

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 8/21/2013

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I apologize for keeping you waiting. I made a rookie mistake and almost forgot my glass of water. (Laughter.) So, my apologies.

I do have a quick announcement at the top before we get going. The President -- it's actually about the President's schedule today. The President and other senior administration officials today will hold a video teleconference with directors of state-based marketplaces. The President will thank them for working on the front lines every day and hear about the progress they have made in setting up the new marketplaces where Americans will be able to shop for quality, affordable coverage that will be there for them when they need it most.

There are a couple other pieces of relevant health care news I thought I'd raise while we're on the topic.

Q When is that?

MR. EARNEST: That's this afternoon. I'm not sure the exact time.

But a couple other pieces of news. Yesterday we learned that the growth in health care premiums for employer-based coverage has slowed significantly under the Affordable Care Act. The growth rate in 2013 was about one-third the size of the increases we saw a decade ago.

Also, this week, Montana became just the latest state to announce health care premiums for plans in the states that were lower than expected. The premiums announced by states so far have been nearly 20 percent below the CBO's projections, and tax credits will make that coverage even more affordable for many Americans.

Finally, there are a couple of reports today about an ADP study that indicated that job creation at small companies has almost doubled in the last six months. This is another signal that economists say undercuts claims that the Affordable Care Act is having a negative impact on job growth, particularly among smaller businesses. In fact, some might even say that this is evidence that the Affordable Care Act is having a positive impact on small businesses, their bottom line, and of course their employees who will have access to health care coverage.

So, with all of that, Julie, I'll let you take us away.

Q Thank you. I wanted to ask about the situation in Syria. We obviously got the statement earlier today asking for the U.N. to investigate this latest incident. The President has said for, I think it's been about a year now, that chemical weapons use crosses his red line, and yet we have at least the one confirmed use, we have this new report. Is there any indication that that policy is actually working, given that the deaths in Syria continue and given that Assad allegedly has used chemical weapons again?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we think is most important for right now is there actually happens to be a United Nations chemical weapons investigative team on the ground in Syria. They were just granted access to the country yesterday, I believe. So given the reports that we've seen overnight about what may or may not have taken place in Syria, we think it's important for that investigative team to be given access to that area.

Now, the Assad regime, when presented with evidence that chemical weapons have been used in their country, has said that they are interested in a credible investigation to get to the bottom of what exactly has happened. Well, it's time for them to live up to that claim. And if they actually are interested in getting to the bottom of the use of chemical weapons and whether or not that's occurred in Syria, then they will allow the U.N. investigative team that's already in Syria to access the site where chemical weapons may have been used. It will allow them unfettered access to eyewitnesses or even those who were affected by the weapons. It will allow them to collect physical samples without manipulation. And it will also ensure the security of that team as they do their work.

So the United States will be consulting with our allies and our partners on the United Nations Security Council about this, because this is and should be a top priority of the United Nations.

Q But what about the U.S. policy should make Assad feel threatened in any way, feel like he shouldn't do this again?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is not just a U.S. policy, but there is broad international agreement.

Q But the broad international community's response, I mean, what about that is threatening to him at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can't speak to what he may or may not find threatening. There is no doubt that we condemn in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons. And you're right, we even said before there was an intelligence community assessment that chemical weapons had been used, that those individuals who were responsible for safeguarding chemical weapons would be held accountable for the way that those chemical weapons are handled.

So there are a range of consequences for the actions that have possibly taken place.

Q But that's what I don't understand. I mean, what are the consequences? How have they been held accountable for this first incident? And given that we're having a hard time figuring that out, why should they feel threatened and feel like they shouldn't take this action again, as they may have already done?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, it's hard for me to speak to whether or not they feel threatened. But there is a broad international view that the use of chemical weapons is completely unacceptable. Even some people who may disagree with us on some aspects of our policy related to Syria should be able to agree that the use of chemical weapons is completely unacceptable, and should be able to support a robust and impartial, credible investigation into reports that chemical weapons may have been used.

Again, how this is going to affect our policy as it relates to the Assad regime, we'll continue to involve our consultations with our international partners. We are providing some assistance to the opposition and even to the Syrian military council. The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to try to meet the humanitarian needs of those refugee populations that have been forced to flee the violence; in some cases, we're talking about women and children that are living in terrible conditions just trying to avoid the violence.

