

Daily Press Briefing by the Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 09/21/15

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/22/daily-press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-092115

September 21, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 21, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:05 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see you. Before we get started, I just wanted to make note of a piece of news I think that all of you saw over the weekend, and that is the tragic death of my colleague here at the White House, Jake Brewer. I think many of you saw the statement from the President indicating that he was heartbroken when he learned of this news.

And just on behalf of all of my colleagues here at the White House, we're thinking about and praying for Jake's family today. They're going through obviously a very difficult time. But as the President said at the end of his statement, they have a family here at the White House that they can rely on. So we're going to keep them in our thoughts and prayers certainly in the days ahead.

So, with that sad news, Josh, let's move on to your questions.

Q Thanks, Josh. Let's start with Cuba. The AP is reporting today that the U.S. is considering abstaining from a vote at the U.N. criticizing the embargo on Cuba, which comes from time to time. Can you confirm that that's the case? And would that be intended to increase the pressure on Congress to lift that embargo?

MR. EARNEST: Josh, I actually just learned of this story shortly before I came out here. I asked for an update in terms of where this stands in the process at the U.N., and it's my understanding that final language on a potential resolution has not been completed at this point. So I don't have any comment or speculation about what that resolution would look like or what position the administration would take.

Obviously, since the last time that the United Nations had the opportunity to consider a resolution like this one, the policy of the United States government has changed.

However, an embargo does remain in place. It requires an act of Congress to remove that

embargo, and the President has made the case to Congress that that's what they should do. But at this point, I wouldn't speculate on a resolution, what it would say, or what the position of the United States on it would be.

Q And I was wondering if the President has been following the Pope's visit in Cuba, news coverage of that trip, perhaps to glean some insight on what he should expect when the Pope comes here.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what we've seen in Cuba is not at all surprising, and I think it's what we expect to see here in the United States, which is that the Pope will be very warmly received when he arrives in this country. And Pope Francis has inspired both Catholics and non-Catholics alike for his willingness to live out the kinds of values that he preaches. And that, I think, has really resonated not just among Catholics but among people of faith all around the world.

And that's why I don't think anybody was surprised by the enthusiastic reaction that the Pope received when he arrived in Cuba, and I think there will be similar enthusiasm when Pope Francis arrives here in the United States.

Q There have been some reports of dissidents in Cuba who were invited by the Vatican to attend some of these events that the Pope is doing while he's in Cuba being either detained or prohibited by security forces from getting to the place where they'd be able to meet with the Pope. Does the White House want to see Cuba be more lenient or tolerant in allowing dissidents to meet with the Pope?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can't speak to those individual cases that may or may not have arisen over the weekend. But we have certainly long made the case that the Cuban government, whether the Pope is on the island or not, should do a better job of protecting the basic human rights of their citizens, including those who may even have some criticism of the Cuban government to offer. That's a part of respecting the basic human rights of human beings. And we believe that the government of Cuba has a responsibility to do a better job of protecting those basic human rights, and we're going to continue to make the case aggressively that that's what they should do.

Q Turning to Iran, the IAEA is saying that the evidence that's been collected has met its standards in terms of what needs to be happening at the probe into -- of previous activity at Parchin, even though we're learning that those samples were collected by Iranians without IAEA individuals present. Given that those are the facts of the situation, regardless of what may be in a deal between the IAEA and Iran, is the White House confident in the way that probe is progressing?

MR. EARNEST: Josh, the reason that the United States worked so aggressively with the international community to compel Iran to come to the negotiating table and come clean about their nuclear program is that for a long time Iran had resisted cooperating with any sort of inspections that the IAEA wanted to do. And as a result of the international

pressure that built up over time, principally because of the tough economic sanctions that the United States put in place and got the rest of the international community to go along with, we now see indications that Iran is cooperating with IAEA inspections.

And the statement from the IAEA today indicates that authentication by the agency of the sample was achieved through the use of an established verification process. "The process was carried out under our responsibility" -- meaning the IAEA's responsibility - and monitoring.

