

Remarks Following Trilateral Discussions and an Exchange With Reporters at Erez Crossing, Israel December 15, 1998

Good morning, everybody. I just had a very good meeting, a very frank meeting, with Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat. First, everyone agrees that yesterday's convening of all the Palestinian groups and the vote by the Palestinian National Council and the others to fully and forever reject the conflict with Israel and commit to a path to peace and cooperation was a truly historic day.

And what we focused on in our meeting is how to follow up on that. Where do we go from here; how can we vigorously implement the process that we agreed to at Wye? And I'd like to just—I have a few notes here from the meeting; I'd like to go over them with you.

The first thing that we agreed to do was to energize the permanent status talks. Keep in mind, the purpose of the Wye agreement was to resolve the matters that had to be resolved so we could get into permanent status talks and try to get back as close as possible to the timetable set out in 1993.

Secondly, we agreed to vigorously pursue the security issue through the appropriate committee. There is, I think, no space between the two sides in their understanding that maintaining security cooperation and minimizing security problems is the precondition to making all the rest of this work. It's what made Wye possible.

Thirdly, the prisoner issue, as you know, is a difficult one. But an informal channel has been agreed to for dealing with that, and it was agreed to—referred all the questions to that channel and to pursue that accordingly.

Fourthly, there is a so-called steering committee which is basically a clearinghouse for a lot of the other specific issues agreed to at Wye, questions of law enforcement, of weapons handling, of all the specifics there. They are going to meet today, and I anticipate that there will be agreement at the end of the day, at the end of this meeting, that a lot of the requirements of Wye for this next phase have, in fact, been met.

Then there are some other issues that I would like to mention, all of which we agreed to establish to deal with through established committee procedures: Education—I talked about this in

my speech in Gaza yesterday, the importance of teaching children that a commitment has been made by these two people to be partners and to share this land together. It's a very important issue to the Israelis and one I think that the Palestinians recognize. Second, the economic committee, which is very important. And thirdly, one big issue that has been agreed to but the details haven't been worked out is the whole question of safe passage. And there is a committee on safe passage, and I expect it to meet, if not today, then very shortly, to continue to push forward on that.

So the message of this trip is that yesterday was a historic day. It was a very important day for both peoples. Again, I want to compliment and applaud Chairman Arafat and all the others who were at that meeting who made the decision, clear, public, and unambiguous, that we now have to decide practical means to go forward. And I think we are well on the way to doing that. So I have achieved what I came here to achieve, and I expect the Secretary of State to be back here in several weeks, and we'll just keep at it.

Israeli Troop Redeployment

Q. Mr. President, will the redeployment that is scheduled for Friday go ahead?

The President. Well, I think the proper way to answer that is that the Israeli Government in my meeting reaffirmed its commitment to the Wye process. And so we have to resolve a number of issues in order for the redeployment to go forward. I think it would be unfortunate if we got too far behind schedule, and I hope we can keep pretty much to the schedule that's there. But obviously, that remains to be worked out here.

We believe in keeping to these schedules as much as possible, and we worked very hard to put all this back on track here. I do think that we are back on track. We're going to see this through, and I feel good about where we are now.

Q. This clearinghouse you're speaking about—

Trilateral Discussions

Q. Are they talking again?

The President. Oh, yes, yes. We sat there for however long, an hour and 25 minutes today, with all the parties in the room, including the major members of each side's team, as well as the leaders, and everybody had their say. And there was some—we got beyond people stating their own positions to actual conversation, and I'm quite hopeful. I think the proof is always in what happens tomorrow, not what happens today, but I think at least we've got a process set up and we can go forward.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, have you been able to insulate the peace process from the domestic political problems affecting you and the Prime Minister?

The President. Oh, absolutely.

Q. How so?

The President. You show up for work every day. It's not a complicated thing.

Q. These clearinghouses, are these to clear those obstacles that stand in the way of Netanyahu going through with the next phase of the withdrawal? Is this to satisfy him that these various issues like unilateral declarations are being resolved so he can go ahead? I don't understand the clearinghouse.

The President. No, no. What I am saying is—no, there is a steering committee that we had set up at Wye that is supposed to deal with things like—

Q. Well, yes, prisoners, for instance.

The President. No, no, that's different. It's supposed to deal with things like—the steering committee deals with things like the weapons confiscation and destruction issue, the size of the police forces, all those specific issues that were set up at Wye not being dealt with in the security committee, not being dealt with in

the informal channel on prisoners, not being dealt with in some other way.

And so what I would say, as I think you will get a report before the end of the day here, that these folks have gotten together, the reports have been made, and I think a determination will be made that a number of the requirements of the Wye agreement have been met so that we can go forward. But this is a complicated matter, obviously, and I hope we can stay as close to the schedule as possible.

Q. He set preconditions for going in. His latest one was unilateral declarations of statehood; he said that yesterday. Before that, it was the covenant. You got the covenant taken care of. What I am trying to determine is whether his preconditions have been swept away.

The President. Well, the meeting we did yesterday was part of the Wye agreement. The other question is one that I think both sides should observe, which is, it is okay to advocate how you want this to come out. That's okay. Neither side should try to stop the other from saying what their vision of the future is. That would be a terrible mistake. But it is not okay to imply that we're not going to resolve all the matters that were listed in the Oslo agreement for negotiations by negotiations. That is what we've got to do, and that's where I think the line ought to be drawn and the balance ought to be struck. If we stick with that, you know, we'll have fits and starts; it will be hard parts, but we'll get through this. We'll get through this just fine, and it will come out where it ought to.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:35 a.m. in the Matak Headquarters. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Statement on the Death of A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr.
December 15, 1998

Hillary and I were deeply saddened to learn of the death of Judge A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. Throughout his life as a scholar, lawyer, and

judge, Leon Higginbotham was one of our Nation's most passionate and steadfast advocates for civil rights.