So what's happening there is a terrible situation. There is work that can be done with our international partners to try to continue to pressure the Assad regime. We've seen evidence and indications that the Assad regime is feeling that pressure, but you're right that we have not -- that it has not resulted in the outcome that we would like to see, which is Assad being completely removed from power. That's not just the preference of the United States of America, that's the will of the Syrian people and that's why it's important.

Jeff.

Q Josh, does the United States have any independent verification about this alleged attack?

MR. EARNEST: We do not. We have seen these reports. We've consulted with some of our partners in the region about these reports. But that is why we are calling for this U.N. investigation to be conducted.

There is an investigation team that's on the ground in Syria right now, and we are hopeful that the Assad regime will follow through on what they have claimed previously: that they are interested in a credible investigation that gets to the bottom of reports that chemical weapons have been used.

So, again, it's time for the Assad regime to live up to their rhetoric in this regard and give the investigators access to the sites, the opportunity to interview witnesses, the opportunity to collect physical samples and other things that would help them reach a credible determination about what exactly occurred there.

Q Has this triggered any diplomatic efforts? For example, is Ambassador Rice speaking to her Russian counterpart? Is Secretary Kerry putting any pressure on Russia over this particular incident in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any specific calls to read out to you. There are a number of conversations that have occurred at a couple of different levels between the United States and our partners and allies who have a vested stake in the outcome. And there is the request that was made for a consultation at the United National Security Council. Ambassador Power's office may be able to provide additional insight into what kinds of conversations are occurring in New York.

Q And is there any concern, as you look at this, that it might have been staged by rebels for international attention?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't want to speculate on what may or may not have happened. Fortunately, we have credible, professional investigators with the United Nations on the ground in Syria right now. Let's give them the opportunity to take a look at what happened. Let's give them the opportunity to interview witnesses. Let's give them the opportunity to collect some physical evidence. And then we can reach a conclusion about what exactly happened there.

But suffice it to say, though, that the use of chemical weapons is something that the United States finds totally deplorable and completely unacceptable. And those who are responsible for the use of chemical weapons, if it's determined that that's what happened, will be held accountable.

Let's move to the back a little bit. Olivier.

Q Josh, you said there were indications that Assad is feeling the pressure, I think it was your term. What specifically leads you to conclude that he is feeling the pressure?

MR. EARNEST: Well, certainly the public statements that we've seen from world leaders across the globe is an indication that he not only doesn't have their support, but has their active opposition. We have seen the toll that this conflict has taken on the relationships that the Assad regime has with other countries in the region that they had previously had at least a working relationship with. There's also clear indication that the Syrian economy has taken a pretty tough hit in the midst of all this turmoil as well.

So there are a range of ways I think that they could have felt this pressure. But as I acknowledged to Julie earlier, we have not attained our goal yet here, which is the removal of Assad from power. And, again, we are seeking that removal not just because it's our preference, but because it's the will of the Syrian people.

Jared.

Q Josh, you said that if the Syrian government, if Assad's government prohibits or inhibits the investigators in any way, will that be taken as a sign of guilt in this? And will that cross the red line for the administration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, they certainly have an opportunity to live up to the rhetoric that they've articulated previously, which is when confronted with reports of previous use of chemical weapons, the Assad regime says that they welcome a credible and fair investigation to get to the bottom of what exactly occurred. So, conveniently -- there are reports of widespread use of chemical weapons, at least in one location overnight that affected a large number of people, it's unclear how many -- and there is today, as we speak, on the ground in Syria a United Nations team with a specialty in investigating the use of chemical weapons. So let's give this team the opportunity to investigate what exactly occurred and get to the bottom of this so that we can hold accountable those who are responsible.

Q Right, but what I'm asking is you said that it will cross the red line if their chemical weapons were used or distributed because of the Assad regime. What I'm asking is will a prevention or inhibition of the investigators also be some kind of trigger for the administration, because what other incentive does Assad have to let them investigate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, he has previously stated, or at least indicated -- his regime has -- that it's in the interest of the regime to get a full investigation of what's happening. So even if he wants to continue to ignore the strong urgings of the international community, he has already articulated that it's in the best interest of his regime for an investigation to be conducted.

So even if he doesn't want to listen to the rest of the global community, he can follow through on his own rhetoric.

Q So if he impedes the actions of the investigators, will that cross any line for the administration?

MR. EARNEST: We certainly would like to see this cooperation -- well, look, it's not even a matter of cooperation. What we would like to see is the Assad regime not interfere with this investigation. The Assad regime does have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of the team as they're doing their -- as they're conducting the investigation. But really what we're looking for is unfettered access to the witnesses, the opportunity to visit the site where this allegedly occurred, the opportunity to collect some physical evidence without manipulation from the Assad regime. And let's let the investigation move forward, and we'll judge the results accordingly.

