

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 8/26/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here. Thank you for your patience today. As you know, we rescheduled this briefing so that it would come after Secretary Kerry was able to make the statement he made about Syria. But again, I thank you for your patience.

I have no announcement of my own to make at the top, except to say that I'm glad to be back and glad to be with you. And with that, I turn to the Associated Press.

Q Thanks, Jay. Welcome back. Some pretty tough language from Secretary Kerry today. Are the options that the administration, that the President is considering designed to be merely retaliatory for the actions that you all say occurred in Syria? Or is it an opportunity to kind of change the course of the fighting there?

MR. CARNEY: Thank you for your question. Secretary Kerry I think made clear, not long ago, that what we are evaluating now is a response to the clear use, on a mass scale, with repugnant results, of chemical weapons. And there is very little doubt that the Syrian regime, the Assad regime, used those weapons -- because they have maintained control of the stockpile of chemical weapons in Syria.

They alone have the capacity to use rockets to deliver chemical weapons. And they have continued to -- well, they had, prior to the use of chemical weapons, tried to clear that neighborhood, and have continued to shell that neighborhood in the aftermath of the use of chemical weapons.

So what we are talking about here, as Secretary Kerry made clear, is a response to the clear violation of an international norm. And it is profoundly in the interest of the United States and of the international community that that violation of an international norm be responded to.

We have seen, as Secretary Kerry said, the horrific results of the use of chemical weapons. We have seen it with our own eyes. And the evidence that chemical weapons were used is undeniable, and the proof comes from sources well beyond the U.S. government -- open sources, international organizations, witnesses on the ground.

This violation has to be taken very seriously. And the President is consulting with his national security team. The international community -- rather, the intelligence community is further assessing and evaluating what happened, and we will be able to share with you an assessment of the IC in the coming days about the use of chemical weapons on August 21st. And the President will continue to consult and review his options in terms of responding to it.

Now, we have a clear policy with regards to the conflict within Syria as well. And we have obviously provided substantial assistance to the opposition, and we will continue to do that. But it is important to make a distinction here when it comes to this violation of an international norm -- it's not just an incident that pertains only to Syria or to the region, it is a violation that pertains to the whole world.

Q The President himself has spoken about the difficulties of a response to something like this. But what would be considered a proportional response then?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to speculate about potential responses. I'm going to make clear, as Secretary Kerry did, that the fact that chemical weapons were used on a widespread basis against innocent civilians, with tragic results, is undeniable. And there is very little doubt in our minds that the Syrian regime is culpable.

We are continuing to review potential responses, to consult with our allies and partners and with Congress as we make that review. But I'm not going to engage in hypotheticals about potential responses or what might occur after any response or any decision is made about a response.

Q Would the President act without congressional or U.N. authorization? And would he lay out the evidence personally? You said that you'd come out with what the IC ultimately determined. Will the President himself make that case to the American people?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think you have heard the President speak on this issue in the past, and I think you can expect to hear him speak on it again as he evaluates the potential options and responses, and as he makes a decision about a potential response. But he has not made that decision, and when he does I'm sure you will hear from him.

When it comes to Congress, we're consulting with Congress and will continue to do that. And when it comes to the international community, the President, as you know, as we read out, has had conversations with key allies, leaders of allied nations, and will continue to have conversations with other foreign leaders and we'll make information available about those conversations as they occur.

Q Are you distinguishing the international community and international allies from the U.N. specifically?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to -- you're getting into a hypothetical about a decision that hasn't been made. So I'll refrain from doing that, expect to make clear that the President is consulting with the international community, as well as Secretary Kerry broadly with his counterparts around the world, and that will continue.

Q Anything on timing?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about a timeframe. The President, as Secretary Kerry made clear, at the President's direction, considers what happened in Syria and the use of chemical weapons on this scale to be a horrific violation of an international norm. It's an extremely serious matter, and he is evaluating the appropriate response.

But I'm not going to speculate about the timing of a response or a decision.

Jeff.

Q Jay, Secretary Kerry referred to additional information that the United States has about the attack. Can you tell us what that is and what he meant?

MR. CARNEY: What I can tell you, as I mentioned, is that the intelligence community is making assessments, and when it has a formal assessment we will be able to share conclusions with you in the coming days. That's what the Secretary was referring to.

Q What would the legal basis be for a military strike?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about a decision that hasn't been made.

Q Does the fact that Americans, polls show, are reluctant to get involved in another war factor into the President's thinking and decision about how to respond?

