

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 7/7/2015

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. I do not actually have any statements to make at the top, so we can go straight to your questions.

Josh, do you want to get us started?

Q Sure. Thanks, Josh. Some foreign policy questions for you. With the Iran talks being extended yet again, what is the U.S. hope that it can accomplish in an additional few days that you were not able to accomplish over the past year or more, and many other extensions to this process?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, I think the first thing that we have been clear about is that the President will not accept any sort of an agreement that falls short of the political commitments that were made back in April. And as Secretary Kerry himself said, back on Sunday, we have never been closer to reaching a final agreement than we are now, but there continue to be some significant differences that remain. And this is a view not just of the United States, but this is the view of all of our P5+1 partners as well.

So that's an indication that these talks, at least for now, are worth continuing. And that is what's driving this decision-making process.

And so we're focused on the quality of a potential deal. We're focused on the usefulness of continuing to talk. And we want to be sure that the Joint Plan of Action remains in place.

The Joint Plan of Action, you'll recall, is something that's been in place for over a year now. It is an agreement that essentially opened the door to these broader talks. And what it did was it froze Iran's nuclear program in place; it rolled it back in some key aspects.

There was a lot of skepticism from some Republicans about whether or not entering into that Joint Plan of Action was actually a good idea in the first place. Now we actually hear even a lot of Republicans saying things like, well, why don't we just let the Joint Plan of Action remain in place.

So what we have said is that we want to make sure that we keep the Joint Plan of Action in place, continue to freeze Iran's nuclear program, continue to keep it rolled back in some key areas, while we negotiate an agreement that we believe is consistent with our best interest. And what our best interest is is shutting down every pathway that Iran has to a nuclear weapon, and ensuring that Iran will cooperate with the most intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country's nuclear program.

Q Considering the deep levels of resistance to this deal that exist in Congress, how concerned are you that by extending these talks you're essentially guaranteeing that the congressional review time will double to 60 days instead of 30 days?

MR. EARNEST: Well, a couple of things about this. I think the first thing that comes to mind is, just because we may be in a period where this agreement is subject to a 60-day review by Congress, that actually reflects the more than 30-day August recess that Congress will take. So the 60-day review period may require additional delay, but it doesn't necessarily ensure additional scrutiny. It's not as if Congress is going to spend the entire 60 days studying the agreement.

Q But they could spend those 30 days in their districts railing against it, or hearing from constituents who may be very concerned about the deal.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, there's certainly the possibility of that. But again, we're not concerned -- well, so the second thing I would say is this: We'd welcome additional scrutiny of the deal. If we're able to reach one, it's going to be one that we are confident is clearly in our best interest, clearly shuts down every pathway that Iran has to a nuclear weapon. And we would welcome that kind of scrutiny and careful consideration of the agreement. But again, that will require us to actually reach a final agreement, and the Iranians so far have not yet been able to sign on the dotted line on a final agreement that reflects the broad parameters that were established back in April.

Q Turning to Afghanistan, the Afghan government, as you know, has launched direct talks with the Taliban in Pakistan -- these being the first direct talks that they've had. What does the U.S. see as the significance of those talks? And does this increase your optimism for a breakthrough in that peace process?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by saying that the United States welcomes talks between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban. This is an important step in advancing prospects for a credible peace. The United States commends the government of Afghanistan's prioritization of peace and reconciliation efforts with the Taliban. And we both acknowledge and appreciate Pakistan's important efforts to host these conversations.

Josh, we've talked quite a bit about how the United States has been encouraging Afghans to participate in an Afghan-led process that would bring about a political reconciliation in Afghanistan and a de-escalation, if not an end, to the violence that has wracked that country for more than a decade now.

So that's a process that we're going to continue to be supportive of, but ultimately it's a process that must be led by the Afghan people and the Afghan government, of course.

Q And lastly, on Greece -- it looks like the Greeks have shown up at this new talks with Eurozone leaders without any new concrete proposal for dealing with this crisis. And I know that the President spoke earlier this morning with Prime Minister Tsipras. Could you give us some details on what those two leaders spoke about?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, the President actually began his day by having a conversation with Chancellor Merkel. And then after concluding that telephone call, he had a conversation with Prime Minister Tsipras of Greece.

The conversations reflected the view that I articulated yesterday, which is that all parties continue to acknowledge that it's in their collective and mutual interest for Greece to remain part of the Eurozone. But the only way that we'll succeed in achieving that goal is for all of the parties to agree to a package of reforms and financing that puts Greece back on a path toward economic growth and debt sustainability.

That is the solution here. And I don't mean to suggest that because it's easy to articulate the solution, that it's easy to agree to a solution. In fact, this is quite complicated. But we continue to take heart in the fact that everyone who's sitting around that table acknowledges that it's in their collective interest for this to be resolved in that way. And so we're going to continue to encourage all sides to participate constructively in those conversations. And obviously the fact that they're meeting right now as we speak is good because it's necessary for an agreement to be reached.

Julia.

Q Just earlier today, Secretary of Defense Carter was on the Hill before the Senate, and he said that the U.S. has actually only trained 60 Syrian fighters, which is far below expectations. Was the President made aware of that yesterday when he went to the Pentagon? And what did he mean when he said that the U.S. would be increasing its support for the moderate opposition in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Julia, the President is regularly updated on our anti-ISIL efforts. This is a strategy that encompasses a large number of elements, including building up the capacity of local fighters -- security forces -- inside of Iraq, but also building almost essentially from the ground up a trained, equipped moderate Syrian opposition.

And we have long acknowledged that that would be a more challenging, difficult, longer-term task. And that is something that is still ongoing, so the President has been regularly updated on this. And what the United States and our coalition partners are looking to do is to try to accelerate that training process. And that includes more resources; that means stepping up our recruiting efforts. And that's what the President was referring to when he made reference to the fact that we want to do more to build the capacity of opposition fighters in Syria.

I would also point out that we have seen some local fighters in Syria with whom our coalition is able to coordinate. And these are opposition fighters in northeast Syria that have made important progress against ISIL both not just driving them out of Kobani, but actually driving them out of pretty broad areas of northern and northeastern Syria.

And they have been backed by coalition military airstrikes. That has also improved their performance on the battlefield. And there were -- as was noted pretty broadly, there were additional airstrikes that were taken over the weekend just outside of Raqqa, with an aim toward trying to further the advantage that those fighters currently have against ISIL forces on the battlefield in northern Syria.