Jim.

Q On the big picture of foreign policy right now, you have Russia ignoring our request for Snowden, ignoring our request for cooperation with Syria and putting pressure on Syria. You have Egypt ignoring requests to stop the violence. And you have Syria ignoring requests to stop using chemical weapons or killing their own people. These are all greeted with -- or responded to by the Obama administration with some harsh condemnations, we're greatly disappointed. But there is a perception among some that this is weakness on the part of the Obama administration. Can you address that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say a couple of things about that. You are referring to some very difficult and in some cases intractable problems that in some cases are bearing some very severe consequences for the people who live in these countries. There's no doubt about that.

The United States has a responsibility to be a part of the international effort to address those problems for a variety of reasons. One of them is that it is the desire of the United States of America to have good relationships with these countries.

And what we are trying to do is, in many of these cases, is to marshal some international support and to work with our friends and allies, to work with our partners in the region. And we have done that with some success and with some progress that's notable in a variety of circumstances.

And what we would like to see moving forward is a continued effort on the part of the international community to work together to address some of these problems. But we would also like to see in a lot of these situations the leaders of these countries to respect the basic human rights of the people that they govern, the people that they lead. That's true of the Assad regime in Syria, and that's certainly true of the interim government in Egypt -- sort of the two most intractable problems that we've been dealing with lately.

Q But there are people who are wondering when the United States -- and is Mr. Obama, President Obama willing to use the stick along with the rhetoric that's coming from this platform and also from President Obama himself. Is there a real stick? Should these countries fear the United States and fear when the United States says we condemn what you're doing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you're asking a philosophical question that I think is an entirely legitimate one. It might be one that's better posed to the Commander-in-Chief himself.

Q Bring him out.

MR. EARNEST: But let me say this, I think the President's willingness to use force to protect the interests of the American people has been well documented by a lot of people in this room. I think that's particularly true when you consider the effort that this administration has implemented to go after the core leadership of al Qaeda that previously was at least intact along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. That's no longer the case. Osama bin Laden is no longer there plotting against the United States

and our allies. That doesn't mean that there isn't a continuing threat that's posed by other elements of al Qaeda, but that threat has changed because of this President's willingness to use some force.

There also are plenty of other ways in which we have worked with the international community to accomplish some objectives and to make some progress on things. The President took a trip to Africa where he highlighted some of the strong relationships the United States has with some countries there. And this is some of the work that the President vowed to do when he took office, which is to rebuild some of the relationships that were in tatters when this President entered the Oval Office. That strengthens the position of the United States on the international scene. It's good for our broader national security interests, but it is something the President and senior members of his team have to work on every single day.

Peter.

Q Josh, so far, in Syria, more than 100,000 people have been killed. That's effectively like wiping out the whole city of South Bend, Indiana. How many more people in Syria need to die before the U.S. does employ some use of force beyond the humanitarian aid that we're providing or the provisions of small arms before there is a U.S. military use of force?

MR. EARNEST: Peter, what the President does as he is evaluating difficult foreign policy problems like this is assess the national security interests of the United States of America. And that's exactly what the President has done in this circumstance. And he has assessed that the best way for us to tackle this problem is to work closely with our international allies to present a united front to the Assad regime.

It has involved working with our partners to try to pressure Bashar al-Assad to respect basic human rights and to leave power. It has involved providing assistance to the Syrian Opposition Council and to the Syrian military council to aid them as they fight against elements of the Assad regime troops who are waging war against them. It also means providing humanitarian assistance -- as I mentioned earlier, the United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance -- to try to meet the needs of those people in Syria who are bearing the brunt of the violence in Syria.

Q Does this change the calculation? If this, in fact, is the case, does this change the calculation for the President? You had said before that boots on the ground was not an option. Does this change that?

MR. EARNEST: Before we suggest what may or may not happen as a result of the investigation's findings being revealed, let's start with making sure that this investigation actually gets conducted in a manner that is credible.

Q Fair enough. So last time, during the investigation, several months passed before the U.S. took any form of action. In this case there's no reason to believe that the U.N. will be granted access to that location given the fact that the terms of the negotiation between the regime and the U.N. inspectors --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I might quibble with that just a little bit because there actually is an investigations team that is in Syria right now. So I think that makes it slightly more likely, but we'll see -- it certainly makes it easier for the Assad regime to facilitate their access to these sites. There is a bunch -- the access of this team to the country represents at least one negotiating step that doesn't have to occur.