MR. CARNEY: The President makes decisions about military action, or potential military action, with the national security interests of the United States in mind. There is no weightier decision for the President, and he has made that clear on numerous occasions. And he makes decisions of that nature based on what he views as the long-term interests of the United States.

Again, as Secretary Kerry made clear, and as I just repeated, this is a matter that is distinct from, although part of, the conflict in Syria. This is a violation of a long-held international norm that bans the use of chemical weapons on a widespread scale with horrific, morally obscene, as Secretary Kerry said, consequences.

Q Does Russia play a role in the President's desire to get international backing for whatever decision he makes?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the President, again, as I mentioned, has been and will consult with foreign leaders, international partners and allies. I don't have specifics to preview for you. We have read out some of those conversations. We'll provide more information for you about them.

When it comes to Russia, I think it's important to make clear that the use of chemical weapons on a widespread scale on August 21st, on the outskirts of Damascus, is undeniable. The international community has already concluded that it occurred. Even Russia and Iran have concluded and made clear that they believe chemical weapons were used.

The United Nations mandate, the inspection team's mandate is merely to establish whether chemical weapons were used, and that has already been established. The United Nations team does not have a mandate to establish culpability.

And so it is our belief, and as I think the Secretary made clear, that the regime in Syria has made obvious their attempts to preclude a credible investigation into what happened. Having stated initially that they welcomed the inspection team to make an analysis, they then blocked that team from having access to the region for five days while they bombarded the region to destroy evidence.

Today, the United Nations' team caravan was attacked en route to the site. And upon its return from its first day of work from the site, the neighborhood was again bombarded and shelled in a further indication of the utter lack of credibility of the Syrian regime on this matter. And we do not believe that that credibility is going to suddenly be restored.

Jim.

Q Jay, earlier this afternoon, Secretary Kerry expressed his personal feelings about what he thought about the images that were coming out of Syria. Has the President expressed what he was thinking when he first saw these images? What's his gut reaction?

MR. CARNEY: Secretary Kerry spoke today at the President's direction, and the President shares Secretary Kerry's sentiments. I think all of us who have seen the visual evidence are repulsed by it and heartbroken by it. And it demonstrates a disregard for international norms of behavior and a disregard for innocent life, and in this case for the innocent life of fellow Syrians that is appalling. Indiscriminate killing of innocent women and children in an attempt to maintain his bloody grasp onto power is despicable. But that is what we've come to expect from Bashar al-Assad.

Q And, Jay, earlier this summer there was some reporting out there that there were divisions, that there was sort of a split inside the President's national security team as to what to do about Syria. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Martin Dempsey, wrote a letter to Congress talking about some of his concerns, why the U.S. should be cautious about unintended consequences. Would you say that there's a more united front now, given the Secretary's comments this afternoon and given what you're saying?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think in response to that question I would make clear again that what we're talking about here is a potential response -- in consultation with our allies and partners, in consultation with Congress -- to the specific violation of an international norm by the widespread use of a chemical weapon. And while it is part of this ongoing

Syrian conflict in which we have an interest and in which we have a clear stated position, it is distinct in that regard. So the President himself has spoken to the issues around our support for the opposition and our views on the conflict in Syria.

But let's be clear that we have substantially stepped up our support for the opposition. And we did so fairly recently in response to our assessment that the Syrian regime had clearly used on a much smaller scale, but in numerous incidents, chemical weapons. This is on an entirely larger scale. In response to that, we're evaluating potential actions.

Q You said that the U.S. has stepped up its aid to the rebels there. At this point, given what we've seen in the past week, is that now a sufficient response in the eyes of this administration, or is something more now necessary?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I just made reference to the increased support for the opposition in response to the previously established use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime on a smaller scale -- a small scale. We are now evaluating the widespread use of -- or the use of, in a widespread attack, chemical weapons, with devastating consequences and hundreds of fatalities and thousands of casualties, and a response to that. So those are distinct.

Q Going back to the first question, you say "potential response." I think you earlier said there would be a response. There are different levels, different scales. Is the President looking to punish the Syrian regime, or to deny the regime access to its chemical weapons or to turn the tide of the fighting? I don't think you have to do a hypothetical to give us a sense there of what is being determined. And what is the President taking into account to determine that level, that scale?

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me be clear that we are assessing a potential response, or a response to the use of chemical weapons on August 21st. And the fact that those weapons were used with devastating consequences for innocent women and children and others is absolutely undeniable. And I think I got the question earlier about the distinction between the ongoing conflict in Syria and our support for the opposition, which has been stepped up and which continues, on the one hand; and a response to this specific violation of an international norm, and a violation which we believe there is very little doubt was committed by the Syrian regime.

