

Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Richmond, VA, 3/9/12

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

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Aboard Air Force One
En Route Richmond, Virginia

11:24 A.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good morning. It's nice to see you all this morning. Our itinerary today includes a stop in Prince George County, Virginia, where the President will tour the Rolls-Royce Crosspointe plant, which engineers and manufactures aircraft parts. From there we'll head to the Bayou City -- Houston, Texas, where the President has a couple of campaign events before returning back to Washington late tonight.

I have a couple of announcements before we get started, and then I'll take your questions should you have any.

The first is, en route this morning, the President is placing a telephone call to President-elect Putin. I don't have a preview of that call, but we will put together a readout of that call on paper that will circulate at some point later this morning. So stay tuned for that.

Q That's this leg?

MR. EARNEST: That's this leg. Technology willing, it's probably occurring right now.

The second thing, I wanted to give you a preview of is the official visit by Prime Minister Cameron and his wife Samantha to the White House next week. As you've seen from news reports, the President and Prime Minister Cameron will be flying to Dayton, Ohio, on Tuesday to attend an NCAA Tournament men's basketball game.

The First Lady and Mrs. Cameron will remain in Washington, D.C. and participate in an Olympic-themed event with Washington, D.C. area children on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, you'll see the more formal activities that are typically associated with an official visit. This will include extensive meetings about the special and the essential relationships between the United States and the United Kingdom. There's a strong working relationship and actually even a strong personal bond between Prime Minister

Cameron and President Obama they'll cultivate during this visit and during these meetings, in which they'll discuss a wide range of issues that are on the agenda -- everything ranging from Afghanistan, where our troops are serving shoulder to shoulder, to confronting Iran and Syria, democratic movements in the Middle East and North Africa, and they'll of course, discuss the upcoming G8 and NATO summits.

And as I mentioned before, we maintain a special and a essential friendship and partnership with the government and people of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is our NATO ally and our closest partner in the world. Next week's visit by the Prime Minister reciprocates President Obama's state visit to the UK in May of last year that was hosted by Her Majesty the Queen.

And then the last thing, at this morning's event in Prince George County, the President will tour, as I mentioned, the Rolls-Royce Crosspointe plant, which engineers and manufactures aircraft engine components. It is an example of two important things: Companies are choosing to invest in and create jobs right here in America; and second, it's an example of the kind of advanced manufacturing that the President believes can be and should be a critical part of the American economy. These are good-paying jobs and yield products that the world relies on, and they're stamped with the words: Made in America.

You've also seen the President, from news reports, will talk about a proposal to create advanced manufacturing hubs that will foster a synergy between academia, government, and businesses large and small, to take good ideas from the lab and move them quickly to the production line and eventually to market.

The President believes that these hubs -- the President believes that we should establish 15 of these hubs. This is a proposal that was included in his FY13 budget that was submitted to Congress, and we urge Congress to act on that proposal quickly.

But we can't wait for Congress to act, so the President will also announce today a competitive application for a pilot program that will get going sooner, using existing, already-appropriated funds from a couple of different federal agencies.

Q Josh, why go to a foreign-owned company to make this announcement today? Why not a U.S. company?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I mentioned, Kate, there are companies both foreign and domestic that are interested in investing in America and creating jobs right here in America. This plant also underscores the important role that advanced manufacturing can and should play in the future of the American economy and that's why we're visiting here.

Q Are there any foreign-owned companies that will benefit from these manufacturing hubs or this competitive grant, or is it just U.S. companies?

MR. EARNEST: The goal of the manufacturing hubs is to bring businesses large and small together with academia and government -- both state, local as well as the federal government -- to foster a synergy to bring goods and ideas from the lab more quickly to the production line. So the idea is that this would benefit a broader segment of the economy and not just one specific company.

Q Josh, could you respond to a reported series of defections from Syria, both government officials and military generals? The administration said before that Assad's days are numbered. I wondered if this current situation has changed the number or the overall prospective of how stable the regime is.

MR. EARNEST: Well, we've seen the reports of some defections. I'm not in a position to confirm those reports right now. But those defections are a courageous step by members of the regime demonstrating their loyalty to and support for the Syrian people and their aspirations. This is -- if the reports are true, it's certainly a sign that there are significant cracks in the Assad regime and they do lend some evidence to something that we've said for some time now, which is that Assad -- that a democratic transition will take place in Syria -- I should say a political transition will take place in Syria that will end with Assad no longer in power.

These defections, like I said, if they are true, are an indication of something that the United States and the international community have said many times and continue to believe is true.

Q The head of the opposition, though, seems to indicate that Kofi Annan getting involved wouldn't really help the situation. Does that throw any cold water on this plan for a political situation?

