

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jay Carney and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Aboard Air Force One
En Route St. Petersburg, Russia

11:50 A.M. CEST

MR. CARNEY: Welcome aboard Air Force One as we make our way from Stockholm, Sweden to St. Petersburg, Russia, where the President will be attending the G20 Summit. The President very much enjoyed his visit to Sweden, his dinner last night with the Nordic Council and his meeting this morning with the King and Queen. And he's looking forward to the G20.

I have no other announcements. Joining me today is Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor, who can walk you through the President's day -- continuance of his day, rather. And we can take any questions you might have.

Ben.

MR. RHODES: Just quickly, when we get to St. Petersburg, the President's first meeting will be a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Abe of Japan. I expect that they'll discuss the situation in Syria, alliance issues, the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the ongoing TPP negotiations, as well as general Asia Pacific regional issues.

After that, the President goes into the G20 sessions. The first working session is on global growth in the global economy. Then there is a dinner for the leaders -- a working dinner. And then there is a cultural program.

I anticipate the President will have additional interactions with leaders on the margins of the meeting, but the meeting today with Prime Minister Abe is the one scheduled bilateral meeting.

Q Is the President going to be trying to rally support from these leaders for a strike in Syria on the sidelines of the summit?

MR. RHODES: Well, the subject of the G20 is the global economy, so the sessions will focus on economic issues. I think that the past practice at these summits is you do end up having discussions on the margins of the meeting about other global security issues. We would not anticipate every member of the G20 agreeing about the way forward in Syria, particularly given the Russian position over many, many months now in terms of resisting efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable.

The President will, however, have a chance to speak with allies of the United States and key partners to explain our current thinking on Syria. And I think we'll continue to work with those countries to see what type of political and diplomatic support they may express for our efforts to hold the Syrian regime accountable.

I think there was a good statement out of the Nordic Council last night about the need for a strong international response to the use of chemical weapons. And I think, similarly, the President will talk to allies and partners about their ability to express support for the notion that an international norm that the international community has spent many, many years reinforcing must be upheld in Syria. And I think we've found common views on that position among some of our key allies and we'll continue to discuss that with them here.

I'd also just note that tomorrow the President will have a meeting with President Hollande of France, a bilateral meeting. And of course, France has been a stalwart ally in the notion that there needs to be a response, and has also indicated their potential interest in participating in an effort to hold the Syrian regime accountable.

Q Do you anticipate a pull-aside with President Putin?

MR. RHODES: We have nothing formally scheduled with President Putin in terms of a bilateral meeting. However, it's always the case at these summits that leaders end up sitting next to each other; they end up having side conversations. So I certainly anticipate the President will have interactions with President Putin even as we don't have a formal meeting scheduled. And we'll keep you updated on those conversations.

Q Is he seeking financial support for any activity in Syria, based on his conversations, Ben?

MR. RHODES: The type of action we're contemplating, again, I think does not come with significant requirements of international participation, even as we welcome those countries that do want to express support for holding the Syrian regime accountable. However, there is significant needs within Syria in terms of humanitarian assistance. There is a current U.N. call for additional humanitarian aid into Syria.

The United States has already provided -- allocated over a billion dollars in that regard, and many other countries who are at the G20 have been contributors of humanitarian assistance. I think we'll continue to call on nations to meet the humanitarian needs in Syria, which are considerable and which are exacerbated by chemical weapons attacks,

which cause not just enormous humanitarian suffering, loss of life, but also increase the displacement of peoples who are leaving those areas that have been subjected to chemical attacks.

In addition to the humanitarian support, a number of the countries that are -- including some of the G20 -- are providing assistance to the opposition, along with us. Turkey, for instance; the French have expressed their interest in increased support for the opposition; Saudi Arabia, who will be at the summit, are among some of the countries that are supporting the opposition. So I think the President will continue to discuss with those countries how we can work on a multilateral basis to provide support for the opposition.

And then, finally, even as we deal with the issue of chemical weapons, and even as we have expressed our belief that there needs to be a military response to the use of chemical weapons, we still believe that the long-term resolution of the Syrian civil war is going to depend on a political process and the Geneva process is still the best way forward in that regard. And that would have to involve many countries, including Russia, investing their efforts in a political process that brings an end to the civil war and we believe must bring an end to Assad leading Syria as the President.

Q And when President Putin says he just hasn't seen the absolute proof of chemical weapons uses in Syria, what do you say to that?

MR. RHODES: We could not be more confident in the evidence that we put forward. Again, just to reiterate, that includes the fact that there's an overwhelming amount of open-source material that demonstrates a chemical attack took place. We have physiological evidence in terms of sarin samples that tested positive from blood and hair. We have intelligence that shows regime officials preparing to use chemical weapons in the areas that rockets were launched. We saw and detected the launch of rockets from regime-held areas into 11 different sites that were opposition-controlled or contested areas. We saw an explosion of social media; reports from hospitals of people coming immediately after those rockets landed -- or shortly after those rockets landed with symptoms of a chemical attack. And then we've declassified intelligence of regime officials and those who were familiar with the attack acknowledging that it took place, expressing concern that the U.N. inspectors would find evidence of chemical attacks, and then bombarding those opposition neighborhoods for days after.

