January 30, 2001: Religious Freedom and the Civil War in Sudan Press Conference

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(left to right): Congressman Joseph R. Pitts (R-PA), Former Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice, and Commission Chairman Elliott Abrams.

Participants:
Elliott Abrams, Chairman, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; Dr. Susan Rice, Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; Congressman Joseph Pitts; and Congressman Frank Wolf

Transcript:

Rep. Joseph Pitts. From what we have heard of the bombings of schools, hospitals, and churches, the active slave trade, the persecution of religious minorities, basically are human rights issues that we have heard about from people like Frank Wolf, and Senator Brownback and the Human Rights Caucus, so that has generated a lot of interest, I think in our conference. We seek to do something about correcting those abuses.

Question: Is there a particular religious nature of the conflicts in Sudan and (inaudible)?

Rep.
Pitts. Well, it is a matter of religious freedom. The Commission here has given us a very good report with some very good suggestions and reported a lot of these atrocities that are occurring on the population in the South and that perhaps is one of their major angles or interests, but it is broader than that. It is a human rights issue. When you talk about slavery and bombing, not just the Christian but the animist South, it transcends just religious freedom.

Q:
Niells Sorrells, CQ Daily Monitor. Last year there was legislation on relief in Sudan and it got held up basically in the Senate which did not include sanctions and the House did have sanctions. I was curious what you see happening this year in terms of sanctions. Do you see the two sides working it out? What's your standpoint?

Rep.
Pitts. I really can't answer, we've got new subcommittee chairmen, new committee assignments, I don't know if Frank has any angle - (Rep. Frank Wolf - "I don't know"). At this point I can't, we haven't even met as committees yet.

Q: Steve Coleman, Associated
Press. What have you learned from this new briefing that you hadn't known before? What's the latest from Sudan?

Elliot
Abrams. Well, I had not had heard any account of Secretary Rice's trip and what she found, particularly with respect to the intensification of the bombing in Bahr al- Ghazal and particularly her own experience finding people who clearly were by any reasonable definition of the term, in slavery. That's new. And she then also laid out some thoughts about potential policy options over the next few years, that I think everybody would, found quite interesting and that any new administration would have to consider.

Q: Would Dr. Rice rattle off some of those options for us?

Dr.
Susan Rice. First of all let me apologize for having no voice. I shared with colleagues here my personal thoughts on some steps the new administration may want to consider. I think frankly the new administration deserves some time to digest these and other ideas and come up with their own view of the way forward. I don't want to get in the business at this early stage of publicly prescribing policy. But I will say that obviously I think it's critical that we maintain a clear-eyed view of the policies and practices of the government in

Khartoum, which are in many respects, antithetical to our interests; that we not be fooled by Khartoum's often very skillful charm offensives. And that we seek ways to end the threat to the people of Sudan in the North and the South and the victims of terror, of aerial bombardments, of slavery, of other forms of extraordinary human rights abuses that nobody anywhere should have to suffer. So I think there's a wide range of steps that have already begun to be taken, and ought to be continued, and others that need to be considered, and I think I'll leave it at that.

Mr.
Abrams. Let me add just one other thing. That we, one of the reasons for organizing this meeting on the part of the Commission was just our hope that Sudan is an issue not going to fall off the radar screen for very long. We do have a new Congress, we do have new committee and subcommittee chairmen in many cases, and obviously, all the officials in the Executive Branch are new, and they can't turn around on a dime on this. On the other hand, the abuses in Sudan continue, and therefore we hope this is a high priority item for the new Congress, and for the new administration, and the new officials in the State Department.

Q:
To follow up on Dr. Rice - I'm not trying to contradict what you just said about not moving forward with recommendations but this Commission recommended last year tightening sanctions against Sudan and one way of doing that. General, Secretary Powell has come and said he doesn't generally like the idea of sanctions. Do you think they would be effective in this situation (inaudible)?

Dr. Rice. Well we have in place unilateral economic sanctions, comprehensive sanctions,

Q: Are they comprehensive, or are there exceptions?

