



Future tv - lbc - France 24 interview with Mr Jacques CHIRAC President of the french Republic on the occasion of the international conference on aid to Lebanon.

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Elysee palace, tuesday 23 january 2007

QUESTION Hello everyone. On Thursday the conference known as Paris III, on economic aid to Lebanon, will open in the French capital.

We are here in the Elysée Palace, the headquarters of the presidency of the French Republic, where President Jacques Chirac has been kind enough to receive us to answer questions put by France 24 and by two Lebanese television channels, Future TV represented by Mona Essaid, and LBC represented by Marcel Ghanem.

Mr President, thank you for receiving us. We understand that this conference means a lot to you, and that it is not merely concerned with releasing funds to assist Lebanon, though the country's needs are considerable. You therefore wished to make a few comments about the importance and relevance of this conference, before we enter into the substance of the interview.

THE PRESIDENT This conference, known as Paris III, the first to have been initiated by Rafiq Hariri, who did so much for Lebanon, for a stable Lebanon, is above all a conference about solidarity and hope. We have just been through another war in Lebanon, and naturally I am thinking of the victims at this time, of the dead and wounded, of those who have lost someone dear to them, of those who have lost their house or their job, and all those young people who, no longer knowing what to do, decide to demonstrate or emigrate in ever greater numbers. This is all extremely serious for Lebanon. These are the issues that concern me, and which justify what, in my opinion, is an unprecedented effort of international solidarity. On Thursday we are going to meet the people best placed to provide assistance and solidarity to Lebanon. I wish the conference to be successful, and have no doubt that it will be.



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QUESTION Mr President, you will be chairing the Paris III conference. Having regard to the current climate on the ground in Lebanon, which is very strained, what are your expectations for this conference?

THE PRESIDENT As I have said, I am expecting solidarity. Lebanon is in a very serious, a very grave, financial situation. Lebanon currently has a debt which represents 185% of its national wealth. It urgently needs financial support and aid. And so we are asking the whole international community to provide such aid. It can be provided either in the form of direct aid or through debt rescheduling. All these things can be combined, but all of them are essential. Clearly the behaviour of those who are taking advantage of the situation to create social unrest, at the very time when the conference is meeting (about which I make no judgment, since I do not interfere in Lebanon's affairs), is not calculated to encourage those who wish to provide aid and to give Lebanon the means to survive. Such action may, of course, suit those involved in political manoeuvring. But who will pay the price in the end? It will be all the Lebanese people who will undoubtedly be discouraged by the current demonstrations. Political problems can be dealt with other than in the street.

QUESTION Mr President, Lebanon is taking part in the Paris III conference at a time when its government is divided. Do think that, in the absence of political stability, substantial commitments of a financial nature can be expected from countries participating in the Paris III conference? And don't you think that Paris III will have the same effect as Paris I and II, namely that it will merely defer the crisis by a few months?

THE PRESIDENT Paris I and Paris II had more positive effects than that. It has to be said that Rafiq Hariri's strong personality and sense of national history made a major contribution to that. It is true that there is a danger of there being little encouragement to aid Lebanon, but the international community obeys the rules. The Lebanese government was established as a result of legitimate elections. Those elections took place. They were not challenged. The government was set up as a result of those elections. It is therefore a legitimate government. The fact that it may not please everybody is entirely normal. Do you think that the French government pleases everybody? Certainly not. No government in any democracy pleases everybody. But people have a sufficient sense of democracy and of what is right to recognize that there must be democratic government. The Lebanese government today is recognized by the international community as a democratic government established following elections which were themselves democratic. The day other elections decide otherwise, well, there will be another government. But, as I say, I do not wish to interfere. I have an affinity with the whole Lebanese people. I have no preferences among the Lebanese people. I have an affinity with the whole Lebanese people regardless of their origins or allegiance. I respect all the Lebanese people, but I advise them to obey the general rules of democracy, i.e. to wait for normal elections to take place in order, if that's the case, to change the government. Otherwise, they will never be taken seriously by the international community. And who will pay the price for that? It will be the unfortunate Lebanese people, who will not be helped as they could be.