MR. EARNEST: As you know, Ken, we're very interested in working with the "Friends of Syria" and the international community to support the Syrian people and their aspirations. Certainly, the role of the international community here is important in demonstrating to the Assad regime that they should stop their violence against innocent civilians and respect the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. And that's the goal of those efforts.

Q Is Mr. McDonnell going to greet the President in Virginia, and is Governor Perry going to be in Texas?

MR. EARNEST: I understand that Governor McDonnell will greet President Obama when we land in Richmond and also travel with the President to the events today. He'll also be greeted by the Mayor of Richmond and Congressman Bobby Scott when we arrive in Richmond.

I don't know about Governor Perry, and I don't know what his schedule is today.

Q Do you have any response to the change in leadership the Pakistan intelligence agency announced today?

MR. EARNEST: I'll have to get back to you on that. I'll have to get back to you on that.

Q Can you talk about some of the steps the White House is taking in advance of the hearing on the health care case, rallying support around it, as reported today?

MR. EARNEST: I saw the report in The New York Times today that you're referring to. The administration has been involved for more than two years now in an effort to educate the American public about the benefits of the Affordable Care Act. We remain confident that the Supreme Court will rule that the Affordable Care Act is constitutional. That's a good thing.

We're already seeing many of the benefits of the Affordable Care Act. There are 2.5 million young adults who are on their parent's insurance today. We are seeing -- we've seen more than 3 million seniors save \$600 last year on their prescription drug costs. We're going to continue to see these kinds of benefits kick in as the Affordable Care Act is implemented. And that's what the focus of our efforts are on -- is educating the public about the benefits of the program, but also making sure that the Affordable Care Act is implemented properly and effectively and efficiently.

Q Josh, three years ago today the DOW Jones Industrial Average hit its financial crisis low. It's doubled since then in value. Do you see that as a positive economic indicator? Do you have any response to that? When you talk to people suffering, I mean, that's something people have not been talking too much about.

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you know, Laura, we don't comment on the ups and downs on the stock market specifically. But as a general matter, I would say that the statistic you're citing seems to undercut the criticism from some of the President's political opponents who have raised significant questions about the President's handling of the economy in some ways. That's one of many statistics that would lend some perspective on how far this economy has come and the role that the President has had to play in that.

Q You have new jobs numbers this morning. What's your message for those people who aren't yet feeling any of this -- the jobs, the stock market?

MR. EARNEST: We did see a solid jobs report today, and that is an encouraging sign about the economy. As you know, we don't get too excited about one month's jobs numbers beating expectations, and we don't get too disappointed if there's one month of jobs numbers that fails to meet expectations. What we are examining, however, are the longer trends that are at work here. And today's jobs numbers are a continuation of a trend that is encouraging. Over the last six months we've seen 1.3 million private sector jobs created. That is a positive trend.

But as you know, Michael, we're digging out of a very deep hole. This is something the President talks about a lot. And so this isn't good enough. There's a lot more work that remains to be done. That's one of the reasons the President is talking today about his proposal to create manufacturing -- these advanced manufacturing hubs, because there is an important role for advanced manufacturing to play in strengthening our economy over the long term.

There are a range of other proposals that the President offered -- last fall, the American Jobs Act, that Congress has not yet acted on. And so we want Congress to do more to strengthen our economy, create jobs, and support the private sector as they lead our economic recovery.

Q Josh, why did it take the President a couple of days to call Putin to congratulate him?

MR. EARNEST: It's my understanding that there -- that it took him a little while to -- that it took a little while to schedule the call. But I don't have any of the details on that. Like I said, we'll have a readout of the call shortly.

Q Did you call the call congratulatory, or did you just say he called him?

MR. EARNEST: I just said he called him.

Q On Tuesday, the President said he was going to put forward another framework on immigration reform. Is that something that you expect to happen before the election this year? And will it be different in any way from what came out in 2010?

MR. EARNEST: I don't actually have an update for you in terms of our legislative agenda as it relates to efforts to pass immigration reform. This is something that has been a priority of the President's since he first took office, and it continues to be. We've obviously been disappointed that some Republicans who have previously articulated their support for immigration reform have backed away from that.

That has been a source of -- you heard the President talk about that at the news conference actually, this idea that at one point Republicans believed it was something that Democrats and Republicans should work together on. But now we're hearing a different tune from not just Republicans in Congress but some of the Republican candidates, in fact, too. And that's something that the President finds pretty disappointing.

Now that we're on the ground we'll try and keep you updated over the course of the day, and we'll try to expedite the Putin readout as well.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, guys.

END

11:36 A.M. EST