So, again, we're going to see -- and this is a test for the Assad regime about whether or not they're going to live up to their rhetoric here. But I'm not sure that this is exactly the same situation that we were facing before.

Q And what's also unique here is that the terms have already been negotiated between the U.N. inspectors and the regime in advance of their arrival, suggesting they could only go to those communities, which is why --

MR. EARNEST: Yes, that suggests that there might be a framework in place that could be applied in this circumstance.

Q So if they do not get access -- which appears to be the case right now -- the Syrians have said they will not grant them access to those specific locations. Last time around when the White House spoke about the use of chemical weapons, they referred to it as having taken place on a small scale. Does this qualify as a large scale, as a more significant scale?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you're referring to an intelligence community assessment about the previous use of chemical weapons. I don't have an assessment about this particular circumstance to share with you at this point. But this is certainly one of the things that could be determined by a legitimate, credible investigation. And it's among the many reasons why the Assad regime should facilitate the investigators' access to that site.

Q Two more quick things. One, Jeffrey Goldberg today writes, "Why would the Assad regime launch its biggest chemical attack on rebels and civilians precisely at the moment when a U.N. inspection team" -- as you noted -- "was parked in Damascus? The answer" -- he suggests -- "to that question is easy: Because Assad believes that no one -- not the U.N., not President Obama, not other Western powers...will do a damn thing to stop him. There is a good chance that he is correct." Is the U.S. going to do anything to stop him beyond what it's done?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a number of steps that we have taken, and I've walked through what those steps are. Those involve humanitarian aid. That involves close coordination with our allies.

Q It hasn't stopped.

MR. EARNEST: It involves important conversations with regional partners. And it involves some assistance to the Syrian military council. So there are a range of things that we've done already. In terms of additional assistance that could be provided, I certainly wouldn't rule that out. But that's something that we are considering on a pretty regular

basis. And the conduct of this investigation, the results of this investigation or the efforts by the Assad regime to inhibit this investigation will certainly impact that calculation about possible additional aid.

Q My last question is on Bradley Manning. His attorneys are saying that they're going to apply for a presidential pardon. Will the President grant Bradley Manning a presidential pardon?

MR. EARNEST: There's a process for pardon applications or clemency applications, I believe they're called. And I'm not going to get ahead of that process. If there is an application that's filed by Mr. Manning or his attorneys, that application will be considered in that process like any other application.

Ed.

Q Josh, when you were talking on Syria here about tough statements coming from this government, other governments around the world, I think Julie noted earlier it was one year ago this month the President said at that podium in a news conference that if chemical weapons were used or spread in Syria, that would be a red line. But his next sentence was -- "and there would be enormous consequences." So Julie got at this and I didn't hear an answer. What have the consequences been? Where are the consequences?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a number of them. We've talked about the steady escalation of aid that has been provided to the Syrian opposition, and that is an effort to try to help the opposition weather the war that's being waged against them by the Assad regime. We have also talked about our insistence that those who are responsible for the handling of chemical weapons will be personally held accountable for the responsibility that they have in the handling of those weapons.

Q But it's been a year since the President made that statement. So you're saying they'll be held accountable. It's been a year.

MR. EARNEST: It has been. And we are in a circumstance where the Assad regime is still in power. But you have a large segment of the international community aligned against them. You have the United States of America providing assistance to the opposition. You have the United States of America trying to meet the humanitarian needs or assist in the meeting of the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. And this is a situation that is ongoing. And our efforts to work with the international community and to work with the Syrian opposition, to remove Assad from power are ongoing.

And, again, we're working in that effort not just because it's the preference of the United States, but because it's the will of the Syrian people. And that, ultimately, is what we would like to be the outcome here -- a government that reflects the will of the Syrian people and that respects the basic human rights that the Syrian people deserve to have protected by their government.

Q So applying the same -- and Jim got at this a bit about the rhetoric in many of these cases -- be shifted to Egypt with people being killed, Christians in particular being targeted, churches being destroyed. What's the President's red line in Egypt?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't bring my red pen out with me today. But I can tell you that we have condemned in unambiguous terms all the violence that's been perpetrated there in Egypt. We have been concerned and condemn the violence that was perpetrated by the government against peaceful protestors. And we're just as outraged and just as concerned about reports that Christian churches have been targeted.

