

Remarks Prior to Discussions With Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel
and an Exchange With Reporters
June 26, 2001

President Bush. It's my honor to welcome back to the Oval Office Prime Minister Sharon. He is a leader who has faced extraordinary circumstances in the Middle East. I believe he's shown patience and is willing to lead. I understand the pressures he is under.

Today it's my opportunity to once again look him in the eye and tell him he's got no better friend than the United States and, as well, tell him that we all must work to break the cycle of violence so that we can begin the process of implementing the Mitchell agreement. Our fervent hope in this Nation is that there is peace in the Middle East.

And I'm so honored you came back, Mr. Prime Minister, and I look forward to having the discussion with you that—it will be an add-on to the great discussion we had the last time you were here.

Welcome.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you, Mr. President. I'm very glad to be here again. Israel is committed to peace, will make every effort to reach peace. Peace should be peace for generations, and peace should provide security to the Israeli citizens.

The Jewish people are having one tiny, small country, that is Israel—[inaudible]—would have the right and the capability to defend themselves by themselves. And that, of course, we have to preserve, and we have to thank God for that every day.

We are committed to the Mitchell report in its sequence, according to sequence. We adopted the Mitchell report, and we received Tenet document—Tenet plan. And we'll be willing to continue. The one thing that we are looking for is, first of all, it would be full cessation of hostilities, of terror, and incitement. If that would happen, I am fully convinced that the day will come, and we'll have peace in the Middle East.

I would like to thank Mr. President again for coming here. We regard your administration to be a very friendly one, and we would like to thank you for that.

President Bush. And as you know, Mr. Prime Minister, our Secretary of State leaves tonight for the Middle East, and our fervent hope is to advance the process for making sure there's peace in that part of the world.

We'll be glad to answer a question apiece.

Situation in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President, do you expect Prime Minister Sharon—do you expect Prime Minister Sharon to negotiate under fire, Mr. President?

White House Aide. Mr. Fournier of the Associated Press.

Q. Mr. President, the same question to both of you. Do you think it is possible—do you think it's appropriate to move to the next step in the Mitchell report? They call for a cooling-off period even before there's a full cessation of violence.

President Bush. I think that there has to be. The cycle of violence must be broken. I look forward to discussing with the Prime Minister about what's realistic and what's possible. But we both believe that it is possible if there's a strong effort made by both parties to break the cycle of violence.

Mitchell says it's a sequential process. Step one is to break the cycle. And we have been on the phone with all parties—all the time it seems like—urging the cycle of violence to be broken. And progress is being made. I am here to tell the Prime Minister, I know there's a level of frustration, but there is progress being made. And for that progress, we are grateful.

The Prime Minister has shown a lot of patience in the midst of a lot of—in the midst of casualty. But progress is being made. Is it as fast as we'd like? No, it's not. But the fundamental question my administration makes is, are we making progress; is peace closer today than it was yesterday? We believe the answer is yes.

And therefore, the Secretary of State leaves tonight to try to advance the process, to make peace more real. And he's going to meet not only with the Israelis; he'll be meeting with the Palestinians, as well; urging—urging the cycle of violence to be broken.

Q. The question to both of you, though, is, can we move to step two now, even though there is not a complete end to violence?

President Bush. We're going to discuss all opportunities today, in the meeting today. If I didn't think progress is being made, I would not be sending the Secretary of State to the Middle East. We believe we have a further opportunity to advance the peace process. This is an important statement of the progress that's being made. So the Secretary of State leaves tonight to continue working hard to break the cycle of violence.

Both parties will understand when the level of violence has gotten down to the point where there can be some progress. We just want to make sure that there's a realistic assessment of what is possible on the ground. And we believe that at some point in time, we can start the process of Mitchell.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you. First of all, I would like to wish to Secretary of State Colin Powell success in his trip to the Middle East. I know that he, like the President, makes a major effort to bring security and peace in the Middle East.

