

Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on Syria

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/background-briefing-senior-administration-officials-syria

August 30, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 30, 2013

Via Conference Call

1:20 P.M. EDT

MS. HAYDEN: Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us on what we know is a busy day. We are doing this call on background with senior administration officials to talk to you about the documents you just received -- the U.S. government assessment of the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons on August 21st.

The call is on background. There is no embargo. And with that, I will toss it over to our first senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, everybody, for getting on the call. You should have in front of you or you can access an unclassified U.S. government assessment of the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons, as Caitlin said. We should also be releasing, if not already, a map that goes along with that that details some of the places that are discussed in the assessment.

I'll just note a few of the points that we draw your attention to in the assessment, and then turn it over to my colleague to discuss a little bit more the process.

Importantly, this is a high confidence assessment that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs on August 21st, 2013. We draw from all types of information to inform this assessment, including the open-source information

we've discussed with you in recent days, which I think makes it undeniable that a mass casualty attack took place, as well as intelligence. And of course, in dealing with intelligence there's declassification procedures and we worked to make available as much information as possible, but clearly for sources and methods purposes, some information remains classified but is being shared with both Congress and international partners.

I'd just note a few things -- first of all, that this intelligence assessment as well as a broader assessment draws from multiple streams of information. It includes a preliminary U.S. government assessment that determined that 1,429 people were killed in the attack, including at least 426 children. And again, that's a preliminary assessment. It's certainly plausible that that number could, tragically, rise.

Then we provide some background on the Syrian chemical weapons program, which you've heard us talk about frequently over the last several months. I'll just point beyond that background to the discussion of the locations in question. This attack took place in an area where the Syrian regime had initiated an effort to rid Damascus suburbs of opposition forces. The regime had failed to clear dozens of Damascus neighborhoods of opposition elements, and that includes the neighborhoods targeted on August 21st.

This is despite the fact that they had employed nearly all of their conventional weapons systems. So an assessed motivation for the regime's use of chemical weapons is their frustration at their inability to clear these neighborhoods. And importantly, the map will show to you that the attack came -- originated from regime-controlled areas and went into 12 neighborhoods, 12 sites that are opposition controlled or contested.

Similarly, we have intelligence that leads us to assess that Syrian chemical weapons personnel were preparing chemical munitions prior to the attack. In the three days prior to the attack we collected streams of human signals and geospatial intelligence that revealed regime activities that we assessed were associated with preparations for a chemical attack.

So I draw your attention to this section on preparations. That includes discussion of certain precautions that were taken by Syrian regime elements for chemical weapons impact, including the utilization of gas masks.

Then we go through a narrative of our understanding of what took place with the attack. This includes intelligence that indicates the regime executing a rocket and artillery attack against the Damascus suburbs in the early hours of August 21st. Our satellite detections corroborate that attacks came from a regime-controlled area and struck neighborhoods where the chemical attacks reportedly occurred. And we go through those neighborhoods.

And then this was followed by the explosion of open-source information about chemical weapons being used in these neighborhoods -- from social media, from a variety of credible international organizations who report thousands of people showing up at hospitals with symptoms of a nerve agent.

So, essentially, the sequence is the intelligence that we have from multiple sources on personnel preparing for a chemical weapons attack, rockets leaving from that area -- regime-controlled area -- and going into these opposition neighborhoods or contested neighborhoods, then a very significant preponderance of open-source information that corresponds with a chemical weapons attack.

Then, to conclude, what I draw your attention to on the final page of the document, the paragraph that concludes with "We have a body of information," that includes "past Syrian practice that leads us to conclude that regime officials were witting of and directed the attack...We intercepted communications involving a senior official intimately familiar with the offensive who confirmed that chemical weapons were [being] used by the regime on August 21st, and was concerned with the U.N. inspectors obtaining evidence." And on that afternoon, we also have intelligence that Syrian chemical weapons personnel were directed to cease their operations.

In addition, you've heard us discuss the uptick in shelling. We have in our assessment here that the regime intensified the artillery barrage targeting these specific neighborhoods where chemical attacks occurred. And to give an illustration of that, in the 24-hour period after the attack, the indications of artillery and rocket fire were four times higher than the 10 preceding days. And that shelling was sustained for several days afterwards.