This certainly disproves the claims of our critics who suggested that Iran would be conducting self-inspections. That obviously is not true. And there also was some concern and some claims made by critics of the deal that the IAEA would not have access to military sites. The fact is the Director General of the IAEA was at a prominent Iranian military site over the weekend.

So I do think that as this agreement moves forward to being implemented we'll have many future opportunities to illustrate how the critics and warnings of many of those who opposed the Iran deal are eventually disproven based on the way that the agreement is implemented.

And let me close by saying this is not something that we take lightly. It's certainly not something that the President takes lightly. And here's the reason why. We've made clear that this agreement between Iran and international community is not one that is based on trust. It is an agreement that is rooted in the ability of international, impartial nuclear experts to get access they need inside of Iran to verify Iran's compliance with the agreement.

And so these sorts of inspections are critical, and we do believe it's incredibly important that these inspections live up to the standards that are established by the international, impartial nuclear experts at the IAEA. And when it comes to the inspections that were conducted at the Parchin military facility over the weekend, the IAEA has said that these inspections were consistent with their standards.

Q And you're comfortable with that, that they're consistent with their standards as well?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the standards -- I guess this is where I started, which is that the goal of the international coalition that confronted Iran's nuclear program was to compel Iran to agree with the -- or to cooperate with IAEA and their inspections. That's what we asserted all along is a reasonable expectation that the international community could have about Iran's behavior. And again, that's exactly what we've seen here.

Roberta.

Q Back to the U.N. resolution -- potential resolution that Josh was asking about. How active a role is the U.S. playing in trying to shape the language of that potential resolution?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a lot of insight into any of those conversations. I'd refer you to my colleagues in the U.N. Ambassador's office at the U.N. for more insight that they may be able to provide on the process here.

Q And can you rule out an abstention at this point?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't speculate at this point what our position would be on a resolution that hasn't actually been finalized and made public yet.

Q Will the President meet with President Castro on the sidelines of UNGA next week?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any additional details about the President's schedule when he's in New York next week. In fact, I know that this is something that our national security and our scheduling staff are still working through. The President has a limited window of time in New York, and how he's going to use that time is something that's still being discussed here. But hopefully we'll have some more information on this in the next few days.

Q And I wanted to briefly ask about the Volkswagen emissions scandal. Has the President been briefed on this? And how closely is the White House watching what's transpiring?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is obviously an enforcement action and an investigation that the EPA is responsible for carrying out. They take the responsibilities that they have to enforce the Clean Air Act very seriously. And I think it's fair to say that we're quite concerned by some of the reports that we've seen about the conduct of this particular company. But ultimately this is the responsibility of the EPA to take a look at it, and that's exactly what they're doing.

The EPA does have an important role that they play here in this country to enforce the Clean Air Act consistent with the kind of economic priorities, but also with the public health priorities, that this administration has identified and the previous administrations have identified through the implementation of the Clean Air Act.

Q Is the President paying attention to this, as well? Has he been briefed on it?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to him about it, but I'm confident that he is well aware of the news.

Let's move around. Nadia.

Q Has the intentions of the Russians become clearer to you in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, to be blunt about it, no. The United States continues to be concerned with the ramping up the escalation of military assets that Russia is sending to Syria. This has been the source of a number of conversations not just between Secretary Kerry and his counterpart, but at the end of last week, Secretary Carter and his Russian counterpart.

And our message to the Russians in private has been the same message that you've heard me and others deliver in public, which is that we would welcome Russia's constructive contribution to the more than 60 nations that are working together to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And the President himself said last week that the Russians are making a losing bet when they double down on the Assad regime. And it's the view of this administration and many people around the globe that President Assad has lost legitimacy to lead that country and it's time for him to go.

Q With the presence of hundreds of Russian marines and helicopters and tanks, many people in the region believe actually that they are there to protect President Assad and his security forces around Latakia area. Do you share that analysis?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, we've been engaged in conversations with the Russians to get a better sense about what their intentions and goals are, and we've made clear both in public and in private that doubling down on supporting Assad is a losing bet. There's an opportunity for the Russians, if they would like, to constructively contribute to the anti-ISIL coalition that is formed to degrade and ultimately destroy that terrorist organization. And we'd welcome their participation in that regard. But thus far, it's unclear exactly what Russia's intentions are.

