

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 11/13/2015

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

*Please see below for addenda to the transcript, marked with asterisks.

12:47 P.M EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Friday. I feel like I'm staring in a room full of people who are happily not getting on a plane to Asia in the next 24 hours. (Laughter.)

Q Some are only doing the Turkey leg.

MR. EARNEST: I see. Except for me, and at least one of my colleagues here today.

Before we go to your questions, I just wanted to do one thing at the top that is relevant to both an activity that the President will be engaged in later this afternoon, but also a good preview of the President's activities over the course of the next week.

Later this afternoon, the President will convene a meeting here at the White House where he will be joined by a bipartisan group of some of the most prominent voices in national security and diplomacy in both parties to discuss the strategic importance of setting the rules of the road for global trade in the Asia Pacific. Participants in today's meeting include Secretaries of State who have served Presidents in both parties, including Madeleine Albright, James Baker, Henry Kissinger, and Colin Powell. The meeting will also include former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen, and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft.

The group will discuss how high-standards trade agreements, like the recently negotiated Trans-Pacific Partnership, can bolster the U.S. economy at home and strengthen our relationships abroad by uniting countries in one of the fastest-growing regions of the world under a set of common values and principles. These principles will promote inclusive development and level the playing field for businesses and workers here in the United States.

As we've noted before, the rules of the road in Asia are up for grabs, and there is a lot of concern and even some complaints expressed by people in both parties about how U.S. influence when it comes to the economy, but also when it comes to our strategic interests, are in competition with China. And in the mind of the President -- and you've heard me say this before -- in the mind of the President, the question really is, what are we going to do about it. And in the mind of the President, the question of what we're going to do about it is we're going to sign trade agreements, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, with other countries in the region about setting higher standards and leveling the playing field for American businesses and American workers in a way that's good for the U.S. economy and capitalizes on the opportunity that exists in the Asia Pacific region. And this has long-term ramifications for the strength of the U.S. economy and the influence that the United States exercises around the globe.

Obviously, you're going to hear a lot more from us and from the President on this over the course of his trip to Asia, where the President will certainly be talking about the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. In fact, the President will actually be meeting with the leaders of the Trans-Pacific Partnership member nations on this trip.

The President will also have the opportunity to talk about the importance of ensuring that the South China Sea remains open to the free flow of commerce and the freedom of navigation, and will give him the opportunity to underscore the ties that the United States maintains with other countries in the region to help them protect their interests in the region, but also to reinforce our view that any disputes in the region, including territorial disputes, should be resolved through diplomacy and, frankly, should not be resolved by larger countries throwing their weight around.

So this will -- obviously we'll have an opportunity to talk about this not just later today, but also over the course of the trip. And the reason this is significant -- and many of you have spent a lot of years covering this already, but I would anticipate that over the course of the next year you'll be interested in talking about what the President's foreign policy priorities have been since he's been in office and what kind of opportunities that will create for the United States in the future and for the next President, regardless of which candidate is elected to that job.

And seizing the opportunities that exist in Asia for the United States, and deepening our relationships with our allies, including the Philippines and South Korea and Japan, but also other countries with whom we have important relationships, like Malaysia and Vietnam and others, is an important part of the President's view about the best way to protect the national security interests of the United States and to strengthen our economy.

So you'll hear from the President at the end of his meeting today talking about this a little bit. But the President is doing a couple news conferences over the course of this trip, and I think the President will be eager to talk to you more about it then as well.

So with that long windup, Darlene, let's get going on this Friday.

Q Thank you. Do you have anything to add to the Pentagon saying it's reasonably certain that "Jihadi John" is dead?

MR. EARNEST: Darlene, at this point, what I can confirm for you is that U.S. forces conducted an airstrike in Raqqa, Syria yesterday, our time, that targeted Mohammed Emwazi. Mr. Emwazi was a British citizen who is best known in this country for his participation in the death of some Western hostages, including some American citizens. Mr. Emwazi was an ISIL leader. He was a strategist for that organization. And he was intimately involved in the effort by ISIL to recruit individuals to their cause. And so his ability to use social media to inspire and radicalize people around the globe meant that he was making a valuable contribution to ISIL.

At this point, I'm not in a position to confirm the results of that operation. Confirmation of the results of that operation will be shared with all of you by the Department of Defense once they have had the opportunity to take a close look at what exactly occurred. And there is a very rigorous process for assessing these outcomes. And so any final determination about this will be issued by the Department of Defense, but the fact is, a final determination has not been made at this point.

Q The British Prime Minister described the strike today as "an act of self-defense." I was wondering if you have any idea what he meant by that. And is that how the U.S. would characterize the airstrike?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't see the entirety of Prime Minister Cameron's remarks, so I'd refer you to his office for an explanation. But certainly the role that Mr. Emwazi has played in radicalizing individuals around the world and inspiring individuals to join their cause made him a threat not just to the region but to countries around the world. And I would just note that this airstrike that has gotten, understandably, a fair amount of attention here in this country is consistent with a number of other operations that the United States military has carried out inside of Syria against leading ISIL figures. Earlier this summer, we noted that an ISIL senior leader named Abu Bakr al-Turkmani, who was described by some people as the number two in ISIL, was killed in a coalition airstrike in Iraq. There were other external fighters; Reyaad Khan and Ruhul Amin were killed in an airstrike -- a coalition airstrike in August, near Raqqa.

So this is consistent with the kinds of operations that the President and our coalition partners have -- well, that the President ordered and that the United States and our coalition partners have carried out against ISIL leaders. And it's consistent with our broader -- with the broader military component of our counter-ISIL strategy to apply significant pressure to ISIL leaders. And that has yielded, in some cases, important intelligence that can be exploited.

