nothing that would dissuade us from the President's broader statement.

Q Ari, that means that, indeed, you all believe that Saddam Hussein was trying to obtain uranium from an African nation; is that correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: What the President said in his statement was that according to a British report they were trying to obtain uranium. When I answered the question it was, again, specifically about the Niger piece

involving yellow cake.

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Q So you believe the British report that he was trying to obtain uranium from an African nation is true?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm sorry?

Q If you're hanging on the British report, you believe that that British report was true, you have no reason to believe --

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm sorry, I see what David is asking. Let me back up on that and explain the President's statement again, or the answer to it.

The President's statement was based on the predicate of the yellow cake from Niger. The President made a broad statement. So given the fact that the report on the yellow cake did not turn out to be accurate, that is reflective of the President's broader statement, David. So, yes, the President's broader statement was based and predicated on the yellow cake from Niger.

Q So it was wrong?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's what we've acknowledged with the information on --

Q The President's statement at the State of the Union was incorrect?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because it was based on the yellow cake from Niger.

Q Well, wait a minute, but the explanation we've gotten before was it was based on Niger and the other African nations that have been named in the national intelligence --

MR. FLEISCHER: But, again, the information on -- the President did not have that information prior to his giving the State of the Union.

Q Which gets to the crux of what Ambassador Wilson is now alleging -- that he provided this information to the State Department and the CIA 11 months before the State of the Union and he is amazed that it, nonetheless, made it into the State of the Union address. He believes that that information was deliberately ignored by the White House. Your response to that?

MR. FLEISCHER: And that's way, again, he's making the statement that -- he is saying that surely the Vice President must have known, or the White House must have known. And that's not the case, prior to the State of the Union.

Q He's saying that surely people at the decision-making level within the NSC would have known the information which he -- passed on to both the State Department and the CIA.

MR. FLEISCHER: And the information about the yellow cake and Niger was not specifically known prior to the State of the Union by the White

House.

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Q What does that say about communications?

MR. FLEISCHER: We've acknowledged that the information turned out to be bogus involving the report on the yellow cake. That is not new. You can go back. You can look it up. Dr. Rice has said it repeatedly. I've said it repeatedly. It's been said from this podium on the record, in several instances. It's been said to many of you in this room, specifically.

Q But, Ari, even if you said that the Niger thing was wrong, the next line has usually been that the President's statement was deliberately broader than Niger, it referred to all of Africa. The national intelligence estimate discusses other countries in Africa that there were attempts to purchase yellow cake from, or other sources of uranium --

MR. FLEISCHER: Let me do this, David. On your specific question I'm going to come back and post the specific answer on the broader statement on the speech.

Last one?

All right, no last one. I'll accept that. No briefing today. So we will see you -- I guess we won't see you in Africa.

Q -- will you post something later?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'll just get the word out. If you don't hear from me, just assume that there is nothing new that moves the ball today.

END

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