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QUESTION You have alluded to the internal crisis in Lebanon but one cannot talk about Lebanon without talking about the regional context. Can one resolve this crisis without considering the role of Syria, for example, or the presence of Israel, which we saw during last summer's military operation? One cannot talk about Lebanon without also talking about the adjoining or neighbouring countries.

THE PRESIDENT That is certain. It is true and this must be the ambition of the international community that we must all insist on the countries around Lebanon leaving it in peace, and on Lebanon being allowed to manage its affairs normally as a democratic, independent and free country. Which is what it is and must continue to be. It is true that there is all manner of interference, which, it must be acknowledged, is not acceptable in terms of the democratic governance of the world.

QUESTION And, specifically, can this conference help to reduce such interference?

THE PRESIDENT First, this conference can provide the necessary immediate aid, which is essential. The Lebanese government has practically no more money, yet it has things to be paid for: the Lebanese army, which fortunately now occupies the south of Lebanon, must be paid; there are weapons which must be bought; the whole running of Lebanon must be paid for. So the first objective of this conference is to provide the resources for the Lebanese budget to shoulder its responsibilities. And that is something which is in the interests of the whole Lebanese people, regardless of their origin.

Secondly, Lebanon has debts. In the next five years, its debts will be substantial; it can be helped by deferring these debts or cancelling some of them, to facilitate matters. The governor of the Bank of Lebanon, Mr Salame, who is universally respected and acknowledged as such by the international community, has a number of proposals to make about the financial management of Lebanon and about the participation of the Lebanese financial community in the general effort in Lebanon.

Moreover, the countries around Lebanon must be a bit reasonable and not engage in systematic interference. You mentioned Syria. We are insistent that it should no longer interfere in Lebanese affairs. As regards Israel, there is the necessity to settle the problem of the Shebaa farms. In the same way, we cannot regard the aerial incursions by Israel into Lebanese territory as acceptable. Lebanon must be respected. Lebanon needs resources, it needs money to repair the damage, but it also needs to be respected and not to have people interfering in its affairs.

QUESTION Mr President, do you think that the international inquiry into the assassination of Mr Hariri conducted by Judge Brammertz is on the right track? Has France cooperated with the international commission?



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THE PRESIDENT You are alluding to comments made by certain sections of the press. Well, I can assure you that France, like the majority of countries, is cooperating in the fullest possible way, and without reservation, with the international commission headed by Judge Brammertz, who is an eminently competent and honourable man. I think that this commission will make concrete findings which will enable us to determine the identity of those responsible for the monstrous, really monstrous, attack against Rafiq Hariri and also for the 14 or 15 attacks that have followed that assassination, and which really are the methods of savages, methods which one can only condemn in the strongest possible terms.

The fact that there is an international tribunal is doubly important. First, because it will enable those responsible for these assassinations to be punished, which is all the same the least that can be done. But also because it will make people more cautious in the future. The mere fact of having an international tribunal under the aegis of the United Nations will perhaps make potential assassins a little more cautious in the future...

QUESTION But in that case, Mr President, do think that the international community should have recourse to Chapter VII to form this tribunal?

THE PRESIDENT This is a complex problem which must be settled between the Lebanese government and the UN Security Council. For me, what is essential, and what will be done, is for the international tribunal to be made operational as quickly as possible, and for Judge Brammertz to be able to provide that international tribunal with his findings. And I believe that that is what will take place. The practicalities are a matter for negotiation between the Lebanese government and the Security Council.

QUESTION Mr President, with regard to UNSCR 1701, there are French soldiers within UNIFIL. What is your assessment of the application of UNSCR 1701? Is UNIFIL capable of carrying out its mission, having regard to the incidents, the overflying, without becoming a target of attacks, especially after the information about al-Qaida infiltrations into Lebanon?

THE PRESIDENT Even so, UNIFIL has made great progress. First, it has done so in a context which has enabled the Lebanese army to deploy in southern Lebanon, for the first time in a long while. Now, one cannot imagine an autonomous and independent country not being sovereign over the whole of its territory. There is no country in the world which is not sovereign over the whole of its territory. So a country which is not sovereign in the whole of its territory is not a country. This was also one of the key ideas of Rafiq Hariri. We have therefore made it possible to solve this first problem, and I wish to pay tribute to the high calibre, courage and intelligence of the Lebanese soldiers on the ground, who haven't got a lot of resources because the Lebanese government hasn't got a lot of resources, but who have conducted themselves well, and who are good soldiers.



