

Rice Puts Iran On Notice

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned Iran Wednesday that it cannot use a European diplomatic initiative to delay indefinitely accountability for a suspected nuclear weapons program.

"The Iranians need to hear that if they are unwilling to take the deal ... the Europeans are giving ... then the Security Council referral looms," she said in an interview with Fox News taped in Paris and released after her arrival in Brussels early Wednesday.

"I don't know that anyone has said that as clearly as they should to the Iranians," she said in a reiteration U.S. policy as she neared the end of a European tour that included visits to both old and newer NATO members. "We have believed all along that Iran ought to be referred to the Security Council and then a variety of steps are available to the international community.

"They need to hear that the discussions that they are in with the Europeans are not going to be a kind of way station where they are allowed to continue their activities; that there's going to be an end to this and that they are going to end up in the Security Council."

Britain, France and Germany are in talks with the Iranian regime, but the United States kept its distance from that effort and the Europeans has been reluctant to take the matter to the United Nations before making further efforts at a deal.

French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier used a news conference with Rice Tuesday night in Paris to repeat that France and the other European participants are committed to letting the diplomacy run its course.

He said he had asked Rice for American "support and confidence."

Rice told reporters that Iran is already on notice that it must not use a civilian nuclear power program to hide a weapons project.

Rice visits alliance headquarters Wednesday for an informal luncheon with NATO foreign ministers.

Alliance officials said her NATO visit would focus on preparations for a visit by President Bush on Feb. 22, when he will hold a summit with leaders of the other 25 allied nations.

NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer wants the meetings to seal a new unity in the trans-Atlantic alliance following bitter divisions over the Iraq war.

The talks are also expected to review NATO's peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo and its efforts to train Iraq's military. De Hoop Scheffer said last month's elections in Iraq — which were widely applauded in Europe — should boost allied efforts to expand its training mission.

Alliance defense ministers are set to discuss expanding both the Afghan and Iraq missions at a long-scheduled meeting Wednesday and Thursday.

NATO has been struggling to persuade governments to commit extra troops to both its missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the problem has been compounded by the refusal of France, Germany and other nations that opposed the U.S.-led war to send instructors.

NATO currently has about 100 troops in Iraq on the training mission.

Rice's visit to NATO is part of an eight-day tour of Europe and the Middle East that included a speech on U.S. foreign policy in Paris.

"I do not think that NATO needs to become the policeman of the world," Rice said in Paris. "I think that would be asking too much of this alliance."

"It is a bulwark for democratic states, and it can therefore play an important role in the spread of democracy and liberty, but we have other means," Rice said at a news conference with French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier.

The trans-Atlantic alliance now includes countries far removed from its Cold War-era roots in Western Europe, and has numerous peacekeeping and military operations around the world.

"NATO has a very important role to play, but we should be very clear that there are many others who need to play these roles as well," Rice said in Paris.

For example, she noted that Brazil is leading the peacekeeping effort in Haiti and that the African Union is willing to help in Sudan.

Rice's first trip abroad as secretary of state concludes Thursday in Luxembourg. She has said that either she or her second-in-command will visit each of the NATO capitals early this year.

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