Q Finally, what options do you have when you see a scenario like Crimea or Ukraine that the Russians basically are defying you and moving to Syria the way they want to militarily?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I will say there is one important thing that Ukraine and Syria have in common when it comes to their relationship with Russia. One of the reasons that we saw Russia intervene so directly in Ukraine was there was a sense that Ukraine was sort of starting to drift from the orbit of Russian political influence. And certainly with the change in leadership in that country, Russia was responding out of a position of weakness, to go and try to protect their investment in that country and to protect the influence that they had in that country.

There's a similar phenomenon going on in Syria. Syria for years has been a client state of Russia in the Middle East. That's why they have -- already have had a significant military presence, and it explains the relationship that they've had with President Assad. But what's clear in the last few years is that as Assad has lost more legitimacy to lead and as we have seen him -- as it has become clear to the international community that he doesn't have control over large portions of that country that Russia is now concerned about the investment that they have made there. And so responding to that concern about their waning influence, we've seen the Russians deploy more military equipment there.

So I think there is at least a rough analogy that can be drawn between those two situations, and both of them underscore the waning influence of Russia in those two areas.

Now, we've also seen a willingness on the part of Russia to use military force to try to shore up that influence, and that has led to a lot of lives lost in Ukraine. And that's a tragedy, but it has also led to significant international isolation on the part of the Russians and it has led to the imposition of significant sanctions that have weakened their economy.

So the question I think for the Russians will be how effectively do they feel like they can cooperate with the international community to advance our shared interests as opposed to engaging in the kind of activity that we've seen in Ukraine, at least, where they have unilaterally violated the territorial integrity of an independent nation.

Q Another question -- today a Muslim NGO called for presidential candidate Dr. Carson to step down because of his anti-Muslim stand. He said he does not believe a Muslim should be a President. What's the White House reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I hadn't seen that statement. Obviously Dr. Carson doesn't hold any position, so I'm not sure of what he could step down from, but --

Q I meant withdraw from the race.

MR. EARNEST: Oh, withdraw from the race. Well, I think what is clear is that -- and this goes to something that we talked about in this room quite a bit on Friday -- which is that we have seen not just a tendency but a willingness on the part of some successful Republican politicians -- and, let's face, Dr. Carson, in many of the polls, ranks second or third so at least in the last few months he has been quite successful in elevating his status in the Republican Party -- and we've seen a willingness on the part of many of those candidate to countenance offensive views, all in pursuit of political support and, in the case of the Republican primary, in the pursuit of votes.

And I think what's particularly disappointing to many observers, including me, is that we haven't seen a significant outcry from all of the other candidates in the Republican race. And it's for the same reason, because they're chasing for the same votes. And the fact is this is not something that's consistent with the values of the vast majority of Americans. And, ironically enough, I actually do think that the views articulated by Dr. Carson are entirely inconsistent with the Constitution that does actually guarantee the freedom of religion in this country. So, ultimately, there will be consequences. And certainly those views will be taken into account by voters, both in the primary but also in the general election.

Justin.

Q First I wanted to ask about a report in The New York Times that the administration and the Chinese were negotiating a code of conduct for cyber activities and legal cooperation going after cyber criminals. I'm wondering if you could talk at all about the status of those negotiations were.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Justin, we've made clear for quite some time that we would expect that Russia's [sic] behavior in cyberspace to occupy a prominent place on the agenda when President Obama and President Xi have the opportunity to meet later this week --

Q You said Russia.

MR. EARNEST: Did I say Russia? I'm sorry. Let me start over then.

Q For radio.

MR. EARNEST: For radio. (Laughter.) Justin, we've made clear -- (laughter) -- we've tried to make clear over the last several months that when President Xi of China visits the White House later this week, that our concerns about China's activity in cyberspace will feature prominently on that agenda. And that is because the United States has articulated for quite some time that China's behavior is unacceptable and certainly not consistent with the kind of relationship that we should see between our two countries.