And you've heard us make the point that a regime that has nothing to hide would not escalate its bombardment by four times of these neighborhoods if they wanted to permit a credible investigation into what took place.

So, again, we have a high confidence assessment that a chemical weapons attack took place and that the Assad regime was responsible. I'll now turn it over to my colleague who can walk you through a little bit more the process by which we arrived at this.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm going to touch on two pieces before we look forward to your questions. One is how was the paper put together, a little bit on the methodology; and then, two, just kind of the broad strokes on how we got to the high confidence assessment.

So, first, the paper. It's fully vetted within the U.S. intelligence community. All members of the IC participated in its development. It also is completely sourced. By that, I mean that when the DNI approved our submission to this process, it had to be done so that we could track every statement that we're making here with our core analytic line on the classified line.

As my colleague has mentioned, it won't have the detail that we can and do share with our congressional partners as well as our international allies, but I just wanted to reaffirm that the broad and underlying assessment is the same.

What goes into that assessment? My colleague talked about the streams. I'm happy to try to answer your questions if you have additional, but first, it's the history of this program. This is not a new program; it's decades old. It's vast. It's extensive. And it's very well run. And so we continue to assess that this program is tightly commanded and tightly controlled.

Two is past use. And so we made an assessment in late May and early June that we presented, again with high confidence, that the regime had, in fact, directed small-scale use against the opposition to include in the Damascus suburbs previously. And so there's that history.

Three is the effectiveness of the program. I spoke to the control; we do assess that those individuals who are recruited or assigned to this program are carefully vetted and screened for two reasons -- for security and effect.

And then there is the instances leading up to the 21st, from the activity that we detected from Sunday through early Wednesday morning Syria time. Those are the preparations that my colleague hit the highlights of. Then there's the activity itself, so this is early Monday morning hours on the 21st through that afternoon cessation of operations that we detected.

And then finally, it's the indications that we've seen since the event -- the artillery fire to cover; the inability to gain access to obtain evidence immediately; and then regime precautions vis-à-vis the potential for, as I said, the U.N. inspectors collecting said evidence.

And I think I'll stop there and see what questions we have.

Q I was wondering if you could just explain a little bit the piece that you talked about where the personnel were directed to cease operations -- if you could explain what that means, what that indicates to you other than obviously a certain amount of direction. But what's the broader significance of it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure. To me, it does two things. You spoke to one of them. There's the control, the command-and-control. But it also speaks to I think a level of concern on their part vis-à-vis potential detection and attribution. Again, our insight is always limited and so we build upon those pieces. But in this case, it mainly provided us additional confidence that this was a commanded operation.

Q And can you say anything -- when you say that we have intelligence that they were directed to cease operations, you right before that referred to intercepts. Should we assume then that it was something other than intercepts?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I guess what I'd prefer you assume is the entire paper is built upon human intelligence, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, and open source. And we need to stress that we are leveraging heavily both open social media as well as NGO and medical reporting. In this case, I think I'd be most comfortable staying with the line as it is in the paper.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: But it is intelligence --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Absolutely.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: -- again, the open source.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And can I just add an alibi for my opening? Look, as we enter into this space for the intelligence community, it's not kind of our normal position. So what we have to weigh is how well we can present the case, first, to our customers -- in this case, to the public. At the same time, we've got to balance our ability to do our job tomorrow, and that's the sources and methods piece we seek to protect and that's the balance we seek to find. And so, in this case, I think the paper found the right balance.

Q There's been some speculation in response to the question of why the Assad regime would think this was a good thing and something they could get away with, that perhaps there was some miscalculation about the amount of the poison or the target choices. Do you have any indication that that was the case? Or is it your conclusion that what happened was exactly what they intended to happen?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll just go first. I'd, first of all, point you to -- well, to a number of things -- first of all, the high confidence assessment from earlier in the year that chemical weapons were being used and had been introduced to the battlefield by the Syrian regime, albeit on a much smaller scale than what we saw on August 21st.