The violence in Egypt should come to an end. It needs to stop. And that is the way that we're going to facilitate the kind of reconciliation that will allow the interim government to make good on their promise to transition back to a democratically elected, civilian government. We need to see an inclusive process get started there, and that's something that we are encouraging the interim government to undertake.

Q Last topic. Do you have any reaction to the Christopher Lane case?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not familiar with it, actually.

Q In Oklahoma, this 22-year-old Australian -- 22 or 23, I've seen different reports -- baseball player, came from Australia, was targeted apparently by three African American young men who -- the Australian was out on a jog and these young men apparently told the police they were bored and they thought it would just be fun to kill him. Any reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, just that this sounds like a pretty tragic case. I wouldn't want to get ahead of the legal process here. And it's clear that law enforcement officials are involved as they're investigating.

But these -- any act of violence is something that -- the President, I think, himself has spoken pretty eloquently about violence in our communities, and he stood at this podium a few weeks ago where he talked about his concern about the impact that violence is having on, in particular, young people in this country.

Q Yes, we heard him on Trayvon Martin here and in the Rose Garden. Why hasn't he spoken out on this, in this case? You said there was a judicial proceeding; there was one in the Trayvon Martin case. He spoke out extensively on that one.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not sure that -- there are some people in this room I don't think who would agree with you that the President spoke out extensively on it. I think that he answered a --

Q It was in the Rose Garden, he spoke on it, got a question.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, and he got asked a question about it.

Q And he didn't have to answer but he did, and then he came out here himself --

MR. EARNEST: At the conclusion of the legal process and shared some thoughts --

Q Sure, for several minutes.

MR. EARNEST: -- that are, I think -- where he expressed his concerns about the impact of violence in communities all across the country, and he talked about the number of things that the government can do but also a number of things we can do in our communities, whether it's parents, churches and communities can do to try to address the impact of violence, and whether there is more that we can do to try to protect our children.

Major.

Q Hi Josh, can you talk about the meeting yesterday with the National Security Council and the President? How long did it last? What is the decision point the President is at going forward with Egypt? Is it, as you suggested yesterday, more likely if there are not concrete steps taken by the transitional government -- things like Apache helicopters, M1-A1 tanks -- things that are pending in the next three or four weeks will be delayed or cancelled entirely?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Major, the President did meet with his national security team in the Situation Room yesterday. They met for more than an hour. They had an opportunity to talk about the consultation that senior members of his team have been having with their counterparts in Egypt. You've heard me say this a number of times in the last few days that Secretary Kerry, Secretary Hagel, other senior members of the Obama administration have been in touch with their counterparts in recent days and weeks as the situation in Egypt has evolved. This is an opportunity for the President to hear directly from them about those conversations.

As you've also heard me say in recent weeks, the President in early July ordered his team to conduct a review of our aid and assistance program to Egypt. And this was an opportunity for the President to hear from senior members of his team about that ongoing review. There has been no -- that review today continues to be conducted. So there's no change to report at this time as it relates to our aid and assistance program in relationship with Egypt.

There also was an opportunity for the President to hear from some senior members of his team about the security situation in Cairo. We still have personnel and facilities in Cairo in particular, but in other places in Egypt. And the President was briefed on that.

And then finally, we've also been in regular touch with our allies and partners in the region who have a stake in the outcome in Egypt and have been engaged in trying to find a solution. And the President was given the opportunity to hear from them about the conversations they've had with our allies and partners as well.

Q Based on that briefing, does the President believe there are extra security precautions that can or should be taken for Americans in Egypt?

MR. EARNEST: Nothing that I'm prepared to announce right now.

Q On the NSA story that was in The Wall Street Journal today, is it really credible now for this White House to continue to say, as the President said on Jay Leno, there is not a domestic surveillance program going on in this country?

MR. EARNEST: Of course.

Q Even though as these disclosures continue to show up, there is ample evidence and confirmation, in some cases, that surveillance activities that the public was not aware of do go on on a rather ordinary basis and feel and look as if there is a sort of a constant net out there that, if not in every way, according to the President's point of view on surveillance, would strike many Americans as sort of an ongoing domestic surveillance program?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think even the report in The Wall Street Journal was pretty clear about the fact that what we're talking about here is a narrowly focused program that's aimed specifically at foreign intelligence, and that the goal here is to implement these programs in a way --

Q Aims and goals. But as the report indicated and other reports have, there are more than one or two instances where emails or conversations that don't fit into those particular identified legally established surveillance guidelines do get surveilled.

