

***ABC This Week with George Stephanopoulos***  
**April 13, 2008**

Former President Jimmy Carter spoke with ABC's George Stephanopoulos from Katmandu. Carter is in Nepal to observe the historic elections, and the former president will soon visit the Middle East.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS, ABC NEWS: Good morning. We begin today with our exclusive headliner from Katmandu, former President Jimmy Carter.

President Carter, welcome.

I want to get to your mission to the Middle East, but first, you are in Nepal to monitor the elections that were held this week.

And you've called these elections the most transformational and profound you've ever monitored. Why?

JIMMY CARTER, FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT: Well, this is the 70th election in which the Carter Center has been employed as monitors. And this one will totally transform the structure of a society and the political situation and military situation in Nepal.

It will be the end, for instance, of 12 years of conflict, both military and political -- a war that lasted for 10 years and cost about 13,000 lives -- and this will bring peace.

Secondly, it would transform completely the nature of the government. For 240 years, Nepal has had a Hindu kingdom -- the only one on earth. And now, it will have a democratic republic.

And the third thing I think is significant is that, for the first time, large numbers of marginalized people -- more than 50 percent of their total population -- will be guaranteed a place in the political process.

The Madhesis, who live down on the Indian border, Dalits, who are Untouchables, ethnic groups -- and particularly women. As a matter of fact, in the constituent assembly that will assemble as a result of these elections, that'll write a new constitution for Nepal, will have at least 30 percent of the seats in the constituent assembly filled by women.

So, this'll be a transformational experience in the lives of the people of Nepal.

We've been involved here now -- the Carter Center has -- for about five years, first negotiating or mediating among the royal family, the seven old political parties and the Maoists. And later, when the king was deposed -- he's in isolation now and his rule is over -- then between the Maoists and the political parties.

So, it's been a very successful election so far, reasonably quiet -- accepted (ph) the results as they come in slowly.

STEPHANOPOULOS: While you've been in Nepal, the controversy over the Olympics has been kicking up as the Olympic torch has been going around the world.

You led the boycott of the Moscow Olympics to protest what the Soviet Union was doing in Afghanistan.

Should the U.S. boycott the Olympics this year to protest China's crackdown on Tibet and its complicity with the genocide in Darfur?

CARTER: No, I don't think so at all.

That was a totally different experience in 1980, when the Soviet Union had brutally invaded and killed thousands and thousands of people, who -- in Afghanistan then. They were threatening to go further south and take over other countries.

Fifty-four nations in the world decided to boycott the Olympics. Two-thirds of the U.S. Olympic Committee, a relatively independent group, decided not to go. The Congress voted overwhelmingly not to go.

And that was a completely different situation.

But I hope that all the countries will go ahead and participate in the Olympics in Beijing.

STEPHANOPOULOS: You are on your way to the Middle East, as well, where you'll be meeting, it's been reported, with the leader of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal.

You'll be the highest-ranking American ever to meet with him. His group is labeled a terrorist organization by the United States, and the State Department advised against the meeting.

Why are you doing it anyway?

CARTER: Well, the State Department has not advised me against a meeting. I haven't heard that. But I've been in Africa and here in Nepal. They may have.

But I've not confirmed our itinerary yet for the Syrian visit, but it's likely that I will be meeting with the Hamas leaders. We'll be meeting with the Israelis. We'll be meeting with Fatah.

We'll be meeting with the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, the Saudi Arabians, and with the whole gamut of people who might have to play a crucial role in any future peace agreement that involves the Middle East.

As a matter of fact, I've been meeting with Hamas leaders for years. As a matter of fact, 10 years ago, after Arafat was first elected president of the PLO and the Palestinians, we were monitoring that election, and I met with Hamas afterwards.

And then, in January of 2006, we were the monitors there for the Palestinian election, and Hamas won the election. We met with them after the election was over.

And so, I think that it's very important that at least someone meet with the Hamas leaders to express their views, to ascertain what flexibility they have, to try to induce them to stop all attacks against innocent civilians in Israel and to cooperate with the Fatah as a group that unites the Palestinians, maybe to get them to agree to a ceasefire -- things of this kind.

But I might add very quickly, that I'm not going as a mediator or a negotiator. This is a mission that we take as part of an overall Carter Center project, to promote peace in the region.

Since the election was over -- the one that I just mentioned, in 2006 -- we've had a full-time office in Ramallah, trying to keep me informed about what progress was made and what things weren't.

But my overwhelming commitment is to support fully the peace effort that has been supported and endorsed by President Bush and by Secretary Condoleezza Rice, and by the Israelis and the Palestinians.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But Secretary Rice just said this week that it's hard to see what can be gained by you meeting with the Hamas leader, because Hamas is an impediment to peace.

CARTER: Well, I'll be sharing what I find with Secretary Rice. And I don't find myself able to anticipate, without having a meeting with them, what they might have to contribute.

But I think there's no doubt in anyone's mind that, if Israel is ever going to find peace with justice concerning the relationship with their next-door neighbors, the Palestinians, that Hamas will have to be included in the process.

And I might add that the Israeli people, according to the most recent poll that's been published in many media, fully believe that the Israeli government itself should be engaged with direct negotiations with Hamas. Sixty-four percent, I believe, of Israelis believe this.

So, I think someone should be meeting with Hamas to see what we can do to encourage them to be cooperative and to find out what their attitude.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Your trip has also become fodder for the political campaign here at home. Senators Obama and Clinton and both said they would not meet with the Hamas leader. Several Democratic congressmen are urging you not to follow through with the meeting.

And former Speaker Newt Gingrich pounced on this, saying Democrats ought to disinvite you from their convention, because of this proposed meeting.