Secondly, this has been an area that the regime has actively sought to clear and to take control of. And as the map will show you, these were attacks in two neighborhoods that have been contested or that were opposition controlled. And in fact, some of these neighborhoods had been a base of operations for the opposition in the Damascus area. So there was certainly a motivation for the regime. And our intelligence community has assessed in the past that chemical weapons are introduced in order to break that type of stalemate.

The only other thing I'd say before turning it over is that I think what you're struck by when you look at this is just how broad this attack was. You're talking about 12 different locations. You're talking about the use of rockets. You're talking about over a thousand

dead in that preliminary assessment.

So whatever the exact calculation was, there's simply no question that a significant attack was initiated in a regime-controlled area, tracking the intelligence we have in terms of preparations that regime personnel were making, and went into this opposition area.

But I turn it over to my colleague for me.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I mean, you spoke to, and we wrote in the paper, about the potential motivation deriving from the frustration they've had with the opposition control of these suburbs. Let me pile on that or add to by saying that -- why now? If indeed, the regime had intentions to make a serious surge and push on Aleppo, they most likely needed to free up resources that were being held down by these opposition areas.

So as my colleague mentioned and as we say in the paper and have said before, unfortunately, we assess that the regime considers chemical weapons in its portfolio of military use. It is not considered an extraordinary measure in which it is only used in very particular cases. In this case it appears that they chose to use it in a densely populated area, and obviously had horrendous effects.

But again, to go back to the Aleppo case, I think that you can make a case that they were trying to secure their home front, their home capital so they could further invest in a potential push towards Aleppo.

Q Just to make sure I understand, you are saying unequivocally that you have no indication that either the scale or the targets of this attack were a mistake?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We have no indication of that. That's correct.

Q A question about Assad. Just to confirm, is there any evidence, any solid evidence pointing to Assad directly ordering the attack? And I'm just wondering what your assessment is on how he gives orders for chemical weapons. Does he give -- has he given

a blanket order to the commanders that they can use it whenever? Or does he have to approve each one? What is your assessment on his role in these attacks?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What I'd like to go to is go to the baseline set of fundamentals that I spoke to about what goes into it. And so that's the history of the program and our insights that we've had into how it's run and how it's managed.

So we do assess that he's the decision-maker and he's ultimately in charge of employment. I'd rather not speak to, here, particulars about how that's executed on a day-to-day basis. I can just say with confidence that we assess overall use, overall program is firmly under his control.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And I'd just say one thing to add to that, and the document does point to some chain of command with Assad as the decision-maker -- the SSRC as a subordinate unit of the Syrian Ministry of Defense, and then these specific SSRC personnel who were at and around the site where these rockets were launched from. So we establish to that extent how this works through the chain of command without getting into the types of details that my colleague mentioned.

The only other thing I'd say here, though, is that the United States made clear some time ago that President Assad is responsible for the use of chemical weapons by his regime. And there can be no doubt about that. And we made that clear publicly that if the Assad regime employs chemical weapons, he is the responsible party. And that's been our consistent position throughout this.

So what we have here is a high confidence assessment that his regime carried out this chemical weapons attack, and that violates a clear international norm -- and also the clear indication that ultimately President Assad is the one who is accountable for what takes place in terms of the employment of the Syrian regime's chemicals weapons stockpile.

Q I was wondering if you could talk a little about this map and the number of attack sites that are listed on that map, and what kind of capabilities went into carrying that out and what it says about Assad's overall capabilities. Because one of the questions is about whether or not there's a strike. I think a big question is can a strike of a limited extent really knock out these capabilities, because it seems as if, just judging by that map, that the capabilities are fairly robust. I wanted to get your comment.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I'd just offer an initial comment to clarify the map. The map represents the neighborhoods that were attacked by chemical weapons. So these are not neighborhoods where Syrian regime CW is stored; these are areas that were targeted by the Syrian regime in this chemical weapons attack.

I will note that in the preparations area we note that the Syrian chemical weapons personnel were operating in the Damascus suburb of Adra from Sunday August 18th until the early morning on August 21st, which is near an area that the regime uses to mix chemical weapons, including sarin. So what the map shows is where the attacks initiated from in terms of regime-held areas and where they went into.

To your point about the stockpile and the potential response, first of all, let me begin by saying that the President has not made a final determination about a course of action. What I would say is we'd be focused on the issue of chemical weapons as what the Assad regime needs to be held accountable for.

