

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Rice Defends U.S. Treatment of Detainees

ANNE GEARAN
Associated Press
November 10, 2005

WASHINGTON - Amid rising debate over America's legal and moral obligations in the treatment of suspected or potential terrorists, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the United States will always play by international rules.

The top U.S. diplomat was traveling Thursday to Middle Eastern nations where President Bush is unpopular and the U.S. terror detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is shorthand for a foreign policy seen as discriminatory to Muslims.

"For the United States, an essential element of the rule of law has always been and still remains law among nations," Rice told an American Bar Association international law gathering Wednesday. "We have always respected our international legal obligations and we have led the world in developing new international law."

The first stop on Rice's trip is Bahrain, for an international meeting meant to promote democracy, development and accountable government in the Middle East. She has a full agenda in Saudi Arabia, which has been working to rebuild a network of political and economic contacts with the United States, a long-standing ally estranged by the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

Rice also will see Israeli and Palestinian leaders at a delicate moment. Neither side has heeded her advice to capitalize on Israel's historic withdrawal of troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip two months ago.

Headlines in Bahrain this week followed the homecoming of three men held at Guantanamo for nearly four years. "Free at Last!" proclaimed the English-language Gulf News. The three were picked up in Pakistan shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks and were never charged with a crime.

Three Bahrainis remain at the military prison, including one who has repeatedly attempted suicide. The Bahrain government said it will continue pressing U.S. officials for his release.

Bahrain is one of America's closest allies in the Gulf region and is home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. As in other small Gulf nations and in Saudi Arabia, close official ties with the United States coexist with widespread popular distaste for the United States and Bush policies.

A Saudi detainee was also released from Guantanamo this week, but scores remain. American lawyers representing Saudi detainees said in June that 124 Saudis were held there.

The treatment of the mostly Muslim prisoners picked up in the global fight against terrorism is largely an issue handled by the Pentagon and the CIA. But resentment over Guantanamo and abuses revealed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq complicate Rice's diplomatic agenda.

"When Americans violate the law, whether in our country or in foreign lands, we do and we should hold them accountable for their crimes as we saw ... after the horrific events that sickened us all at Abu Ghraib," Rice said Wednesday.

"The virtue of the rule of law is not that it erases all human imperfection but that it upholds a standard of justice that enables democratic societies to improve themselves over time."

Rice has been advocating behind the scenes for modulating the administration's message on torture and detainee treatment, but in her only public remarks on the topic this week, Rice said the United States is in a "different kind of war."

"We, our allies, others who have experienced attacks, have to find a way to protect our people," Rice said Tuesday after releasing a report critical of religious intolerance in Saudi Arabia. The administration protected itself "within the constraint of the Constitution and cognizant of our values," she said.

Vice President Dick Cheney has led a White House charge to exempt the CIA from a proposed national ban on torture and the administration has threatened a veto over the issue.

Senate Democrats are pressing for creation of an independent commission to investigate detainee abuse, and the European Union is investigating news reports of secret CIA prisons in Europe. Bush on Monday defended U.S. interrogation practices and called the treatment of terrorism suspects appropriate.

"We do not torture," Bush said.