MR. EARNEST: And the reason that we know about that, the reason that you read about it in The Wall Street Journal, and the reason that we're talking about it right now is because there are very strict compliance standards in place at the NSA that monitor for compliance issues, that tabulate them, that document them, and that put in place measures to correct them when they occur. So I'd actually refer you back to --

Q So there's a tabulation of the domestic surveillance?

MR. EARNEST: So there's a tabulation of compliance issues. This is a program that is related specifically to foreign intelligence and foreign surveillance for our national security purposes. So I think The Wall Street Journal in that respect was pretty specific about the aims of that program and how some of those aims were achieved.

Now, at the same time, when this President took office, he acknowledged in a news conference with all of you that when he took office, he had some inherent skepticism about these programs and about whether they did properly strike the balance between protecting our national security and protecting the privacy rights that all Americans enjoy.

So, as a result of that skepticism, he ordered a review of these programs, and as a result of that review, some steps were taken to put in place stricter compliance standards, greater transparency measures, and additional responsibilities for the intelligence community to report to Congress, who has oversight responsibility. So the President has taken some steps to address these concerns.

The last thing I'll say about this is, as we've talked about this in recent months, one thing that has become clear is that these programs are operated by national security professionals, and that the conduct of these programs is critical to our national security. There are documented cases where these programs have contributed to the disruption of terror plots. There are documented cases where these programs have strengthened not just our homeland security, but also the security of our assets and our allies around the globe. So we're talking about very important programs, but the President feels just as strongly about the need to make sure that we're striking the right balance between our national security and privacy.

I actually do want to add one more thing, which is that we have heard in recent weeks suggestions from members of Congress that there are additional things that we can do to strengthen the oversight of these programs and to make sure that these strict compliance standards are met. So if there are individual members of Congress that have suggestions for additional changes that they would like to enact into law, the President and other senior members of his administration are willing to sit down at the table with them to put in place greater transparency measures.

The reason for that is simply the President believes that these programs will work better if there is public confidence in them. So if we can inspire greater public confidence in these programs by being slightly more transparent or by putting in place additional oversight measures, then we're certainly willing to work with Congress to implement those changes.

Q Let me just follow up on Jim's question about weakness. Maybe that's maybe not the way the administration looks at it, but does it at times feel, particularly in Syria in and in Egypt, powerless to affect events the way they would like to?

MR. EARNEST: Of course not. And the reason for that is very simple, which is that the President believes that there is a role for the international community to play in those both of these instances. And this President and this country have taken a leadership role in the international community.

Q And the result of that international community pressure in Syria are -- you would concede extremely hard to find, would you not?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I would say is that -- I acknowledged a couple of times that we have not, to this point, achieved our ultimate goal, which is removing Bashar al-Assad from power. And again, that is something that we seek to do not just because it's our preference, but because it's the will of the Syrian people.

And there is international -- broad international support for that. And there is also broad international support in Egypt in terms of asking the interim government to follow through on their promise to transition back to a democratically elected, civilian government. And there is a role for the international community to play, and there is a leadership role for the United States to play in the international community.

And you're right, in both instances we have not attained our ultimate goal. But that is something that we --

Q Maybe some of your incremental goals --

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's harder to assess. What I can tell you is that there are -- that we've got some work to do in both of these areas, and this is something that we're actively working on, whether it's a national security meeting that the President convenes in the Situation Room, whether it is meetings and consultations at the United Nations that are conducted by Ambassador Power, whether it is conversations with Cabinet officials here. Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel and others are working in coordinated fashion to try to address some of these challenges.

Jessica.

Q Thanks, Josh. As you said yesterday, many people have Beau Biden in their thoughts and prayers. There have been some reports that he may have a potentially worrisome medical condition. Can you tell us anything about his condition and the President's latest contact with the Vice President?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in the position to offer any new details about the medical condition of Mr. Biden. When additional details are available, they will likely be communicated to you through the Delaware Attorney General's Office.

I don't have any update in terms of conversations between the President and Vice President. And it's the Vice President's Office who is maintaining the Vice President's schedule, so I don't have any updates on the schedule. As you know, he is in Houston today. At this point, he is still scheduled to join the President in Scranton on Friday, but we'll see. And if there are any changes to the schedule to announce, we'll get them to you.

Q Okay. Following up on a question you said you would take yesterday, the U.S. government currently classifies marijuana in the category of most dangerous drugs with no medical benefit, the same category as heroin and more harmful than cocaine or meth. Sanjay Gupta, as you may know, has just --

MR. EARNEST: Who is your distinguished colleague.

