

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 8/27/2013

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/27/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-8272013

August 27, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 27, 2013

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:02 P.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here, as ever. I have no announcements to make at the top of this briefing, so I will go straight to Julie Pace.

Q Thank you. Has the President made any decision in the last 24 hours or so on what the U.S. response to the Syrian chemical weapons attack would be?

MR. CARNEY: The President continues to work with his national security team reviewing the options available to him. And when he has made a decision and has an announcement to make he'll make it. So that process continues.

Q So he has not made a decision at this point?

MR. CARNEY: Correct.

Q And there's a lot of speculation that this intelligence report that presumably would link Assad directly to the chemical weapons attack might be released today. Can you give us an update on the timing?

MR. CARNEY: What I would say is that yesterday I made clear that the intelligence community is working on an assessment and that once we had that assessment we would provide information to the public about it in the coming days. And that remains true. I think that that's speculation that it would come today rather than some other day. But it will come and I think you can expect it this week.

Let me also say, and I think that both Secretary Kerry and I attempted to make clear yesterday that there is no doubt here that chemical weapons were used on a massive scale on August 21st outside of Damascus. There is also very little doubt, and should be no doubt for anyone who approaches this logically, that the Syrian regime is responsible for the use of chemical weapons on August 21st outside of Damascus.

We have established with a high degree of confidence that the Syria regime has used chemical weapons already in this conflict. We have made clear that it is our firm assessment that the Syrian regime has maintained control of the stockpile of chemical weapons in Syria throughout this conflict. It is also the case that the Syrian regime has the rocket capacity to deliver the chemical weapons as they were delivered with repugnant results on August 21st outside of Damascus.

So the deliberations that are taking place now and the options that are being considered by the President and his national security team are not around the question of whether or not chemical weapons were used in Syria on a significant scale, causing mass death and injury to innocent civilians -- to women and children. It is not around the question of whether or not the Syrian regime is responsible. It's around the question of what is the appropriate response to this clear violation of international norms.

Q But it's your expectation the intel report -- that it will provide some type of evidence that clearly shows, beyond sort of taking all of these pieces that we know and inferring that this must be the Assad regime -- will this be tangible evidence --

MR. CARNEY: There will be more information provided with what we can give to you in an unclassified manner to the public from the intelligence community. But this is not just an inference. This is not just the U.S. government asserting it. I think you saw the statement from the Arab League. I think you've seen multiple eyewitness accounts, video accounts. You've seen statements from independent organizations working in Syria, like Doctors Without Borders. Some of your colleagues who are risking their lives to cover this story in Syria have provided substantial confirmation of what occurred on August 21st.

So what the President is engaged in is a process of deciding, as he consults with international allies and as his administration consults with Congress, about what the appropriate response to this flagrant violation of international norms should be. And there must be a response.

Q And then finally, British Prime Minister David Cameron is recalling Parliament this week. There's going to be a motion put forward on Thursday, a vote on authorizing the British response. Is it fair to say that President Obama is not going to recall Congress to seek some type of similar measure before proceeding?

MR. CARNEY: Well, first of all, I don't want to engage in speculation about a course of action that has not been decided upon. When the President has an announcement to make, he'll make it. As this process is undertaken, we are consulting directly with House and Senate leaders in Congress. We are consulting directly with the leadership of the relevant committees as well as with other members of Congress who have a keen interest in this matter. I think you've seen that documented by some members who have spoken to it. And that process will continue. We think it's very important that the consultation process take place in a matter like this of such gravity.

We are also, as we've made clear, engaging with our international partners. There's a substantial list of communications that the Secretary of State has had. The President himself, as we've read out to you, has had consultations with Canadian Prime Minister Harper today, and in recent days with British Prime Minister Cameron, French President Hollande, and Australian Prime Minister Rudd. And I would anticipate that the President will continue to make calls to his counterparts throughout the week.

When it comes to processes -- I think which goes to your question -- I'm not going to -- it presupposes a course of action that hasn't been decided upon.

Q But that fact that Cameron is in a position to recall his Parliament, says he's going to put forward a motion on Thursday, seems to suggest that there is something that's been decided.

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me just make a broad statement. Obviously, this is a different country with a different form of government. There is --

Q I'm just talking about whether something has been decided. I mean, the fact that he's in a position to take this step on Thursday seems to indicate something has been decided.