Israel's position is that we can negotiate only, and we would like to negotiate only when it will be full cessation of hostilities, terror, violence, and incitement. Otherwise, I don't think we'd be able to reach a peace

which will really make all of us committed to.

One must understand that if last week we had 5 dead, it's like the United States, Mr. President, having 250 killed, or maybe even 300 people killed by terror. And that is saying that one should not compromise with terror. And therefore, I believe that if we stick to what we have been saying for so many times, such a long time—that it should be full cessation of terror before we move to the other phase—then our neighbors will understand that they have to do it.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister—[inaudible]—also ready for a full freeze of settlements?

Q. Mr. President, how can we—

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, do you see any signs that Yasser Arafat stopped the violence and is willing to go to peace with Israel?

Q. [Inaudible]—peace timetable says—

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, do you see any progress on Arafat's side?

Israeli Embassy Spokesman. Israeli Television, go.

Q. Mr. President, you said that we—

President Bush. Whew! Man. [Laughter] I don't know if they wore you out, but I'm certainly worn out. [Laughter] Go on.

Prime Minister Sharon. [Inaudible]—asked by American television—

President Bush. I don't know, but Gregory [David Gregory, NBC News] looks like he's got one on the tip of your tongue. That's right. [Laughter]

Q. Mr. President, you said that we should be realistic. Don't you think it's a price for terrorists, for terrorism, if right now the United States will force Israel to begin the cooling-off period? We see that in the field the hostilities continue.

President Bush. Any terror is too much terror. Any death is too much death. We recognize that, and we recognize the pressure that the Prime Minister is under. And we condemn terror. We condemn violence. We condemn death.

We also believe progress is being made. If you look at—yes, there's violence; yes, there's terror; but it's being isolated; it's beginning to—contained. Can the parties do more? Absolutely. And that's what the Secretary of State is going to do, is to urge Mr. Arafat to do more, to take better control of his security forces.

We're going to talk to the Prime Minister about his attitudes. We're friends, and I believe that what's important from this perspective is not to let the progress that's been made so far to break apart. We cannot let violence take hold.

And so that's why I've said I admire the Prime Minister's restraint and his patience. I understand the difficulties and the pressures. As he just said, 5 Israeli lives lost is equivalent of 250—5 is too many. But nevertheless, progress is being made. And it's essential that we continue the process and continue the progress that's being made. We're gaining by inches. I recognize progress is in inches, not in miles. But nevertheless, an inch is better than nothing.

And so therefore, this administration is committed to working with the parties. We urge people in the region—

Q. [Inaudible]—the decision—

President Bush. [Inaudible]—we urge people in the region to stop the violence. And that's first and foremost. You know, it's— either you're an optimist in life or not. And I'm optimistic that we can get—start the process of Mitchell at some point in time.

Q. But Mr. Prime Minister—

Prime Minister Sharon. I would like to answer to the Israeli Radio. Yesterday we had 16 terror attacks. And that included multi-fire; it included side bombs; it in-

cluded shooting and sniping. We had 10 wounded. So all together, generally speaking, maybe there are less, but still terror is going on. And by now, though I would like very much to hear that Chairman Arafat instructed to re-arrest those terrorists which are planning and sending and mobilizing those suiciders, he has not done it yet. He has not instructed to arrest them, and they were not arrested. And beside that, he has not instructed yet to stop incitement. And that, of course, he could do—I would say he could have done it immediately because he controlled the—[inaudible]—completely.

Q. But will you negotiate under fire, Mr. Prime Minister? Will you negotiate under fire?

Prime Minister Sharon. I've said it very clearly: Israel will not negotiate under fire and under terror. We said it because if we do that, we'll never reach peace. That is the point. It's not—what I'm saying is not an obstacle, not a barrier against peace. On the contrary, if we will be very strict, then the Palestinians will understand they cannot gain anything by terror. Therefore, we have to be very strict in order to reach peace, which all of us would like to have.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:25 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. The President also referred to the Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee, chaired by former Senator George J. Mitchell, issued April 30. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.