

Press Conference by President Obama



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**Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.

2:08 A.M. CET

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good afternoon. Once again, I want to thank the people of France and President Hollande for their extraordinary hospitality. Hosting nearly 200 nations is an enormous task for anybody, but to do so just two weeks after the terrorist attacks here is a remarkable display of resolve.

And that's why the first place I visited when I arrived on Sunday night was the Bataclan, so that I could pay my respects on behalf of the American people -- who share the French people's resolve. It was a powerful reminder of the awful human toll of those attacks. Our hearts continue to go out to the victims' families.

But here in Paris, we also see the resilience of the universal values that we share -- liberté, égalité, fraternité. And based on my discussions with President Hollande and other leaders, I am confident that we can continue building momentum -- and adding resources -- to our effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, to disrupt plots against America and our allies, and to bring about the political resolution necessary to resolve the situation in Syria and relieve the hardships on the Syrian people.

Now, this has been a quick visit. Of course, all visits to Paris seem quick -- you always want to stay a little bit longer. But we have accomplished a lot here. I have high hopes that over the next two weeks, we'll accomplish even more.

I know some have asked why the world would dedicate some of our focus right now to combating climate change even as we work to protect our people and go after terrorist networks. The reason is because this one trend -- climate change -- affects all trends. If we let the world keep warming as fast as it is, and sea levels rising as fast as they are, and weather patterns keep shifting in more unexpected ways -- then before long, we are going to have to devote more and more and more of our economic and military resources not to growing opportunity for our people, but to adapting to the various consequences of a changing planet. This is an economic and security imperative that we have to tackle now. And great nations can handle a lot at once.

America is already leading on many issues, and climate is no different. We've made significant progress at home -- increasing production of clean energy, working to reduce emissions, while our businesses have kept creating jobs for 68 straight months. And we've been able to lower our unemployment rate to 5 percent in the process. And since we worked with China last year to show that the two largest economies and two largest emitters can cooperate on climate, more than 180 countries have followed our lead in announcing their own targets.

The task that remains here in Paris is to turn these achievements into an enduring framework for progress that gives the world confidence in a low-carbon future. As I said yesterday, what we seek is an agreement where progress paves the way for countries to update their emissions targets on a regular basis, and each nation has the confidence that other nations are meeting their commitments. We seek an agreement that makes sure developing nations have the resources they need to skip the dirty phase of development if they're willing to do their part, and that makes sure the nations most vulnerable to climate change have resources to adapt to the impacts we can no longer avoid.

We seek an agreement that gives businesses and investors the certainty that the global economy is on a firm path towards a low-carbon future, because that will spur the kind of investment that will be vital to combine reduced emissions with economic growth.

That's the goal. Not just an agreement to roll back the pollution that threatens our planet, but an agreement that helps our economies grow and our people to thrive without condemning the next generation to a planet that is beyond its capacity to repair.

Now, all of this will be hard. Getting 200 nations to agree on anything is hard. And I'm sure there will be moments over the next two weeks where progress seems stymied, and everyone rushes to write that we are doomed. But I'm convinced that we're going to get big things done here. Keep in mind, nobody expected that 180 countries would show up in Paris with serious climate targets in hand. Nobody expected that the price of clean energy would fall as fast as it has, or that back in the United States, the solar industry would be creating jobs 10 times faster than the rest of the economy. Nobody expected that more than 150 of America's biggest companies would pledge their support to an ambitious Paris outcome -- or that a couple dozen of the world's wealthiest private citizens would join us here to pledge to invest unprecedented resources to bring clean energy technologies to market faster.

What gives me confidence that progress is possible is somebody like Bill Gates -- who I was with yesterday -- understands that tackling climate change is not just a moral imperative, it's an opportunity. Without batting an eye, he said we're just going to have to go ahead and invent some new technologies to tackle this challenge. That kind of optimism, that kind of sense that we can do what is necessary is infectious. And you tend to believe somebody like Bill when he says that we're going to get it done -- since he's done some pretty remarkable things. And I believe that a successful two weeks here could give the world that same kind of optimism that the future is ours to shape.