As you've heard us say, we are not contemplating an open-ended military intervention, or a military intervention that is meant to impose regime change. We are contemplating something to make clear that the international norm against the use of chemical weapons and the national security interests of the United States that are implicated by the mass casualty use of chemical weapons must prompt accountability for the Assad regime. In doing that, I wouldn't get into potential options for the United States in carrying out specific targets. But what I would say is our response would be tied to the issue of chemical weapons use.

Q Just to follow up, based on just the intelligence assessment and what you gathered about the chemical weapons capabilities of the Assad regime, are they more extensive or less extensive than what was previously known? Does this attack in some way shed some new light on that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No. I mean, again, our insights into the history and the scope and the prior use of this program is fairly extensive. And so, as we've said, it's a very large program. It's a very capable and it's a very well-run program. So there isn't anything that we learned really new other than, again, their willingness to employ it in greater measure than we had seen in the past.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Just real quick on that, I think that the very significant size of the Syrian chemical weapons program has been evident to the world for a long time. What is different about this, as you look at that map, is the scale of this attack.

Earlier in the year, we were looking to piece together an intelligence case -- and we did -- that focused on a small scale of use. And even calculating up the different instances that we were focused on, we settled on 100-150, for instance, as a casualty estimate. This is a much larger scale of use. It's indiscriminate. It's mass casualty. It was immediately apparent to the world. And I don't think there's any doubt to the world that a chemical weapons attack took place, given the thousands of sources -- people on the ground, videos, social media -- that you've heard us reference.

But again, I think what's different about this is the scale, indiscriminate nature, and dramatic impact of this CW attack.

Q Number one, can you confirm that the President is going to speak on this at 2:15 p.m.? And, second of all, on the question of what was collected the days before the attack, did you actually get samples of the chemicals? And what did you do? Did you evaluate it before the fact, or not until after?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll just say a couple of things and then turn it over to my colleague. First of all, I'd anticipate that the -- well, I don't want to get ahead of the President. I anticipate that he'll address this to some extent, but he'll be doing so in the context of meeting with three important allies of the United States as well.

So I think Secretary Kerry's statement at length lays out where the United States views this issue. And the President will have an opportunity to address it in his comments, just as he was able to address this issue on Wednesday as well.

In terms of the second question, I'd say that the intelligence that we're talking about in terms of preparation comes from other sources of collection. And we specify in here that we are dealing with streams of human signals and geospatial intelligence -- so that's rather specific for an unclassified document -- and that that intelligence is what revealed the regime activities that we assess are associated with preparations for a chemical weapons attack. And then, we go on to note the neighborhood and site at which we believe chemical weapons personnel were operating.

In terms of physiological samples, we do not -- we have physiological samples from the previous assessment, which you'll remember was informed in part by those samples. But given how shortly ago this attack took place, we have not included physiological samples in this assessment. That would have to be something that has a longer time lag in terms of collecting that type of information.

I would note, however, that in the past instances, physiological samples were, of course, very critical to determining the agent used in the previously assessed attacks. Here, the fact of a chemicals weapons attack has not been in question or in doubt in the international community. The overwhelmingly available information -- videos of people clearly suffering from the effects of a nerve agent; the report that we've had from doctors, medical personnel on the ground, both Syrian and international; the reports we've seen and we cite in here from an NGO that speaks to a massive influx of patients in the exact timeframe after these rockets were fired, and the symptoms that people suffered.

So we have a significant amount of other evidence that points to a chemical weapons attack, which is why I think you've seen the international community accept the fact that the chemical weapons attack took place. And what we do here is piece together all of the information that we've pulled in about the culpability of the Assad regime in that attack.

Q Just to clarify, are you saying he'll speak at the Baltic leaders spray around quarter after 2:00, and then make a further address before a strike, or whatever it is that he's decided to do?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to get -- no, I was just saying it's likely that he will address Syria in his meeting with the Baltic leaders, including in his public comments. That, obviously, won't be a lengthy presentation.