Now, we are engaging in -- and this is what Secretary Kerry referenced and I spoke to minutes ago in answer to Jeff -- an assessment by the intelligence community, a further assessment that when it's concluded we will provide conclusions to you about this specific incident.

But in answer to your question, the President and his team are evaluating options with regards to responses to this specific violation of an international norm -- the prohibited use of chemical weapons against civilian populations. And that is part of, but distinct from, the ongoing conflict in Syria and our support for the opposition.

Q So any kind of retaliation would be specifically for this one incident, not necessarily to turn the tide of the war in Syria, but --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about what the decision will be. When it's made, obviously we will make it clear and make it clear to the public what our views are and what our actions will be.

But the answer broadly is that we are considering responses to this transgression, to this violation of an international norm. We are continuing our support for the opposition in its fight against Assad. But we also have made clear for a long time now that there is not a military solution to that conflict. There has to be a political solution -- that ultimately Assad has to step aside to allow for a better future for the Syrian people.

Q Does the G20 put you in a box as far as when the President could take action?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to speculate about timelines. We obviously consider this matter to be grave and serious, and I think as Secretary Kerry reflected in his remarks earlier today, we are giving it a great deal of attention.

Major.

Q Jay, I'd like to get a sense of the sequence of things. When the President was asked about this on Friday, he was not as aggressive in his assertion of culpability or the sense of moral outrage that Secretary Kerry was today. Did the evidence presented at the Saturday national security meeting to the President harden a sense -- not only for himself personally, but the national security team -- that this was a more conclusive assessment that could be made and that a response was required?

MR. CARNEY: I think we have in the days since the chemical weapons attack, both through means that we have, but also more broadly through open sources and other sources established very clearly and undeniably that chemical weapons were used on a broad scale on August 21st outside of Damascus. And the meeting on Saturday I'm sure reinforced that factual foundation. I think when the President had the interview we were still only a day and a half or two days in the aftermath of the attack itself.

I think Secretary Kerry's statements today reflect very clearly and specifically the President's views and the entire administration's views about what happened; about the fact that the use of chemical weapons on a broad scale is undeniable; and our view -- and I think a clearly logical view -- that because the Syrian regime has maintained control of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons, because the Syrian regime alone has the capacity to deliver those weapons via rockets, and because of the actions that Syria has taken in that neighborhood, both prior to and in the aftermath of the attack, that there is very little doubt that the Syrian regime is responsible for this attack.

But as Secretary Kerry said, and I said, there is an assessment ongoing, a formal assessment ongoing by the intelligence community. And when that assessment is concluded in the coming days, we'll make those conclusions known to you.

Q Is it fair to say that you have an inference now, not hard evidence, because you don't have access to the site, and as you mentioned more than once, evidence has probably been destroyed? This is a circumstantial or inferential case -- would you agree with that?

MR. CARNEY: I think you're blending two issues. One is, did a chemical weapons attack occur? Undeniably, the answer to that question is yes. Iran and Russia -- even Iran and Russia agree with us and the world on that fact.

Q The culpability aspect.

MR. CARNEY: A separate issue is culpability. And we believe there is very little doubt about culpability for the reasons that I said. But we obviously are continuing to make --

Q You don't have a fact-based --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have a presentation to make to you today. The intelligence community obviously is assessing this, and has gathered and will continue to gather information in that assessment. And when conclusions have been reached, we will provide them to you.

Q And so, let me make sure I understand -- that fact-based conclusion will have to precede any action the President might order?

MR. CARNEY: I don't want to get into timelines, and I don't want to speculate about decisions.

Q No, that's for the process.

MR. CARNEY: Well, that process related to a timeline. But again, the international -- the intelligence community is making an assessment. We will have conclusions about that assessment available for you in the coming days.

Meanwhile, obviously, working with that information as well as with the preponderance of outside information that make the use of chemical weapons undeniable, the President and his national security team are evaluating their options.

Q You mentioned a political solution. Is it practicable, is it reasonable anymore to envision any sort of negotiated peace conference, which has been long discussed, with a regime that has now, from the administration's point of view, very likely used chemical weapons in violation of international norms?

Some of the opposition have already said today they have no interest anymore in trying to negotiate something outside of a militarily achieved ousting of the Assad regime. Where does the administration stand on that prospect --

MR. CARNEY: Well, we certainly believe -- it's a good question, and I would say in answer to it that we certainly believe that ultimately there is no solution here that does not require a politically negotiated settlement.

The fact that Assad has continued to barbarically attack his own people using means now that boggle the mind and violate international norms makes the potential for that kind of negotiated solution more difficult. But there is no solution, as we have long made clear, for Syria's future that includes Assad.