Q On Friday, I know that the White House will again have a chance to go before the Fifth Circuit in oral arguments to defend the immigration executive action. This is the same court that earlier denied a stay, and now they're trying to get an appeal granted. Is there any change in strategy going forward, considering this is a very conservative court that already denied a stay? And are there any talks going on at the White House of alternatives to the executive action to help immigrants, should this be delayed further?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the state ruling from the court was predicated on procedural grounds. This will be an argument before the Fifth Circuit on Friday that's based on the merits of the case. And the administration continues to have a lot of confidence in the power of those legal arguments.

And this is, I would acknowledge, a court that has not shown itself to be one that is easily persuaded by the arguments that we've previously made, but that does not diminish our confidence and the power of those arguments. And we are looking forward to a fair hearing before the judges who sit on that panel. And we've got confidence in the Department of Justice to represent the interest of the administration.

I think the other thing that's important for people to not lose sight of is that we don't just believe in the legal power of these arguments, we actually believe in the importance of these policies being implemented both for the positive economic impact it could have on the country because of the positive impact this could have on public safety and communities all across the country, but also in ensuring we have a set of immigration enforcement rules that reflect the values that we hold dear in this country.

So this is a high priority. The President has obviously spent a lot of time talking about this. And we're confident that we'll have an opportunity to have our arguments be heard in open court. And we're confident that we'll have judges who will listen to those arguments with an open mind.

Jim.

Q Josh, I wanted to ask you about the President's comments yesterday at the Pentagon that he doesn't want the U.S. to play a game of whack-a-mole with ISIS and terrorists. Isn't that what the U.S. is doing -- playing whack-a-mole? You bomb them here, you bomb them there? They pop up, you bomb them. Isn't that whack-a-mole?

MR. EARNEST: Well, maybe you spent more time on the beach recently playing carnival games than I have. (Laughter.)

Q That's my memory of whack-a-mole.

MR. EARNEST: Apparently it's a very vivid memory of whack-a-mole. (Laughter.)

Q It was.

MR. EARNEST: Here's what I'd say about that. I think what the President was illustrating is the importance of ensuring that we have local forces on the ground that can counter extremists in their own country. The whack-a-mole game that the President was referring to is that the United States military can't be in a position of putting boots on the ground to respond to extremists in every hotspot around the world.

What we need to do and what is the critical part of this anti-ISIL strategy is to build up the capacity of local fighters who can provide for the security of their own country. Yes, that does mean that military airstrikes can be taken in support of those operations that are being carried out by local fighters, but ultimately we want local fighters to clear ISIL out but also have a strategy for essentially retaking these communities that have been previously held by ISIL, and making sure that we can reestablish local government structures, we can reestablish a police force, and keep the peace in these communities and prevent ISIL from returning.

But ultimately, that's a responsibility that cannot be borne by the United States or some other foreign government; it's a responsibility that must be borne by local officials and by the central government in Iraq, and eventually in Syria. But that's what the President is referring to. And so that's why you have seen the strategy place so much emphasis on building up the capacity of local fighters both in Iraq and in Syria.

Q And on the Iran deal, you sounded open to the possibility of a 60-day review period. It sounds like you're almost embracing that as a distinct possibility now. But that does raise the prospect that this is going to drag out for days, potentially weeks. Does that postpone -- does that prospect postpone some hopes that the White House might have for dealing with other headaches in the Middle East? And I guess the question I'm getting at is, does this deal with Iran -- if you can clinch it -- does it open up possibilities in other areas if you can get Iran to agree to this deal, to constrain its nuclear program? Perhaps you can agree on ways to deal with the situation in Yemen, to deal with Assad in Syria. Does it open up other possibilities for your Middle East strategy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, to take your first question, Jim, and I think to put it bluntly, we don't have the luxury of postponing the kinds of problems that we currently see in the Middle East. And that's why you have seen the United States working closely with Israel to ensure that their safety and security is accounted for. Those consultations, despite some of the diplomatic friction that was on display earlier this year, those are consultations and cooperation that's continued, and it continues to this day.

The concerns that we have about the instability in Yemen, the continuing ISIL-related violence in areas like Iraq and in Syria, are the subject of extensive conversations that the President hosted at Camp David with our GCC partners back in May -- that's an indication that we continue to be very focused on these broader regional challenges.

As it relates to the Iran talks, though, you'll recall that from the very beginning of the conversations with Iran, we've indicated significant concern about the destabilizing impact that Iran getting a nuclear weapon would have on the Middle East. And, in fact, that's one of the reasons that we entered into these negotiations was to try to prevent that destabilizing event from occurring. And that's been part of the conversations we've been having with the Israelis, that's been part of the conversations that we've been having with our GCC partners. It's also been part of the conversations that we've been having with our P5+1 partners in Vienna.

And I would just reiterate that that's also why we've been clear that we're only going to accept a good deal that reflects the parameters of the political agreement that was reached back in Lausanne. That's the kind of an agreement that shuts down every pathway that Iran has to a nuclear weapon. It's the kind of agreement that ensures that Iran would cooperate with the most intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country's nuclear program. And so we're very mindful of these broader regional challenges, even as focus on this very significant one.

Q And just a political question. What does the White House make of these really large crowds that are showing up for Senator Sanders in a variety of states? It's not just in areas where you might suspect a large liberal crowd to show up for a progressive candidate. Is he tapping into something that perhaps Hillary Clinton should be paying attention to?

MR. EARNEST: Well, each of you have news organizations that have the benefit of having reporters on the ground that can talk to people at these events and ask them why they're showing up. I think --

Q Barack Obama used to draw some large crowds, as I recall, back in 2008, and that was a problem at that time.

MR. EARNEST: Even in 2007. (Laughter.)

Q Not a problem for you, I guess.

MR. EARNEST: So that was an opportunity to -- again, this is based more on my personal experience as opposed to viewing it from afar.

I think the thing that I would note is that even from afar it's clear that there is a lot of energy on the Democratic side of the aisle. And I think that is a good thing. It certainly is good for the Democratic Party, and I think it also happens to be good for the country. And so that's a good sign.

What impact that has on the candidacy of one candidate or another is something I'll leave to all of you. But obviously seeing a lot of Democratic-leaning voters charged up and excited about politics and participating in a political event is something that we're pleased to see.

Margaret.

Q Thank you. There's been a pretty horrific attack in Kenya that al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for. And I'm wondering, I guess on the most basic level, whether this in any way is going to affect President Obama's plans to travel there, but also whether he's been in touch with the Kenyan government, whether he has a personal message about going after extremist groups that he's going to be delivering.

MR. EARNEST: Margaret, I don't know of any presidential calls on this particular incident to report to you. I can tell you that the United States is very mindful of the broader extremist threat that is confronting some countries in Africa right now. We've talked quite a bit -- and the President, I'm sure, will be talking about this issue with President Buhari of Nigeria when he arrives at the White House for a visit later this month. This counterterrorism cooperation will be high on the agenda. And I'm confident that these security questions will be on the agenda when the President meets -- when the President travels to Africa and when the President has the opportunity to meet with leaders of African countries over the course of the trip.