So, with that, I'm going to take a few questions. We'll start with Jerome Cartillier of *AP AFP. Where's Jerome?

Q Good morning, sir, and thank you, Mr. President. For months now, you've been asking Mr. Putin to play basically a more constructive role in Syria, basically shifting from defending Assad to attacking ISIL. It appears your calls have not been heard. What's your strategy going forward?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, I'm not sure that's true. The fact that the Vienna process is moving forward, steadily -- not conclusively, but steadily -- I think is an indication that Mr. Putin recognizes there is not going to be a military resolution to the situation in Syria.

The Russians now have been there for several weeks, over a month, and I think fair-minded reporters who looked at the situation would say that the situation hasn't changed significantly. In the interim, Russia has lost a commercial passenger jet. You've seen another jet shot down. There have been losses in terms of Russian personnel. And I think Mr. Putin understands that, with Afghanistan fresh in the memory, for him to simply get bogged down in a inconclusive and paralyzing civil conflict is not the outcome that he's looking for.

Now, where we continue to have an ongoing difference is not on the need for a political settlement; it's the issue of whether Mr. Assad can continue to serve as President while still bringing the civil war to an end. It's been my estimation for five years now that that's not possible. Regardless of how you feel about Mr. Assad -- and I consider somebody who kills hundreds of thousands of his own people illegitimate -- but regardless of the moral equation, as a practical matter, it is impossible for Mr. Assad to bring that country together and to bring all the parties into an inclusive government. It is possible, however, to preserve the Syrian state, to have an inclusive government in which the interests of the various groups inside of Syria are represented.

And so, as part of the Vienna process, you're going to see the opposition groups -- the moderate opposition groups that exist within Syria -- some of which, frankly, we don't have a lot in common with but do represent significant factions inside of Syria -- they'll be coming together in order for them to form at least a negotiating unit or process that can move Vienna forward.

And we're going to just keep on working at this. And my hope and expectation is, is that political track will move at the same time as we continue to apply greater and greater pressure on ISIL.

And with the contributions that the French have made, the Germans have recently announced additional resources to the fight, the Brits have been steady partners in Iraq and I think are now very interested in how they can expand their efforts to help deal with ISIL inside of Syria -- with not just the cohesion of the coalition the United States put together but also the increasing intensity of our actions in the air and progressively on the ground, I think it is possible over the next several months that we both see a shift in calculation in the Russians and a recognition that it's time to bring the civil war in Syria to a close.

It's not going to be easy. Too much blood has been shed, too much infrastructure has been destroyed, too many people have been displaced, for us to anticipate that it will be a smooth transition. And ISIL is going to continue to be a deadly organization -- because of its social media, the resources that it has and the networks of experienced fighters that it possesses -- is going to continue to be a serious threat for some time to come. But I'm confident that we are on the winning side of this and that, ultimately, Russia is going to recognize the threat that ISIL poses to its country, to its people, is the most significant, and that they need to align themselves with those of us who are fighting ISIL.

Justin Sink.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. I guess I wanted to follow on that shift in calculation that you discussed in terms of President Putin. Did you receive assurances from either him or President Hollande -- who said earlier this week that President Putin had told him he would only target jihadis and ISIS -- that that will be the focus of Russia's military campaign going forward?

And then, separately, I just wanted to ask about climate. The outstanding issue seems to be whether Republicans who have kind of voiced opposition to your agenda could somehow submarine funding for the Green Climate Fund. That's a pretty crucial part here. So I'm wondering both how you prevent that in the upcoming appropriations process, and if you're at all concerned about what Senator McConnell said earlier today or yesterday that a future Republican President could undo what you're trying to accomplish here in Paris.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: First of all, on Mr. Putin, I don't expect that you're going to see a 180-turn on their strategy over the next several weeks. They have invested for years now in keeping Assad in power. Their presence there is predicated on propping him up. And so that's going to take some time for them to change how they think about the issue.