It also serves the purpose of ensuring that those ISIL leaders are devoting a significant amount of their time to their own security. And that is less time than that they can devote to ensuring that their operation can run successfully and that, frankly, that they can devote to plots and plans that they may be considering against Western targets.

Q Switching topics. Is there any comment or reaction from the White House to the latest allegation of misconduct against a Secret Service agent?

MR. EARNEST: Darlene, I'm aware of those reports. Obviously, from reading the reports, the allegations included in them are disgusting and allegations that the administration, including the Secret Service, takes quite seriously. I think the fact that as soon as the Secret Service became aware of this information, that they acted, is an indication of how seriously they take this matter. But I'm unable and unwilling to comment much more about a personnel matter. For additional details, you can check in with the Secret Service.

Q One last question. Are you aware that Ben Carson said earlier today that he's going to be releasing evidence that he has of China's military involvement in Syria, and that he's going to share that with the White House before the weekend is over?

MR. EARNEST: Someone did tell me that he said that earlier today. (Laughter.) I guess it's not common that -- maybe it violates my job description as a spokesperson to be speechless, but I think in this case I am. (Laughter.)

Roberta.

Q Is there a way to sort of characterize the importance of this airstrike on this individual in the overall fight against Islamic State?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Roberta, what I would -- the way that I would describe it to you is I think it is clear evidence that we are making important progress on one element of our strategy, which is to apply pressure to the ISIL leadership, and to capitalize on available intelligence to advance our goals.

Again, I say all of this without the Department of Defense having rendered a final assessment about the results of this particular action. But the fact that we are even able to conduct this airstrike I think is some indication that we are serious about applying pressure to ISIL leaders and to using that intelligence to do that.

And again, in the case of Mr. Emwazi, somebody who is an ISIL leader, a strategist for that organization, and somebody who was actively involved in their online recruitment and radicalization efforts -- and that made him a target worth going after.

Q And as you mentioned earlier, this individual had a role in the deaths of some Western hostages. I'm wondering if the White House has reached out today or yesterday to the families of those hostages, and if you could describe I guess what kind of outreach was done for them sort of leading up to this.

MR. EARNEST: Roberta, I can confirm that a number of families of hostages who have been killed in Syria were contacted in advance of public reports to let them know that this operation had taken place. The reason for that is simply that when these kinds of operations take place, it once again elevates the media attention around their loved one. And so hearing from us firsthand about that is something that we try to do.

This was something that was done consistent with the process that was established by the task force that the President announced earlier today -- or earlier this year, over the summer, to talk about how the United States will handle the cases of American hostages that are being held around the world. One of the goals of that new structure was to streamline and improve our communication with hostage families, and -- or the families of hostages. And this is one example of how that process has been made more efficient by the structure that we have put in place.

Q And briefly on this afternoon's meeting, the bipartisan meeting that you're having on TPP -- how concerned is the White House and the President that the TPP is becoming kind of a target of bipartisan criticism in the 2016 campaign, with both Democrats involved in the campaign and people -- Republicans who are running sort of attacking it from both sides?

MR. EARNEST: Not particularly -- again, primarily because this was -- when Congress was working to advance trade promotion authority legislation over the summer -- something that did not enjoy bipartisan support on the campaign trail -- but yet we were able to succeed in building bipartisan support for that legislation on Capitol Hill. If anything, we believe that our case is strengthened by the fact that we have a final agreement that includes, for example, 18,000 tax cuts. I think that will make our case even more persuasive to members of Congress who actually have a vote on the matter.

So I also think that the meeting that the President will convene today with national security experts in both parties serves as a useful illustration that when you set aside politics, the benefits of an agreement like this are significant and wide-ranging, and extend even beyond the strong economic argument that we have to make. The concerns that some of even our critics have expressed about our ability to protect our interest in the Asia Pacific region, particularly when it comes to the growing influence of China and the growing size of China's economy, I think have to acknowledge that this strategy for continuing to advance our interests is one that has bipartisan support by -- frankly, among people who know best. And that merits mentioning on the eve of a trip where the President was going to spend a lot of time talking about this strategy.

Justin.

Q First on the strike in Syria. Were the Special Ops forces that the President authorized in the last month at all involved either in tracking this individual down or in calling in the airstrike anywhere?

MR. EARNEST: For the operational role, Justin, that may have been played by our Special Operations forces, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. My understanding about what took place, however, is that this is -- that this airstrike that was conducted within the last 24 hours is consistent with the kinds of airstrikes that have been taking place targeting ISIL leaders over the last several months. But for the details, I'd refer you to DOD.

Q The President spoke earlier today with French President Hollande. Obviously, earlier this week, there seemed to be a bit of a split. Secretary Kerry said the Paris talks weren't going to have a binding treaty, and that's been your guys' stated preference for a long time. Well, Hollande said that a legally binding treaty would be necessary for there to even be an agreement coming out of Paris. I'm wondering if the two leaders were able to bridge that gap at all in their conversation today.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any more details to share with you about the specific nature of their conversation. As I said yesterday, our expectation is that we hope that the meeting in Paris can serve to lock in significant commitments from countries around the world to fighting climate change and cutting carbon pollution. And part of that discussion will center on transparency and accountability -- not just making those commitments, but how you're going to demonstrate compliance with those commitments.

And all of this will be the subject of the negotiations that are scheduled to take place over 10 or 11 days in Paris. So I think they'll have ample opportunity to sit down at the negotiating table and hammer out these agreements. But our expectation is that the kinds of commitments that people will make will be significant and that they will be verifiable and transparent.

Q And lastly the President met with a number of Catholic leaders earlier this morning. I'm wondering if you can read out what that meeting was about.