I would acknowledge upfront, as we have on many occasions, that there are some areas where the U.S. and China are able to cooperate, but many other areas where we're in direct competition. And when it comes to actions in cyberspace, we do continue to be, in particular, concerned about the government-sponsored, cyber-enabled theft of corporate secrets for financial gain. We've also seen activities in cyberspace that undermine core freedoms of individuals in cyberspace. We've also seen China take steps that violate the personal privacy of individuals. And we've also seen steps by the Chinese in cyberspace that discriminate against U.S. technology firms, some of whom were seeking to do business in China.

So we've got a rather long list of concerns, and I think this is evidenced by the fact that the U.S. Department of Justice has indicted five Chinese military officials for some of this behavior.

Now, the good news I think is that there's no doubt on the part of the Chinese government that they understand how seriously we hold these concerns. And I think that is one reason that you saw Secretary Meng travel to the United States a week and a half ago to meet with senior U.S. officials both in law enforcement but also in the national security realm to discuss our concerns. And I think that is at least one indication that China at least takes seriously our concerns. But, ultimately, we'll have to see where the discussions lead when the President meets with his counterpart.

Q Well, I guess that's my question. Have those discussions progressed into negotiations, or is it still in the discussion phase?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't -- I don't have a specific update for you in terms of where things stand right now, but the Chinese are well aware of just how seriously we take this issue. And we certainly have appreciated their willingness to engage in those conversations. There has been some discussion about the possibility that the United States could use a new tool that is now available to the Secretary of Treasury to impose economic sanctions against those individuals who are suspected of engaging in this kind

of behavior in cyberspace or have benefitted from it. And you've heard me make clear -- and the President alluded to this, too, when he spoke to the Business Roundtable -- that having these policy options even available to the administration can have the effect of applying some pressure to those countries that have well-known concerns.

And so, again, I think that's a testament to this administration's shrewd policymaking and essentially putting this policy option on the table. The President, you'll recall, signed an executive order only about six months ago delegating this authority to the Secretary of the Treasury. So that's going to factor into these conversations as well.

Q I wanted to ask about another story that was in the Times over the weekend about U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and how it was a policy not to intervene in cases where they believe that sexual assault, especially of young boys, was going on, and instead leave that to Afghan authorities. I'm wondering, is that policy under review now? Or can you explain why U.S. soldiers wouldn't intervene if they knew sexual assault of a young boy was going on?

MR. EARNEST: Justin, let me just say that the United States is deeply concerned about the safety and welfare of Afghan boys who may be exploited by members of the Afghan national security and defense forces. This form of sexual exploitation violates Afghan law and Afghanistan's international obligations. More broadly, protecting human rights, including countering the exploitation of children, is a high priority for the U.S. government. We monitor such atrocities closely and have continually stood up for those who have suffered exploitation and denial of basic human freedoms.

The United States works closely with the Afghan government, civil society and international organizations in Afghanistan to put an end to the exploitation of children, and also incorporate human rights training into our law enforcement programs to heighten awareness and prosecution of such crimes. We continue to urge the Afghan government and civil society to protect and support victims and their families while also strongly encouraging justice and accountability under Afghan law for offenders.

Q Would the Commander-in-Chief of our military tell a military officer to intervene if he witnessed sexual assault of a young boy happening?

MR. EARNEST: Well, for the policies that sort of govern the relationship between U.S. military personnel serving in Afghanistan and their Afghan counterparts, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. But I think the passage that I read earlier indicates just how seriously we take this issue and how this kind of behavior doesn't just violate Afghan law and Afghanistan's international obligations, but it certainly violates I think pretty much everybody's notion of what acceptable behavior is.

Q Well, I think that's why we're struggling with why the U.S. wouldn't tell its soldiers to intervene in the situation. I mean, could you game out any sort of circumstance under which we wouldn't do that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, for the rules of engagement and the kind of structure that's in place to guide the relationship between the United States and Afghan members of the military, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense for that.

Q One last one. Arizona Congressman Paul Gosar said last week that he was planning to boycott the Pope's address to Congress over the issue of climate change. I'm wondering if you had any reaction to that.

MR. EARNEST: I don't.

Jim.