And so long as they are aligned with the regime, a lot of Russian resources are still going to be targeted at opposition groups that ultimately are going to end up being part of an inclusive government that we support or other members of the coalition support, and are fighting the regime and fighting ISIL at the same time. So I don't think we should be under any illusions that somehow Russia starts hitting only ISIL targets. That's not happening now. It was never happening. It's not going to be happening in the next several weeks.

What can happen is if the political process that John Kerry has so meticulously stitched together -- in concert with Foreign Minister Lavrov of Russia -- if that works in Vienna, then it's possible, given the existing accord that the parties have already agreed to, that we start seeing at least pockets of ceasefires in and around Syria. That may mean then that certain opposition groups no longer find themselves subject to either Syrian or Russian bombing; they are then in a conversation about politics. And slowly, we then are able to get everybody's attention diverted to where it needs to be, and that is going after ISIL in a systematic way.

With respect to climate and what's taking place here, I don't want to get ahead of ourselves -- we still need a Paris agreement. And so my main focus is making sure that the United States is a leader in bringing a successful agreement home here in Paris. And there are a number of components to it. So I just want to repeat so that everybody understands what we will consider success several weeks from now.

Number one, that it is an ambitious target that seeks a low-carbon global economy over the course of this century. That means that countries have put forward specific targets, and although those are self-generating, there is a mechanism in which they are presenting to the world confirmation that they are working on those targets, meeting on those targets. So there's a single transparency mechanism that all countries are adhering to, and that those are legally binding; that there's periodic reviews so that as the science changes and as technology changes, five years from now, 10 years from now, 15 years from now -- in each successive cycle, countries can update the pledges that they make; and that we've got a climate fund that helps developing countries to not only adapt and mitigate but also leapfrog over dirty-power generation in favor of clean energy.

And if we hit those targets, then we will have been successful. Not because, by the way, the pledges alone will meet the necessary targets for us to prevent catastrophic climate change, but because we will have built the architecture that's needed. We will have established a global consensus of how we're going to approach the problem. And then we can successfully turn up the dials as new sources of energy become available, as the unit costs for something like solar or improvements in battery technology make it easier for us to meet even higher targets. And systematically, we can drive down carbon emissions and the pace of climate change over the course of several decades.

So I want to emphasize this because I know that in some of the reporting -- if you add up all the pledges and they were all met right now, we would be at a estimated 2.7 centigrade increase in temperature. That's too high. We wanted to get 2 centigrade or even lower

than that. But if we have these periodic reviews built in, what I believe will happen is that by sending that signal to researchers and scientists and investors and entrepreneurs and venture funds, we'll actually start hitting these targets faster than we expected, and we can be even more ambitious. And so when you look at the cumulative targets that may exist 10 years from now, we may well be within the 2 percent centigrade increase.

And by the way, that's not just foolish optimism. When you look at the experience of the United States, for example -- I came into office, I prioritized clean energy, I said we're going to double our clean energy production. Through the Recovery Act, we recognized that making these big investments were also good for the economy and helping us get out of recession and could create jobs. So we made a big investment, and it turned out that we met our goals a lot quicker than we expected.

If you had asked me when I first came into office my expectations for the price of solar-generated power versus traditional coal or other fossil-fuel-generated power, I would say we would make some progress but that solar would still require substantial subsidies in order to be economical. The cost of solar has gone down much faster than any of us would have predicted even five years ago.

So the key here is to set up the structure so that we're sending signals all around the world: This is happening. We're not turning back. And the thing about human ingenuity -- I was going to say American ingenuity, but there are other smart folks around too, don't want to be too parochial about this -- the thing about human ingenuity is, is that it responds when it gets a strong signal of what needs to be done.

The old expression that necessity is the mother of invention -- well, this is necessary. And us getting a strong, high-ambition agreement in place, even if it doesn't meet all the goals that we ultimately need to meet, sends a signal that it's necessary and that will spur on the innovation that's going to ultimately meet our goals.

Nancy Benac.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. One follow-up on the climate change issue. Are you confident that you can hold the U.S. to its commitments under existing treaties with no new vote needed? And separately, on Planned Parenthood, I wondered if you could share your thoughts on that shooting, and any thoughts in the context of the sharp political rhetoric in the country at this time.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I apologize, Justin, I didn't address that but, fortunately, Nancy was batting cleanup after you.