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Secondly, we have reinforced UNIFIL. UNIFIL was quite a small force after all, and it has now been reinforced. As you can see, we have the resources. The French, in particular, have sent substantial resources, including heavy tanks. We hope that UNIFIL will be able to carry out the whole of its mission. I am not worried about UNIFIL, I believe that it was an important step that was taken for the benefit of Lebanon. The proof of this is that the Israeli armies have withdrawn.

QUESTION Earlier you referred to the presence of political forces in Lebanon. Whether one likes it or not, there is Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran, and recently you promoted a French initiative involving a renewal of contact with the Tehran regime so as to be able to influence the situation in Lebanon. My question is as follows: why, in your view, is Syria not a country that you wish to associate with, and why would it seem that Iran has become such a country?

THE PRESIDENT I should first of all say that, for me, Syria is not a country with which one does not wish to associate. I have the greatest respect for the Syrian people, who are descended from an old civilization, and whom I admire greatly. On the other hand, experience has shown me that that it is difficult to believe the current leaders of Syria, who represent a minority of Syrians. So, before engaging with Syria, I must be sure that commitments will be given. I have observed that the few Europeans who have tried to obtain commitments from Syria have all come back empty-handed. Nothing happened and they obtained nothing.

Iran is completely different. I should say that I have seen reports in the press (which cannot always be considered as gospel, can they) that France had covert intentions to make political contact with Iran. This has no foundation whatever. It is not correct for one simple reason: the main problem with Iran is, of course, the problem of uranium enrichment, the nuclear question. This problem cannot be settled between France and Iran, it is a problem which is currently being dealt with by the international community, comprising, on the one hand, the three European countries France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and on the other hand, the Russians, Chinese and Americans. There are therefore six countries discussing this issue together. It is perfectly obvious that France has no intention of going it alone in this matter.

QUESTION Even to help Lebanon?

THE PRESIDENT There is no question of us being able to discuss nuclear matters with Iran other than with the complete agreement and participation of our five other partners. The Lebanon problem is a specific problem of very special interest to France, as you know. In the past we have had discussions with Iran, not with political leaders but through our diplomatic representatives, which is quite normal and entirely legitimate. This is why what is said in the press is neither entirely true nor entirely false. This is why we had perhaps thought that, if Iran had something to say about Lebanon, in Lebanon's interest, about restoring calm in Lebanon and about preparation for



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International solidarity to help Lebanon, we might then make contact through our diplomatic representatives, while naturally keeping our partners informed. Such contact has not been made for the moment because the terms and conditions have not been clarified. And so for the moment, the matter is in abeyance and only relates to Lebanon and not to anything else.

QUESTION In relation to Lebanon, do think that the Taif agreement still forms a basis for a settlement in Lebanon, and despite the criticisms one hears about Taif, what you think of the risks of partition and implantation?

THE PRESIDENT Taif was a major development. As you know, Taif was an idea which was formed in the mind of Rafiq Hariri. I was a witness to that. One day, he came to see me to explain the idea that he had, which then resulted in Taif, naturally with the agreement of Saudi Arabia and the Arab countries. I believe that it was a good initiative and that a number of things are dealt with in the Taif agreement. I think it should be respected.

QUESTION Do you think that there will be a presidential election in Lebanon next September, and should the future president be a compromise president?

THE PRESIDENT I make it an absolute rule not to interfere in the internal affairs of Lebanon. Lebanon will choose a president according to its constitutional rules, a president who will be elected by the Parliament, and I hope it will be the best possible candidate.

QUESTION A president of 14 March...

THE PRESIDENT It is not for me to make a judgment on that point. The best possible president, naturally a president who will represent the majority.

QUESTION And the characteristics of that president?