Q Yes, my distinguished colleague, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, has just called for a reconsideration by the government. So given the reported medical benefits of marijuana, does the President believe the government should reconsider this classification?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jessica, I can tell you that the administration's position on this has been clear and consistent for some time now, that while the prosecution of drug traffickers remains an important priority, the President and the administration believe that targeting individual marijuana users, especially those with serious illnesses and their caregivers, is not the best allocation of federal law enforcement resources.

I looked it up -- I think the President last talked about this in an interview he did with Barbara Walters back in December, where she asked him a similar question. And the President acknowledged that the priority here -- the priority in terms of the dedication of law enforcement resources should be targeted toward drug kingpins, drug traffickers and

others who perpetrate violence in the conduct of the drug trade; that that is the best use of our law enforcement resources. But at the same time, the President does not at this point advocate a change in the law.

Q Is he willing to take steps to make it easier to conduct research on marijuana's medical benefits?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not exactly sure what steps are required or what changes could be implemented into the law to have an impact on marijuana research.

Q Okay. Maybe you could let us know.

MR. EARNEST: For some reason I have the sneaking suspicion that this is going to draw me all kinds of traffic on Twitter. (Laughter.) I'm just -- I'm predicting that now. And maybe I'll have an update for you later about that.

Q Maybe I'll bring you some Doritos later. (Laughter.)

There are fires burning in 11 states across the nation impacting tens of thousands of acres. Has the President considered stepping up federal involvement in fighting the fires, and has he considered visiting any of these states?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, that's a good question, because there actually has been quite a bit of federal involvement here. The President was briefed on the situation -- the President got a briefing yesterday on the efforts to fight the firefighters -- fire -- there's a lot of Fs involved in this. The President was briefed yesterday on the wildfire situation that's occurred throughout the West, and the efforts that are currently underway to fight those fires. I got it right that time.

One thing that has been announced recently -- and I think this was also just yesterday -- by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group -- they elevated the national preparedness level from four to five at 6:00 a.m. yesterday. Now, what that does is it allows greater state and federal resources to be applied to confront this situation. The assessment of the preparedness level is based on fire conditions, fire activity, and resource availability.

There are more than 40 uncontained large wildfires all across the West, including in states like Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. There are more than 19,000 federal, state, and local personnel who are fighting those fires, including 1,700 who have responded to the Beaver Creek fire in Idaho that has gotten a lot of attention in the last couple of days.

Since the start of the wildfire season, FEMA has approved 26 fire management assistance grants, including a fire management assistance grant that was provided on August 15th to fight the Beaver Creek fire in Idaho. These fire management assistance grants, what they do is they provide resources, both monetary and otherwise, to state and local officials who are responsible for fighting these fires. So there is a robust effort underway at the federal level to support the ongoing efforts.

I should have started this comment by saying something that I think is true of everybody in this room, which is that our thoughts and prayers are with those families and those communities that have been affected by these fires. And our thoughts and prayers in particular are with those who are risking their lives right now to fight these fires.

April.

Q Josh, can you talk to me about Cory Booker and the President's endorsement of Cory Booker, and particularly his comments that came out talking about how Cory Booker would help him in the fight -- the gun issue that he's trying to win?

MR. EARNEST: You just want me to talk about it? I'm not sure that I have a whole lot more to add than what the President has said about this. I know that Mayor Booker has been a leading advocate of steps that can be taken to reduce gun violence in communities all across the country. The President certainly shares that goal. And you've heard the President talk quite a bit about steps that he believes that Congress should take to reduce gun violence in this country. That's everything from passing laws that make it harder for criminals and others who shouldn't have guns, make it harder for those individuals to obtain firearms. There are also a range of things that we can do on areas like mental health and education that also stand to reduce gun violence in communities all across the country.

But I know that Mayor Booker has also made middle-class families a priority in trying to fight for expanded economic access for -- expand economic opportunity for middle-class families. And that is also a priority that the President has been loudly advocating. And that would be another thing that the President would look forward to the opportunity to work with Mr. Booker to make progress on.

Q So along those lines -- I'm going to branch off of this but still on the same line -- so has the President still been, in the midst of all of this, everything else that's going, he is still trying to galvanize his group to help him push this gun legislation through as he is talking about bringing Cory Booker into this?