Dr.
Rice. There is an exception that has been granted on an annual basis for gum arabic, which I would suggest needs to be reviewed. The original logic I think, was to give the consumers of gum arabic in this country an opportunity to find alternative sources of supply. They've had three years to do that, which in my personal opinion is long enough. But that is frankly a relatively minor piece of the puzzle, but the bigger piece is the fact that American companies have been prohibited from investing in Sudan's oil sector, which is where the big money is. Now obviously, unilateral sanctions are more symbolically significant than economically significant. If Europeans and others can go in and exploit the oil sector, the oil is still available. And I think there ought to be further efforts made, and efforts have already been made to try to multilateralize the sanctions, but I think that everybody understands that's pretty much an uphill battle.

Q:
Al Milliken, Washington Independent Writers. This 12-month plan, I'm wondering, should there be a more timely concern here as far as the regular bombing that I'm understanding is going on, and the effort to try to drive people from their homes and to use this as development for oil. My understanding, I heard a speaker earlier today at the Martin Luther King Library talking about every time a plane flies over this region in Nuba mountains and below, that people will, to be protected, have to cover the ground, otherwise they will be seriously hurt.

Mr.
Abrams. The Commission's 12-month plan was suggested, stated in our annual report on May 1st, so we're about three-quarters of the way through that year. And we had suggested how, that we should react to behavior on the ground in Sudan. There should be an increased diplomatic effort, but if the situation worsens, the United States should consider giving assistance to the opposition groups in Sudan. Now, we have not as a commission reached a conclusion, yet, as a commission, as to whether it's now time to give aid to the opposition groups. We may wait and make that suggestion one way or the other in our annual report on May 1st, we may do it before then at a prior meeting; we meet once a month. But it isn't, the Commission is not proposing now on January 30 that we wait a year before we do anything, no, we said that May 1st. And so we'll have some recommendations with respect to Sudan either at our coming meetings or in the May 1 report.

Q:
We have two African leaders I believe coming to Washington this week, Rwanda and Congo, arriving tomorrow. I'm not sure if there is any impact at all on the Sudan situation, but are there any concerns the Commission may ask of these African leaders?

Mr.
Abrams. Well, don't forget that the Commission is the Commission on International Religious Freedom, not on human rights more generally. Therefore it is possible to have a situation that is from the political point of view or a human rights point of view of great concern but not of particular concern to the Commission given our quite narrow charge from Congress. And I would say that neither country has really been one that we have spoken about because religious freedom is not the central issue in either of those countries, nor I think, is the situation, I think, is the situation in Sudan been of, been one in which those governments have been particularly involved, but correct me if that's wrong.

Dr. Rice. That's wrong. That's very wrong. They haven't been involved in Sudan, Sudan has been involved in them.

Q:

I was just curious, based on the session today, and Secretary Rice's recommendations, are you going to be issuing the modified past recommendations, or recommendations to Congress in the next couple of days?

Mr. Abrams. We will certainly make recommendations about Sudan, the only question is whether to wait until the May 1 report or to do it sooner, and we meet on the 12th and 13th, the 11th and 12th; one day is the hearing on religious freedom in Vietnam, and one day is the Commission meeting, at which we will consider the events on the ground in Sudan, what we heard from Secretary Rice and we have the option obviously of moving ahead. There is the other consideration that she mentions, rightly, that is, we may, some members of the Commission may want to wait a month or two and see what the administration says or does about Sudan, and may want to wait therefore until the May 1 report. We will certainly address the issue again, take a look at what we recommended last year, say what we think should now be done with respect to sanctions, with respect to aid to the opposition, with respect to diplomatic activity on the part of the U.S., and a fourth thing which the Commission has spent a great deal of time on, that is, the securities laws of the United States as they relate to this problem. That is, should American investors have the right to invest in companies doing business in Sudan, particularly in the oil industry; How do the sanctions that are in place affect that, and then the informational question - Should people be allowed to sell stocks and bonds in the United States without divulging to potential buyers that they are involved in economic activity in countries that the Secretary of State has designated "Countries of Particular Concern," that is to say, egregious abusers of religious freedom. Don't American potential purchasers need to know for moral reasons and for economic reasons - for example, vulnerability to future economic sanctions - about activities in such countries. So that is another matter that we will definitely be discussing in our May 1 report.

Q:
Stacy Mattingly, Newsroom. Secretary Rice, I was recently interviewing a Northern Sudanese Muslim opposed to the regime. He was commenting on the U.S.'s reliance on Egypt for information about Sudan, and the U.S. leaning on Egypt as a channel in that regard and he called that naïve and he urged the U.S. not to rely on Egypt, and I'm wondering to what extent do you work with Egypt to get information on Sudan, could you comment?