On the issue of the climate fund, we already engage in assistance to countries for adaptation, mitigation, sharing technology that can help them meet their energy needs in a clean way. And so this is not just one slug of funding that happens in one year -- this is multiyear commitments that, in many cases, are already embedded in a whole range of programs that we have around the world. And my expectation is, is that we will absolutely be able to meet our commitments.

This is part of American leadership, by the way. And this is part of the debate that we have to have in the United States more frequently.

For some reason, too often in Washington, American leadership is defined by whether or not we're sending troops somewhere, and that's the sole definition of leadership. And part of what I've been trying to describe during the course of my presidency is that where we make the most impact -- and where, by the way, we strengthen our relationships and influence the most -- is when we are helping to organize the world around a particular problem.

Now, because we're the largest country, because we have the most powerful military, we should welcome the fact that we're going to do more and oftentimes we're going to do it first. So during the Ebola response, other countries could not respond until we had set up the infrastructure to allow other countries to respond, and until we had made the call and showed that we were going to make that investment.

The same was true with respect to making sure that Iran didn't get a nuclear weapon. We had to lead the way, but, ultimately, because we reached out and brought our allies and partners together, we were able to achieve goals that we could not have achieved by ourselves.

The same is true with climate. When I made the announcement in Beijing with President Xi, I was able to do so in part because we had led domestically, so I could put my money where my mouth was, and I said, here are the tough political decisions we're making, now

what are you going to do? And once we were able to get China involved that gave confidence to other countries that we were in a position to make a difference as well -- or that they needed to be involved in the process as well.

So whether it's organizing the coalition that's fighting ISIL, or dealing with climate change, our role is central, but on large international issues like this, it's not going to be sufficient -- at least not if we want it to take, if we want it to sustain itself. We've got to have partners. And that's the kind of leadership that we should aspire to.

With respect to Planned Parenthood, obviously my heart goes out to the families of those impacted. I mean, Nancy, I say this every time we've got one of these mass shootings -- this just doesn't happen in other countries.

We are, rightly, determined to prevent terrorist attacks wherever they occur, whether in the United States or with friends and allies like France. And we devote enormous resources -- and properly so -- to rooting out networks and debilitating organizations like ISIL, and maintaining the intelligence and improving the information-sharing that can identify those who would try to kill innocent people. And yet, in the United States, we have the power to do more to prevent what is just a regular process of gun homicides that is unequalled by multiples of 5, 6, 10.

And I think the American people understand that. So my hope is, is that, once again, this spurs a conversation and action. And I will continue to present those things that I can do administratively. But in the end of the day, Congress, states, local governments are going to have to act in order to make sure that we're preventing people who are deranged or have violent tendencies from getting weapons that can magnify the damage that they do.

And with respect to Planned Parenthood, I think it's clear -- I've said it before -- they provide health services to women all across the country. Have for generations. In many cases, it's the only organization that provides health services to impoverished women. And I think it's fair to have a legitimate, honest debate about abortion. I don't think that's something that is beyond the pale of our political discussion; I think it's a serious, legitimate issue. How we talk about it -- making sure that we're talking about it factually, accurately, and not demonizing organizations like Planned Parenthood -- I think is important.

Jeff Mason.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Do you believe that Turkey is doing enough to strengthen its northwest border with Syria? How is it that a NATO country with as large a military as Turkey has, has not sealed its border? And is that something that you raised today with President Erdogan?

And then, to put a finer point on the climate change question, can leaders gathered here believe that the United States will keep its commitments, even after you've left office, if a Republican succeeds you in the White House?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Just with respect to my successor, let me, first of all, say that I'm anticipating a Democrat succeeding me. (Laughter.) I'm confident in the wisdom of the American people on that front.

But even if somebody from a different party succeeded me, one of the things that you find is when you're in this job, you think about it differently than when you're just running for the job. And what you realize is what I mentioned earlier, that American leadership involves not just playing to a narrow constituency back home, but you now are, in fact, at the center of what happens around the world, and that your credibility and America's ability to influence events depends on taking seriously what other countries care about.