Q A couple things. First on China. National Security Advisor Susan Rice said today that the use of -- that the cyber warfare that's going on that China is using is serious and a serious threat to the United States economically, and that the President -- and that it should be stopped, and the President will tell the Chinese that in person. What is the next sentence, though? After he says, this is serious, and stop it, what is the follow-up that says any if you don't, this is what's going to happen?

MR. EARNEST: I think there are a couple things about this, Jim. The first is, I wouldn't want to prejudge a conversation between the President of the United States and the President of China. And I think what's implicit in your comment is -- well, let me just explain why that is the case. The reason for that is simply that it could be perceived as a threat. And I think the President spoke to this quite candidly when he spoke before the Business Roundtable and made clear that there are any number of good reasons why the Chinese government would take very seriously the concerns that we have expressed about their behavior in cyberspace.

And again, the President has raised this directly with his counterpart in China during their previous meetings, and so this concern is not a new one when it comes to the Chinese understanding our perspective on this issue. And again, I think the fact that Secretary Meng, a high-ranking Chinese official, traveled to the United States and spent time with the Director of the FBI, senior officials here at the White House, senior officials in the intelligence community and others means that they now have a very good firsthand understanding of exactly what our concerns are.

And there are a range of options that we have for responding. But at this point, the President will certainly look forward to a robust discussion of these issues when President Xi is here later this week.

Q But anticipating that conversation is not really out of bounds when the NSA is saying that they will take it up and that the President will be very frank and will reflect comments that it must be stopped. So what I'm asking is, is that all we're going to do is say, you got to stop? Or is there something else the President is going to tell China?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think China is well aware, as all of you are, that the United States has a range of economic sanctions that could be used to respond to anyone engaged in malicious behavior in cyberspace, or benefits from some of that malicious behavior in

cyberspace. The Department of Justice has indicted five Chinese military officials for their conduct in cyberspace. So there are a range of options, and I don't have any specific things to put on the table here. But I think it's quite well known -- and the President alluded to this when he spoke last week -- that there are a range of options that are on the table.

Q And then on a separate subject, we've learned through sources that, this afternoon, the Border Patrol will release new figures to both the Hill and to the public which shows that the number of people coming across the border illegally, including minors, has again spiked. Do you have a reaction to that? And do you think it has anything to do with the rhetoric that is going on now in the presidential campaign?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, we'll have a lot more to say about this later today. I will just say generally that this issue that the administration and this country has been dealing with over the last year and a half or so is one that this administration takes quite seriously. And we have seen over the last year a precipitous decline in the number of unaccompanied children attempting to enter this country without the proper documentation, and we have seen just in the last month, in the month of August, a surprising uptick. And it still is below -- far below the levels that we saw at the peak last year. But what is true is that it typically, in August, the numbers decline because of the weather patterns, and instead we saw an increase. So that is concerning.

The administration, because of our commitment to working effectively with Congress to confront this issue, is, based on our own judgment, essentially voluntarily reading members of Congress into this issue and briefing them on the latest details. So this is something that we take very seriously. It's something that the administration has been quite vigilant about over the last year and a half and it's something that we're going to closely monitor in the months ahead.

Let me just restate something that you heard me say many times last summer, which is that there is no family that should even contemplate putting a young child in the hands of a human trafficker in response to promises that that person can get their child into the United States. That journey is dangerous, and those human traffickers all too often aren't able to deliver. And part of that is because this administration has been cracking down on human traffickers.

So we take this issue very seriously, and we're going to continue to be engaged in both trying to stem that flow but also messaging very clearly to the people in Central America who may be thinking about trying to help their child get into the United States, to urge them not to subject their child to that dangerous journey.

Q But do you think that the rhetoric, which threatens a finishing of a wall across the entire border of the United States, is leading to a rush to the border now?

MR. EARNEST: I think, Jim, it's hard to know exactly what may or may not be causing these latest numbers. Now, the other thing that's true is that these numbers are a snapshot of one month, and they're an aberration from the trend that we've seen over the

longer term. So we're going to continue to be vigilant. The success that we've had in driving down those numbers was rooted in a very rigorous application of a strategy to work effectively with our partners in Central America to take reasonable steps at the border to further secure the border, but also to communicate directly with those who may be contemplating sending their children on this dangerous journey that they shouldn't do it.

