

Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz, 10/10/2014

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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MR. SCHULTZ: Thank you for joining us this morning. Later today, the President will deliver remarks in Los Angeles County at the Frank G. Bonelli Regional Park, where he will announce that he will use his executive authority under the Antiquities Act to designate approximately 346,000 acres of national forest land in the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County as the nation's newest national monument.

With that, I will take your questions.

Q Eric, will the President leave office without taking action to close Guantanamo prison?

MR. SCHULTZ: Steve, I appreciate your question. I'm going to restate our policy here, which is that we continue to object to congressional restrictions, as we've made clear many times, including in our Statement of Administration Policy on the House-passed National Defense Authorization Act.

Now, Steve, the President has been clear about the administration's strategy with respect to Guantanamo Bay. To the greatest extent possible and consistent with our national security interests, detainees will be repatriated or resettled or prosecuted in federal courts or military-commissioned proceedings. As you know, the administration will also continue to call on members of both parties to work together to ensure that Congress lifts the remaining restrictions and enables the closure of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.

Q I don't understand. So what is the administration's position? Are you looking now at bypassing Congress after the midterms in a way you haven't so far in order to close the facility? I mean, we saw the statement earlier -- I understand that you're objecting to the notion of drafting options. But putting that aside, is this a maneuver that politically you can't do before the midterms but you can do after the midterms? And is your reluctance to broadcast it -- like you don't want to say you're doing that, or is it not right?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes, I don't have any maneuvers to readout to you right now. I would say -- but for many years now we've always looked at options to close Guantanamo Bay. For now, our position is clear that we're seeking support from Congress to lift those restrictions.

Q What does "seeking" mean, though? I mean, you're seeking -- are there new phone calls? Are there new briefings? I mean, he said this within his first year of office that he would close it. So is there something new? I mean --

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have any new briefings, phone calls to readout to you right now, but I can say that this is something important to the President, important to the administration, and something we are constantly working with Democrats and Republicans in Congress over.

Q But there's no unilateral action being considered at this moment?

MR. SCHULTZ: Like I said, we, for the past few -- for many years now, have always looked at options to do this. Our position right now, our policy right now is seeking support from Congress to lift the restrictions that we feel are misguided.

Q We have other questions, we're just typing frantically.

MR. SCHULTZ: Take your time, I'm here all day. (Laughter.)

Q Eric, I wanted to ask about North Korea. It's been five weeks since the leader there has been seen, and this morning he missed some sort of big celebration that he hasn't missed for the past three years. So does the White House have any idea what's going on over there and with him?

MR. SCHULTZ: Thanks, Darlene. We have seen those reports about Kim Jong-un's health and his absence at the event you mentioned. I don't have anything for you on this specifically. I will say that given the DPRK's regime is one of the most opaque on this planet, it's not surprising that there is very little reliable and publicly available information about this.

Q There were reports this morning that militants were closing in closer to Baghdad and closer to the airport. Anything on the President getting updated on that or just ISIS strategy, and if fears -- getting to the airport would obviously be a big deal?

MR. SCHULTZ: As you know, we remain deeply concerned about the situation there. Strikes were conducted last night, as announced by U.S. Central Command. That included seven strikes around the city that destroyed -- around the city of Kobani that destroyed three ISIL vehicles, two ISIL training facilities, and damaged an ISIL tank. These strikes also struck two ISIL units.

As you know, Kimberly, the strikes were conducted as part of the President's comprehensive strategy to degrade and destroy ISIL. This destruction of targets in Syria and Iraq further limits the terrorist group's ability to lead, control and project power.

Q Eric, sorry, can I go back just real quickly to Gitmo? I want to understand -- you are not ruling out the possibility of unilateral action, you're just saying that right now you're seeking support from Congress?

MR. SCHULTZ: What I'm saying is we are seeking support from Congress. That is our position right now.

Q I'm going to say that you're not ruling out unilateral action unless you tell me I shouldn't say that.

MR. SCHULTZ: There's a lot of jobs I want in life; being Margaret Talev's editor is not one of them. (Laughter.)

Q Eric, can I ask you about Syria? The State Department said that Turkey has agreed to be part of the coalition, particularly in participating and the training of moderate rebels. A couple questions. Is that the most that you guys think you can get out of them? Are they going to help at all in terms of taking on ISIL, protecting Kobani? And Hagel had said today that you guys would like to use their airbase. Is that something that you think you can also get out of them?

MR. SCHULTZ: Thank you, Carol. Today, as you pointed out, General Allen and Deputy Envoy McGurk met with Turkish officials. Yesterday they held constructive and detailed talks with Turkish officials, including the Prime Minister and NATO representatives -- actually, the NATO Secretary General.

General Allen is currently en route back to Washington, and Brett McGurk is staying in the region for further consultations. Nearly 12 hours of meetings with Turkish counterparts yesterday and followed this morning with Turkish General Staff helped align our strategic thinking against ISIL with this key NATO ally, Turkey. As the State Department noted, Turkey has agreed to support train-and-equip efforts for the moderate Syrian opposition. There is going to be a Defense Department planning team that goes out to the region to Ankara next week to continue planning on those channels.