MR. CARNEY: Well, no, nothing has been decided, as I said in response to your first question. We are in direct contact with Prime Minister Cameron and his government, and the President himself has spoken with the Prime Minister, as he has with other foreign leaders, and those consultations will continue. And we share the views of the British government about the appalling nature of the transgression that occurred in Syria, and are consulting with the British and other allies and partners about the appropriate response.

Q Jay, you were very firm in saying just now that there's little doubt that the Syrian regime was, in fact, responsible for this chemical attack. So in that context, what is the purpose of this intelligence report? Is it to legitimize -- to get rid of any remaining doubt and, therefore, legitimize a response in the eyes of the international community?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not aware of any doubt that exists. I think that maybe if you take Bashar al-Assad seriously on these matters you might have some doubt. But there's no evidence to suggest that he has any credibility when it comes to his statements about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The actions taken by his regime in response to in the immediate aftermath of this heinous attack demonstrate his lack of credibility. And we believe that a careful review of the facts leads to the conclusion that the regime was behind this.

Again, it's undeniable that chemical weapons were used on a large scale. We know that the regime maintains custody of the chemical weapons in Syria and uses the types of rockets that were used to deliver chemical weapons on August 21. The opposition does not. We also know that the opposition does not have the capabilities that the Syrian regime has. And, as I mentioned earlier, we have already had an assessment by the intelligence community with a high degree of confidence that the Syrian regime has used

on a smaller scale chemical weapons in this conflict already. So suggestions that there's any doubt about who is responsible for this are as preposterous as suggestions that the attack itself didn't occur.

Q Secretary Hagel said, I guess it was yesterday, that any actions taken would be in concert with the international community and within the framework of legal justification. Is any legal justification lacking prior to any action by the United States on this? And does the international community need any further convincing?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to make legal justifications for actions that haven't been decided upon. When the President makes a decision about what the appropriate response for the United States is, we will and he will provide ample context for the decision that he makes. But prior to that, I'm not going to speculate about what that context will be because an announcement has not been made and a decision is pending, as the President and his team review the options available to them.

Q And finally, the United States yesterday postponed with Russia talks in The Hague. Russia calls that regrettable. What is the United States trying to say or communicate to Russia about Syria -- that it should accept a military response; that it should not stand in the way or object? What are we trying to communicate to Russia?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the meeting that you mentioned has been postponed, not cancelled. We are very engaged in the process of pursuing a political resolution to this conflict. We have stated for a long time that there is no military solution available here; that the way to bring about a better future in Syria is through negotiation and a political resolution. And it is our firm belief that Bashar al-Assad has long since forsaken any legitimacy that he might have to lead, and that Syria's future must be one that is without Assad in power. But that is a process that has to take place through negotiation. And we will continue to engage in all of the many ways that we have in an effort to bring about that reconciliation -- or that process, that settlement.

But what we are focused on this week, obviously, is the response to a specific violation of international norms. And I think it's important -- I was asked about this yesterday and I think it's important to look at what we're talking about when we talk about international norms. The effort to deal with the scourge of chemical weapons has been undertaken at an international level since the mid-19th century, and in particular, since the end of World War I, when forces on both sides of that conflict engaged in the horrific use of poison gas.

The Chemical Weapons Convention has more than 150 signatories and makes clear that the use and proliferation of chemical weapons is a clear violation of international norms, and that it is absolutely in the national security interest of the United States and in the international community that the use of chemical weapons on the scale that we saw on August 21st cannot be ignored. It must be responded to.

Because to allow it to happen without a response would be to invite further use of chemical weapons and to have that international standard dissolve. And the consequences of that, given the volatility of the region and the concerns that this nation

and many others have about proliferation of chemical weapons, would be very serious indeed.

Jim.

Q I don't want to say that there are word games going on here, but you're saying that there will be -- I'm definitely not saying that.

MR. CARNEY: Sure, sure.

Q But you're saying that there will be a response, but the President has not made a decision yet. It is safe to say, though, at this point that the Syrian government will pay a price for what has happened?

MR. CARNEY: There must be a response. Secretary Kerry made that clear, at the President's instruction, yesterday. I echoed that here yesterday, and I'm echoing it again today. There must be a response. We cannot allow this kind of violation of an international norm with all the attendant grave consequences that it represents to go unanswered. What form that response will take is what the President is assessing now with his team.

Q And as the President weighs his options, does he want to take out Assad? And would his death be a welcomed outcome at this White House?

MR. CARNEY: I appreciate the question. I want to make clear that the options that we are considering are not about regime change. They are about responding to a clear violation of an international standard that prohibits the use of chemical weapons.