Q So that trip will continue to as planned?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. No changes to the schedule at this point.

Q On Iran, I guess I wanted to ask a two-parter. Can you talk to us a little bit about the White House effort? Like, what happens after -- assuming a deal is announced -- what happens after a deal is announced? We've talked a little bit about the 60-day scenario and whether that matters. But do you think that if a deal is announced, you're done? Or do you think that now will kick off sort of a new wave? And if it's true that you have real stuff on Iraq and Yemen and stuff that you want to do after, why would that be linked to any deal with Iran? Why does that matter?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me try to answer your question this way. We are confident that once we have an agreement, if we're able to reach an agreement, it will only be one that reflects the parameters that we've already established. And generally speaking, that is shutting off every pathway they have to a nuclear weapon and getting Iran's cooperation with the most intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country's nuclear program.

If we're able to reach an agreement like that, yes, I'm confident that we'll spend some time talking about it publicly to make sure that people understand exactly what's included in the agreement. We certainly are going to be engaged in an effort to communicate with countries throughout the region and around the world about what exactly has been agreed

to. And we're obviously going to want to work closely with the United Nations, work closely with the IAEA to implement the agreement. That will require some effort and some time and attention, as well. And that will be part of this effort moving forward.

We've been just as candid, Margaret, about the fact that this will not resolve all of the concerns that we have with Iran, with their behavior and with our relationship with them. The fact is, Iran continues to unjustly detain American citizens in their country. That is a source of significant irritation in the relationship by the United States and Iran. Iran continues to menace our closest ally in the region, Israel. That is a source of significant concern here in the United States. I know it's a source of significant concern by President Obama -- of President Obama. Iran continues to engage in destabilizing activity throughout the Middle East. The most prominent example of that is in Yemen, where we see a terrible humanitarian situation, and we continue to see Houthi rebels carrying out acts of violence and other destabilizing activities with the support of Iran.

Q So that's why I'm asking -- why would it actually make any difference? I mean, if -- I think there's people who are like, what's your strategy on -- whatever, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. And if the answer is, well, let's take care of the Iraq thing first, and then that will help us to better address with a strategic solution, why -- what's the link? If Iran is not going to be an ally or a trusted partner, and this deal is just kind of a deal that doesn't solve all the world's problems, why would it make any difference?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at the risk of oversimplifying it, for all of these bad things that Iran does, Iran would be even more dangerous if they are armed with a nuclear weapon. If Iran is making anti-Semitic threats against Israel, that's something that we are very unhappy about, but it would be much more dangerous if they had a nuclear weapon that was aimed at Israel.

The other concern that we have with Iran's behavior is we know that they continue to support terror activities around the globe. Their support for terrorists is even more dangerous if they have the capability to build a nuclear weapon. God forbid they would be able to transfer some of that nuclear technology into the hands of a terrorist.

So I recognize that sometimes, when put through a political lens, the "it would be a whole lot worse" outcome is one that sometimes is not viewed as having a lot of weight, but the fact remains that a nuclear-armed Iran would be even more dangerous than the dangerous Iran that we now confront.

Q But you're not making the case that reaching a limited deal with Iran on this will make it much easier to execute a broader hotspot strategy; you're just saying, forget about that, this is worthy of doing in and of itself?

MR. EARNEST: This is worthy of doing in and of itself, principally for that reason -- it makes Iran less dangerous. It also, and we've acknowledged this too, as destabilizing as Iran already in the region, if Iran were able to obtain a nuclear weapon, it would even make the situation in the Middle East more volatile. And I say that because if Iran were able to obtain a nuclear weapon, it certainly is plausible that other countries in the Middle

East, including those countries with whom we have a much stronger relationship, that they might decide that it's in their interest to obtain a nuclear weapon. And seeing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East is not something that anybody -- is not something that countries like the United States and France and Germany and other members of the P5+1 at all want to contemplate. So that is why we're pursuing this.

There has been some speculation that the successful completion of an agreement could pave the way to better relations between the United States and Iran. If that's the case, we'd obviously welcome that kind of outcome, but that's not the reason we're doing the agreement. We're doing an agreement and we're pursuing this diplomatic channel in order to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, full stop.

Major.

Q Now that there's been the referendum in Greece, the President has talked to all the principals -- Hollande, Merkel, Tsipras -- can you tell us philosophically where the administration comes down on what is a central question: Does Greece need more austerity or less? The people there voted for less austerity, arguing they've gone through several rounds of it, they have done the things that the European Union has asked of them, and they haven't worked. And the solution is not only debt relief, but something different than what has been applied to now. The European Union believes more austerity is the solution. Where does the administration come down? And has it rendered a judgment, and will it use any of its good offices to move this in one direction or another?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Major, I think unfortunately that it's not simply a question of, well, if they just had a little less austerity that we'd be able to find a solution here, or if there was just a little bit more austerity added to the mix here, that it would lead to an agreement. I think essentially what we're going to need is we're going to need both --

Q But you said today and before: economic growth and debt stability -- those are goals. How does this administration believe it is most reasonable and equitable and economically viable to achieve that? More austerity or less?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what it will require is it's going to require all sides to determine what the best mix of those things is going to be. And what is clear --

Q Does the President have an opinion on it?

MR. EARNEST: He does, and his opinion is simply this -- that austerity alone is not going to lead to a solution, and relaxing all of the -- allowing Greece to walk back all of the commitments that they previously made in exchange for financial assistance is also not going to be an option. I'm not suggesting that that's an argument that anybody is making, I'm just suggesting that it's going to require a mix. And that mix, that combination, is something that all of the parties are going to have to work out.

Q What did the President mean yesterday when he said, in his conversations with those in the region, there is a glimmer of hope that there could be a political solution to remove Assad from power in Syria? What does that mean?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what it --

Q Does he envision a timetable or a method? And secondarily, what comes next?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what the President is suggesting is that it has become clearer with each day that President Assad has lost legitimacy to lead that country.

Q To whom? Other than --

MR. EARNEST: I think to the world. I think it is clear to the world that he has lost that legitimacy; that he clearly no longer has the support of the vast majority of the people of Syria. He clearly has lost control of the security situation of almost the entire country.

And it's clear that what he's doing to try to hang on is to carry out terrible acts of violence against innocent civilians. And I do think that that has led more and more people to arrive at the conclusion that, frankly, we arrived at quite some time ago, which is that it's time for President Assad to go and for the central government in Syria to lead that country in a way that's consistent with the will and ambition of the Syrian people.

