

White House Hails Putin's Cooperation

At a press briefing on Sept. 26, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer's words of praise for Russian President Putin took the press corps by surprise. Here is an excerpt from the briefing, as provided by the White House website.

Q: Is the U.S. taking a softer line on Russia over Chechnya in return for the cooperation Putin has offered in this effort?

Fleischer: President Putin gave a very important speech the other day, which should be noted. President Bush appreciated very much President Putin's offer of concrete cooperation in the common fight against international terrorism. And President Putin's remarks demonstrate that Russia can make a major contribution to that common struggle against international terrorism, while at the same time displaying a respect for the sovereignty and independence of Russia's neighbors.

In particular, the President noted and wants to thank President Putin for his offer to provide, as President Putin described it, permission for humanitarian overflights, information about the situation on the ground, as well as search and rescue operations, if necessary. The President looks forward to continuing

to work with the Russian government together as we build this international coalition.

The President also wants to note particularly President Putin's remarks about the situation in Chechnya, in which President Putin called on Chechen insurgents to disassociate themselves immediately from the international terrorist networks and meet for discussions to resolve the crisis in Chechnya. The Chechnya leadership, like all responsible political leaders in the world, must immediately and unconditionally cut all contacts with international terrorist groups, such as Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda organization.

At the same time, the United States has long said that the only solution in Chechnya is a political solution, a political process to resolve the conflict there. The President welcomes the sincere steps that have been taken by Russia to engage the Chechen leadership, and consistent with what you've heard repeatedly, respect for human rights and accountability for violations on all sides is crucial to a durable peace there.

Q: Does this offer by Putin reflect any input by the United States? Did Bush suggest that he needed to do something on Chechnya? And do you have any idea what might happen if the 72-hour period expires without an acceptance by the rebels?

Fleischer: Well actually, there's been an update on that, as you may have heard. The Chechen leader, Mr. Maskhadov, has responded and indicated a commitment to the peace process. He has indicated a willingness. And so it's important now to let events develop in Chechnya. That is an encouraging sign.

Q: And so the administration believes, with President Putin, that the resistance in Chechnya has been infiltrated and is linked to the same terrorist networks that committed the atrocities in New York?

Fleischer: Terry, there is no question that there is an international terrorist presence in Chechnya that has links to Osama bin Laden. And that's why I indicated what I indicated.

That also is a point of view that was shared with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in, I believe it was November of 1999, by a spokesman—an official from the Clinton State Department, when he testified before Senate Foreign Relations. So that's been—long been known. In fact, it's been referenced in the *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report,



Secretary of State Colin Powell. The official U.S. response to Putin's German speech was an important development in the crisis. "President Putin gave a very important speech. . . . President Bush appreciated very much, President Putin's offer of concrete cooperation," said spokesman Ari Fleischer.

which is issued by the State Department.

Q: One more on this. Would, then, Chechen separatists, by the statement you read today, calling on them to cut off links to this group, are they on notice, as the Taliban is, that they will share the terrorists' fate if they don't do so?

Fleischer: The President's words speak for themselves about those terrorist organizations that have global reach. But what's notable here is the President is reiterating that it's important to have a political solution to the situation in Chechnya. But undeniably, there are terrorist organizations in Chechnya that have ties to Osama bin Laden.

Helen Thomas: Haven't we made many statements denouncing Russia for its attacks in Chechnya? And isn't there some image of freedom fighters there? And all of a sudden you're calling them terrorists?

Fleischer: As I just indicated, the concern for human rights remains a vital part of American policy, and the only solution to the problem in Chechnya is a political one.

Q: Yeah, but why is it just today that you're calling them terrorists? What has changed?

Fleischer: Well, as I indicated, that's not the case. That's been the long-standing position.

Q: I think this is the first time—is this not the first time you've used this word at that podium? It's the first time we've heard it.

Fleischer: I'm not sure that I have discussed the situation in Chechnya with the White House press corps prior to this. We haven't had much reason to do so.

But that's why I indicated, going back to the previous administration, in testimony before the Senate, they said what they said because it's true. And the State Department publishes a report every year that included similar information.

Q: Is it fair to assume that these words from you are in exchange for Putin's cooperation on the U.S. effort?

Fleischer: No, it's an accurate statement about the situation on the ground and the importance of the speech that President Putin made. But keep in mind, President Putin called for political discussions. Leaders of Chechnya have now indicated they are willing to engage in such discussions. That's a positive development.

Q: It sounds like a deal, though. It sounds like, in exchange for Putin's support, we, rhetorically, from this podium, are lending him support in characterizing the opposition as international terrorists.

Fleischer: No, there's no—no such conclusion should be reached. This is consistent with actions taken by the previous administration, because it's an accurate statement about developments in Chechnya.

Putin Addresses Nation On Terrorist Threat

Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a nationally televised address on the evening of Sept. 24, after going to the State Duma (lower house of parliament) earlier in the day to brief and discuss with its leaders, his security deliberations over the weekend. This was his statement (subheads have been added):

After the barbaric acts of terrorism in New York and Washington on Sept. 11 of this year, the entire world has continued to feel the impact of this tragedy.

The Russian Federation has been waging the struggle with international terrorism for a long time, relying exclusively on its own resources, and has repeatedly called on the international community to unite efforts. Russia's position is unchanged: We remain, it goes without saying, prepared to contribute to the struggle against terrorism. We hold that it is necessary, first and foremost, to give attention to strengthening the role of those international institutions, which were created for the purpose of reinforcing international security. These are the United Nations, and the UN Security Council. It is also necessary to put energies into improving the basis in international law, which would make possible an effective and timely reaction to acts of terrorism.

Position On Afghanistan

As for the planned anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, we define our position as follows:

First. Active international cooperation between intelligence services. Russia is providing and intends to continue to provide information in its possession, concerning the infrastructure, the locations of international terrorists, and the training bases of terrorist fighters.

Second. We are prepared to open the air space over the Russian Federation for flights by planes carrying humanitarian cargoes into the region where this anti-terrorist operation is conducted.

Third. We have coordinated this position with our allies among the Central Asian states. They share this position and do not exclude the possibility of providing their airfields.

Fourth. Russia is also prepared, if it becomes necessary, to take part in international search and rescue operations.

Fifth. We shall expand our cooperation with the internationally recognized government of Afghanistan, headed by