We further assessed that the opposition doesn't have the capacity to carry the attack that took place. And we've noticed in recent days France and Germany express their belief that the Assad regime was responsible for this as well. So there's just a preponderance of evidence and common sense that leads one to believe that not only did a chemical attack take place, but the Assad regime is responsible.

We'll continue to discuss with the Russians what our evidentiary basis is and what -- our degree of confidence in the fact that the Assad regime carried this out. But, again, what we do not want to see is some ongoing debate about whether or not a chemical weapons

attack took place that everybody saw with their own eyes on August 21st. And similarly, we don't want to entertain implausible theories that are simply not likely that somehow the opposition undertook an attack that it doesn't have the capacity to carry out.

Q You mentioned Geneva. Is Geneva actually still on the table? Because it was supposed to have happened in July, and that came and went, and there hasn't really been much discussion about it since then.

MR. RHODES: There is not a meeting scheduled. However, Geneva continues to provide the framework that we believe is necessary for a political resolution, which is, at the end of the day, there's not a military solution that will bring an end to Syria's civil war. There has to be a political process that brings the regime and the opposition to the table with the backing of the international community.

Q Is there an active discussion with the Russians about getting that up and running again?

MR. RHODES: There's been an ongoing discussion with the Russians about getting that up and running. There was a meeting that got postponed in recent weeks that would have focused on this Geneva process. In the current environment with the focus on chemical weapons, we postponed that meeting.

Again, our focus right now is how on how do we respond to this chemical attack. But we're also cognizant of the fact that even as we increase our support for the opposition and even as we aim to deter Assad's use of chemical weapons and degrade his capabilities, we have to remain invested in some form of political process to bring the Syrian civil war to an end, and we believe brings Assad's leadership of Syria to an end.

Q Did the President hear anything in Putin's interview that indicated any change of posture? And what will he say to Putin on these pull-asides when he sees him?

MR. RHODES: Well, President Putin expressed the fact that he's been able to work with President Obama as interlocutor on some issues, even as we've had differences. That's essentially the same view we have. The U.S.-Russian relationship is very broad. Even with the differences we've had -- sharp differences on Syria -- there's continued cooperation on nuclear security issues, on transit in Afghanistan, on counterterrorism, and on global economic issues. So we will continue to address areas where we can work with the Russians.

Syria is an area where, even as we've had sharp differences, we believe Russia in the long term can be a part of a political process to bring the Assad regime to the table. What we are highly skeptical of is the notion that Russia will take a different view at the Security Council -- because for two years what we've seen is several Russia vetoes of Security Council resolutions that aimed to express disapproval or hold the Assad regime accountable. So thus far, we have not seen any evidence that Russia is taking a different approach towards the Syrian issue at the U.N. Security Council.

Were they to do so, of course it's our preference always to work through the U.N. Security Council on these issues, but we haven't seen any change in the Russian position at the U.N. and are skeptical that given the current environment and given their relationship with Assad, we're skeptical that that change is forthcoming.

Q Ben, another subject -- Brazil, the spying charges. How is the President going to react or deal with the President of Brazil when he presumably sees her at some point?

MR. RHODES: Well, we understand how important this is to the Brazilians. We understand their strength of feeling on the issue. What we're doing in this case, as we've done in other cases since the NSA revelations came to light, is take a comprehensive look at what exactly the allegations are, what exactly the facts are in terms of the NSA's activities. And we will work with the Brazilians so that they have a better understanding of what we do and don't do, and so that we have an understanding of their concerns. So it's an important discussion, and the President I think will be able to see President Rousseff on the margins of the G20, I'm sure, and to discuss these issues. And we're also going to continue to work it in other diplomatic and intelligence channels.

We think the U.S.-Brazil relationship is a very important, emerging relationship not just in the Americas, but in the world. So we'll aim to take steps to work these issues through on a bilateral basis.

Q The Foreign Minister said he wanted an apology.

MR. RHODES: Well, I think -- what we're focused on is making sure the Brazilians understand exactly what the nature of our intelligence effort is. We carry out intelligence like just about every other country around the world. If there are concerns that we can address consistent with our national security requirements, we will aim to do so through our bilateral relationship.

Q Tell us what the status is of U.S. military aid to Egypt and that review process.

MR. RHODES: That's still ongoing. The President has not made any new decisions with respect to military assistance to Egypt beyond the items that we have announced have been suspended in terms of delivery -- the military exercise, Bright Star, F-16 deliveries. So there are ongoing discussions about that issue, and we have no additional announcements to make right now.