We are also very much engaged in an effort to support the opposition in its struggle with the Assad regime as the Assad regime continues to try to massacre its own people in an effort to maintain power. And it is our firm conviction that Syria's future cannot include Assad in power.

But this deliberation and the actions that we are contemplating are not about regime change. We believe, as I said earlier in answer to Mark's question, that resolution of this conflict has to come through political negotiation and settlement.

Q And because so much blood and treasure has been spilled and spent in both Afghanistan and Iraq, if some sort of military action will be taken -- obviously the President will be talking about that to the American people -- but how much should the American people expect, prepare themselves for, in terms of sacrifices being made by people inside the armed forces? And are there cost estimates being put together in terms of how much this is going to cost? And will it run us up against that debt ceiling sooner than expected?

MR. CARNEY: All excellent questions, most of them assuming a decision has been made, and I'm not going to sort of speculate about a decision that hasn't been made yet. So a lot of those questions we'll certainly take once the President has announced the course of

action that he's chosen, What I can tell you is the President has made clear that he does not envision a situation in Syria that would lead to U.S. boots on the ground, and that remains the case. And I've also tried to make clear that --

Q You can have boots in the air. (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: I'm trying to see that. Yes.

Q Theoretically speaking.

MR. CARNEY: Theoretically speaking. But I think the President has been clear about that, Jim. And I think that that applies generally to the Syrian conflict, but also specifically to the responses contemplated here with regards to the use of chemical weapons.

Yes, Jim.

Q So just so I'm clear, the White House has decided that there must be a response. Does that mean that there must be a military response? Or are there other things possible still on the agenda? Could it be further sanctions, or economic in any way, or is this a military response you're talking about?

MR. CARNEY: I'll say two things. First, we have made clear for a long time, notwithstanding our views about the fact that we don't envision U.S. boots on the ground in Syria, that we retain -- and the President retains all options available to him in Syria, and that includes military options. And that is the case here in response to this transgression.

But a decision about the use of military force has not been made. The President is reviewing his options -- plural. And obviously, his options are many and they include a variety of possibilities that are not limited to the use of force.

Q And one other thing I wanted to ask you about, and that is on the -- you say that the reason why the United States has come to the decision that the Syrian government was responsible for this attack was because they have the rockets to deliver it. And there's no evidence that they -- are we sure there's no evidence that they have lost any control of any stockpiles of chemical weapons? Is our intelligence that there's not been a chemical depot somewhere that's been overrun by al Qaeda forces or other rebels in that country? Do we know that?

MR. CARNEY: We have a high degree of confidence, based on our assessments, that the Syrian regime has maintained full control of its chemical weapons stockpiles throughout this conflict. It is our conviction that the Syrian regime has the rocket capability that was employed to devastating effect in this chemical weapons attack.

It is abundantly obvious to those who have covered this conflict, who were covering it last week, to the international organizations present on the ground, that the Syrian regime was engaged in an effort to clear these particular regions of opposition forces with violent

force prior to the use of chemical weapons and, in the immediate aftermath of the use of chemical weapons, prevented the U.N. inspections team from going in to establish that weapons had been used as they continued to bombard the neighborhood. And they continued to do that yesterday after the U.N. inspection team, finally, after being attacked, was able to make it to one area that they needed to visit. After they left they continued to bombard the area, which is a clear effort to try to dispose of evidence.

Q And finally, just one more if I could, and that is, if the aim here is to make sure or to punish the Syrian government for using chemical weapons and to discourage them from using them again, there are those who argue that the best way to do that is, in fact, to take out Assad and to have regime change. What is the argument against that from the White House, from those who are calling for --

MR. CARNEY: Well, as I noted earlier, the options that are being considered do not contain within them a regime change focus, and that is not what we are contemplating here. We are examining options to respond to this violation.

And as I tried to say yesterday, this is obviously a terrible conflict that has exacted a horrific price on the Syrian people and the region, and it is ongoing. And we have stepped up our support for the opposition and our humanitarian support for the Syrian people and for the countries that are dealing with the refugee crisis related to the Syrian conflict.

The use of chemical weapons on the scale that we saw is a separate and distinct fact that needs to be responded to, and it will be responded to in some form. Because the President believes, and many of our allies and partners clearly believe, and as I stated earlier and I understated the number of nations who have participated in the Chemical Weapons Convention -- it's 189 nations representing about 98 percent of the global population -- all have a stake in ensuring that that international norm is maintained and respected. And so a clear violation of it, a flagrant violation of it, that has resulted in mass death, the killing of innocent women and children, has to be responded to.