So we're going to continue to be engaged in that effort. And, Jim, I know this is an issue that you followed very closely, but this is the kind of -- this is a phenomenon that we've seen before, where there will be attention on one issue and as soon as the problem is at least adequately addressed, if not solved, but at least adequately addressed, people sort of divert their attention elsewhere. And that's understandable, but that's not what we do here.

What this administration has been doing is continued to be vigilant about this specific challenge. And we do that even when the numbers are going down. And we're going to continue to be focused on this in the months ahead.

Alexis.

Q Josh, to follow up on Justin's question, I just want to clarify -- because you're directing the questions about the allegations of sexual assault of children in Afghanistan to the Pentagon, but I want to ask Justin's questions again. Are you saying that President Obama, the Commander-in-Chief, is deferring the decision completely about policy in terms of local abuse of children, unless it's an act of war, to the Pentagon? Or is he involving himself in deliberating over the policy that you are directing us to the Pentagon to describe?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the question that Justin was asking was about the policy that is in place for U.S. military personnel when confronted with this situation. And what I'm suggesting is that you should go to the Department of Defense for an explanation of that policy.

Q But my question is, is that what the President is tolerating -- he is acceding to the policy that the Pentagon has established that U.S. military look the other way when children -- women, children are abused because the policy is that unless it's an act of war, the Pentagon is going to tolerate it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I would refer you to the Department of Defense for the policy that --

Q But why? Why are you directing us to the Pentagon about something that's important to the President of the United States?

MR. EARNEST: Because, Alexis, you're asking me about a policy that governs the conduct of U.S. military personnel in a dangerous place.

Q But doesn't the President set those policies?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the Department of Defense is the agency that's responsible for --

Q Has he asked for a review of those policies?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of.

Jim.

Q What do you think the Pope is going to say on Wednesday?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think there will be a lot of people here who are asking themselves that same question. I think that --

Q Because he's so unpredictable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think there's a lot of anticipation about what the Pope will say. And there's a palpable excitement and energy in this town, and I think it relates to the palpable excitement about the impending visit of this Pope, particularly a Pope that has inspired so many with his willingness to not just talk the talk, but walk the walk, when it comes to his views related to -- particularly as it relates to economic and social justice.

Q And would you agree with the assessment that the Pope and the President are fairly simpatico when it comes to a lot of big issues -- climate change, income inequality, immigration, Cuba -- there's a long list -- they're very much on the same page, as opposed to perhaps the President and Pope Benedict, or previous Popes?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can just say as a general matter that President Obama himself has talked about how inspired he has been by Pope Francis and he certainly has been impressed at the willingness of Pope Francis to take on some tough issues and to lay out his values. It's clear that Pope Francis has considered those kinds of statements prayerfully, as he should. But ultimately the purpose of this visit is for the President to sit down with somebody like Pope Francis who has tremendous moral and spiritual influence all around the globe.

And again, I think that's obviously something that's impossible to measure, but I think, based on the reaction that we've seen, it is something both Catholics and non-Catholics alike, through his teachings and through his message, is that he's got a set of values and a way of carrying himself that really resonates with people.

And, yes, President Obama shares those values with Pope Francis. It doesn't mean they agree on every issue -- they surely don't. But their focus in the context of this meeting will not be about politics, not about specific policies, but rather about the kinds of values that both men have dedicated their lives to changing.

Q And are you being somewhat hesitant to say that they're aligned on a lot of issues because the Pope, being so unpredictable, could come in and talk about something that you're not expecting? Has the White House been in any kind of discussion with the

Vatican in terms of what the President might say, what the Pope might say? Or are you walking into this just completely -- just like the rest of us, awaiting some divine intervention, I guess?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's possible that people at the White House may have a little bit more insight than most do into what the Pope has planned for his visit. But there is no plan or strategy that's been put in place to try to stage an event that will advance anybody's political agenda. Rather, this is an opportunity for President Obama to welcome Pope Francis to the United States on behalf of 300 million Americans, including the millions of practicing Catholics here in the United States, but also the millions of others who are not Catholic but have yet been inspired by the Pope's teachings and his values and the way that he has chosen to live in his daily life even though his daily life is now quite unique as he serves as the Pope.