Q Does that mean that those who the President has talked to and spoke for yesterday are prepared to take actions to make this happen, or is this just a kind of theory they've landed on but they'll sit on the sidelines and wait for whatever happens?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that there is -- it's fair to say that there have been conversations about the need for a political transition in Syria and there are all sorts of ideas about how to effect that transition.

Q With leaders in the region.

MR. EARNEST: Well, not just with leaders in the region, but with others who are concerned about the instability in that country. So this is -- and I think the point the President is making is that this is something that we have supported for a long time, and I think it's becoming clear that we're seeing other countries come around to this point of view as well.

Q Lastly, on Iran. Over the weekend, there were several think-tanks that took stock of where they believe the negotiations are, and there were some criticisms of the way the administration is selling or going into a PR overdrive about the imperative to have a deal. And some even characterized the administration as acting as if it were Iran's lawyer when questions were raised about whether they've complied with the JPOA; whether in technical ways or in statistical ways they've lived up to the argument. I want you to address that head-on. Does this administration feel compelled, in pursuit of a deal, to not just represent its interests but argue on behalf of Iran's as if it were its own lawyer?

MR. EARNEST: Not at all. Let me start by saying I'm confident that Iran doesn't feel that way. And I think that's apparent from the public comments that they've uttered over the last year and a half or so in complaining about the way that we have described the kinds of agreements that have been reached between Iran and our P5+1 partners. In fact, I think the President has been very focused on details, and I think to that extent, the administration has taken a lawyerly approach to these negotiations and making sure that every "I" is dotted, that every "T" is crossed, and if there is one phrase that isn't consistent with the parameters of the agreement that was reached back in April, that we're going to raise significant concerns about that. And the President has been clear that if the final agreement doesn't reflect the broad commitments that were made back in April, then we're not going to have an agreement.

And at the same time, what we're also insisting on in this agreement are snapback provisions of sanctions. And that's an indication that the President is serious about ensuring that this agreement is enforced. And if there are -- if the IAEA does detect that there is some aspect of a final agreement, if one is reached, that Iran is not living up to, the President wants to make sure he has the tools necessary to snap sanctions back into place and to make sure that we're holding Iran accountable for every aspect of the agreement.

And so I think from that standpoint, the administration has demonstrated a lot of seriousness of purpose when it comes to reaching the kind of agreement that reflects our prior commitments and the prior commitments that Iran has made, and a seriousness about ensuring that in the agreement that's reached is one that's vigorously enforced.

Q So you're more the prosecutor than the --

MR. EARNEST: (Laughter.) Maybe that's a better way to say it.

April.

Q Josh, two subjects. What's the White House thinking about what's happening in South Carolina when it comes to the Confederate flag today? It made it out in the state senate and it's now in the house. What are the thoughts?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously the vote from the South Carolina State Senate is consistent with the views that the President himself has expressed but, frankly, consistent with the views that Governor Haley and others who have commented on this have articulated. And so obviously we welcome that vote from the state senate and acknowledge that before action can be taken, the state house is going to have to weigh in as well. So it's fair to say that we're aware of that ongoing political process, but I think it's also fair to say that the entire country is aware of that ongoing political process. And the country is watching.

Q And on that point, about two weeks ago I talked to Reince Priebus, the head of the RNC, and he said this country is more united than it is divided. What do you say to the state about that when it comes to the Confederate flag?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that we have in the last several weeks seen comments that many people have found surprising; that some people who have previously been supportive of that symbol have reconsidered that point of view and I think for good reason. But, again, ultimately there's a political process that needs to play out in South Carolina and we certainly want to be respectful of that process but we obviously welcome - the President spoke warmly of the comments of Governor Haley on this previously, and we obviously welcome the vote from the state senate in South Carolina today.

Q Now, also on another subject, yesterday President Obama made some statements at the Pentagon on Nigeria and Afghanistan, but I want to focus in kind of on Nigeria and terrorism. Housewoman Frederica Wilson, out of Florida, said that there is a marriage between ISIS and Boko Haram that is a marriage made from hell. Could you talk about the efforts that this White House and this government is doing to try to break up Boko Haram and all the other terrorist groups that are in Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, as it relates to ISIS? Because we see the issue with the missing girls and there's a thought that maybe if you still are looking for the missing girls out of Nigeria, you could find them and then you could also deal with Boko Haram and finding them and breaking up that cell.

MR. EARNEST: April, we're mindful, first, of the fact that there are some extremist organizations around the globe that have sought a propaganda victory of one sort or another by claiming that their efforts were coordinated or aligned with the broader ISIL efforts. And our intelligence community and our other national security professionals are still evaluating the nature of the relationship between some of those extremist elements in Nigeria and ISIL.

But as I mentioned in response to an earlier question, the President -- I would anticipate that the President will have a conversation about our ongoing security cooperation efforts with President Buhari when he visits the White House later this month. We certainly welcome the promises that President Buhari has made to reform the military and to follow through on the strategy to defeat Boko Haram. The United States obviously can provide important counterterrorism assistance to the Nigerian authorities as well as their regional partners, and we can assist them as they develop a comprehensive approach to combat the variety of threats that Boko Haram poses.

But again, we're mindful of the security situation in Africa, and it's one that the President will spend some time talking about on his trip.

Q And lastly, the Congresswoman makes a very interesting point. She kind of linked to what President Obama said about Internet access and things of that nature, and how they are going after -- how ISIS is going after people on the Internet, and something that you said yesterday, Twitter and social media. She's concerned with the summer months and how the kids don't have jobs and things to do, particularly in the summer months when unemployment for teens are at the highest level. She's concerned about the possibilities of ISIS attracting young Americans through social media. Is there that same kind of concern here at the White House? Do you agree with what she's feeling?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, I don't know what sort of impact the seasonal conditions may have on this threat, but we certainly are aware of the a strategy that ISIL has employed to use social media to target vulnerable populations, including in the United States but also around the world, to try to radicalize some individuals. In some cases, it means trying to recruit them to join the fight in Iraq and in Syria. In other cases, it means radicalizing them and trying to inspire them to carry out violent acts of terror in their home countries, including in the United States.

And this is a threat that our national security professionals are very mindful of. There have been a number of announcements from the Department of Justice and from the FBI who have made some arrests to try to prevent that kind of activity. And there was an extensive discussion at the Countering Violent Extremism Summit that was convened here at the White House earlier this year about efforts that we can take in cyberspace, online to try to counter the messaging from extremists, including from the extremists that are backed by ISIL.