Dr. Rice. Well, obviously all of my comments have to be taken in the context of the past, not the present, and obviously I am speaking as a former official, but obviously we had extensive discussions, regular discussions with Egypt on the issue of Sudan. But I think it would be a mistaken impression to suggest that we relied primarily, or excessively, or even in significant part on Egypt for information on Sudan. We get our information from a variety of sources, and we obviously also assess the information and its reliability based in part on its source.

Q: Al
Milliken again, Washington Independent Writers. I'm wondering if everyone on the Commission and Dr. Rice viewed the exhibit at the Holocaust Museum, and was there agreement that this was a well-done presentation, accurate and appropriate?

Dr. Rice. I haven't been. I just started getting out about 10 days ago. I guess there is a lot out there for me to see and do.

Mr. Abrams. At the Commission meeting, January or December, do you remember -

-- January --

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we went over, we adjourned the meeting and we went over to the museum to see the exhibit and I think all of us were delighted to see it there. Obviously, from our point of view we would have been happy to have it two or three or eight or 10 or 12 times as large. We were really delighted that the museum took the initiative to put that exhibit together, because I think it's, I think it is really very much a part of their mandate to look around the world and see when similar events are beginning to happen, and I'm, we are all delighted that visitors to the museum, and there are hundreds and hundreds of thousands every year, would get the basic facts, which were all correct, about the situation in Sudan. We've been very pleased also, that in the course of the last couple of years, the issue has gotten more and more attention on the Hill, and more and more attention in church and other religious groups all around the country; more and more attention is being paid as well it should be given the horrendous human rights abuses there.

Q: Jim
Fisher-Thompson, Washington File. Speaking of attention on the Hill, Congressman Frank Wolf suggested last week that President Bush name a Special Envoy to Sudan, and he recommended that Richard Holbrooke (inaudible). Do you and the Commission support a move like that, or have a recommendation for an envoy?

Mr. Abrams. We
have not considered the question, partly because there has been an envoy and there has been an incumbent and so the question, during 2000 the question didn't arise. I would imagine that is something that we will have an opinion about whether that position should be continued; I don't know that we would ever support a particular, I think we would not support a particular candidate or oppose a particular candidate, but we might well take a position on whether there ought to be a special negotiator or special representative whose sole function is the diplomatic process in Sudan. We just haven't done so yet.

Q:
To Dr. Abrams. You suggested that the focus of the Commission is narrowed specifically to religious issues. Why is Sudan more religious than say political, racial?

Mr. Abrams. Well, it
certainly has a racial side. There is a distinction between North and South in Sudan. Just the way the British did or did not draw the lines when they were the colonial power there. It's our view that there is a very powerful religious dimension. We're not suggesting that it is the only dimension, but we are suggesting that it is a very, very important dimension. The government in Khartoum is an Islamic government; the people of the South are for the most part either Christian or followers of traditional religions; they are not Muslim, and part of the government's efforts in the South is to impose Islam in our view and to turn Sudan into a fully Islamic country. That is a violation of the religious freedom of the people of the South. Any kind of pressure such as that - to force people to adhere to a religion not there own, to try to force conversions - is a fundamental and egregious violation of religious freedom, and we think that one of the motivating factors in Khartoum is religion and we think one of the abuses on the ground in the South is very much the violation of freedom of religion.

Q:
Chris Newton at the AP. Have you received any indication from the Administration what kind of support you'll be getting when your report comes out in May? Have you had any conversations (inaudible)?

Mr.
Abrams. No, we've not. I mean, they've only been around for what, 10 days? Nine to 10 days. We have written to the Secretary of State, to National Security Advisor Rice, and to Vice President Cheney so far seeking meetings with them, and we will ultimately seek a meeting with President Bush as well. The previous administration, we've met with President Clinton, with Mr. Berger, with the Secretary of State, I guess we didn't meet with the Vice President, an oversight on our part, as well as with regional Assistant Secretaries such as Secretary Rice for regions with which we were concerned; of course those officials will be in place later. But we would hope in the next month, let's say, to get those meetings with the Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor, and the Vice President.