MR. EARNEST: The steps that we can put in place to reduce gun violence remains a domestic policy priority of this administration. And we are willing to work with Democrats and Republicans to make progress on it. And there was a high-profile vote in the spring that left the President pretty disappointed -- might be characterizing it mildly. And we look forward to an opportunity to revisit not just a vote on that one specific issue related to closing loopholes in the background check system, but on a variety of measures that would address the scourge of gun violence in our communities.

Q So is Cory Booker somewhat -- a more interesting person to help them with this, as New Jersey was one of the first states who came out with this anti-assault weapon ban in the '90s?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that the words that the President had about Mayor Booker today were concentrated mostly on Mayor Booker's record on these issues and his advocacy on these issues, and had less to do with the state in which he resides.

We'll do a couple more here. Roger.

Q Can you talk a little bit about the plans for tomorrow, the education plans? And, specifically, is there anything aimed at for-profit higher education institutions?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position right now to talk about any of the policy details the President is going to roll out tomorrow, beyond just characterizing for you that the President's comments will be focused on reducing the cost of a college education for families all across the country, because it's so important for middle-class families and those families trying to get to the middle class to have access to programs like that.

Q Plans for a briefing?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I can share with you at this point, but we're working on it.

Ari.

Q You've talked about meetings the President has had in the last few days with regulators, with health care officials, on Egypt. And I wonder with so many crises brewing domestically and around the world, if you could explain the decision to only have the President appear in a very lighthearted event with the 1972 Dolphins. I wonder if you think there's a disconnect between events in the world and the way the President presents himself here.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say a couple of things about that. The event with the Dolphins was something that was long scheduled and long planned, and it was something that the President did enjoy. But I don't think that anybody has reason to question the seriousness with which the President confronts these challenges that we're facing. The President delivered some very sober and serious remarks last Thursday, where he talked about the need of the interim Egyptian government to live up to their promise to transition back to a democratically elected, civilian government. He called on them to end the violence there.

So I'm not sure what the President will -- well, I think that is an indication that the President is focused on these issues. And I think the fact that he had a meeting with his national security team yesterday that Major and I talked about a little bit is an indication this is something that he is focused on. And that will continue.

We're going to -- as Roger alluded to -- spend some time on a bus in New York and Pennsylvania at the end of this week talking about another priority of the President's, which is reducing the cost of a college education. But that doesn't mean that there's any less attention being paid to the ongoing violence in Egypt or reports of chemical weapons use in Syria or any of the other range of serious things that are happening all across the globe.

Q So you don't think the American people expect to see or hear from the President on some of those crushing issues of the moment in a given week?

MR. EARNEST: I think they expect their President to be focused on the important priorities. And I think based on what we've communicated to you about his national security meetings, about the public statement that he delivered last Thursday and about the focus of the bus tour this week, I think there's ample evidence to indicate that the President is focused on the right things.

Alexis, I'm going to give you the last one.

Q Josh, can I follow up on what Roger was asking about the bus tour?

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q There are so many Americans who are packing their kids off this week or next week and writing these enormous checks for college. And they're going to be wondering if the President has anything to propose that might actually affect the cost that they're incurring now. Can you add anything about whether they should expect to hear from the President in a way that would help them with the expenses now in this academic year?

MR. EARNEST: I don't want to get ahead of any of the policy announcements for tomorrow. So just stay tuned.

Q Can you also expand on just why New York and Pennsylvania? He could have gone to many other campuses. Can you give us a hint?

MR. EARNEST: That will be something that will be a little bit clearer after we've talked a little bit more about the policy proposals the President will unveil.

Q So there are going to be examples. He is going to use them as good examples?

MR. EARNEST: Well, wait and see tomorrow, and we'll see what happens.

Q I wanted to follow up also on what you were talking about with the front row. The President at his news conference talked about trying to put together a task force on surveillance to offer him some expertise from the private sector and other expertise. Maybe I missed it, but what's the update on when we might see that group of people put together?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update on the specific timing in which that will be announced, but I know that's something that is being actively worked on since the President announced it. But I think it would be another example of the President's desire to work with members of Congress and others who have an expertise to inspire greater confidence in these programs -- that if there are steps related to advancements in technology that would allow us to strengthen these programs but also strengthen the oversight, then we want to hear those ideas.

And so putting together an outside group like this to examine some of these issues and to examine their impact on the programs is an example of the President's efforts to further refine these programs in a way that will strengthen public confidence in them, and therefore strengthen the programs altogether.

Thanks, everybody. Have a good Wednesday.

Q Can I ask you about Bradley Manning real fast?

MR. EARNEST: No, not today. Thank you.

END

2:01 P.M. EDT