THE PRESIDENT If you want me to insist on one characteristic, I do hope that he will be French-speaking. You know, the only way the Lebanon crisis can be solved is for the institutions, and the agreements on which those institutions are based, to be respected. All the protests being organized project a negative image of Lebanon and discourage the international community from helping Lebanon. In the end, it is the unfortunate Lebanese people who must pay the cost of all that, and if I had to say just one thing, I would say, almost out of love for Lebanon, that one really must be reasonable, renew dialogue, discuss matters together and find the necessary compromises, so as to project a positive image to the international community and ensure that the aid which is essential, not only for the government of Lebanon and its political parties, but also for all the Lebanese people, can be provided in a straightforward way by the international community. The international community is entirely in favour of providing such aid, but it could be somewhat discouraged at the sight of the events currently unfolding.



QUESTION Mr President, let us move on to the Palestinian question. The international community is constantly asking the Palestinians to embrace the democratic process. Since Hamas took power, we have seen an entire people being punished. How long can this policy of double standards continue to be applied, and in the end doesn't it contribute to the clash of civilizations?

THE PRESIDENT Throughout the world, a lot of people wanted elections in Palestine. I was not one of those who thought it the most urgent matter. Incidentally, I should say that Abu Mazen was also of that opinion. But it was said that elections must take place because that is democracy. Once elections take place, they must be respected. Of course, it is normal, legitimate to expect the new power arising from the election to respect the past, i.e. the commitments given by the PLO to the international community. I am thinking, in particular, of the recognition of Israel and of the various commitments given by the PLO and the other parties involved. In exchange, it is quite normal and legitimate for the necessary aid to be provided to the Palestinians, because again, if I may put it like this, who is it that ends up footing the bill? It is the unfortunate Palestinian people. I have fought for the European Union not to cut off its aid to the Palestinians. I would remind you that in 2006 the European Union sent the Palestinians 650 million, that is more than in 2005. I was delighted with the decision recently taken by Israel to release funds blocked in respect of customs duties owed to the Palestinians. It is absolutely essential for the Palestinians to be provided with the necessary aid, otherwise, again, the results will be disastrous in human, social and political terms.

What is the solution to the current situation? It must be arrived at through the Quartet, which will meet in Paris on an unofficial basis on the fringes of the conference and will then have a meeting in Washington. I propose that there be an international conference, not to tell the various parties what must be done, but to guarantee the various parties that what they decide will really be applied. In other words, if they decide to put the borders in a certain place, or if they decide to take a certain number of steps, the purpose of the international conference would be to guarantee the various parties that that will be applied. Because the root of the problem is that there is a lack of trust between Israel and the Palestinians. Trust has disappeared, or in any case is very inadequate. Trust must be restored, and one of the ways that trust can be restored is to say that once you decide or take decisions, we, the international community, will take the necessary steps to ensure that those decisions are respected. If you decide that the border is there, we will put men there to guarantee the border.

QUESTION Do you think that after the presidential election France will adopt the same policy, in this case, your policy, towards the Middle East, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria?

THE PRESIDENT I think so and I hope so. There is an old Franco-Lebanese tradition, and I would also say a Franco-Syrian and a Franco-Middle Eastern tradition. France has always respected and loved the Middle East. Take the



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example of Saudi Arabia. I have known several presidents of the French Republic. I knew General de Gaulle. I was even in his government. I have been in many governments, because I began very early. I knew General de Gaulle, I knew M. Pompidou, I knew M. Giscard d'Estaing and I knew M. Mitterrand. We have never changed. The relationship between Saudi Arabia, a great country, and France, has always been a relationship of trust, esteem and friendship. I don't see why that should change, and what I say about Saudi Arabia, I could say of all the countries in the Middle East. And I hope it will remain the case of the whole of the Middle East. Our relationship with Egypt is the same. With the United Arab Emirates, with Qatar, with Bahrain, now with Kuwait, with Oman, these are countries with which we have very trusting and friendly relations. And that has been true with all successive presidents. I don't see why that should change.

QUESTION And after the election, will the foreign policy of France towards Lebanon and the Middle East be maintained?

THE PRESIDENT I honestly think so. As I mentioned earlier, I have observed that regardless of the regime, foreign policy as regards the Middle East in general or Lebanon in particular has not changed, and I hope that it will not change.

QUESTION Mr President, we are nearing the end of your interview, and it remains for us to thank you on behalf of Future TV and LBC. Thank you very much for receiving us. We will follow this conference with great interest on our respective channels, and we hope that your wishes for the future of Lebanon may be granted. Thank you once again.

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