And what is clear is that the most persuasive, the most authentic messaging efforts will be efforts that don't originate in the government, but that actually originate from prominent members of the community, and them speaking out in opposition to some of the hateful ideology that's propagated on -- through social media by ISIL.

Q The synopsis of my question, so I can get a little bit more of an answer, a targeted answer -- is there a concern for youth with social media and ISIS attracting them right now in this country? Is there a concern?

MR. EARNEST: That's a concern that we discussed at the Countering Violent Extremism Summit that was held back in February. So the point is, yes, this is a concern, and a concern that we have spent quite an extensive amount of time and resources trying to confront.

Julie.

Q Thanks. Just first off, I wanted to clarify, on the meeting with Mr. Trong from Vietnam, did the President actually accept an invitation to visit Vietnam? And what does he see as the significance of that visit?

MR. EARNEST: I'll have to get back to you on that. I didn't get a full readout of the meeting that was just concluding when I walked out here.

Q Could you --

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q That would be great. And then on Iran, what is the President doing and what's the White House doing, if anything, to lay the ground work with Congress, recognizing that if you are able to get a deal, you will have either a 30- or a 60-day review period, depending

on when you get it? And there are obviously still a lot of questions among members of Congress about the validity of a deal at all; in particular, the specifics of the framework that was arrived at previously. So what's he doing, if anything, right now?

MR. EARNEST: The administration continues to keep members of Congress apprised of the ongoing talks in Vienna. And that has included phone calls from members of the negotiating team back to members of Congress here in the United States. It also has included extensive conversations from White House officials, or officials from the State Department or the Department of Defense with members and staff on Capitol Hill.

You may have noticed on the President's schedule that he's going to meet with a large number of Democratic senators here at the White House this evening. I wouldn't be surprised if the status of the ongoing Iran negotiations is something that comes up in the context of that meeting.

So this is something that members of Congress -- many members of Congress are paying close attention to. And the administration is doing the best we can to try to be responsive to that interest and help them understand exactly where things stand. But there's no doubt that those conversations will be more extensive and more robust once there's actually a final agreement to discuss.

Q And how is the President himself staying abreast of the latest on the negotiations as they enter this sort of critical phase? Is he in the Situation Room a lot? Is he on the phone with Kerry every day, multiple times a day? Can you give us a sense of kind of what he's doing while he's waiting to hear whether there's been a breakthrough or not?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know of the -- I can't give you the date for the last conversation that the President had with Secretary Kerry, but I know that the President is being updated more than once a day by his national security team about the ongoing negotiations. In some cases, that is a briefing on the progress that's been made, and in some cases that's a discussion of the kinds of obstacles that remain to a final agreement.

But those are updates the President is regularly receiving from members of his national security team. I think it's principally National Security Advisor Susan Rice who delivers those updates, but it's not just -- it's not exclusively through the National Security Advisor.

Q And just lastly on that, what is the message that the President has conveyed to Vienna, either through Susan Rice or personally, about the importance of staying with this deadline? Or has he said instead, "take as long as you need, I want a good deal"?

MR. EARNEST: The President, as he has been in public, his private conversations are focused on making sure that any sort of final agreement reflects the commitment that he has made to shut down every pathway that Iran has to a nuclear weapon, and to ensure Iran's cooperation with the most intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country's nuclear program. And that is the only kind of final agreement that the

President will sign onto. It also happens to be the only kind of final agreement that our P5+1 partners will agree to as well. The President has made that very clear in public. He's made that very clear in the private consultations that he's had with his team.

And that means that if Iran is not willing to follow through on the commitments that they made back in April, and not willing to sign onto a final agreement that reflects those broad outlines, then the President is ready to call the team home. And these conversations will only go on as long as the President and his team perceive them to be useful because they are making progress in that direction.

And again, Secretary Kerry acknowledged that they've never been closer to a final agreement than they are now, but also acknowledged that there are still some important obstacles to a final agreement that remain in place. And the final agreement will not be completed until those obstacles are removed.

Jim.

Q Just a couple follow-ups on subjects my colleagues have raised. First of all, on what's going on in the district court involving immigration. Conceding that you're confident in your arguments, the venue, however, is troublesome. Is the White House -- does the White House have a backup plan other than just having this go through the courts, which could take a considerable amount of time and while some people are in jeopardy and are at risk of being deported?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, it's important for people to understand that the President rolled out a series of executive actions to reform our broken immigration system back in November. He did this after it became clear that Republican leaders in the United States House of Representatives were not willing to allow a vote on a bipartisan agreement that had already been reached in the Senate that we knew already had bipartisan majority support in the House, but because of the obstruction of House Republicans was not voted on and could not be enacted.

So the President vowed -- or followed through on his vow to do everything within his power to try to bring more accountability to our broken immigration system. There were some parts of that exercise of executive authority that were challenged in the courts. And that's the subject of some ongoing discussion in the Fifth Circuit -- or will be the subject of arguments before the Fifth Circuit on Friday.

Some of the announcements that the President made back in November are moving forward and are being implemented. But those elements that have been subject to a court challenge are steps that the President has taken that he and his team believe are consistent with the proper and appropriate use of executive authority consistent with the way that a handful of Presidents in both Democratic and Republican parties have previously used executive authority in the area of immigration.

So we continue to be confident in the legal precedent and in the legal arguments. But our lawyers will have an opportunity to make the strongest case possible before the Fifth Circuit on Friday.

Q But does the President believe he's done all he can do about these issues as the court holds it up? Or does he have other options?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I will say that the President does believe that he took significant and important action back in November. But the President has also been just as direct with his team that they need to continue to be pushing to look for ways that we can bring some badly needed accountability to our broken immigration system and to make sure that we have an immigration system that reflects the unique economic challenges that are facing this country, but also making sure that we have enforcement mechanisms that are consistent with the values of this country.

Q And just a housekeeping question on Iran. Does the White House expect Secretary Kerry to stay in Vienna until the conclusion of these talks, whether it's an agreement or walking away? Will Secretary Kerry himself remain there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our expectation would be that, yes, that Secretary Kerry would remain in Vienna until we have an outcome one way or another. But I guess if there is a need for him to come back prior to the conclusion of those talks, he could of course do that. But we'll have to see.

Q My main area of question is on Vietnam, if I could for a moment. Vietnam and Cuba. Is Vietnam, in fact, a model -- the way the President is treating Vietnam as a major trade partner involved in this TPP -- is this the way that, despite its human rights problems that have been acknowledged by the White House, that it would, in fact, like to deal with Cuba itself?