Q And I understand that, Jay. But what my question is, what is the response as to -- if the way to do this, as some say is, and prevent it from happening again is to take out the guy who's doing it, what's the reason why the White House doesn't want to do that? Why don't you want to do that?

MR. CARNEY: It is not our position -- it is not our policy position to respond to this through regime change. We will take an appropriate response, and we are evaluating -- the President and his team are evaluating the options available to them. And the President will make an assessment and an announcement in due time.

We also maintain a policy with regards to the conflict which has us providing significant support to the opposition, significant humanitarian support to the Syrian people that is designed to help bring about a transition in Syria, a political transition, that will allow Syria the future that its people deserve.

Q But I don't think you're answering why you ruled it out. The why is --

MR. CARNEY: It is not our policy to respond to this transgression to a regime change.

Yes.

Q Is it necessary for the United Nations to arbitrate this international violation?

MR. CARNEY: Obviously, the United Nations has an interest in this. They have an inspection team in. They and others have made clear that the mandate of that inspection team is to establish whether or not chemical weapons were used. That has absolutely and undeniably already been established. They are not assigned the responsibility of assigning culpability. So the work of that team is redundant, you might say, because it is clearly established already that chemical weapons have been used on a significant scale.

We are engaged in international consultations. And we have not decided upon what course of action the United States will take, and therefore it's premature to talk about the context and the means of moving forward once a decision has been made. Once we have something to announce we'll provide the context around it.

Q But it's not necessarily required, from the President's point of view, that the United Nations and the Security Council be the one to say, yes, an international violation has occurred and therefore something must be done in response?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't think there's any doubt, and I don't see anyone contradicting it -- anybody with any credibility in the world -- that chemical weapons were used on a significant scale in Syria, so the transgression is established. Beyond that, we will have more to say once a decision has been made about the response that will be taken.

Broadly speaking, I think it's important to note that it is in the clear national security interest of the United States that the use or proliferation of chemical weapons on this scale not go unanswered. The consequences of a dissolution of that norm would be profoundly not in the interest of the United States or in the international community, in particular in this highly volatile region, but also around the world.

Q You've mentioned the volatility of the region. Syria said if there is an attack, there might be a response directed at Israel. Israel has said it will respond forcefully to anything that comes its way from Syria. Among the risks, which are many, involved in this, how concerned is the President and the White House about this not becoming just a Syrian problem but a wider regional problem if, in fact, there is a military response that has a coalition of not just the United States but Britain, France and others?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I'm not going to speculate about decisions that haven't been made, and we'll have more to say when an announcement is forthcoming.

I would note that the Syrian conflict has already had profound negative conflict -- consequences to other countries in the region. I would note also that when we talk about the instability in the region and the volatility in the region that Syria borders an ally -- a NATO ally of the United States in Turkey, and a close friend and partner of the United

States in Jordan. And both of those nations have felt significant consequences as a result of this conflict and have a great deal at stake when we talk about the use and proliferation of chemical weapons.

So, again, I'm not going to go down the road of making justifications for actions that have not been decided upon. I urge you to wait until we have an announcement to make.

Q But is one of the reasons not to seek regime change and to have something that is being described as singular and responsive to chemical weapons and therefore of shorter duration and likelihood to avoid the spillover effects that might occur if there was a more sustained military campaign?

MR. CARNEY: There's all sorts of hypotheticals we could engage in about decisions that haven't been made, and they're all substantive and interesting. But I think that before we go down that road, I want to make clear that the President is engaged in a process of reviewing his options in response to the undeniable use of chemical weapons and our conviction that those weapons were used by the regime. And not just our conviction; I would point you to the statement today by the Arab League, which was very forceful, as well as by Prime Minister Cameron and others.

Ed.

Q Congresswoman Barbara Lee -- you'll remember she was the only member of Congress to vote against the war in Afghanistan after 9/11 -- she said today she agrees with you that chemical weapons were used, that it's troubling, it's unacceptable, but she said there's no military solution in Syria. And so she said, "Congress needs to have a full debate before the U.S. commits to any military force." Do you disagree?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I made clear I think, in answer to other questions, that we completely agree that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria, that there has to be a political transition. And we are engaged in a process with many countries as well as with the opposition to help bring about that transition. In the meantime, as Assad continues to brutally assault and murder his own people, we have provided assistance and stepped up assistance to the military opposition in Syria as we help the opposition itself unify.