And we, because of the situation on the ground and because of the military conflict, have provided enormous amounts of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and substantial assistance to the Syrian military opposition.

Q Last question. I'd like you to describe the strategic difference for the American government. There have been countless women and children slaughtered in this civil war -- at least 100,000 thousand victims, maybe 120,000. There are various analysts writing today, look, if this is only about responding to a chemical weapons attack, what is the strategic difference for the United States between -- and I'm not trying to minimize -- but what's the difference between 300 casualties of one barbaric act of war and 300 others? Or, for that matter, 100,000? What takes this to a strategic level of importance that it might envision a U.S. military response?

MR. CARNEY: I think that's an excellent question, and I appreciate the opportunity to make clear what is distinct about this particular atrocity. The use of chemical weapons is contrary to the standards adopted by the vast majority of nations and international efforts since World War I to eliminate the use of such weapons.

The international norm against the use of chemical weapons is fundamental to the interests of the United States and of the international community. The use of these weapons on a mass scale and the potential risk of proliferation is a threat to our national interests and a concern to the entire world.

It is because that this international norm exists, because it has been so clearly violated, that we and many around the world have to assess an appropriate response.

Without question, there is ongoing barbarity in Syria perpetrated by the Assad regime. And we have provided substantial assistance to the Syrian opposition and will continue to provide substantial assistance to the Syrian opposition in their struggle with Assad. This instance, this use of chemical weapons is distinct because it so clearly violates an international norm that has been in place for a very long time.

Q So by that standard, does it give you a better legal case to actually launch military action? Because killing 100,000 to 120,000 people also violates international norms, right?

MR. CARNEY: I would say, Ed, that I'm not going to speculate about decisions that haven't been made. I would simply say that, as I just mentioned, this international standard, this international norm is something that has been adopted by a vast majority of nations. It reflects an effort that has been engaged in by the vast majority of nations since World War I, and the -- for those who know their history -- horrific use of chemical weapons in that conflict. And, therefore, it is a distinct problem that requires a response.

Q Two other things. One, talk about the U.N.'s role in this. Because my understanding of the inspectors, their mandate only allows them to determine whether or not chemical weapons were used, not who is culpable. And to Major's question earlier, the U.S.

government has already determined both, it seems like: One, chemical weapons were used; and, two, you believe you know who is culpable. So why are we waiting for the U.N. team? What is their role in this if you've already made that conclusion?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'd say a couple of things. We have concluded, as have almost everyone who has an interest or expressed an opinion on this matter, that chemical weapons were used on August 21st. Russia and Iran have concluded as much.

We believe there is very little doubt, for the reasons that I have made clear, that the Syrian regime is responsible for the use of chemical weapons on that day, because they have maintained control of the stockpile of chemical weapons in Syria, because the Syrian regime alone has the capacity to deliver those weapons with rockets, and because of the actions the Syrian regime has taken to clear this area prior to the attack; and the fact that they have shelled it continuously since the attack, and are shelling it now, today, in the wake of the visit by the U.N. inspectors.

Now, when it comes to the inspectors and their investigation, let's remember that we led the calls for U.N. inspection of potential chemical weapons sites in Syria. We were highly critical of the Syrian regime for blocking entry and access to that inspection team. But, at this point, we do not have confidence that the U.N. can conduct a credible inquiry into what happened. And we are concerned that the Syrian government's continued obstruction and delay of the inquiry is designed to create more time and space for their continued actions.

And as you stated -- and you're absolutely right -- the U.N. has made clear that their team's mandate extends only to establishing whether or not chemical weapons were used. We've already established that chemical weapons were used, and not just the United States government, but governments around the world, including Russia and Iran; independent organizations, humanitarian organizations, including Doctors Without Borders and the -- Human Rights Council. The visual evidence is overwhelming and compelling. So we have established already that the weapons were used.

On the issue of culpability, we haven't concluded but we believe there is very little doubt that the regime is culpable. We are continuing assessments and will provide conclusions when we have them for you. But we do not believe that the suggestions from some quarters that this whole thing is contrived or that the Syrian regime was not responsible are very credible for all the reasons that we have all been able to see and evaluate.

Q But based on the President's own criticism of the previous administration, not being able to clearly establish the use of WMD -- if you're now acknowledging the U.N. doesn't have the mandate to determine that anyway, what will the President use to decide whether or not to take U.S. military action --

MR. CARNEY: Again, we are continuing to assess the matter of culpability. We believe, and I think the evidence is overwhelming, that there is very little doubt that the Syrian regime is culpable. But we will continue to establish, or assess the incident, and we'll have

more information for you, as Secretary Kerry mentioned, in the coming days about that matter.