Now, the fact of the matter is there's a reason why you have the largest gathering of world leaders probably in human history here in Paris. Everybody else is taking climate change really seriously. They think it's a really big problem. It spans political parties. You travel around Europe, and you talk to leaders of governments and the opposition, and they are arguing about a whole bunch of things -- one thing they're not arguing about is whether the science of climate change is real and whether or not we have to do something about it.

So whoever is the next President of the United States, if they come in and they suggest somehow that that global consensus -- not just 99.5 percent of scientists and experts, but 99 percent of world leaders -- think this is really important, I think the President of the United States is going to need to think this is really important. And that's why it's important for us to not project what's being said on a campaign trail, but to do what's right, and make the case.

And I would note that the American people, I think in the most recent survey, two-thirds of them said America should be a signatory to any agreement that emerges that is actually addressing climate change in a serious way. So the good news is, the politics inside the United States is changing, as well. Sometimes it may be hard for Republicans to support something that I'm doing, but that's more a matter of the games Washington plays. And that's why I think people should be confident that we'll meet our commitments on this.

With respect to Turkey, I have had repeated conversations with President Erdogan about the need to close the border between Turkey and Syria. We've seen some serious progress on that front, but there are still some gaps. In particular, there's about 98 kilometers that are still used as a transit point for foreign fighters, ISIL shipping out fuel for sale that helps finance their terrorist activities.

And so we have been having our militaries work together to determine how a combination of air and Turkish ground forces on the Turkish side of the border can do a much better job of sealing the border than currently is. And I think President Erdogan recognizes that. I'm also encouraged by the fact that President Erdogan and the EU had a series of meetings around -- or Turkey and the EU had a series of meetings around the issue of the Turkish-Greek border.

We have to remind ourselves, Turkey has taken on an enormous humanitarian effort. There are millions of Syrians who are displaced and living inside of Turkey -- not just refugee camps, but they are now moving into major cities throughout Turkey. That puts enormous strains on their infrastructure, on their housing, on employment. And Turkey has continued to keep those borders open for people in real need.

So I'm proud that the United States is the single-largest contributor of humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees. I'm glad that the EU is looking to do more to help Turkey manage those refugee flows. But I also think the EU, rightly, wants to see the kind of orderly process along the Turkish-Greek border that's necessary for Europe to be able to regulate the amount of refugees it's absorbing, and to save the lives of refugees who are oftentimes taking enormous risks because they're being ferried back and forth by human traffickers who are now operating in the same ways that you see drug traffickers operating under -- at enormous profit, and without regard for human life.

Q Did you raise the border issue with him today?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: We talked about it today, but I guess what I'm saying, Jeff, is this has been an ongoing conversation. We recognize that this is a central part of our anti-ISIL strategy. We've got to choke them off. We have to choke off how they make money. We've got to choke off their ability to bring in new fighters. Because we've taken tens of thousands of their fighters off the battlefield, but if new ones are still coming in, then they continue to maintain a stranglehold over certain population centers inside of Iraq or Syria. So we've got to cut off their source of new fighters.

That's also part of the great danger for Europe, and ultimately the United States, as well, and countries as far-flung as Australia or Singapore. If you've got foreign fighters coming in that are getting not only ideologically hardened but battle-hardened, and then they're returning to their home countries, they're likely candidates for engaging in the kind of terrorist attacks that we saw here in Paris.

So this has been ongoing concern and we're going to continue to push hard among all our allies to cut off the financing, cut off the foreign fighters, improve our intelligence-gathering, which has allowed us to accelerate the strikes that we're taking against ISIL.

A lot of the discussion over the last couple of weeks was the pace of airstrikes. The pace of airstrikes is not constrained by the amount of planes or missiles that we have; the pace has been dictated by how many effective targets do we have. And our intelligence continues to improve. And the better we get at that, the better we're going to be at going after them.