Q But should Congress have a full debate on whether or not military force would be used?

MR. CARNEY: We are engaging in what we believe our responsibility is here, which is to consult with Congress -- that process is underway -- about what happened --

Q Authorize -- not consult, but authorize force.

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're asking me to speculate about courses of action --

Q This discussion has to happen before military force is used --

MR. CARNEY: Again, as I said -- you're talking about courses of action based on --

Q So the President is not considering military action?

MR. CARNEY: I certainly didn't say that.

Q He's considering military action, so why not have a debate in Congress about whether that's the right way?

MR. CARNEY: Congress can have the debate. The issue here is you're asking me about what Congress should do if the President makes a certain decision. And what I've made clear repeatedly, both yesterday and today, is that the President is reviewing his options with his national security team. We have never taken military force off the table and we will not now in response to this flagrant violation of international norms. And when we have an announcement to make, we'll make it. And we will provide all the necessary context about the response that we've decided upon.

Q In 2007, the Boston Globe asked candidates running for president to answer a series of written questions, and one was in the context of Iran: Does the President have the constitutional authority to bomb Iran without seeking a use of force authorization from Congress? Candidate Obama said, "The President does not have the power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation." Does the President still agree with that?

MR. CARNEY: Absolutely. But you're also trying to get me to engage in a discussion about a decision that has --

Q But it's not a hypothetical anymore.

MR. CARNEY: It is a hypothetical, Ed.

Q You have to admit the military option has been on the table for a year, a year and a half.

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q Now it's not about hypotheticals. We are maybe within days, if not hours, of the President making a decision, correct?

MR. CARNEY: It is correct that the President is working with his national security team reviewing the options available to him to respond to the clear violation of an international norm by the Syrian regime with the use of, on a significant scale, chemical weapons against innocent civilians, A.

B, as I made clear, it is clearly in the United States' national security interests that that norm be maintained because the consequences of that standard dissolving are enormous and very detrimental to the interest of the United States and very detrimental to the international community, to our allies and partners in the region, and to the world at large.

Q But you're saying that's the standard today. But I'm saying the standard in 2007 to candidate Obama was an actual or imminent threat to the nation. Do you believe that exists right now, an actual imminent threat to the United States?

MR. CARNEY: I believe that absolutely allowing the use of chemical weapons on a significant scale to take place without a response would present a significant challenge to or threat to the United States' national security interests.

Q Not just to our allies in the region, but to the United States?

MR. CARNEY: Correct.

Q Jay, I just want to be clear on the role that the U.N. investigators are playing. You said yesterday during the briefing that you do not have confidence the U.N. can conduct a credible inquiry into what happened. So does that mean that their findings won't play a role in President Obama's ultimate decision?

MR. CARNEY: The mandate of the inspection team is to establish whether or not chemical weapons were used. That's been established incontrovertibly, undeniably. I don't think anybody in this room, anybody who is covering it, any international organization that's there, or any nation that I'm aware of outside the Syrian regime has made an assertion to the contrary.

Q So does the President need to wait for them to come to their ultimate conclusion before making a decision? Will he?

MR. CARNEY: There is the issue of were chemical weapons used; that is what the United Nations inspection team is mandated to discover. Since that has been already discovered, I'm not sure that they need to fulfill their mandate. But as I say that, I want to be clear, as I was yesterday, that this country, this administration has been a strong proponent of the U.N. inspection team and having it provided all the necessary access to establish whether or not chemical weapons have been used. And of course, Assad has blocked that repeatedly.

And even in this case, where they said in the initial aftermath of the attack that they welcomed an inspection team, they then blocked -- even though the inspection team was 45 minutes way -- they blocked access for four or five -- for five days, as they bombarded the neighborhoods to try to eliminate the evidence of chemical weapons use.

So the credibility of the Assad regime here is obviously close to zero. The use of chemical weapons on a significant scale is undeniable, and so the mandate has been fulfilled in many ways.

Q So just to be clear, they could be there until Sunday. President Obama could make a decision before Sunday. Should we expect that?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to engage in hypotheticals about when decisions are going to be made, when courses of action may be engaged in. I will simply say, as Secretary Kerry did yesterday, that the violation is undeniable. It is our firm conviction that the Assad regime is responsible. Logic dictates that conclusion, as well as the hard facts. And the President is working with his national security team to evaluate the options available to him to respond, as well as consulting with international allies and consulting with members of Congress.