On the second address that you were seeking to have me confirm, we have no additional remarks by the President to preview. The fact of the matter is he'll have to make a decision, but he certainly will keep the American people informed as he does. And I'd also note he also concluded an NSC meeting here at the White House on Syria this morning in which he was able to meet with all of his top national security team to discuss the situation in Syria.

I want to see if my colleague has anything on this.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I don't think so.

Q Actually, my question was asked. But let me just ask when Secretary Kerry said that the President will continue talking to the American people and Congress, what does he mean by that? Is this more evidence that he needs to provide, especially to Congress? And also, since Assad used weapons of mass destruction and you already clearly said that he's accused of crime against humanity, would you like to see him tried in The Hague as a war criminal? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me take your first question. Well, let me take your second question first, actually. As it relates to President Assad, look, what we're contemplating would be a military response that is, as I said, limited and tailored and focused on the issue of chemical weapons -- because it violates a fundamental international norm. It poses a direct threat, of course, to the Syrian people who have suffered so much at the hands of Assad and his regime, and also to the national security of the United States, given our interest in preventing the use or proliferation of chemical weapons; given friends and allies that we have in the region, including neighboring countries like Turkey and Jordan as well as Israel; and given our broader security presence and partners in the region.

And fundamentally, as you heard Secretary Kerry say, doing nothing sends a message to those in the future, whether they be dictators or terrorist groups, that you can carry out chemical weapons attacks with impunity.

With respect to the future of President Assad, we are not contemplating a military effort aimed at regime change. What we have said, though, and what we will continue to do is pursue a strategy in Syria that seeks to strengthen the opposition, including through the provision of many different types of assistance. And we are coordinating our efforts and providing that assistance with other countries in the region and other allies and partners. It includes significant efforts to deal with the humanitarian crisis, including the many hundreds of thousands of refugees who are currently in neighboring countries like Jordan and Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.

And it also includes a political effort, because we actually don't believe that there's a military solution to the conflict in Syria. So what we would like to see is a situation where there's a political process in which Bashar al-Assad leaves power. Because, frankly, we think he's lost the legitimacy to lead. Anybody who has carried out the attacks he has against his population is not a legitimate leader in our eyes. And, frankly, the use of chemical weapons only reinforces that point.

So we will continue to work through the Geneva process to support a future for Syria in which Assad does not play a role. And in terms of accountability, our first order of business is dealing with CW. We're, of course, focused on the broader transition. And we will have to see what form accountability takes for President Assad and other members of his regime.

What we've said in the past is people should consider the decisions that they make. To associate with their regime they would commit a violation of international law like the use of chemical weapons. So those around President Assad I think should consider the type of accountability that they will face in the long run from the international community for this use.

What was the first question again?

Q When Secretary Kerry said that the President will continue to talk to the American people and Congress, what more evidence would he want to present?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, this is something we're doing on a daily basis. And last night, we had a Cabinet-level consultation with the leadership of both houses of Congress and the chairs and ranking members of relevant national security committees. We're going to continue to reach out to Congress on a daily basis.

This assessment is being provided to Congress and additional classified assessments are being provided to Congress as well. We take very seriously our responsibility to inform Congress. But the bottom line is we feel like our case is strong, our case is clear that the Assad regime is responsible for this mass-casualty chemical weapons attack.

And, similarly, with the American people, we'll continue to speak publicly, as Secretary Kerry did today, as the President has been doing, as other senior members of the administration have been doing, to explain to them how we are viewing the situation, the information that we have that is informing our decisions. And of course, when the President makes a decision, we will communicate that robustly to the American people as well. So this is something that's been an ongoing process and we'll continue to do so, given the seriousness of the issue.

Q I have a couple quick questions. Just on logistics, first of all, you said that the classified version or additional classified information is being handed over to leadership in Congress. Has that already happened? Do they have that, or is that happening simultaneous to this release -- would be the first question.

And I'll ask the second one now as well, if I could -- more an editorial. When you say that the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Army had become just part of their portfolio and that was just another armament in their bag of tricks, does that not in some way say that this could have been a rogue group who has that already ready to use? Does it not layer Mr. Assad from the actual launch control of this weapon? And what is your strongest link to Assad that you have, the actual strongest link?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: On the first question, with respect to provision of intelligence to the Hill, that's been ongoing from day one. They did get our first full classified IC product on the 26th of August. They will receive the update that's being produced today that underlies the unclassified piece that you've had. We're actually having classified briefings for staff members this afternoon. So that's a continual provision of intelligence.