But, in the meantime, we should make clear from here and from the State Department and elsewhere, and in capitals around the world, that the Syrian regime has very little credibility on this matter. If the Syrian regime had any interest, as Secretary Kerry said earlier, in proving that they were not culpable, they had the opportunity to allow that U.N. inspection team to visit the site immediately. Instead, they blocked access for five days while they shelled the neighborhood, killing more innocent civilians, in an attempt to destroy evidence.

And even today, when the inspection team began its trip to the region where the attack occurred, its convoy was attacked. They had to turn back. And then they were able to make it later into the region. After they left, the Syrian regime started shelling again. The credibility here does not exist.

Q Last one. It's been a year ago this month that the President laid out the red line. Since then, many military analysts, like Anthony Cordesman is out today saying Assad has only gotten stronger since then, the rebels have become more fractured since then. So more broadly, how does the administration know that if you take military action it's not too little, too late -- that too much time has passed to make a difference?

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me take that question in pieces. And, first of all, on the issue of the red line, that was a reference to the potential at the time of use of chemical weapons. And when it was established by us that chemical weapons had been used on a very small scale, but in several instances, by the Syrian regime, we took action and we stepped up our assistance, direct assistance to the Syrian opposition, the military opposition.

And now, as we have and the world has established that chemical weapons were used on a much broader and more horrific scale just a few days ago, we are working to establish culpability in this matter. We believe there is very little doubt about culpability. And we will consider the options and the President will make a decision, and obviously you will hear from him about that.

On the issue of the ongoing conflict, there is no question that it continues to be brutal, and Assad continues to use every means available to him to assault his own people. And the conflict is far, at this point, from resolution. But, for that reason, we and others have continued to step up our assistance to the opposition, and we will work with the opposition going forward.

But as I've tried to make clear in response to earlier questions, this is a -- the transgression here, the violation of this international norm is a distinct issue, and we are considering options in response to it.

Chuck.

Q Jay, you keep using this phrase "violation of international norms," and so did Secretary Kerry. Is that a legal finding by the United States government?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to lay out a legal case here because we are evaluating potential responses.

Q What's the norm that it's in violation of?

MR. CARNEY: Standards adopted by the vast majority of nations prohibiting the use of chemical weapons.

Q Is there a specific treaty you're citing here? Is this the Geneva Convention?

MR. CARNEY: I'll have to get back to you on this.

Q Is this the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction?

MR. CARNEY: The answer is --

Q Is there a specific document here --

MR. CARNEY: There is a clear ban prohibiting the use of chemical weapons that has been violated.

Q Did Syria sign onto that ban?

MR. CARNEY: I doubt it, but we can check. The question at issue here is whether or not the international community and the United States, as part of the international community that shares this view, can tolerate this violation because it is in the profound interest of the United States for that international norm to be maintained.

We cannot tolerate the use of and proliferation of these kinds of weapons. It's horrific, obviously, in this instance and in the use of chemical weapons in this conflict. But the norm applies to the whole world. And the implications of proliferation of the use of chemical weapons around the region and the world are terrible, and that is why that is the view that we've taken in response to this and it's a view that's shared by many nations around the world.

Q Why is the United States responsible for enforcing this norm?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we are consulting with partners and allies around the world on this matter, and we have not announced a response, and the President has not made a decision about a response.

Q Secretary Kerry said you guys are going to respond. That has been -- now what it looks, whatever. But he made that pretty clear.

MR. CARNEY: Well, again -- there has to be a response, but I don't think that --

Q Why is it the United States is in charge of this?

MR. CARNEY: I think this is concluding that the United States alone is appalled by the use of chemical weapons in violation of international norms here, and that is not the case. And I think leaders from other nations have made clear that they share our views about what happened in Syria on this particular occasion.

But I don't want to get ahead of a process here. The President is consulting with allies and partners. Secretary Kerry has consulted with and will continue to consult with a vast array of his counterparts. And we will keep you updated as we make these evaluations.

Q Can you detail the consultations with Congress that have gone on so far? Because there are many members of Congress who believe they have not been consulted.

MR. CARNEY: Well, members of Congress have been consulted, and those consultations will continue. We don't tend to read out every individual phone call, but the White House and obviously the State Department and others have been consulting with members --

Q Can you give us some examples? Some leaders?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't want to read out a specific member, but I can tell you that members of Congress have been consulted and will be consulted as we continue to make these evaluations.