MR. EARNEST: Well, clearly we would like to see a lot more progress be made on the human rights front in Vietnam; that's true in Cuba as well. I think where there tends to be some overlap in terms of the way that we view these situations is when it comes to the advocacy that we make in Vietnam for greater protection of human rights -- that what the President has concluded is that the most effective way for us to do that is to try to engage with the government of Vietnam.

And in the case of Vietnam, this is encouraging them to be part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. They are participating in the negotiations. And the fact is, we are -- if we can complete a TPP agreement, and if Vietnam signs on, they would be making specific commitments to better protect and reflect the basic rights of workers in that country.

That would be important progress. Right now, we don't just have a moral objection to the way that basic universal human rights are not protected in Vietnam; we recognize that in some instances the violation of basic human rights actually puts American businesses at a significant economic disadvantage.

So by engaging with Vietnam, by getting them to sign on to this broader agreement, we can get them to do a better job, at least, of protecting basic universal human rights, while at the same time doing that in a way that starts to level the playing field for American

businesses and American workers. This is part of the -- so I think this reflects a validation of the President's strategy that just trying to shun and isolate a country can, in some cases, not put as much pressure on them as actually engaging them.

And again, if we can complete this TPP agreement -- or the TPP agreement, then we'll see Vietnam start to take those kinds of steps. And again, this is consistent with the philosophy that we have applied in Cuba -- that for almost 60 years we tried a strategy of isolating Cuba, and we didn't see nearly as much movement on the human rights front as we would like to see. The President is ready to try a new strategy and is hopeful that, in the years ahead, we're going to see a Cuban government that will do a better job of respecting and even protecting the basic human rights of their people.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. I'm not sure if you heard before you came out about an F-16 crash with a civilian aircraft in South Carolina. Can you give us an update on that, or what you learned?

MR. EARNEST: I learned about that incident shortly before walking out here, and I know that the Department of Defense is working to learn more about that particular incident. There is a regular process that they have for investigating these kinds of incidents. So I'd refer you to the Department of Defense for the latest on this.

Q I want to ask you about comments the President made at the Pentagon when he said, "Ideologies are not defeated by guns, they're defeated with better ideas." And he said this is a "larger battle for the hearts and minds" that may be a generational battle. What did he mean by "generational"? Does he mean that we should expect, as Americans, that we'll be involved in that region, in that part of the world in a significant way for generations to come? Did he mean that what we're doing now we have to do beyond sort of on the ground with weapons and with troops, but we have to sort of do social media, we have to get involved in the way they view us, in the way they view freedom? What did he mean by that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Kevin, the point that the President was trying to make is that these are obviously some very wrenching social changes taking place in the Middle East. And the question before the President and before the American people is how are we going to confront that situation in a way that reflects the national security interest of the United States.

And it's the President's conclusion that, for example, committing a large-scale ground operation to go and, through the use of our military might, root out extremists in the dark corners of the Middle East is not consistent with our national security interest. That the better way for the United States to be involved in that effort and to protect our interests is to support central governments that share our commitment to preventing these extremist elements from gaining a foothold and from carrying out acts of violence across the region and even across the world.

That's why the United States, again, has insisted on a functioning, inclusive central government in Iraq that can unite that country and unite the security forces to eradicate that extremist element inside their country's borders. We're seeking to bring about a similar kind of political change in Syria, but that's going to take a lot longer given the political situation in that country.

But I think the point the President is making is that for us to see that kind of change in the environment, that's not something that we should expect to happen next week or even next year. But these are longer-term changes that we need to see in that region of the world, and the challenge for policymakers and for leaders of the U.S. government and the U.S. military is to determine the proper level of involvement by the United States that reflects the security interest that we actually have in that region of the world.

Q But could you see how some would say you can't reach people that behead people, that throw gay people off of buildings? They can't be reached?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, that's true. I think the point that we would make is that we want to support those elements of Iraq and in Syria -- and this is the vast majority of the population in those countries -- that have a similar opposition to the use of those kinds of violent tactics that we do in this country. Again, no one is envisioning a scenario where we turn Iraq or Syria into a Jeffersonian democracy. But we can secure the -- use the assistance of the United States to support the central government of Iraq, in this instance, of trying to secure that country so that those kinds of radical extremist elements aren't able to establish a safe haven inside of Iraq and carry out those extreme acts of violence that you just described.

Q Last one. Yesterday, we heard Defense Secretary Carter say there are 60 Syrian volunteers currently in training. The idea was to get as many as 5,400 per year.

Previously, we heard General Dempsey say that it would take probably around 18,000 Syrians to really make an impact against ISIS. And I'm curious, given the paltry number, would the White House describe that number of 60 as embarrassing? Is there a level of frustration that it's been so slow in getting more people trained so that they can ultimately take the fight to ISIS themselves?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I'd say, Kevin, is that clearly that number is not enough. And what we need to do is continue to accelerate that training-and-equipping program.

What's also undeniable is the importance of making sure that the individuals who go through that program are properly vetted. We want to make sure that individuals who go through that program don't have -- aren't affiliated with extremist groups, for example. We want to make sure that the right individuals are going through that training program. And setting up the program for vetting those individuals take some time.

I do think that it's common sense to conclude that once those vetting mechanisms are in place and once they demonstrate some success in choosing the right people, that that's when you can start to accelerate them. You can fit more people through that system. But

we've been mindful and pretty candid about the challenges in Syria for some time, and I think this is the latest indication of how significant those challenges actually are.

Q Progress report -- you'd give it a D? An F?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'd just say that -- I'd say what the President said, which is that clearly we're going to need -- we've got a lot of work to do in Syria.

Chris.

Q So in addition to saying publicly for the first time that there are only 60 of the moderate Syrian or rebel fighters in this training program, Ash Carter also said today that it remains an essential element of the U.S. strategy there. And I'm wondering, with that number, does it make sense -- how do you justify that as an essential element of a critical strategy? Or does it require a re-thinking of that strategy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think he was pretty clear about the fact that it's not the only element of the strategy that we have in Syria.

Q But he said it was an essential element.

MR. EARNEST: That's true. That's something I think I said earlier in this briefing, and something I've said in many other briefing as well. The reason that it's essential is the President is not going to be in a position where we commit U.S. ground troops to a large-scale combat operation inside of Syria. It's not going to happen. And the way that the ground combat is going to be waged inside of Syria is with local forces who are fighting for their own country.

And it's going to take some time for the United States and our coalition partners to vet the population in Syria, to sign up those who are, A, willing to fight, but, B, don't have ties to extremist organizations, have a history of carrying out acts of terrorism. We need to make sure that the right people are going through this program.

And it is fair to say that the United States and our coalition partners are being judicious about deciding which individuals to send into the program. But there is a possibility that we can build up some momentum. And as we refine the process for vetting these individuals, there's the potential that we could obviously increase the capacity. That's clearly what's needed.