On your second question, to answer your question, no, it would not absolve Assad, because it wasn't just the preparations that we detected in those three days in advance of Wednesday; it was also the people that were involved. And they were the people that are responsible for his program. There's a chain of command from him to them.

And so we looked at all other explanations and scenarios to test the case, and the scenario that we're presenting here, that this was executed under the command and control of the Assad regime, was strengthened because of the people who were involved.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add to that and just to draw attention on the preparation, we'd note the SSRC personnel who are within the chain of command through the Defense Ministry. And then, on the back end of the attack, you'll note the

intercepted communications of a senior official confirming the use of chemical weapons, expressing concern about the U.N. inspectors. And then, you also have Syrian chemical weapons personnel directed to cease operations.

So they're different -- or they're multiple points in the document and in this progression of events that implicate different individuals who have a connection to the Syrian regime, and specifically its chemical weapons program.

Q You said that the President has not made a final determination on how to proceed. Why has the President not made a decision on how to proceed? Is he waiting for Congress, support from allies? What exactly?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, first of all, it's important for the President to be prudent and careful in his decision-making given the seriousness of the issue. What is clear to us is what happened. And what is clear to us is that there needs to be consequences and accountability for the Assad regime.

In terms of the timing of his decision, he is receiving -- has received, I should say, options from the military and also from his broader national security team about potential courses of action. At the same time, we are very aggressively consulting with Congress and providing them with the information that we have as soon as we can related to the intelligence. And we're also reaching out to them for their input about what we should have under consideration as the President makes a decision. So that's a two-way discussion where we provide them with our assessment and our thinking, and we want to hear from them what their thoughts are about the situation.

Just to continue, I would note that Congress has been, I think, strong on this set of issues for many years -- the Chemical Weapons Convention, for instance, which undergirds the norm, had strong support in Congress. The Syria Accountability Act and other measures have expressed concern. But given this decision, we very much need to continue to consult with Congress to determine how we are going to go forward and to keep them updated on any decision the President makes.

On the international side, I just wanted to add we are consulting with a variety of international partners, and the President is speaking with other leaders. And it's important to do that as well given the expressions of support we've had from many other countries, given the fact that this is rooted in an international norm. So those international consultations are also important to the President's decision-making. But, ultimately, he will make the decision that is in the best interest of the United States on his timeline.

Q I'm wondering, you said in the assessment and today on the call that you had signs that the chemical attack was coming, that there were preparations for it. I was wondering if there were any diplomatic avenues that you tried before the attack to prevent this from happening, or were you just not aware -- you didn't anticipate the scale that it was going to be on.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just say a couple of things and hand it over to my colleague here. First of all, we have actually pursued diplomatic efforts to forestall the use of chemical weapons. One of the reasons why the President has spoken out publicly about this is to deter the use of chemical weapons.

At various junctures over the last year, when we saw particularly concerning things, we were able to demarche diplomatically a variety of different countries so that the Syrian government would get the message that the use of chemical weapons violated a fundamental international norm. That includes, by the way, direct messaging to the Syrian government as well.

So that as a general matter, in the last year since the President raised the level of attention on this issue last summer, we have at times pursued diplomatic efforts as well as public efforts to message the Syrian government to understand that it should not employ that use of chemical weapons in violation of international norms.

But my colleague can speak to the specific information in question.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: As to the indicators that we have of preparations, let me just say in this forum that timelines for all of our streams of intelligence are different. And so, in some cases, we can and do get something close to real time; and other times, because of the nature of the access or the procedure or the process, there is some built-in delay.

And again, I don't want to add more here as to what's on our capability side, but just to say that we feel confident that we can, in fact, identify that those preparations occurred. They were under the regime control and thus implemented from above.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We're going to have to make that the last question. Again, you should have the assessment and the map that accompanies it. And we appreciate the questions and will stay in touch with you as we go forward.

MS. HAYDEN: Thanks, everyone. Just a reminder, that was on background with senior administration officials. Thanks.

END

2:05 P.M. EDT