Q I just want to get your reaction to something that Senator John McCain said, Jay. He said, "Assad was able to use chemical weapons before and there was no response. And so why not do it again? This should surprise no one. They viewed that not as a red line, but as a green light, and they acted accordingly." What is your reaction? And is the President satisfied he's done enough to prevent --

MR. CARNEY: As I said yesterday when we established with a high degree of confidence that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons on a small scale, relatively small scale, we did respond and we stepped up our assistance to the Syrian --

Q But did you stop this apparent larger attack?

MR. CARNEY: And there will be a response to this not "apparent," but clear and undeniable large-scale attack. And that is what is under deliberation at this time.

Carol.

Q I just want to clarify -- at the beginning of the briefing you said that you had very little doubt the Assad regime was responsible for this, and you said there should be no doubt. And then you just most recently said the White House has a firm conviction that it was the Assad regime. So are you -- in the White House's view, you're 100 percent sure that the Assad regime is responsible for this?

MR. CARNEY: We see no evidence of any alternative scenario. The regime has already used chemical weapons in this conflict against its own people on a small scale. It has maintained firm control of the stockpiles of chemical weapons in Syria. It has the rockets and the rocket capability that were employed in this chemical weapons attack. And it was engaged in an assault against these neighborhoods prior to the use of chemical weapons and in the aftermath of the use of these chemical weapons. You would have to be credulous indeed to entertain an alternative scenario that could only be fanciful.

Obviously, we are working and discussing this with our international partners. We are consulting with members of Congress. And, as I mentioned earlier, the intelligence community is working on an assessment, and we will have conclusions that can be provided to the public available this week. But I think it's important to note that it is clear already that chemical weapons were used on a large scale -- undeniable -- and that the Assad regime is the only possible force that could have deployed them. And there has to be a response to that clear violation of international norms.

Q And then just one other thing, more broadly -- when the President is facing a situation like the deliberations that he's currently having about what to do in response to Syria, what does the White House think its obligations are under the War Powers Resolution?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't want to speculate about courses of action that haven't been decided upon, and that involves --

Q I understand. I mean, in general, what is the President's philosophical -- how does he view his role and the White House's role in terms of what he's obligated to do under that resolution?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we feel, generally, that it is essential to consult with leaders of Congress, and that is what we're doing in a matter like this, even as we engage in a process of evaluating the options available to us. And that's why we're doing what we're doing. And that's why we've, as I think you've seen reported, had discussions with relevant members of Congress, and leaders of committees and leaders of the Congress at large.

Q Jay, following the inevitable response, whatever it will be, what steps is the U.S. prepared to take to secure the chemical weapons stockpiles?

MR. CARNEY: The disposition of chemical weapons in Syria has long been a significant concern of the United States and our allies and partners, and it will continue to be a significant concern. We have, as I've said earlier, confidence that the Syrian regime has maintained control of the chemical weapons in Syria. They have also used the chemical weapons under their control in Syria against innocent Syrians on several occasions on a small scale, and now on August 21st on a large scale, and that's a repugnant fact.

But I can't predict anything beyond the fact that this remains a significant concern of the United States. The proliferation -- the disposition of weapons of mass destruction, the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is an obvious concern of the United States, and the President has made it a very high priority to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Q So you've excluded -- the President has -- boots on the ground in Syria. You've also outlined the concerns about the threats to the neighbors there. So short of boots on the ground, what could the U.S. do to make sure that those stockpiles are secure?

MR. CARNEY: We have made clear throughout this conflict our views about the disposition of and the potential use or proliferation of chemical weapons in Syria. That's what we're discussing now. The violation is clear, and it has to be responded to in order to establish around the world that the Chemical Weapons Convention that 98 percent of the population has signed on to has to be respected. Because the consequences of not respecting it are significant and grave, and threaten the national security of the United States as well as the international community.

So I can't predict, as this conflict continues, what course of action the regime might take with its stockpiles of chemical weapons. What I can tell you is that the use of those weapons or the proliferation of those weapons must be, in our view, responded to because

of the gravity of that transgression.

Roger.

Q Whatever decision is made and whenever it's made, will the President seek U.N. approval or some sort of backing?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I can't speculate about context here until the President has decided upon a course of action in response to this violation. There will be a response, but questions like that depend on the course of action he decides to take.

Q So you're leaving the door open for now?