Q And I know we've taken a couple of stabs at this over the last few briefings, in terms of this Wall Street Journal article that says that the Vatican has registered some objections to a few of the people that the White House has invited to attend the Pope's arrival ceremony. I know that Bishop Gene Robinson, the Episcopalian bishop from New Hampshire, he's actually written an op-ed saying that he has been invited by the White House, the Vatican shouldn't see this as any big deal. Did the White House go about inviting people to the ceremony to reflect sort of a broad diversity, instead of just Catholics who might agree with one particular set of policies?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I think the first thing I'd do is I would point you to the wide variety of comments that we've seen from senior Vatican officials, including from Father Rosica over the weekend, who indicated that the Pope himself is very much looking forward to this visit and that they would expect that there would be a diverse audience of Americans in place to welcome the Pope to the United States.

And again, I think that -- he can speak more directly to the perspective of Pope Francis when it comes to the ceremony, but I can tell you that the White House planned a ceremony that would ensure that Pope Francis would receive the kind of warm welcome that reflects the kind of warm feelings that 300 million Americans have about him and his leadership.

Q And when you say that, I would imagine you mean people from different walks of life, not just people who would agree with the Vatican on --

MR. EARNEST: I will say there was no theological test that was administered prior to giving out tickets to stand on the South Lawn Wednesday morning.

Q Okay. And finally on that subject, Mike Huckabee released a statement earlier this morning saying that the President is being hostile to Catholics and to Christians by inviting certain people to the arrival ceremony on Wednesday, and he described this as being the most anti-Christian administration in history. Do you have a response to that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't.

JC.

Q I have a couple -- perhaps with a little humor, hopefully. There are six Republican candidates who are, in fact, Roman Catholic. The infallibility issue goes to faith and morals. Chris Christie said that the Pope should basically stay away from politics and stick with religion. Does the President believe that as well, that the Pope and Holy Father should basically focus on the teachings of the Church in terms of morality, et cetera, et cetera, and stay away from some of these issues? Is there a sensitivity there, is what I'm asking.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it was interesting to me to watch some of the candidates explain some of the differences that they themselves have promoted when it comes to their views and comparing them to the Pope. The President has taken a different approach, and the President's approach is to welcome the Pope warmly to the United States and to eagerly anticipate and participate in a discussion about their shared values.

And there is so much about what Pope Francis has to say that is inclusive and that reflects the kind of personal commitment that Pope Francis has to a wide range of issues, particularly when it comes to social justice. And his eloquent expression of those values has inspired millions of people, not just here in the United States but around the world. And that's why he's deserving of such a warm welcome. And the President is looking forward to the opportunity to sit down with Pope Francis for a second time and to talk about many of those values that they have in common.

Again, there's plenty of opportunity for others to inject politics into this situation. It certainly is a protected constitutional right of theirs to do that. But that's not what the President is interested in.

Bill.

Q Following up on Jim's question, was there any pushback from the White House on the kinds of people who were issued invitations for the Pope's arrival -- or the South Lawn event?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can't speak to all of the conversations between the White House and the Vatican, but I can certainly point you to the comments from a range of senior Vatican officials, including Father Rosica -- whose interview I saw yesterday on Doug's network -- in which he indicated that everyone at the Vatican was very pleased with the way that the White House had worked with them to plan this event.

So I know that everyone here at the White House is looking forward to it.

Q Any reaction to Secretary Clinton's call to admit up to 65,000 Syrians rather than the lesser number?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say a couple of things about that. The first is, you saw over the weekend that Secretary Kerry announced the United States will accept 85,000 refugees from around the world.

Q That's worldwide.

MR. EARNEST: That's correct -- in fiscal year 2016, and 100,000 the next year. And we've previously made clear that the President had set a goal for his team of accepting at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next fiscal year.