Q Is that the best you guys can do? Do you think that's adequate for a NATO ally who has a 500-mile border with Syria?

MR. SCHULTZ: Actually, the border is about 550 miles, and you are right that ISIL is obviously a threat to Turkey security. In fact, there are few countries that have felt the ripple effect of the crises in Syria and Iraq as much as Turkey has. To your broader question, I think the fact that Deputy Envoy McGurk is staying in the region and the Defense Department planning team is heading out there next week is an indication that conversations will be ongoing.

Q So this is not the -- basically, this is the floor, not the ceiling. I mean, this is not the best that you're hoping to get out of them?

MR. SCHULTZ: Again, conversations are going to continue.

Q I'm just going to ask you on the Attorney General. Can you give us any on-the-record guidance in the wake of reports that -- the latest wave of reports that it will be Perez? I mean, on the record, is it true that no decisions have been made yet and that those reports are not accurate?

MR. SCHULTZ: On the record, I'm not going to engage in any personnel announcements at this time. I will say the Attorney General over the past five and a half years has done tremendous work at the Department of Justice along with his entire team there. But there is still a lot of work to be done. That's why filling this post will be a priority for us, and as soon as we have an announcement to make, you all will be amongst the first to know.

Q Has the timing changed at all? There were a couple of reports this morning it was moved up, then moved back. But just on the record, is the timing the same? It was going to take a while was sort of what we were understanding.

MR. SCHULTZ: You're right, I did see conflicting reports, and I will tell you I don't have an update on the timing for you.

Q Does he think Perez would be a good Attorney General?

MR. SCHULTZ: Again, Steve, good try. I'm not going to engage in speculation about personnel announcements.

Q So Congressman Chaffetz up on the Hill is asking for all documents related to the White House Counsel review of the Cartagena situation in his office by October 24. Do you see this as a reasonable request and one that you would meet?

MR. SCHULTZ: Steve, my answer to this is going to be strikingly similar to the one yesterday. We've seen Congressman Chaffetz's request and, as you know, as a general rule, we work hard to comply with requests that we seem -- Oversight requests that are legitimate. I don't have a specific response to this one yet.

I will say if you look at Congress's oversight heretofore into this matter, you'll see that a bipartisan Senate committee, chaired by Senators Claire McCaskill of Missouri and Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, found that there's no substantiation to the allegations you're referencing.

Q At the time after the President was briefed on the situation in Colombia, he I think referenced there were some knuckleheads or whatever in the situation. Was he briefed on this potential incident with the White House advance staffer? Is he aware of it? Was he aware of it at the time and/or now

MR. SCHULTZ: I did get this question yesterday and I don't have an answer in terms of that awareness. I will tell you, again, when the White House completed its review several years ago when we were aware of an erroneous hotel log, a similar version of which falsely implicated a Secret Service agent who was subsequently exonerated, that review found that no members of the White House team, including the volunteer in question, had engaged in inappropriate conduct.

Q If we're done with serious questions, did the President have a reaction to Gwyneth Paltrow telling him that he was quite handsome and that she couldn't speak properly around him because of that

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have a reaction to read out to you on that.

Q Week ahead.

Q We had a pretty early night last night when we ended. Was there anything on the President's schedule that was not announced you can tell us about?

MR. SCHULTZ: No. I do have a week ahead.

Q Will he call Malala Yousafzai at some point? I mean, she was in the Oval Office with him last year, and I'm just wondering if he would telephone and actually speak to her and telephone his congratulations at some point.

MR. SCHULTZ: Thank you, Darlene. I don't have any future calls to read out to you at this time, but I can tell you that, as I think we put out in the statement, the President and the First Lady issued a statement congratulating Malala Yousafzai on winning the Nobel Peace Prize. As you pointed out, the President and First Lady were proud to welcome this remarkable young woman to the Oval Office last year.

Q Week ahead?

Q I have a question. The people that lived around Ms. Paltrow's house expressed deep anger today about how the neighborhood was all shut down last night and they couldn't get back to their houses. Do you guys have any response to these folks?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have a response and I don't have any specific awareness to the situation you're talking about. I would say as a general matter I know the United States Secret Service works with local law enforcement to minimize inconvenience wherever the President travels.

On the week ahead, I will tell you that on Monday, which is Columbus Day, the President has no public events.

On Tuesday, the President will attend a DCCC event in the Washington, D.C., area.

On Wednesday, the President will travel to Union, New Jersey, to attend a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee event. In the evening, the President will travel to Bridgeport, Connecticut, for a campaign rally with Connecticut Democrats, featuring Governor Dan Malloy.

And on Thursday, the President will travel to Rhode Island to deliver remarks on the economy. I'll just pause there to remind everyone today is 10/10. Afterward, the President will travel to Long Island, New York, to attend a DNC event.

And on Friday, the President will attend meetings at the White House.

END

11:26 A.M. PDT