MR. EARNEST: Justin, this was a meeting that was scheduled with some of the Catholic leaders here in the United States to follow up on Pope Francis's visit to the White House earlier this fall. It was a private meeting so I don't have a lot of details to share with you. I can tell you that it was the President's intent to go into that meeting discussing the wide range of areas where there's common ground that is shared by the administration and by the Catholic Church when it comes to some priorities. Those priorities include things like climate change, immigration reform. Certainly our diplomatic efforts in Iran and Cuba would fall in this category. Broader issues related to social justice are priorities of the Catholic Church and are priorities that are shared by the administration and there's an opportunity for us to work together to advance them and that merits some discussion.

Chip.

Q Thank you, Josh. Could you give us a sense of the President's involvement in this strike in Syria? Did he give the final order? Did he follow it from the Situation Room? What was his reaction when it happened? How closely did he monitor it? Was it anything remotely like the killing of Osama bin Laden and his involvement in that?

MR. EARNEST: It was not. It was different than that. As I mentioned earlier, there are a number of strikes that have been carried out by the United States and our coalition partners over the last several months against leading ISIL figures in Iraq and in Syria. There are also a number of strikes, by the way, that have been carried out against other al Qaeda figures in Syria as well because of the threat that they pose to the United States and

our interests. So the Department of Defense has been given orders by the Commander-in-Chief to implement this military strategy that includes conducting airstrikes against ISIL leaders. And this operation was carried out consistent with those parameters.

Q Did he make it clear at any point that he wanted them to go after Emwazi?

MR. EARNEST: These kinds of -- I think it was quite clear to the President's national security team that people who could be described as ISIL leaders and strategists and certainly individuals that play a prominent role in designing an online recruitment strategy are individuals who merit inclusion on a list of people to go after.

Q And are you aware of his reaction?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of his reaction. I have not spoken to him about this particular issue today. I know that he was briefed yesterday on it and presumably he received an update today on the current assessment about the outcome of the operation. At this point, there's no final determination that's been reached and no final determination that was shared with the President about the outcome of the mission. But he got an update on what information is known about the results.

Q In your statement, you used the word "was" -- that Emwazi was --

MR. EARNEST: I noticed that, too. (Laughter.) And it's difficult to adjust the verb tense to sort of account for exactly this individual's current status because no final determination has been made about his current status.

Q You were not confirming his death?

MR. EARNEST: I did not intend to implicitly do that by choosing the past tense.

Go ahead, Gardiner.

Q The subjunctive is best when there's uncertainty. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Jon.

Q Just a follow-up. So did the President have to approve specifically this?

MR. EARNEST: This did not rise to the level of an operation that would require presidential approval. It's consistent with the parameters that the President has previously laid out for the Department of Defense when these kinds of operations should take place.

Q Did he know this was going to happen in advance?

MR. EARNEST: The President was briefed on this yesterday.

Q Before it happened?

MR. EARNEST: The timing of that briefing -- I don't know exactly when that occurred, but the President was briefed on this yesterday.

**[The President was briefed on the strike after the operation had taken place.]

Q And you don't know whether it was before or after the strike?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if it was before or after the strike.

Q Okay, could you check on that for us?

MR. EARNEST: I will check on it, yes.

Q Okay. And obviously "Jihadi John" had personally taunted the President in those awful videos, mentioning him by name, said he had an arrogant policy -- foreign policy towards ISIS. Does he take any personal satisfaction in his likely demise? I mean, obviously there's a strategic satisfaction, there's justice, but is there any kind of personal satisfaction the President takes in that?

MR. EARNEST: It's certainly not based on Mr. Emwazi's comments about the President. I'm not sure the President spent a lot of time focused on those particular comments. I think what the President takes some satisfaction in is knowing that the kind of strategy that the Department of Defense has laid out and that he has approved and that his national security team has carefully worked on over the last several months is showing some signs of progress. And these kinds of -- again, even the fact that we could take a strike like this is an indication that we are able to gather useful intelligence and try to advance our goals in that way. But there are other areas that we can point to just in the last 24 hours that give us some confidence.

There's been a lot of news out of Sinjar in the last 24 hours about the progress that Kurdish fighters are making in that -- in Iraq. That's important because that, again, is also a reflection of some progress that our strategy is yielding. The progress that the Peshmerga are making in those operations have been facilitated by coalition airstrikes that were taken in advance and in concert with their efforts on the ground. It also shows the benefits of the investment that we have made in that fighting force that has been an effective partner with the United States and our broader coalition.

There is some preliminary progress to report about Iraqi forces taking the fight to ISIL in the vicinity of Ramadi. Ramadi has obviously been a place that's been characterized by a lot of back and forth. So obviously we are cautious about making grand pronouncements about that. But any encouraging report is one that we're pleased to see.

But I think at the same time that you sort of have this confluence of events that show some progress in Iraq and in Syria against ISIL, we continue to be mindful of the President's admonition that any sort of military conflict like this will be characterized by areas of progress and periods of setback. And we certainly have spent time talking about

the periods of setback, as we should. Those are something that we should acknowledge.

But there are also days like today where we're showing some progress, and that warrants mentioning as well.

Q Did you see the statement from James Foley's family?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen parts of it.

Q It said that they -- if only so much effort had been given to finding and rescuing Jim and the other hostages who were subsequently murdered by ISIS they might be alive today. They said they took little solace in this news.

MR. EARNEST: I think, Jon, if I had been through -- experienced the kind of personal loss and grief that they have over the last 18 months or so, I think I might feel the same way. I think their reaction is perfectly understandable. What's clear is that this is an operation that was carried out because of the role that Mr. Emwazi had played in -- the leading role that he played inside that organization. And part of our strategy to apply significant pressure to that leadership for the reasons that we've described and that was the reason for the operation and, again, it's -- given the grief that they have felt, I can understand why they take little solace in it. I think that's a perfectly understandable perspective for them to express.

Q And a quick follow-up on the Secret Service. Was the President informed of this arrest? How concerned is he about the fact that apparently a sexual predator, alleged sexual predator was working right here on the White House grounds with Secret Service? Does he still have confidence in Director Clancy?

