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Rice Says U.S. has No Desire to be the World's Jailer

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BLACKBURN, England (AP) - U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Friday that the United States has no desire to be the world's jailer, but suggested that Washington is reluctant to release prisoners from Guantanamo Bay until it is certain they pose no threat.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Rice's host in northern England, announced last week that Britain would take up the case of a British resident held at the Cuban base. Previously, Britain would only take up the cases of citizens, and won the release of all nine Britons.

"We want the terrorists that we capture to stand trial for their crimes," Rice said in a speech at ElwoodPark in Blackburn.

"But we also recognize that we are fighting a new kind of war, and that our citizens will judge us harshly if we release a captured terrorist before we are absolutely certain that he does not possess information that could prevent a future attack or, even worse, if we meet that terrorist again on the battlefield," she said.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has avoided criticizing the indefinite detention of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo, merely calling it "an anomaly" that sooner or later must end.

On March 22, Straw announced that the government would intervene with the United States on behalf of Bisher al-Rawi, 37, a native Iraqi and British resident who was arrested in Gambia three years ago.

Straw did not explain why it was taking up the case, but al-Rawi's lawyers have claimed that before his arrest, he was supplying information to British intelligence about Abu Qatada, a radical London-based preacher.

Earlier, demonstrators booed, chanted "Condoleezza Rice, go home" and called her a war criminal as she joined Straw on a tour of northern England.

About 200 demonstrators at a Blackburn school -- students and their parents -- protested Rice's visit, some carrying signs that read: "How many lives per gallon?" and "Blood, Lies, Oil, War."

Blackburn, a city of about 140,000, has the country's third-highest Muslim population, and Rice had planned to visit the Masjid Al Hidayah mosque, but anti-war protesters presented a security threat, said Ibrahim Master, a mosque official.

But officials canceled the trip because anti-war protesters said they would heckle her during prayer time, mosque official Ibrahim Master said. "It wasn't canceled because we don't like Condoleezza Rice," he said.

A prominent poet and actress also pulled out of planned appearances at a Liverpool Philharmonic concert Rice is to attend later Friday in protest of U.S. foreign policy.

But Rice said she wasn't surprised by the protests, calling it an essential element of a healthy democracy.

"People have the right to protest. That's what democracy is all about," she said in Blackburn, with Straw at her side.

"I've seen it in every city I've visited in the United States. No, I'm not surprised. People have strong views," she added.

Rice also is to meet Muslim leaders and the town's mayor, Ugandan immigrant Yusuf Jan-Virmani, on Saturday.

The protests were the reverse of the warm reception she received last fall when Straw accompanied her on a down-home tour of her native Alabama. Then, elderly white women lined up to shake the hand of a black native daughter made good.

"It's one thing to say this is a cultural visit, but others see it as a council of war," said Carmel Brown, an anti-war protester in Liverpool.

Arif Waghat, a 47-year-old father of two teenagers demonstrating outside the Blackburn school, accused Rice and Straw of warmongering.

"I'm not going to let a couple of warmongers deprive my children of their education," Waghat said.

Opponents of the Iraq war set up a Web site, <http://www.condiwatch.co.uk>, that listed times and locations for marches and gatherings. Protesters planned to distribute T-shirts that read, "Fab Four, Not War," in reference to Liverpool's most famous export, The Beatles.

Rice and Straw also discussed a US\$256 billion (euro212 billion) Joint Strike Fighter jet deal under negotiation. Straw is to show Rice a British Aerospace factory, where the pair are expected to discuss the deal with workers.