But the reason that he described this as an essential element of our strategy is that we need local fighters who are willing to fight for their own country. And what the United States and our coalition partners can do is we can back their efforts on the battlefield with military airpower. That is something that has proved to be effective already in Syria; that there are significant areas in northern and northeastern Syria where we have made -- where rebel forces -- where local forces on the ground inside Syria have made significant progress against ISIL forces.

There was the recent report a couple of weeks ago of the border town that was taken by opposition forces that essentially shut down a main supply route of ISIL. That reflected an important strategic gain. But there's obviously a whole lot more work that needs to get done.

But I think this is an indication that the recipe that we have laid out of effective fighters on the ground backed by the effective use of coalition military airpower is one that can show some important benefits on the battlefield. But obviously, there's a whole lot more work that needs to get done.

Q So just to make sure that I'm understanding what you're saying, is it the administration's position that vetting -- either not being able to find the right kinds of people who can get through the vetting, or the slowness of the process is the main reason that these goals have fallen so far short in terms of the numbers?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's certainly an important part of it; that we're mindful of the fact that we're not willing to just -- we're not willing to take all comers and train them and equip them. We're being judicious about vetting the background and character of those individuals who go through the program.

Syria is a pretty chaotic place right now. And finding those individuals -- and particularly those individual who are willing to fight -- is a challenge. There's no denying that.

Q And just one quick question to follow up on the meeting today. You made a forceful case for engaging with Vietnam, and many human rights activists have wondered if it's possible -- if it isn't better to engage without the symbolic validation of meeting with an elected official in the Oval Office.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Chris, I think the President had the opportunity to talk about the goal of his meeting in the Oval Office earlier. But what I would say is that this is -- this was a meeting where they covered a lot of ground, both to reflect the deepened relationship between our two countries in the 20 years since normalized diplomatic relations were restored between the United States and Vietnam. But they obviously had the opportunity to discuss the TPP agreement, and they had a discussion about human rights. And that level of engagement, the President believes, is consistent with the national security interests of the United States.

Carol.

Q I just want to make sure I understand where you see things in terms of the Iran talks and the way forward. So you've said that talks will go on as long as the President considers them useful. So does that mean that you do or don't see Friday as a deadline? Or are we now in some sort of rolling deadline situation where they will continue to talk in Vienna as long as that's useful, as you said?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, at the risk of being overly blunt, there was a deadline on June 30th and there was a deadline on July 7th. And we've previously said that these deadlines were important to applying pressure to Iran to sign onto a final agreement.

And the fact is those deadlines have allowed us to make some important progress; as Secretary Kerry noted, we've never been closer to a final agreement. But the fact is that there are some obstacles that continue to remain, and those obstacles remain despite the fact that we've gone past a couple of deadlines now.

So what we're focused on right now is making sure that we have the Joint Plan of Action in place, that that continues to be in place. It freezes Iran's nuclear program and even rolls it back in some key aspects. And we're focused on having productive conversations. And if those conversations continue to be productive, we'll have them until we're able to reach an agreement. If we're not able to reach an agreement, then Secretary Kerry and Secretary Moniz and the rest of the negotiating team will come back home.

Q Okay. So you're -- obviously the deadline pressure that you're trying to put on Iran has not been working, which -- as you just acknowledged. But what you seem to be introducing today is a third option, meaning -- you've always talked about there's either an agreement or we'll walk away. But in elevating the extension of the JPOA while they continue to have talks that, as long as you see them useful, seems to be introducing a third option that would allow you to continue talks for an unforeseen amount of time over the coming weeks, days, months, while keeping this in place. Is that where you see this headed?

MR. EARNEST: No, I don't think that's necessarily where I see it headed now. Let me start, though, by saying with -- quibbling with one notion of the question. I do think that the deadline has been useful in applying pressure to Iran because we have made progress in the conversations that they've had in the last eight days.

So I think from that standpoint, the fact that we've been able to make some progress is an indication that the strategy of using deadlines to pressure Iran has yielded some important results. We haven't gotten everything that we wanted yet. And what we want to make sure of is that we continue to put in place, or keep in place, an agreement that freezes Iran's nuclear program, rolls it back in some key areas, while we continue to have these conversations.

I'll point out that this is actually a strategy that has been recommended by even some Republican members of Congress. Bob Corker, back on June 22nd said, we have an interim agreement and we're much better off just keeping that interim agreement in place for a while and continuing to negotiate. Senator Graham, back in April said, "Here is what I think we should do. Continue the sanctions under the interim agreement. That worked pretty well for the world. It has controlled Iran's nuclear ambitions." So we've got some bipartisan agreement that this is an available approach that could benefit the United States and our negotiating partners in a way that continues to keep the pressure on Iran to reach a final agreement.

Q Right. What I'm asking you is that, in elevating that, as you are today with those prepared statements from Republicans and your continued focus on that, are you now seeing this as the likely outcome in terms of when the talks in Vienna conclude?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know what the likely outcome is right now. It's certainly a possibility that because of the persistent negotiations that have stretched on for a significant number of days now, it's possible we could reach a final agreement. If Iran is not able to sign onto an agreement that reflects the broader political agreement that was reached back in April, then there won't be an agreement. And the President has indicated that if they're not willing to do that, that we'll walk away from the table. But we won't walk away from the table as long as the negotiations continue to be useful. And that's something that we'll obviously have to evaluate maybe not on an hour-by-hour basis, but surely one that gets evaluated on a day-by-day basis at this point.

Pam.

Q Josh, unless I missed something, you've always said the chances for an Iran deal, getting one, were 50/50. Now that we're up to a second deadline, has that bumped up to 60/40 or 75/25, or is it still 50/50 because nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I have declined to do is to place much -- I'm not feeling like a betting man today, I guess is a way that I would say it. So we'll continue to evaluate this on a day-to-day basis, and I do think that there is no doubt that we're eight days past the deadline now and that would lead some people to logically conclude that they're a little skeptical that Iran is actually willing to live up to the commitments that they made back in April. It's a pretty tough agreement, but we believe and, more importantly, the international community alongside the United States believes that this diplomatic opening continues the best way for us to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and to verify their compliance with the agreement if one can be reached. That's what we continue to pursue and as long as the negotiations are useful, that's what Secretary Kerry and Secretary Moniz and Ambassador Sherman and others will be focused on.