MR. EARNEST: Jon, the way that I understand the chain of events that took place is that as soon as the Secret Service learned of these allegations, they acted quickly to take away this individual's security clearance, to take away Secret Service equipment, and to prevent their continued access to sensitive areas, including the White House. Shortly after those steps were taken, the White House was informed. And I think the prompt and decisive action that was taken by the leadership of the United States Secret Service I think is an endorsement of their commitment to implementing the kinds of reforms that are needed at the Secret Service to ensure that that agency continues to live up to the high standard that they've established for themselves.

And we saw that high standard on display when the agency as a whole had to take on the significant challenge of protecting world leaders from around the world, including the Pope, the Chinese President and the hundreds of world leaders who were in attendance at the United Nations General Assembly. That, I think, is a strong performance by the agency, and I think an indication that that is an agency that is both well-managed, but also stocked with professionals who are committed to their job.

Q The President continues to have confidence in Director Clancy?

MR. EARNEST: Without a doubt.

Q Okay.

MR. EARNEST: James.

Q Thank you, Josh. The remarks out of the Defense Department this morning regarding this airstrike are that -- are to the effect that the Pentagon is reasonably certain that the individual known as "Jihadi John" was killed; that it's 99 percent certain. You do not dispute those characterizations of certainty, do you?

MR. EARNEST: I don't dispute the latest assessment that the Department of Defense has shared publicly. I would just note that that does not reflect a final assessment based on a rigorous process that the Department of Defense has in place for evaluating these kinds of operations.

Q But all appearances right now suggest that he was killed, correct?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything -- I don't have any information to contradict the latest assessment that has been shared by the Department of Defense. I'd just caution you to note that this does not reflect the final assessment.

Q Just prior to the 2012 Democratic National Convention that re-nominated President Obama for a second term, there appeared in the New York Times what appeared to be an authorized leak averring to the existence of a so-called kill list of terrorists overseas which President Obama was said, as Commander-in-Chief, to personally review and approve or decline the individuals on that list for targeting. Did "Jihadi John" appear on this kill list?

MR. EARNEST: What I can tell you, James, is -- I remember that story, and it obviously is something that has been talked about quite a bit over the years. I certainly can't confirm whether or not that was the result of a so-called authorized leak.

What I can tell you about this specific operation that did target Mr. Emwazi is that it's consistent with the kind of operations that we've carried out over the last several months against other ISIL leaders, and it's consistent with the parameters that the President has established for the Department of Defense as they carry out this aspect of our strategy. That's why it didn't rise to the level of needing a specific presidential sign-off before this kind of operation was carried out.

Q It was, if memory serves, on September 9th, 2014 that President Obama delivered his primetime address laying out his multi-pronged strategy for confronting ISIS.

Accounting for the fact that he said at that time, and many senior officials have reaffirmed since then, that this is going to be a long process, one that will extend beyond the duration of the President's own term, that there will be periods, as you just said to us earlier of progress and setback. Accounting for all of those things, is the President pleased with the pace of the anti-ISIL effort since he announced it on September 9th, 2014?

MR. EARNEST: James, I think it's fair to say that everybody who is paying any attention to this -- and I think this is probably the -- includes the vast majority of Americans -- would like to see this be moving faster. But the fact is, the fact that it's not is a reflection

of the President's conclusion that the United States cannot merely impose a military solution on the problems that are plaguing Iraq and Syria; that ultimately what the United States can do and must do is build the capacity of the central government in Iraq and build the capacity of the Iraqi security forces to protect their own country. And they've obviously got a lot of work to do.

In Syria, the situation is a little bit different. We don't have a central government with whom we can coordinate. We have to rely on trying to build the capacity of local fighters and looking for organizations with whom we can work to take the fight to ISIL on the ground.

But I think the point here is simply that any time you see these kinds of conflicts, you want them to be resolved more quickly, primarily because we know that there are lives being lost, and certainly millions of innocent lives that are being disrupted as people flee violence from Syria.

So if it could be resolved more quickly, we certainly would welcome that. But I also think at the same time there's no denying that we're seeing important progress as a result of the strategy that the President has laid out.

Q So, by and large, the President thinks this effort is going about as well as it reasonably could be expected to go.

MR. EARNEST: I think that -- noting that there will be periods of progress and periods of setback, I think there's no denying that important progress has been yielded. But we sure have a long way to go when it comes to ultimately achieving our goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL, but also trying to address the underlying political challenges that have plagued both Iraq and Syria.

Iraq is substantially further along in addressing those problems, but they've got some work to do, too. And they'll do that work with the support of the United States. In Syria, we've got a much longer row to hoe here. And Secretary Kerry is at the forefront of that effort. He has, over the course of today, been leading diplomatic discussions in Vienna to try to get started on that work.

Q Last question. Is it safe to say then when it's all said and done and he's writing his memoirs in the future, Barack Obama is going to look back on Syria and say, the way his administration handled this conflict was the worst set of decisions he made, the greatest blemish on his presidency, the equivalent of what Rwanda was for Bill Clinton?

MR. EARNEST: No, I don't think that that will be his conclusion. I do think that former President Obama is likely to be in a situation where he writes that Syria was one of the most challenging foreign policy situations that his administration had to confront, but that we succeeded in doing so mindful of the lessons of the recent history, and mindful of the need to ensure that the national security interests of the United States aren't just protected but advanced. And as difficult as this scenario has been, I think our efforts with regard to Syria thus far would pass those two tests.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. Back on TPP. We learned Secretary Vilsack is going to be traveling to Japan to talk to the agriculture minister there. Is there a particular problem or -- what is the purpose or goal of that trip?