MR. CARNEY: I suppose you could say that, Roger. I'm simply saying that I'm not going to speculate about a course of action that hasn't been decided upon.

Q One other thing. Does it make sense for the President to consult with G20 leaders in person next week before deciding?

MR. CARNEY: The President believes that this is a grave transgression and it merits a response. He will obviously take the time necessary to evaluate the options available to him in deciding upon what is the appropriate response by the United States in consultation with our allies and partners, in consultation with leaders in Congress. And when he has decided upon a course of action, he will obviously inform the public about it. I wouldn't put a timetable on it.

The President will be, as you know, attending the G20 Summit, but that's a fixed date and we are in the process of evaluating options in response to this transgression this week.

Q Jay, you said earlier that Assad had a strategic purpose in using these weapons -- he was trying to clear this area. Putting aside the goal of regime change, which you said is not yours right now, do we have any strategic goal at all? In developing this response, is the goal to change the dynamic on the ground, balance of power, in any way?

MR. CARNEY: It is our view that the use of chemical weapons on the scale that we have seen now on August 21st, in Syria, merits a response. And it has to be clear that there is a consequence to that clear a violation of international norms.

So the goal here is to make clear that this is unacceptable; that it is a red line that has been crossed, and it is a red line that was established by 198 nations -- 98 percent of the world's population. And to allow it to happen without a response would be to give a green light to the Assad regime and other potential users of chemical weapons that there will be no consequences to the use of chemical weapons, and that is profoundly not in the interest of the United States, our allies and partners, to the region, or the world.

Q Is that a strategic goal, or are you just trying to send a message?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure the distinction you're making. We are making -- we are evaluating options available to the United States to respond to this clear violation of an international norm.

Q Is the goal to have an impact on the conflict?

MR. CARNEY: I think I made clear yesterday that we are engaged in a long-term policy of supporting the opposition in its struggles against the brutal war being waged upon it by the Assad regime. We are not evaluating this option as a measure to -- as part of an effort to effect the --

Q This is a completely separate matter.

MR. CARNEY: It is a separate matter, in our view, because it is a transgression of an international norm. And our policy of support -- as I said multiple times today and yesterday, it is our view that the conflict, the ongoing conflict in Syria has to be resolved through a political transition. It cannot be resolved through a military resolution.

Q One of the reasons you're supporting the rebels is to convince Assad to come to the negotiating table. I thought that was the purpose of -- sometimes military effort is to achieve a negotiated outcome. So this is not -- you're not trying to --

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's no question that we view it as the correct policy, as do many nations around the world, to support the opposition in its efforts to withstand the brutal assault that Assad has been waging. Ultimately, though, there has to be a political process that creates the transition necessary for Syria's future.

Q So I guess my follow-up to that is you're potentially about to spend many hundreds of millions or billions of dollars in this response. If it doesn't have a strategic purpose, why bother?

MR. CARNEY: I think the purpose of a response is to make clear that the violation of an international norm that has been agreed to by the overwhelming majority of the nations of this world cannot go without a response, because the consequence of that would be damaging to U.S. national security interests, to the national security interest of nations around the world, and would do great harm to an already extremely volatile region of the world.

Q Is there any message in your response for Iran? Obviously, the message to Syria is pretty clear, as you've described it. Any message in this for Iran?

MR. CARNEY: Our view is that the use or proliferation of chemical weapons -- weapons of mass destruction -- has to be responded to. And I think that that has to be made clear to any potential user of these kinds of weapons.

Christi.

Q Thank you, Jay. The President just on Thursday said that if one country attacked another without a U.N. mandate, it would raise questions about whether international law supported it. When he said "U.N. mandate" in that context, what did he mean?

MR. CARNEY: Christi, I don't want to engage in speculation about what decision the President will make or a course of action he has decided. I think as I said in answer to Ed's question, that the President has long said as a candidate and as President that he will absolutely take action when he views that the national security interests of the United States are at stake.

Q So let me just ask this: Is it possible to have a U.N. mandate without having a Security Council resolution?

MR. CARNEY: You'd have to ask our U.N. representation.

Q But just conceptually, is that possible?

MR. CARNEY: Conceptually, I think it's related to the question at hand. And I'm not going to speculate about what courses of action we're going to take until the President has decided on the option he wants to embrace.

Q Today, a Wall Street Journal article says that why Obama is going into Syria after two years later -- the answer is Iran, because Iran has already involved itself in the war in Syria. The Iran factor, in short, is the elephant in the room. So is Iran a bigger trigger than chemical weapons for U.S.?

