

achieve? They voted; 12 million of them actually went to the polls and expressed their opinions.

And so there needs to be a political track; and we're working very hard with the Maliki Government to achieve that political track. That's what I've been doing the last couple of days. As a matter of fact, today on the telephone I spoke to the two Kurdish leaders. These men have been outspoken about the desire to have a moderate governing coalition, which we support. I met with the major Sunni leader yesterday, all talking about how we hope that there is political reconciliation and a commitment to a political process that says to the Iraqi people, "You count; you matter for the future of our country."

There needs to be an economic component. As you know, part of our successful strategies in parts of Iraq have been based upon a "clear, hold, and build." Well, "build" means getting projects up and running in key parts of the country, so that people see the benefits of either working with coalition forces and/or the benefits of supporting a government. And so this is much more than a military operation.

And finally, there's the foreign policy piece that's necessary. And we spend a lot of time in our Government talking to people like Saudi Arabia or Egypt or Jordan or Turkey and sending messages, clear messages, to countries like Syria and Iran. And I believe, for example, the Saudis are committed to a government that will bring peace and stability, and that's a unity government. It's in their interest they do so. And we're working hard with them to figure out a strategy to help the Maliki Government succeed.

I'm pleased when Iraqi leaders go to Saudi Arabia and talk to my friend, the King of Saudi Arabia, and talk about how they can work together to achieve stability. It's in Saudi's interest; it's in Jordan's interest; it's in the gulf coast countries' interest that there be a stable Iran, an Iran that is capable of rejecting Iranian influence—I mean Iraq that is capable of rejecting Iranian influence. It's in our interests that we succeed in Iraq so that we can continue to send a clear message to those in Iran that are desirous of a free society that freedom is possible in your neighborhood.

And so the stakes are high in this fight. Nobody knows that better than the gentlemen standing behind me. They clearly understand the stakes that are confronted—that confront this Nation. And I am proud to have listened to their points of view. And I'm proud to be working with them, as they help lead the greatest military ever assembled—a military, by the way, in which we've got brave volunteers, people who understand the stakes of this fight, saying, "I want to be in; I want to serve my country."

It's a remarkable period in American history right now. And as I deliberate the way forward, I keep in mind that we've got brave souls that need—to need to know that we're in this fight with a strategy to help them achieve the objectives that we've got.

Listen, thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:45 p.m. at the Pentagon. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. George W. Casey, Jr., USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; Secretary of Defense-designate Robert M. Gates; James A. Baker III and Lee Hamilton, cochairs, Iraq Study Group; Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, President Jalal Talabani, and Deputy President Tariq al-Hashimi of Iraq; Masoud Barzani, president, Kurdistan region in Iraq; and King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia.

Statement on the Government of Syria

December 13, 2006

The United States supports the Syrian people's desire for democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression. Syrians deserve a government whose legitimacy is grounded in the consent of the people, not brute force.

The Syrian regime should immediately free all political prisoners, including Aref Dalila, Michel Kilo, Anwar al-Bunni, Mahmoud Issa, and Kamal Labwani. I am deeply troubled by reports that some ailing political prisoners are denied health care while others are held in cells with violent criminals.

Syria should disclose the fate and whereabouts of the many missing Lebanese citizens who "disappeared" following their arrest in

Lebanon during the decades of Syrian military occupation. The Syrian regime should also cease its efforts to undermine Lebanese sovereignty by denying the Lebanese people their right to participate in the democratic process free of foreign intimidation and interference.

The people of Syria hope for a prosperous future with greater opportunities for their children and for a government that fights corruption, respects the rule of law, guarantees the rights of all Syrians, and works toward achieving peace in the region.

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Thomas Yayi Boni of Benin

December 14, 2006

President Bush. It's been my honor to have a visit with the President of Benin. We had a very long discussion about a variety of subjects. My administration is committed to helping the democracies on the continent of Africa deal with very significant problems. The President and I are about to go to a summit where the United States of America will commit resources, time, and talent to help rid much of Africa of malaria.

And, Mr. President, I'm proud to announce today that you're one of the countries that we'll be concentrating our help upon. We cannot succeed, however, unless there's an administration that is willing and capable to do the hard work necessary to educate people, spread nets, insecticides necessary to deal with a disease that can be defeated.

We talked about the Millennium Challenge Account. It's one of the most innovative foreign policy initiatives ever proposed by an administration. It's having a positive effect around the world. And I want to thank you for working toward that end.

We talked about the need for us to work together to deal with problems such as Darfur. The President recognized the genocide taking place in Darfur, as does the administration. We want to work through the United Nations to have a very strong and capable AU force, augmented by United Nations help, to save lives.

One thing I'm impressed with is the President's commitment to democracy, rule of

law, decency, and education. And to the extent that we can help—continue to help your country, Mr. President, we will do so.

Welcome, I'm glad you're here.

President Yayi. I have come here to, first and foremost, thank Mr. President Bush for all the initiatives that have been taken so far to eradicate poverty on the continents. As you may know, among these initiatives, we have the agua initiative, empowerment of women, the fight against HIV/AIDS, and the initiative of MCA—that is Millennium Challenge Account. It is very important for us in Africa because the MCA will help us eradicate poverty. And I would like to thank President Bush for that last initiative he took.

Africa is aware of her responsibility in the roles she has to play, globally speaking, because we have to reach prosperity, and that prosperity has some conditions. We need peace. We need stability. We need security. And Africa—America has a leading role to play in our combat to restore a peaceful continent.

Of course, we have to be together with America to build—succeed in all these challenges, to take up all these challenges. And multilaterally, it should be also a part of concern of the American people. We are aware of the fact that America can really play a very important role to continue building capacity among the institutions like IMF and the World Bank, and the institution of—[*inaudible*]
—which is very important for us also.

And the efforts should continue being made by the American Government within the G-8 group, because Africa needs a lot from this G-8, and international exchanges also have to be reenforced. The Doha negotiations need to find a solution now—try to make it easier because cotton is but one of our important products in Africa, and in my country, two people out of three live out of cotton. It's the same reality in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, where cotton is a very important product.

So some subsidies granted to some countries like America here cause a kind of disfunctioning in our country and on the continent also. So America should help us smooth this mechanism. I'm very happy to hear that America is trying to set up a parallel mechanism that would really help promote