MR. EARNEST: Cheryl, I have to admit, I haven't been briefed on Secretary Vilsack's trip. I know that he frequently travels overseas because the U.S. agriculture sector in some ways has as much to gain as anybody else in the United States -- I guess as any sector in the U.S. economy does from this trade agreement. There are a variety of markets throughout the Asia Pacific that will be opened up to American agriculture exports. And that's a really good thing for the U.S. economy, and it certainly is a good thing for the rural economy here in the United States.

And I know that Secretary Vilsack played an important role in creating the kinds of opportunities that were realized in the context of the TPP agreement. But for the specifics of this particular trip, I'd refer you to USDA.

Chris.

Q Josh, the release of the text of the Trans-Pacific Partnership reveals there was no language in there addressing laws criminalizing homosexuality in Malaysia and Brunei. As I told you before, same-sex relationships are punishable with up to 20 years in prison in Malaysia, and in Brunei they recently enacted sharia law, which calls for death of gay people by stoning. Isn't there a reasonable expectation that an agreement promoted -- quoted as "advancing human rights" would address those laws?

MR. EARNEST: Chris, for the details about what was included and what's not, I'd refer you to USTR. Obviously it is a long document, and I will confess to not having read the thousands of pages that --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: Again, I'm not quibbling with you. I'm just acknowledging that I haven't had the opportunity to read the entire agreement myself. I know I've got several hours of flights coming up that -- (laughter) -- I'll probably pass the time in other ways. But USTR can certainly address that specific issue for you.

Let me just say a couple things about it, though. There are provisions, based on what I have been briefed, that do relate to raising human rights standards, and making adherence to those standards by other countries binding on the overall agreement. And that is an important part of this agreement, and one of the reasons that we believed that it was important.

As it relates to some of the specific issues that you have addressed, whenever the President travels around the world he makes clear to the leaders of other countries when he's visiting with them how seriously we take the issue of human rights in this country, and how the United States uses our influence around the world to try to advance the cause

of universal human rights, not just for U.S. citizens, but for human beings around the globe. And I'm confident that the President will have more than one opportunity over the course of this trip to do that.

And at this point, I'm reluctant to preview too much the bilateral meeting that the President has planned with the Prime Minister of Malaysia. But I do know that in the context of his visit to Malaysia, the President will have an opportunity to visit with some civil society groups. This is something that the President has done on his travels to other locations in the world, not just spending time with the government that's in power, but also spending time with the leaders of civil society organizations that are trying to bring about the kind of change that they would like to see in their country and in their government.

Many of these civil society organizations are organized around some of these human rights issues, including the ones that you raised. So I guess the point is there will be some discussion about these issues generally in the context of the President's trip, and so I'd encourage you to stay tuned.

Ron.

Q Back to the families who lost hostages (inaudible) -- ISIL. The essence of the full family statement questioned whether enough effort had been made by the United States government to rescuing their son. What is the response to that particular part of their concern?

MR. EARNEST: Ron, the President himself has said that significant effort and resources on the part of the United States government was invested in trying to safely recover hostages that were being held -- American hostages that were being held by ISIL. In fact, the President personally authorized a raid of U.S. special operators in the summer of 2014 inside of Syria to try to recover U.S. hostages that were being held.

Unfortunately, that raid did not result in the safe rescue of Western hostages, but it does serve as a useful illustration of the extent to which the President and the rest of the U.S. government was willing to invest to try to secure the release of -- and rescue of these American citizens.

Q And the task force that was set up, I'm just trying to understand the parameters of it. Is the issue of ransom on the agenda? Or is it more about communications, as you seem to be indicating, and relations between the government and the family?

MR. EARNEST: The policies as it relates to ransoms has not changed, but the structure that has been set up inside the U.S. government is actually structured to ensure that information-sharing among the variety of government agencies that are involved in these ongoing efforts is done efficiently, and that we are leveraging the best practices and expertise of different elements of the U.S. government to try to secure the release and safe return of U.S. hostages.

So some of this is about more effective communication and the leveraging of expertise internally in our efforts to secure the release of American hostages. Some of it is also about streamlining and making more effective our communication with the families who have loved ones who are being held hostage. So it serves a variety of purposes.

Q So despite the success that some European countries have had in freeing their nationals, the issue of ransom payments is not on the table, is not being discussed?

MR. EARNEST: The policy of the United States -- and this is a policy that was in place in previous administrations as well -- is that the U.S. government paying ransoms to secure the release of U.S. citizens only allows extremist organizations to get access to financing for their terrorist activities. But it also only serves to make American citizens traveling around the world even more a target of those who may be hoping to profit from hostage-taking.

Q I think you said that we were going to hear from the President after this national security meeting. What form is that going to take?

MR. EARNEST: There will be an opportunity for the pool to photograph the meeting and to hear from the President about the discussion.

Q No news on Guantanamo Bay this week?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any additional guidance for you beyond just letting you know that the promise plan that we said that we'd present to Congress is something that will come relatively soon. And when it's presented to Congress, it's something that we'll make public -- at least as much of it as is possible, given the classification restraints that may be in place.

Q I would think that that's not going to happen while the President is out of the country?

MR. EARNEST: I can't give you a more specific timing update beyond just saying that we would expect that to come relatively soon.

Byron.

Q Thanks, Josh. I couldn't help but notice there are a lot of Secretaries of State, or former Secretaries of State at the meeting this afternoon.

MR. EARNEST: Good, I'm glad you did.

Q Hypothetically speaking, is TPP the kind of agreement that someone who served in the position like Secretary of State should support?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think each of these Secretaries of State will make their own determination about what they believe is in the best interest of the United States, our national security and our economy. And the Secretaries of State that I laid out who will be participating in this meeting -- including James Baker, Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell,

Henry Kissinger -- all share the President's assessment that agreements like that aren't just good for our economy, they are also good for advancing the national security interest of the United States around the globe.