MR. CARNEY: Iran has been involved in supporting the Assad regime for a long time in this conflict. We've made clear that fact and what it says about who Assad's friends are. The options we are assessing at this time have to do with our belief that the use of chemical weapons needs to be responded to. And that is the context of the decision-making process that's underway.

April.

Q Jay, at this time, is there irony for this White House and the President as you're 50 years out from celebrating and commemorating nonviolence and peace, and the President is looking at strong options against Syria?

MR. CARNEY: The President has made clear ever since he launched his campaign for President that he, as Commander-in-Chief, will take actions necessary to defend the United States, to defend the national security of the United States, to defend the American people at home and abroad. I think he gave a memorable speech about it, about his views on this matter, in Copenhagen in 2009. And I think you've seen throughout his presidency his commitment to ending wars, as he has demonstrated by withdrawing from Iraq -- when he views that as in our national security interests -- to winding down the war in Afghanistan, which is happening now.

But he has also demonstrated a commitment and a conviction that when national security interests of the United States are at stake, he will take action. Again, that's a broad statement. I am not presupposing in answer to any of these questions a course of action. When the President has an announcement, he'll make it.

Q Well, I'm going to ask you one last question. What do you say to those -- especially those loud voices that we've heard with some of the most recent wars, people who don't want strikes, who just want peace? What do you say to them?

MR. CARNEY: I don't want to go down the road of answering a question that presupposes that the President has decided upon a course of action when he is evaluating options available to him. There are a variety of options available to him, and I will leave it to him to make that announcement when he has --

Q Even though there are not boots on the ground, there could be military in the air. And there are still possibilities as well.

MR. CARNEY: Sure, that's speculation about the options that are available to him. But he is evaluating those options now.

Let me make this -- Mike, the last one.

Q The goal is essentially to punish the Assad regime and set an example of the Assad regime for violating the international norms. How do you do that without weakening the Assad regime in a sort of a de facto way, turning the tide of the civil war, which you say should not happen -- their differences should be resolved by political means?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm saying that the decision to respond to the use of chemical weapons and the options that are under consideration as a response to that clear violation have to do with the use of chemical weapons.

We have a policy of support for the opposition in Syria. We have a policy of significant humanitarian support for the Syrian people and for refugees in other countries. And that will continue. But this is a clear and distinct violation of an international norm, and it is our view that, as Secretary Kerry made clear yesterday, that we must respond to it.

Q So is it the goal of the United States to degrade the Assad regime's ability to deliver those chemical weapons?

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're presupposing courses of action that haven't been decided upon.

Q But whatever the action is, would that be your goal?

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're presupposing courses of action, when you're talking about degrading military capacities, that haven't been decided upon.

Q Could I ask a non-Syria question?

MR. CARNEY: Okay, last one. Non-Syria.

Q The President is meeting with mayors this afternoon about gun -- how to curb gun violence. Is there some particular reason -- we haven't seen that in a while. Is there a particular reason that's on the plan for -- the schedule for today, this week? And can you tell us, is there some specific piece of legislation or specific --

MR. CARNEY: Well, the President remains committed to taking the action that we can, in the wake of Congress's and the Senate's, in particular, regrettable failure to pass common-sense legislation to improve our background check system, to take steps that we can to reduce gun violence in the United States.

And we put forward -- the President put forward, with the Vice President, a comprehensive approach that included not just the legislative action that we believe needed to be taken, but also some executive action. And we continue to work on those issues, and we continue to engage with stakeholders around the country, including mayors, on this issue because it is of great concern to them, as it is to this administration.

Q Are they talking about legislation then? Possible legislation?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to read out a meeting that hasn't happened. But I would say that we continue to engage in an effort to do everything we can to reduce gun violence in the United States against the clear majority will of the country, of states that are not normally considered blue or even purple, the Senate chose to block common-sense legislation that would have simply improved a background check system that everybody believes is necessary to make sure that people who should not have guns can obtain them. So I don't have a specific agenda for you except that this remains an issue the President and the administration are concerned about.

Q I understand they're not coming out. Will you release the list of mayors, please?

MR. CARNEY: I'll have to take the question. I'm not sure of what our --

Q Jay, on the speech tomorrow, can you --

MR. CARNEY: I got to run, guys. I hope you all can --

Q Do you brief tomorrow, Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Meetings, meetings. We'll see.

END

1:55 P.M. EDT