Q Specific people in different committees that have been consulted? Can you give us at least some --

MR. CARNEY: I think members of Congress with a particular interest in this matter have been consulted and will continue to be consulted, and that process is underway and will continue in coming days.

Q Do you need Congress to act on anything? Or is that determination --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't want to speculate about what Congress might do when we haven't even reached a decision.

Q Consult with Congress -- does not mean having Congress authorize something? Is that a fair --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that's a statement objectively of fact that you've made. But the --

Q Make sure you thought that, too. (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: But we are consulting with Congress. The issues that you raise presuppose a decision that hasn't been made.

Carol.

Q I just wanted to clarify something. You had said earlier that we will hear from the President when he makes a decision, not if he makes a decision. And should we read from that that he will choose one of the military options that he's currently considering?

MR. CARNEY: The President and his team have not made a decision about the response. They are evaluating options. I think it is safe to say that, given the gravity of this issue, that the President will address it and you will hear from him along the way here. But I'm not announcing a specific presidential statement or speech because the process of evaluating our options is underway.

Q I guess what I'm trying to clarify is when you're talking about these options, you're specifically talking about -- I mean, he's going to choose a military option. There's not some other non-military --

MR. CARNEY: I don't think I said that.

Q I guess I'm asking to have that clarified.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think actually just to make clear, obviously a lot of these questions have related to the potential decision to use some kind of force. In response to smaller scale, but proven uses of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, we did take -- we did respond, and we responded with an increase in assistance to the Syrian opposition.

The instance we're talking about now is of a much graver and broader scale and merits a response accordingly. The international community is assessing this. Our intelligence community is assessing this. It is firmly established that weapons were used on a significant scale, chemical weapons were used. And we are evaluating culpability. We believe there's very little doubt about who is culpable here, but we continue that process. And we continue to consult with Congress and with our partners and allies in this matter.

Q I'm sorry, not to belabor this point. So to cut through what you're saying, are you saying that one of the options the President is considering, that they're not all military options, that you could respond to this by providing the rebels with more arms?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to engage in hypotheticals about decisions that haven't been made.

Q But he is going to make a decision and he is going to choose one of the options before him. And all of those are not military options, is that what you're saying?

MR. CARNEY: This is a process. All I'm saying is that in response to the previous use, on a much smaller scale, by the Syrian regime of chemical weapons, we did respond, and we responded in the way that I discussed in answer to your question and to others' questions.

This is obviously significantly more serious with dramatically more heinous results, and we are evaluating our options in response to that, in consultation with our allies and partners and with Congress. And when we have an announcement to make about a response, we will obviously make it. But I don't want to get ahead of that process.

Mark.

Q Jay, in your answer to Chuck, were you saying that, in the White House view, no prior authorization from Congress is required?

MR. CARNEY: Again, that's -- you're --

Q I'm getting ahead of myself.

MR. CARNEY: You're assuming a decision that hasn't been made, and I'm not going to get ahead of that process.

Margaret.

Q Is the President himself involved personally in some of these consultations with lawmakers, or is it all senior aides or Pentagoners?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have specific conversations to read out to you. I can say that the White House and the State Department and others have been engaged. Other agencies have been engaged in consultations with Congress, and that process will continue.

It is certainly the case that the President has discussed Syria and Assad with members of Congress in the past. And I'm sure he will do so in the future, including on this specific matter. But I'm not going to itemize the calls or consultations except to say that they have been taking place and will continue to take place.

Q It does sound like you are laying the groundwork to make a case for the justification of a military option, if that's the way you decide you go. And I know he hasn't made that decision yet. Is that safe to say? You're talking about the fact that this is more heinous than the past, at a different level. Would you dispute the notion that the administration right now is very publicly -- whether it's to signal to Syria or whether it's to signal to Russia or to our allies -- laying the groundwork to say, if we decide to take this route it's because it's justified because of his actions?

MR. CARNEY: Well, Secretary Kerry I think laid out in powerful and graphic terms the severity of this situation and the seriousness with which we view it. And we are not alone in taking that view. The President has made clear for a long time now with regards to this issue -- this red line -- that he would not rule out any option, including military force. He has also made clear that he does not envision boots on the ground. And that remains the case.

So from the beginning, when it came to the potential use of chemical weapons in Syria, as well as the use on a limited scale, a smaller scale, and now the use on a broader scale -- we have never taken a military response off the table, and we certainly aren't doing that now.

Q I just can't help but think about the juxtaposition of this with the week ahead, where you've got an anniversary of March on Washington with a promoter of peace, Martin Luther King, Jr., and a trip to Sweden. And I'm wondering about how the President sort of weighs his desire for peace with the possible need for use of force? I know it's something he talked about in the Nobel speech as well. Is that something that's been on his mind? Can you speak to that?