Are you worried that you might be making trouble for Senators Clinton, Obama and other Democrats?

CARTER: Well, I was not amazed to find that all political candidates -- not only those running for president, but those running for the U.S. Senate, for governor or Congress -- would be critical of any American who met with Hamas or with the Maoists here in Nepal, and so forth, that the United States government condemns.

But I feel quite at ease in doing this. It's something that the Carter Center has adopted as a goal, after I left the office, to promote peace, to promote human rights and justice, and democracy and freedom, and to alleviate suffering. And sometimes we are criticized...

STEPHANOPOULOS: Yet...

CARTER: ... but I try to bear the criticism with relative equanimity.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And you still have a smile on your face.

Yet, sir, Hamas has not renounced violence and will not recognize Israel.

Why is it right to meet with them in the absence of a renunciation of violence and recognition of Israel?

CARTER: Well, you can't always get prerequisites adopted by other people before you even talk to them.

The last meetings that I've had with Hamas leaders, immediately following the election in January of 2006, they told me that they were willing to declare, along with Israel, a complete ceasefire in Gaza and in the West Bank, that they were fully endorsing the right and authority of Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah leader, to negotiate on behalf of all the Palestinians -- including them -- and that whatever peace agreement he was able to negotiate with the Israelis, they would fully support it in advance, provided that it was presented to the Palestinian people in a referendum.

So, I've heard some reports directed to me early on, that they might be somewhat flexible. And I intend to find out if these are their prevailing thoughts now.

And when I find out whether they are accurate or whether they're inaccurate, the latest opinion of the Hamas leaders with whom I will meet -- and I'll just meet with a few -- then I'll share what I find with the Israelis and with Fatah, and also, of course, with the American government officials.

STEPHANOPOULOS: At the beginning of your trip in Africa, you signaled -- and you made quite a splash here in the United States by signaling that you support Senator Obama. You said that your children, their spouses and your grandchildren -- even though you didn't make a formal endorsement -- they are all for Barack Obama.

What do they and you see in Senator Obama?

CARTER: I didn't quite hear the question. The only thing I know is that, I have not made an endorsement, and don't intend to, until the time of the convention.

But so far as I know, all my children and grandchildren are supporting Obama.

STEPHANOPOULOS: you said people could surmise your views from what your children and grandchildren are saying, at least of your trip to Africa.

Yet, at the beginning of the campaign, you said Barack Obama didn't have the proven substance or experience.

Has your view on that changed?

CARTER: Well, I'll let you make your own judgment, George, about my inclinations. I've told you what I -- as much as I intend to reveal.

Just -- and I got permission, by the way, from my children and grandchildren, and their spouses, to reveal their intention. I haven't yet revealed what my intention is directly, or my wife.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Speaker Pelosi has said that the superdelegates should not overturn the will of the people, that that's not what they are supposed to do, and that they should basically vote for, or not overturn, the winner of the pledged delegates.

Do you agree with that standard?

CARTER: I basically agree with it. But I think that any superdelegate who wishes to deviate from that opinion should be perfectly free to do so.

As a matter of fact, some of the top superdelegates in Massachusetts, for instance, publicly endorsed Obama, and then their state went for Mrs. Clinton.

My hometown, my county, my state went overwhelmingly for Obama. But if I decided later on to support Mrs. Clinton, I would feel free to do so.

But I think it would be a very serious mistake for the Democratic Party, if, for instance -- I'm not anticipating what's going to happen with the next contest, I think about a dozen of them -- if a candidate had the majority of popular votes, the majority of delegates and a majority of states -- all three -- were the superdelegates to vote contrary to that, I think it would be very difficult to explain.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Finally, on this subject, sir, back in 1980, Senator Kennedy hurt your reelection campaign by fighting all the way to the convention.

I know you're not going to reveal your choice until the convention, but Senator Clinton has said she's prepared to take this all the way to the convention.

Are you worried that will hurt the Democratic Party?

CARTER: No. As a matter of fact, if you remember, 1980 -- you may not be old enough - - but...

STEPHANOPOULOS: I'm old enough.

CARTER: ... I didn't gain the support of Senator Kennedy, even after the convention.

The Democratic Party, unfortunately, was split very badly. And maybe it was my fault, because I didn't hold it together while I was president. But you may or may not remember that on the reviewing stand at the convention, after I clearly defeated Senator Kennedy two-to-one, he refused to shake my hand, ostentatiously, and made it clear to his supporters that he was not supporting me.

So, you know, that was a situation that I think, I hope was unique in American Democratic politics.

And I don't have any doubt, at this point, that no matter who wins at the Democratic convention, that the other candidate and all of the Democratic delegates will fully support the one who is finally chosen.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Finally, sir, you began your mission in Africa. And when we spoke last year, you said you hoped to completely eliminate the horrible suffering caused by Guinea worms by 2009.

Will you meet that goal?

CARTER: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Absolutely, it'll be eliminated?

CARTER: Just about. Well, I say just about.

We started out with 3.6 million cases of Guinea worm. All the way through 2007, we had less than 10,000, which is a 99.8 percent reduction. We still had two-tenths of one percent.

In the first months of this year, beginning a new tabulation, we have had over a 75 percent reduction in Sudan, and a 91 percent reduction in Ghana. Those are our two problem countries.

So, we are well on the way, and I think it's entirely feasible, that we would have complete eradication of Guinea worm from the face of the earth -- the second disease this ever happened to -- by the end of 2009. That's my prediction.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Well, we hope you make it.

President Carter, thank you very much for your time this morning.

CARTER: Thank you, George. I've enjoyed it.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Bye-bye. Safe travels, sir.

CARTER: Goodbye. Thanks a lot.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Thank you.

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