Q I'm going to ask more directly. (Laughter.) Was this meant to contrast Secretary Clinton's opposition to TPP, bringing in all these former Secretaries?

MR. EARNEST: Not in any way. I think what it is intended to do is to highlight the fact that there is strong bipartisan agreement among those who have been thinking about this issue the most, that the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement isn't just good for our economy. We could convene a meeting of economists that have served Presidents of both parties to talk about the significant economic consequences of implementing the Trans-Pacific Partnership. And we could talk at length -- maybe someday we will -- about the variety of sectors in the U.S. economy that would benefit from a trade agreement like this, because of the impact that it has in raising the playing field -- leveling it off, and giving U.S. businesses and U.S. workers the opportunity to compete in one of the most economically dynamic regions of the world.

Ironically, that's actually not what we're talking about today. This meeting will actually be focused on how an agreement like this gives the United States an opportunity to capitalize on the desire of countries throughout the Asia Pacific to deepen their relationship with the United States, and that has the result of binding other countries to raise their labor standards, to better abide by generally accepted environmental standards, to better abide by and raise human rights standards that are in place in their country. All of these are things that advance the national interests of the United States. And you don't just have to take my word for it, and you don't just have to take President Obama's word for it; there is a bipartisan group of experts that he'll be meeting with today who agree with that sentiment.

Q While we're on the topic, how would you describe Secretary Clinton's role in getting TPP across the finish line? I know her agency did not take a lead role in negotiating it, but she certainly said positive things about the agreement while she was serving in this administration. Would you describe her role as helpful?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what I would do is, the person who would know best about her role is Secretary Clinton. And I know this is something that she talked about in her book and in other places where she discussed her service to the administration.

I can tell you that the President was certainly quite pleased with the way that Secretary Clinton represented the United States around the world to advance our interests in a variety of areas, including in trying to deepen our relationship with countries in the Asia Pacific.

Joe.

Q Putin has, among other things, said he's ready to work with the United States on airstrikes against ISIS. Is there any response to that here?

MR. EARNEST: I saw those reports shortly before I came out. Joe, what we have said about the Russian involvement thus far is that the actions that they have taken are consistent with a strategy to prop up the Assad regime and to protect the longstanding Russian investment -- military investment inside of Syria. At the same time, the Russians have acknowledged that a political transition inside of Syria will be necessary to bring an end to the violence and chaos in that country that has threatened their investment in the first place.

The problem is President Putin has failed to address a fundamental contradiction in this strategy. On the one hand, they say that we need a political transition inside of Syria. On the other hand, they're expending significant military resources to try to prop up and cement the status of the Assad regime. I think that because of that internal contradiction, most people who have taken a look at this are not optimistic at all about the success that Russia is likely to have in this regard. In fact, President Obama has indicated his belief that they're likely to only deepen their involvement in a quagmire that will further isolate Russia and pose a more significant risk to their national security.

So at this point, we are, I think, understandably responding to their actions on the ground, and their actions on the ground have not been consistent with the kinds of overtures that they've rather conspicuously made in public.

Q So should that be interpreted as a rejection of Putin's offer to work with the U.S.?

MR. EARNEST: I think it should be interpreted as our desire to see Russia's actions inside of Syria align with their public comments. And thus far, we have not seen that. There are a variety of benefits to that in terms of resolving this contradiction, in terms of actually making progress toward the kind of political reconciliation that President Putin himself has acknowledged will be necessary to address the many problems that are plaguing Syria right now.

Q Putin made those statements in an interview. Has any of that message been conveyed through official or backdoor channels?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update in terms of the latest communications between Russian officials and U.S. officials on this topic.

Q And speaking of interviews, the President in an interview yesterday with ABC said that ISIS had been contained. And just the armchair point of view of the average American who sees the possibility that ISIS blew up a plane over the Sinai, or contributed to a big bombing in Beirut is signs that ISIS is not contained. What does the President mean by "contained"?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President was referring very specifically to the situation on the ground in Iraq and in Syria; that the significant response that was mobilized by the United States and the international community was a reaction to ISIL not just establishing a toehold and a safe haven inside of Syria, but actually spreading rapidly across the deserts of Iraq and taking over large territories there, and advancing on some of the larger population centers inside of Iraq.

And because of the quick action of the United States, because of the expertise of our military and our success in bolstering the capacity of Iraqi security forces, and because of our success in building a broad, international coalition, that offensive was blunted and, in fact, what we see is we see that the territory where ISIL had previously freely operated had been reduced by anywhere from 20 to 25 percent when you consider the territory that it previously operated in, in both Iraq and in Syria.

So that's what the President was referring to, and we continue to be mindful of the fact that there are extremist organizations that have been in place for quite some time, including in places like the Sinai Peninsula, that may be seeking to align themselves with ISIL but particularly when it comes to the Sinai Peninsula we've been aware of and vigilant about countering that extremist threat in whatever form it takes on the Sinai Peninsula for a long time now.

Q And on the "Jihadi John" strike, could you give us some sense of just what the role of the coalition partners was in this? Was it a large role? And was it more the U.S. going it alone?

MR. EARNEST: I can tell you that this was a U.S. airstrike that was carried out against Mr. Emwazi. However, there was significant intelligence that had to be developed to determine his whereabouts and to develop the specific target. We have talked at length about how our intelligence capabilities are enhanced based on our strong working relationship with allies and partners in the region who are part of our coalition. So I don't have any firsthand knowledge of the intelligence that was used in this regard and even if I did, I wouldn't talk about it from here. But that's at least one example of how our international counter-ISIL coalition is critical to our overall success, including the success of this one component of our broader strategy.

Q And last question, if it was not the President who ordered the shot on "Jihadi John," who was it? Was it JSOC, was it Fort Bragg? Was it the theater commander? Who ordered the shot?