MR. CARNEY: I think you've heard the President say in the past -- and that speech comes to mind, but many other occasions come to mind as well -- that there is no weightier decision that he as President, or any of his predecessors, can make -- and that is whether or not to use military force and put American men and women in uniform in harm's way.

It is absolutely the case that, as he said in his recent interview, that we have tens of thousands of American military men and women engaged in a conflict as we speak still in Afghanistan, even as we draw down our forces there. We only a few years ago ended a long and costly conflict in Iraq that obviously cost in casualties and in many other ways, and reflected the extraordinary service of our men and women in uniform.

So these are matters that the President weighs very seriously and soberly, as any President has and would. But it is absolutely the case that he takes action when he believes it is in the clear interest of the United States to do so. That has been the case throughout his presidency, and it will be the case going forward as he is President. But you're certainly right to say that these are weighty decisions.

Ari.

Q You said members of Congress with a particular interest in this matter have been consulted. The Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, a spokesman for him, told CNN there has been no consultation. Does he not fit the description of members with a particular interest?

MR. CARNEY: I didn't say -- I simply said -- and I'm not going to go down the path of -- there are quite a number of members of Congress, and even quite a number of members who have a specific interest in this matter. And I can assure you that we will consult with Congress. We have consulted with members and we'll continue to do that, both here from the White House and from State and other agencies as these days progress.

Q But you're not denying the House Armed Services Committee Chairman spokesman's --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to get into individual --

Q -- statement that there's been no consultation from his perspective?

MR. CARNEY: As I said earlier, I'm not going to itemize calls or individuals, each member of Congress who has --

Q Why not, by the way? Why not? They're elected officials.

MR. CARNEY: Again, we are consulting with members of Congress.

Q Why do we play this --

MR. CARNEY: Well, because then we could spend -- there are 535 members; we could spend a lot of time with each individual.

Q You could clear this up right now and say, you know what, we talked to these 15 senators, we talked to about 10 House members --

MR. CARNEY: And what I can tell you, Chuck, is that we've talked to a number of members of Congress -- the White House has, the State Department has and others at other agencies have -- and that process will continue. I don't have specific conversations to read out to you. But I can assure you that process is underway and has been underway and will continue moving forward.

Q The other thing I wanted to ask is you said Russia acknowledges that chemical weapons were used. A spokesman for Prime Minister David Cameron said today that Cameron spoke to Putin, and President Putin said they did not have evidence of whether a chemical weapons attack had taken place. Is Putin saying different things to the U.S. and the U.K.?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I'm just referring you to past indications that the use of chemical weapons on August 21st is acknowledged, broadly, by nations around the world, including Russia and Iran. I didn't see that statement.

When it comes to this particular matter and the conflict in Syria, we haven't seen as much cooperation from Russia as we and many nations would like. But on that statement, I just don't have a response because I haven't seen it.

Q At the moment, does the President plan to meet with Putin in the G20? Is there any update there?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a schedule for you. Obviously, the G20 is being held in St. Petersburg. Russia is the host nation, so he will certainly meet with Putin. But, as you know, we decided against a bilateral summit in Moscow with President Putin.

Q So it will be a bilat, though? Will it be a formal --

MR. CARNEY: I just don't have a schedule of what our meetings look like at the G20. I mean, we're going to St. Petersburg for the G20.

Q Do you know if in his deliberations -- you said there's a lot of things the President is looking at, and his staff. Do you know if the deliberations include the Americans that are believed to be held by the regime in Syria?

MR. CARNEY: We are obviously aware of those issues and many others. I don't have a comment to make or an assessment to make about how that issue plays into these deliberations. We're focused on -- the President's team is focused on a potential response to the clear violation of an international norm with the use of chemical weapons.

Q Do you know if there's been talk with the regime on the people who are there?

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry?

Q Do you know if there's been talk? Is there any sort of talks with the regime on getting those people back?

MR. CARNEY: You'll have to be more specific than that, and I can help you on that. The State Department I'm sure has more detailed information.

Cheryl, in the back.

Q Thanks -- new topic. The Treasury Department is just now saying that the debt ceiling is going to be reached in mid-October. Does that change your budget calculations? Do you anticipate a budget agreement by mid-October? Or do you still want to negotiate --

MR. CARNEY: Well, for anything obviously related to the debt ceiling and issues like that, I would refer you to the Treasury Department. I believe you're referring to something Secretary Lew has put out.