Q And on Vietnam. By some accounts, Vietnam is, of the TPP countries, the farthest away in terms of human rights and labor rights. How realistic is it that if they are included in that trade deal, that they could live up to it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that the point that we would make -- and this sort of goes to Jim's question from earlier -- right now, as of today, there's very little pressure that can be applied to Vietnam and their human rights record. Obviously, we can speak out publicly and raise our concerns about it, which we have and which we do. But in the context of a TPP agreement, what we can actually do is compel Vietnam to better respect the basic rights of workers in that country, and make clear to them that there is a tangible incentive for them doing so; that they can join this powerful economic block that could enhance some economic opportunities in their country.

From the perspective of the United States, however, we view the TPP agreement as an opportunity to, first and foremost, start to level the playing field. That if Vietnam is no longer trying to so grievously oppress their workers and trample their basic human rights, that as they start to do a better job of reflecting some of those rights and protecting them,

that that's going to level the playing field. That companies can no longer seek a significant economic advantage by going to a place where the rights of workers are so frequently flouted.

We can also live up to a moral imperative. We recognize that our country has a responsibility to speak out on human rights, to make them a priority, and to make clear to other countries that they should do the same.

And in the context of the TPP agreement, we cannot just advocate for those positions but actually have some results to show for it. So time will tell whether or not they will live up to the agreement. The thing that I can tell you from right now is they will have a very clear incentive to do so, an incentive that right now doesn't exist at least on the same scale.

Q And just quickly, 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War, how does the White House view our relationship with Vietnam? Is it a change on the scale of Japan or Germany after World War II?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the relationship between the United States and Vietnam has obviously improved over the last 40 years, of course, but even over the last 20 years since our diplomatic relations were restored. But they've got quite a way to go to try to reach the level of the important alliances that the United States has with both Japan and Germany.

Casey.

Q Thanks, Josh. My question is about Donald Trump. He's come under significant fire for these controversial comments that he's made. A number of private and public entities have either dropped ties with him or said, in the case of the New York City Mayor, that they're going to reevaluate contracts.

My question is about the Old Post Office Pavilion, which was actually owned by the federal government, and the Obama administration signed the lease with Trump for 60 years for that building. I'm wondering, has the administration considered -- are they willing to reconsider opening up that lease in light of Mr. Trump's comments?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that that's an available option. But let me figure out which government agency is responsible for --

Q The GSA.

MR. EARNEST: Is it GSA?

Q Yes.

MR. EARNEST: You might check with the GSA and see if their lawyers have taken a look at this.

Q And secondly -- (laughter) -- secondly, Hillary Clinton today put out a statement pointedly referencing the Obama administration in light of Puerto Rico and their debt crisis. She called on the administration to do more. I'm wondering, I know you've said that Congress should consider the bill that would allow them to take some bankruptcy protection in some areas of their government. How urgent do you feel doing that is?

Does Congress need to do it before they leave for their August recess? And are there any other steps at this point you think should be taken in this area?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the thing that I would point out is that the statement from Secretary Clinton I do think broadly reflected the position of the administration, which is that there is no federal bailout that is available here. But there could be and is some benefit associated with Congress taking action that would allow Puerto Rico and some municipalities in Puerto Rico to use Chapter 9 of the bankruptcy code to try to reorganize their finances in a predictable way.

And we've indicated that we believe that Congress should consider something like that, and we'd be willing to work with them on it.

Q But should they do it before August?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the timing of the -- I wouldn't set a timeframe on it. The other thing I would point out -- and we can get you a more full list of this -- that there has been a working group led by the Treasury Department to work with the Puerto Rican government to make sure that we are -- that they are aware of all of the federal resources that are already available to them. And whether that is technical assistance that can be provided by the Department of Energy to try to help the public utility in Puerto Rico better manage their resources. I know that the Commerce Department was instrumental in helping Puerto Rico land an aircraft maintenance facility inside Puerto Rico that created 600 jobs or so, I believe.

So there are a number of things that the Obama administration has already done to support Puerto Rico as they're dealing with their financial challenges. But that stops well short of a federal bailout.

Isaac.

Q Can I just come back to Margaret's question about the attacks in Kenya? Is the White House concerned about possible reactions from the Kenyan government and military that could exacerbate the situation and make things worse potentially? And is any of that coming into play as you guys are thinking about leader meetings and on the President's trip to Africa?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we continue to be mindful of the need for security forces in Kenya to ensure that even as they engage in their counterterrorism efforts, that they're respecting the basic human rights of the population. And this is an admonition that we have leveled on more than one occasion to the Kenyan government.

But at the same time, the United States continues to support their counterterrorism efforts. They're obviously critical to the security of that country and to the security of the continent. But at this point, I don't envision the security situation dictating a change in the President's schedule.

Q But you're comfortable enough with the relationship that the President would sit down with President Kenyatta and have a bilateral meeting on this trip?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have an update on the President's schedule for the trip just yet, but we'll get back to you with some more details.

Q You're comfortable with the relationship between the United States and Kenya? Between President Obama and President Kenyatta?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we've certainly expressed some concerns in the past but I don't have more for you on that.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. Can you tell us a little more about what the President plans to discuss with Senate Democrats beyond the Iran issue? Are there specific issues that he wants to bring up with them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know the President certainly will spend some time talking about Iran with them. I anticipate that's a question that he'll get. The other thing the President -- there a couple of other issues, economic issues, the President is mindful of. Obviously, in the last week or so, the authorization for the Export-Import Bank expired, and Congress needs to take action to reauthorize the Ex-Im Bank. That's a priority for the President and it's a priority of some Democratic Senators and will be the subject of some discussion this afternoon.

The President will also talk about the need for congressional action when it comes to transportation investments. Obviously, there is a deadline coming up at the end of this month and we're hopeful that Congress can take action in bipartisan fashion that would reflect the need to make investments in our infrastructure in a way that would not just benefit our infrastructure but also benefit our broader economy in terms of creating jobs and stimulating economic growth.

So those are a couple of things that I'm sure will be on the agenda today.

Q Josh, can I follow up?

MR. EARNEST: Go ahead, JC, I'll give you the last one.

Q Just a quick one on the Greek crisis and Congress this afternoon. In addition to speaking with world leaders, is the President speaking with any members of Congress regarding any form of financial assistance that the United States is willing to offer Greece on its own, as well as part of the world financial organizations?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any discussions like that that are taking place in the United States. I can tell you that this may be an issue more broadly that the President does discuss with the Democratic senators when they're here. But I'm not aware of any specific financial assistance on the part of the United States that's being considered for Greece at this point.

Q But that may come up later on?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the broader issue -- sort of the current status of European efforts to resolve the situation between Greece and its creditors could come up. But I'm not aware of any specific discussion that has been had or is being planned as it relates to direct U.S. financial assistance to the Greeks.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, everybody.

END

2:14 P.M. EDT