Q: For
Dr. Rice. On the issue of presidential envoys, both of you can probably answer this. As people who have been Assistant Secretaries in the State Department, I assume this is not something you would like, having a presidential envoy come in and snatch an issue from your portfolio; and Secretary Powell has made some comments about that as well, as a contradiction. Do you think it would be a good idea to have a

presidential envoy given that it diminishes the role of the Assistant Secretary and the Secretary of State?

Dr. Rice. I might have an unorthodox view on this issue. I don't know if there is a code we're supposed to follow on this, Elliott. I actually think there are in certain circumstances, that special envoys can play a very important and very useful role, and I think we saw that in a number of different instances during the Clinton Administration on Africa. A number of them come to mind, but for example, Tony Lake's role in the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace process I think was critical. There have been others. So, I am not opposed to envoys as a matter of principle; I don't think it inherently diminishes the role of the Assistant Secretary. I think a good Assistant Secretary is very much involved in the work of any envoy, so that's my personal opinion on that. I think the more specific question is whether in a particular circumstance, in a particular context, in this case Sudan, whether an envoy can make a meaningful difference, and there frankly, I think the jury is out. I have great respect for Congressman Harry Johnston, and he made tremendous efforts on behalf of the United States with respect to trying to move the peace process forward, with trying to draw attention to the human rights and humanitarian abuses, but I think the progress that was made on the peace process front has been limited, not because of Harry Johnston or an American envoy, or the lack of an American envoy, but because the parties haven't been totally committed to it. So I think there is at least a legitimate question as to what an envoy would be asked to do and whether that is an achievable objective at this stage.

Mr. Abrams. Let me just add, I think there is a ripeness issue. Some situations as Secretary Rice said may not be ripe for the work of the special envoy, but if the situation is ripe, it can be very useful. If you think of the need for example to shuttle back and forth, there is a limited amount of time that an Assistant Secretary can spend out of Washington. But a special envoy can spend most of his or her time out of Washington going from capitol to capitol. So it can be quite useful and one can think of a number of examples where it has been. So I guess the question is really the questions she puts, whether Sudan in early 2001 is a case where it would be practical and useful. Stacy, you had your hand up, and we'll make that the last one, we said we would finish at 5:00.

Q: Stacy Mattingly, Newsroom. This is actually a two-part question. You were mentioning some widespread steps that Dr. Rice said that you may encourage the incoming administration to continue with; from what I understand, last year there were steps taken by our government to link the lifting of sanctions with progress in the area of human rights, humanitarian aid, I guess, looking into state-sponsored terrorism, etcetera, I understood that from a source, what I'm asking you to do is to either confirm that, or to say that these low level shifts in policy or in attitudinal (inaudible) are non-existent. That would be the first part. The second is, many who would advocate engagement in Sudan over a policy that is more hard-hitting, say the U.S. is really out there alone with Europe persisting in its stance toward Sudan. Could you comment on that?

Dr.
Rice. First of all, I think your first question is, could be the basis for confusion. United States policies and objectives have been in the previous administration to isolate, contain the threat Khartoum poses and to apply pressure on Khartoum to change fundamentally its behavior, policy and practices. Now it's not been punishment for punishment sake, it's pressure for change. We have at various times been in - I need work on my tenses - we were at various times in dialogue with Khartoum about the very specific steps we thought they should take that would represent in our estimation, meaningful changes in their behavior on the human rights front, on the terrorist front, humanitarian, peace process, and regional issues. And we made it very plain, positive progress, concrete and irreversible on those steps would yield an appropriate, positive response from the United States. We also made very plain conversely, if there were no progress or in fact if there were worse they could do, that too would yield an appropriate response from the United States. So there is no policy shift implied. So, it's basically making very plain what it is we want to see changed, and being prepared to acknowledge those changes should they occur. Unfortunately, virtually none of them have occurred.

Your
second question - Europe, thank you. Whether the United States is alone or not, I think the United States has been right in principle about Sudan. We've said that any government that sponsors terrorism and abuses its people, and treats people differently on the basis of race or religion or their political views, that uses food as a weapon, that bombs its civilians, that allows and encourages slavery, is not a government that should be treated as any other. It ought to be set aside, it ought to be pressured, it ought to be isolated, and we ought to have principles and standards we adhere to even as and when they may override our economic interests. And I think its unfortunate that a number of our European partners have not shared that view; for their own self-interested reasons they've pursued an approach of investment and engagement and the investment is the only returns, I haven't seen any returns on the engagement that are meaningful.