But let me reiterate what our position is, and it is unequivocal: We will not negotiate with Republicans in Congress over Congress's responsibility to pay the bills that Congress has racked up -- period. It is Congress's responsibility to maintain the full faith and credit of the United States. We have never defaulted and we must never default. That is our position, 100 percent, full stop.

Obviously, we are going to be dealing with Congress on the need to fund the government. The President has put forward a clear compromise proposal, a broad compromise proposal that would reduce the deficit significantly, including through savings in our entitlement programs, in a balanced way. And we continue to await a response to that proposal which has been on the table now for many, many months.

But Congress has basically two responsibilities: It has to pay its bills, and it has to vote on a budget. And we hope that Congress fulfills those two basic responsibilities.

Q Jay, back on Syria for a second. Because the President's options will flow from his aims, his goals, I wanted to clarify two related questions about his goals.

First of all, on the chemical weapons, is it the President's goal -- considering his concern about use and proliferation -- to locate the chemical weapons, to lock them up or to destroy them, to have the international community take possession of them? That's question number one.

MR. CARNEY: Throughout this conflict, and even predating it, this administration has been extremely focused on working to counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons. And Syria has been, as a nation and a regime that maintains stockpiles of chemical weapons, a concern.

Now, since this conflict began, we've made clear our concern about the disposition of chemical weapons in Syria, and we have closely monitored the disposition of those stockpiles. And it is our clear assessment that the Syrian regime has maintained control over those weapons, which is one of the reasons why we believe there is very little doubt

about who is responsible for the use of chemical weapons several days ago on the scale that we have seen -- that and the fact that Syria alone, the regime alone maintains the rockets and has the rockets capable of delivering the weapons in the manner that they were delivered.

So the rest of your question I think gets to what type of response he may be considering, the President may be --

Q No, I actually was asking about his goal. I was asking about his goal.

MR. CARNEY: Well, he has obviously very clear and broad nonproliferation goals. The disposition of chemical weapons in Syria remains -- separate from this incident -- a matter of great concern to us and to the international community. And that will be the case going forward separate from the response that is decided upon in reaction to this use of chemical weapons.

Q And, second, related to his aims, related to Carol's question -- because the President on Friday said that it is not in the long-term interest of the United States for Syria to be in possession of these chemical weapons, to use them, to proliferate them, and because you called this action on August 21st an atrocity, could you say at least the President's aim is to have a commensurate response in reaction to what happened on August 21st?

MR. CARNEY: I can say that we believe and the President and his team believes that there needs to be a response that reflects the seriousness of this transgression.

Again, I don't want to engage in hypotheticals about what decision will be made here. But I think Secretary Kerry made clear earlier today just how seriously we view this. And as I think I've tried to make clear, we are not alone in that assessment -- far from it.

Q Jay, just heard a fairly strong reiteration of no boots on the ground. Are you saying no boots of any kind on the ground in Syrian territory? No U.S. boots on the ground in Syria in response to this kind of --

MR. CARNEY: I think I would refer to what the President has said clearly on several occasions. He does not envision sending boots on the ground, U.S. military personnel on the ground in Syria.

Q And does this take us beyond no-fly-zone discussion? Ben Rhodes was very detailed in discussing how that wasn't going to be practical in the --

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to past discussions about this. I think the complexities and realities about the conflict are as they were. But I'm not going to speculate about responses to -- including potential military responses -- to this particular incident, this transgression, this violation of an international norm with the use of chemical weapons on a broad scale against innocent women and children and others.

But certainly, the nature of the broader conflict remains as it was when Ben and others have discussed that particular proposal that some have put forward.

Chris.

Q Thanks, Jay. Two questions on some very different topics. First on Chelsea Manning, who came out as transgender after being sentenced to 35 years in prison, the Army prison to which she's been assigned doesn't provide hormone therapy or gender reassignment surgery. Would the President weigh the hardship Chelsea Manning would face because of her gender identity as a factor in a decision to grant her a presidential pardon?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about that, Chris.

Q Okay. And also, as I first reported earlier based on an invitation that was leaked to me, the White House is going to be holding a closed-door roundtable on bisexual issues on September 23rd. I just wanted to know what made the White House decide to hold this event and at that time?

MR. CARNEY: I just don't have any information for you on that right now.

Q Jay, do you have anything on the Keystone pipeline? I'm sorry, but there are several reports suggesting a decision will be pushed back to 2014. Is that true?

MR. CARNEY: That process is being undertaken by the State Department, and I would refer you to the State Department on timelines with regard to that.

I think I'm going to end it there. Thanks very much, everybody.

END

4:35 P.M. EDT