Q Has the President been making any calls to lawmakers regarding the Syria resolutions while he's been on the trip?

MR. RHODES: We can check that. I don't have any read-out for you. I know he is watching it closely. We felt that yesterday's Senate vote in the Foreign Relations Committee was another important step forward in terms of seeing bipartisan support for an authorization to use military force through the Foreign Relations Committee. So we were grateful for the leadership of Senators Menendez and Corker, and the bipartisan group of senators who supported that resolution.

We're continuing to work with leaders in the Senate and the House. We noted a number of other expressions of support yesterday, including from Carl Levin, who is obviously an important figure as the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee. And so we'll continue to work it, but we'll let you know if he has any calls.

Q How is it going in the House?

MR. RHODES: I think in the House -- the Senate is further along in terms of having a resolution out of a committee. In the House, what we have is expressions of support from the two leaders of the Republican Party, Speaker Boehner and Leader Cantor, and the Democratic Party Leader Pelosi and Steny Hoyer.

And we're just going to continue to reach as many House members as we can to make the case for why this is in America's national interest, and urge them to move expeditiously through a debate and discussion of a resolution and a vote. The President will continue to make his case to Congress and to the American people in that process. And we had testimony yesterday from Secretary Hagel, Secretary Kerry in the House, and we'll continue to consult with them going forward.

Q Is the President going to make an Oval Office address, as Secretary Kerry suggested, or some other high-profile speech on Syria?

MR. RHODES: We don't have a particular speech planned at this point, but we certainly do think that the President will be out there making the case to Congress and the American people. He'll have multiple opportunities to do so. Yesterday and today and tomorrow, he'll be able to make that case on the world stage and I think it's important for the world to hear the view of the United States on this issue, particularly because our view is rooted in an international norm that has the support of the international community that we believe must be enforced. But we'll let you know as we make decisions about his communications back home.

Q Why is it important for the President to meet with representatives of civil society in Russia? And how much care and thought went into the selection of these representatives of civil society?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think the United States supports civil society around the world. And in countries that we visit, we often go out of our way to express our support for civil society. In Russia, in particular, we've seen negative trends in terms of the freedom of action for civil society in recent years, so it's important for the President I think to demonstrate that the United States and many in the international community believe strongly that a vibrant civil society is a significant asset for all countries.

Saint Petersburg has also been a longstanding location where there's been a lot of civil society activity. I'd also note in particular that we wanted to include representatives of the LGBT community in Russia. Given our serious concerns with some of the recent laws that have been passed and restrictions on activity for gays and lesbians within Russia, we felt it was important to ensure that we were including their voices in a discussion with the President.

Q Putin said that Kerry was lying when he characterized the Syrian opposition as increasingly moderate. Does the White House have any response? And then, secondly, will the President be offering any assurances to countries expressing concern about the nature of the opposition in Syria?

MR. RHODES: Well, we've been very forthcoming about our assessment of the opposition. We believe that the broad majority of those Syrians who oppose Bashar al-Assad want a better future, want their rights respected, want a government that is responsive to their aspirations. The opposition that we work with, that we provide assistance to both in terms of the political support, economic support, and military support we believe are more moderate elements who will work for that type of future in Syria, and we have carefully designed our assistance programs to ensure that it's focused on strengthening a moderate opposition.

We've also been very clear that there are extremist elements in the opposition. In fact, we've designated al-Nusra as a terrorist entity within the Syrian opposition. So we've always been very clear that there is a segment of the opposition that are extremists, but that there's a broader majority who are moderate.

And frankly, the more we're engaged and the more we're able to provide assistance and work with other countries who are providing assistance, the more we're able to reinforce the more moderate elements of the opposition. So our policy is aimed at isolating those more extremist elements and empowering those more moderate elements.

And I think Secretary Kerry had it exactly right when he characterized the extremist elements of the opposition as a minority and, frankly, identified a broader majority of Syrians who simply want a better and more peaceful future.

Q Any response to Putin's characterization of Kerry as a liar?

MR. RHODES: Well, we certainly would side with Secretary Kerry in that back-and-forth. We think Secretary Kerry was certainly telling the truth. And he reflects longstanding U.S. policy in terms of saying there's an element of the opposition that we believe is extremist and we're not going to work with in al-Nusra, but there's a broader majority that we believe we can empower in terms of strengthening a more moderate force.

We've also said, by the way, to President Putin for some time now that the fact that he has concerns about the opposition is all the more reason to invest in a political process that can bring the conflict to a conclusion, but that in that process, there's no way to envision Bashar al-Assad staying in power. A leader who gassed to death well over a thousand citizens and killed many, many more is simply not going to be able to regain legitimacy.

So those who were concerned about ongoing violence leading to extremists taking root in Syria should invest efforts in finding that type of political solution.

Q Thanks, Ben.

MR. RHODES: Thanks.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you all very much.

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12:10 P.M. CEST