Scott Horsley.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. In terms of sending that market signal you talked about today and a couple of times this week, I wonder if you see any political path back home towards putting an explicit price on carbon.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I have long believed that the most elegant way to drive innovation and to reduce carbon emissions is to put a price on it. This is a classic market failure. If you open up an Econ101 textbook, it will say the market is very good about determining prices and allocating capital towards its most productive use -- except there are certain externalities, there are certain things that the market just doesn't count, it doesn't price, at least not on its own. Clean air is an example. Clean water -- or the converse -- dirty water, dirty air.

In this case, the carbons that are being sent up that originally we didn't have the science to fully understand -- we do now. And if that's the case, if you put a price on it, then the entire market would respond. And the best investments and the smartest technologies would begin scrubbing effectively our entire economy.

But it's difficult. And so I think that as the science around climate change is more accepted, as people start realizing that even today you can put a price on the damage that climate change is doing -- you go down to Miami, and when it's flooding at high tide on a sunny day and fish are swimming through the middle of the streets, there's a cost to that. Insurance companies already are beginning to realize that in terms of how they price risk. And the more the market on its own starts putting a price on it because of risk, it may be that the politics around setting up a cap-and-trade system, for example, shifts as well.

Obviously, I'm not under any illusion that this Congress will impose something like that. But it is worth remembering that it was conservatives and Republicans and center-right think tanks that originally figured out this was a smarter way to deal with pollution than a command-and-control system. And it was folks like George H.W. Bush and his EPA that effectively marshalled this approach to deal with acid rain. We ended up solving it a lot faster, a lot cheaper than anybody had anticipated.

And I guess, more than anything, that's the main message I want to send here, is climate change is a massive problem. It is a generational problem. It's a problem that, by definition, is just about the hardest thing for any political system to absorb, because the effects are gradual, they're diffuse; people don't feel it immediately and so there's not a lot of constituency pressure on politicians to do something about it right away, it kind of creeps up on you. You've got the problem of the commons and you've got to get everybody doing it -- because if just one nation is helping but the other nations aren't doing it, then it doesn't do any good -- so you have this huge coordination problem and the danger of free riders.

So on all these dimensions, it's hard to come up with a tougher problem than climate change -- or a more consequential problem.

And yet, despite all that, the main message I've got is, I actually think we're going to solve this thing. If you had said to people as recently as two years ago that we'd have 180 countries showing up in Paris with pretty ambitious targets for carbon reduction, most

people would have said you're crazy, that's a pipe dream. And yet, here we are. That's already happened. Before the agreement is even signed, that's already happened.

As I said earlier, if you had told folks what the cost of generating solar energy would be today relative to what it was five years ago, people would have said, not a chance. And with relatively modest inputs, that's already happening. I mean, imagine if we're starting to put more R&D dollars into it -- which is why the Mission Innovation announcement was so significant -- the biggest countries, the most prosperous countries doubling their R&D, but then you've also got Bill Gates and other extraordinarily wealthy individuals saying we're going to put our money into this.

I'm optimistic. I think we're going to solve it. I think the issue is just going to be the pace and how much damage is done before we are able to fully apply the brakes.

And in some ways, it's akin to the problem of terrorism and ISIL. In the immediate aftermath of a terrible attack like happened here in Paris, sometimes it's natural for people to despair. But look at Paris. You can't tear down Paris because of the demented actions of a handful individuals. The beauty, the joy, the life, the culture, the people, the diversity -- that's going to win out every time.

But we have to be steady in applying pressure to the problem. We have to keep on going at it. We have to see what works. When something doesn't work, we have to change our approach. But most of all, we have to push away fear, and have confidence that human innovation, our values, our judgment, our solidarity -- it will win out.

And I guess I've been at this long enough where I have some cause for confidence. We went, what, a month, month and a half, where people were pretty sure that Ebola was going to kill us all? Well, nobody asks me about it anymore. And although we still see flickers of it in West Africa, we set up an entire global health security agenda -- part of American leadership -- to deal not only with Ebola but to deal with the possibility of future pandemics. It's not easy. It takes time. And when you're in the midst of it, it's frightening. But it's solvable.

All right? With that, I'm going to go home. Vive la France! Thank you very much.
(Applause.)

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2:55 P.M. CET