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to the Department of Defense for that. Obviously this is consistent with the guidelines that the Department of Defense has received from the Commander-in-Chief about carrying out these kinds of operations, so there is a well-established process for making a decision about the appropriate time and place for these missions to be carried out and for decisions to be made about how best to carry out these missions. But for figuring out at which level those decisions are made, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. It's somewhere in that chain of command.

JC.

Q Although it's certainly not the purpose of the meeting, will the President's counter-ISIL initiative on any level -- the conversation that he will be having with the G20 allies, will that at all become a topic, even on a smaller scale, with the very distinguished former secretaries that he'll be meeting with later on?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sure they all have well-informed views on it, but it's not on the agenda. It certainly is possible that things that are not on the agenda could come up, but the goal of this meeting is to focus on the national security benefits for the United States of completing a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement.

Q It could come up?

MR. EARNEST: It could. I wouldn't rule it out, but it's not on the agenda.

Scott.

Q Josh, I know you said you didn't want to telegraph too much about the meeting with the Prime Minister of Malaysia, but can you say if the President is going to raise the corruption allegations that have been brought against the Prime Minister and if you think that's going to color the ASEAN or East Asia summits?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Scott, obviously we're aware of those reports but it is commonplace for the President to meet one on one with the host leader for the ASEAN Summit. We've done that obviously in previous years and we'll do so in this case as well. The President on his travels to other parts of the world -- I guess most recently in Africa, the President made a strong case about how corruption weakens governance, inhibits economic growth, and saps public confidence in government.

And, again, I wouldn't preview the meeting at this point, but I would note that in addition to the meeting that the President will have with Prime Minister Najib, he'll also have the opportunity to meet with civil society leaders in Malaysia, including advocates for good government. And, again, the President's view is that it's in the interest of leaders to live up to the standards and keep the faith of the citizens that they are responsible for leading; that that's obviously what is expected of them but it's also in the interests of their continued ability to successfully run the country and to advance the interest of that country not just at home but around the world.

Jared.

Q I wanted to ask another follow-up on the Emwazi strike. What is the setback for ISIS at this point? I mean, how would you characterize his role specifically? Was this an operational role, planning, developing battle plans? Was this more of a propaganda/recruitment role? What's the ultimate setback for ISIS after this strike?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jared, I don't think we'll call it a setback until a final determination has been reached about the actual operation and what the results of the operation were. I think in general I can describe him as -- I can describe Mr. Emwazi as an ISIL leader, somebody who was a strategist for the organization. He was involved in their efforts to recruit and radicalize individuals around the globe to hopefully inspire them to take up the cause of ISIL. He was somebody who demonstrated some sophistication with social media and so in that regard, he made an important contribution to the functioning of ISIL. It's why he was targeted in this strike and it's why we're -- I think it's why this issue has gotten a lot of attention.

Q And with that, was there any consideration given to a capture mission instead of just an airstrike -- I mean, for intelligence purposes or anything like that?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense about that. I think that would require an assessment that a capture operation like that was feasible. And given the fact that this operation took place in Raqqa, it might raise questions about whether or not something like that was feasible. But I'd refer you to the Department of Defense about whether or not something like that was considered.

Pam.

Q Josh, other than Emwazi's roles as a strategist and a recruiter for ISIS, he was also the very public face of a very brutal organization. And the President said that anywhere American citizens are harmed, we will bring them -- the perpetrators -- to justice. How big of a PR or a psychological blow is this to ISIS? The fact that he was able to follow through on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Pam, I don't want to be a stickler for details here but it's hard for me to --

Q If he was killed.

MR. EARNEST: If that is the case, obviously this is -- well, I don't want to speculate on what the possible conclusions of the operation may have been. The Department of Defense will speak to this and ultimately if they have a final assessment to offer, they'll do that. But I just -- I think it would be prudent at this point for me to not engage in that hypothetical.

Q This was more than a strategist, though, this was a very public identifying person with ISIS.

MR. EARNEST: I would allow that this is an individual that of all of ISIL's leading figures may be the one that is tragically the most familiar to Americans. But, again, the reason that he was targeted in this strike is because of his role as a leader and strategist for ISIL, specifically as it relates to his efforts to recruit and radicalize individuals to join the ISIL cause.

Q So he wasn't targeted for killing Americans?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Pam, we've been quite clear that these kinds of operations are not motivated by a desire to seek revenge or retribution, but rather to advance the national security interests of the United States. And that's why this specific targeting was for the reasons that I've outlined.

Q I'm sorry if I missed something, but is this the first time you've publicly confirmed that Jihadi John was Mohammed Emwazi?

MR. EARNEST: That's a good question. I'll have to go and check on whether or not that's something that we've previously done.

Q I know you didn't want to because the intelligence community felt that it was not helpful.

MR. EARNEST: It may, in fact, be, but let me confirm that for you.

**[This was the first official USG confirmation that Mohammed Emwazi was "Jihadi John."]

Q Okay. Also, on the TPP, you said that it was going to have an impact on raising the playing field in a variety of areas. One of the big concerns that some of the opposition groups like the AFL-CIO have is that it's going to force American workers to compete with workers in low-wage countries like Vietnam. And the TPP does have a provision saying you have to pass minimum wage legislation, but it doesn't say you have to set any particular kind of a minimum wage. So couldn't they just set a minimum wage of 10 cents an hour and still be in compliance with the TPP?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think for what exactly the agreement would require of a nation like Vietnam I'd refer you to USTR, and they can sort of help you understand the commitment that Vietnam has made -- at least the details of it. But I think the point of all this, Pam, is actually that U.S. workers are already competing with workers in Vietnam. And right now they're doing so on a very unlevel playing field; that a country like Vietnam does not adhere to the kind of environmental standards, human rights standards and labor standards that we do in this country.

And again, I think this is the basic, fundamental question before everyone who will eventually have to render a judgment on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is if you are concerned about U.S. workers being at a disadvantage when competing in some of the most economically dynamic regions of the world, the question simply is, what are you going to do about it? And there are some who complain about this quite loudly but have not articulated any kind of strategy that is consistent with the best interest of middle-class workers, U.S. businesses, or our broader economy.

The President, on the other hand, is actually implementing a strategy to raise environmental standards, to raise labor standards, to raise human rights standards in countries like Vietnam to try to level the playing field between Vietnamese workers and American workers. He's taking the additional step of insisting that Vietnam eliminate tariffs on goods that are produced in the United States and have a market for those U.S. goods inside of Vietnam. We know that Vietnam has a thriving economy, which means that there are more people in Vietnam with more money in their pockets who would love to have the opportunity to purchase American goods.

So that's the essence of the President's strategy. It certainly is not going to solve all of our economic problems, but when you sort of confront the basic problem that many people bemoan, the question really is, what are you going to do about it? And the President has laid out a very clear strategy for how we can improve our economic prospects for middle-class families in the United States while at the same time advancing the interests of the United States when it comes to our position around the world.

When it comes to China, we know that China would love to keep those standards low. We know that that would create ample opportunity for Chinese businesses that also don't adhere to labor standards and civil rights standards and human rights standards and environmental standards -- that by lowering those standards or keeping them low, China benefits. But by raising those standards and opening up markets around the world to American goods, you're going to create significant economic opportunity right here in the United States for middle-class workers. And that's the essence of the President's strategy. And it's the essence of the question that will be before Democrats and Republicans in the Congress when they're asked to vote to approve the agreement.

Connie.

Q Thank you, Josh. On the Israeli aid package, is there anything new to report? Do you expect it to be settled in this administration? And about U.S. troops in Sinai, is there anything being said about pulling back some of the U.S. troops from the Sinai?

MR. EARNEST: As it relates to the Sinai, I don't have any updates in terms of our security posture there, but you can check with the Department of Defense about that.

The next step in the effort to sign a new memorandum of understanding between the United States and Israel when it comes to military assistance is for a U.S. team of working-level experts to travel to Israel and engage their counterparts in a discussion about the assessment of the security situation in the region and an assessment of Israel's capacity to meet those threats.

And so that is a trip that will occur in December. I would not expect an agreement to be reached before then. This obviously is the next step in the process of trying to reach that agreement. But as the President announced in Israel back in 2013, our intent is to sign that memorandum of understanding between the United States and Israel before the President leaves office, and certainly well in advance of the expiration of the current memorandum of understanding.

John Gizzi, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. Two days ago, Prime Minister Cerar of Slovenia ordered the construction of an electric fence, ostensibly to keep refugees out. And this has been likened to the same course taken by Mr. Orbán in Hungary. The President, of course, is committed to helping in the refugee crisis, as is Secretary Kerry. What is the administration's reaction when EU members take a course such as that taken by Slovenia in this crisis?

MR. EARNEST: I'll just say as a general matter, John, that the United States continues to be quite concerned about the significant humanitarian crisis that is emanating from Syria. Millions of Syrians have been displaced from their homes inside of Syria, and millions more have been forced to flee Syria to escape violence. And we've read some tragic reports of Syrians being killed on that journey, and it's tragic. And the President is quite concerned about the destabilizing impact that this is having on the region. Countries like

Lebanon and Jordan and Turkey are bearing a significant burden of trying to meet the basic humanitarian needs of these individuals who are fleeing violence in their home country.

That's why the United States has made a commitment to provide extensive humanitarian assistance. The United States, in fact, is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to this effort -- and we may have even a little bit more news on that for you later today.

And I would expect that at the G20 meeting that there will be an opportunity for the world's largest economies to talk about what more can be done to try to meet the needs of Syrians who are fleeing violence in their country and imposing a significant burden even on the country that world leaders are visiting over the weekend, in Turkey. So I would expect that this will be the subject of extensive discussion. And the United States has obviously done a lot already, and we'll be more interested in having conversations with other leading global economies about what more they can do.

Q So Slovenia and Hungary, are they meeting the same standards, or not meeting the same standards, as the countries you mentioned?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, I think I would stick to sort of where we have been on this, which I think that the vast majority of Europeans have responded to this situation in a way that is consistent with the kinds of values that we hold dear here in the United States, which is recognizing the humanity in these individuals and trying to provide for their basic needs. And I do think that despite some of the news reports, I do think that's the prevailing sentiment inside of Europe.

But I think there's also a realistic conclusion that's drawn about how significant this problem is, and that the resources that Europe can devote to addressing this problem are necessarily limited, given the other challenges facing the countries on the continent.

So this is a difficult problem, and one that merits the attention of the international community. It certainly is one that has the attention of the President of the United States.

Q Final question. Louisiana is having a race for governor next week. All polls show the Democrat, John Bel Edwards with a healthy lead over Senator Vitter --

MR. EARNEST: Seems to have been a rather colorful race, doesn't it?

Q It certainly is.

MR. EARNEST: In the fine tradition of Louisiana politics. (Laughter.) This one is certainly living up to that state's colorful reputation.

Q Mr. Edwards has made joining the Medicaid exchange a premier point of his campaign agenda. Does the President endorse him in that race? I know he'll be away, but does he support the Democratic nominee?

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe the President has taken a position in this race. I don't know how closely he has followed it -- if he's not following it closely, he's probably missing out on some entertainment value. (Laughter.) But I suspect that he's been kept abreast of it. But I'm not aware of any official position that the administration has taken on the race. Obviously, the voters of Louisiana will have to determine who should lead them next.

MR. EARNEST: All right, everybody, have a good weekend. We'll see you when we get back from our long trip.

END

1:55 P.M. EST