In addition to that, however, the United States today is committing to provide nearly \$419 million in additional humanitarian aid for emergency health care, safe drinking water, food, shelter, and urgent-relief supplies to Syrians affected by the conflict. The United States, as you've heard me say many times in the last couple of weeks, remains the single-largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian crisis. And with this new announcement, the United States has now committed to provide more than \$4.5 billion to help address the dire conditions inside Syria and for the more than 4 million Syrian refugees scattered across the region.

We have long said that the most important contribution to address the urgent humanitarian needs of these refugees is in the form of trying to meet their basic needs. And so the kind of humanitarian assistance that the United States is providing here -- health care, safe drinking water, food, shelter -- these are the urgent -- this is the urgent relief that Syrian refugees need.

Now, in addition to that, the United States has committed to scaling up the number of Syrian refugees that would be admitted to this country. And that reflects the President's commitment to demonstrate that the United States will continue to play a leading role in this response. We certainly would like to see countries around the world do more, first and foremost when it comes to offering financial assistance to the ongoing humanitarian effort, but also in other places where appropriate, welcoming more Syrian refugees who are in a terribly desperate situation to their country.

Q When you say "scaling up," you're not talking about scaling up as high as 65,000?

MR. EARNEST: And I'm not talking about scaling up to 4 million, either. The fact is, there is a role for the United States to play here, and that is to continue to be the largest single donor of humanitarian aid and also scale up the number of Syrian refugees that are admitted to this country. But ultimately, this problem will not be solved by admitting 4 million Syrian refugees into the United States. Rather, this problem will be solved by confronting the security threat that is posed by ISIL; ridding Syria of the terrible political problems that have been created by the failed leadership of Bashar al-Assad; bringing about the kind of political transition that is long overdue in that country and trying to stabilize the situation so that those Syrian refugees can do what they want to do, which is actually return home.

Q Well, that may be, but nobody is going home any time soon.

MR. EARNEST: That is true. I don't want to leave you with the impression that it is the view of the United States that that sort of political transition is going to occur overnight. It certainly isn't. And that would be true even if we had recently been making important progress in that political transition. And the fact is, we haven't. There has been an

ongoing U.N.-led process that hasn't gotten the kind of traction that we would like to see. All the more reason that it's important for countries around the world to be a part of contributing to the ongoing humanitarian effort that is underway in the Middle East to try to bring some relief to Syrian refugees who have fled violence in Syria.

Doug.

Q Josh, you've been quick to criticize other Republican candidates who have failed to condemn Dr. Ben Carson's comments about Islam or Donald Trump's lack of comments about Islam when he was offered a question. Would you be so quick to condemn other Democratic candidates for President who failed to condemn Hillary Clinton's email practices?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I think that it's hard to -- I'm sorry, Doug, I think it's hard to sort of draw a connection between those two things. The fact is, the concerns that I have expressed have been with those Republicans who have been reluctant to condemn the cynical strategy that is employed by Mr. Trump and others to appeal for the political support of those with offensive views. And the concern that I have is simply that those candidates are doing the same thing.

The reason they're reluctant to offer that condemnation is because they're hoping for the political support from those same individuals, and that's unfortunate. But, look, we've seen other successful Republican politicians engage in this strategy in ways that has yielded significant benefits for themselves or for their party. But it doesn't make it okay. It doesn't mean that it's consistent with American values -- in fact, I think it is inconsistent with the values that most Americans hold.

Q And back to Ben Carson's comments about a hypothetical Muslim President. Let's fast-forward, assuming there is a hypothetical Muslim President. Do you draw a distinction between a moderate Muslim President or one who believes in strict interpretation of Sharia law to encompass the subjugation of women, the hanging of gays, the stoning of adulterers, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Doug, I think what is clear is that in any election -- hypothetical or real -- the American people will consider the values of those candidates who are on the ballot. And I think that is true regardless of the specific religion of any of the candidates. So, again, it's hard to -- I think that would be my answer to that question.

Q And one more question about the Pope's visit. As you pointed out, he is a warrior for social justice and equality. He has also written an encyclical on climate change. One thing I assume he probably has not accounted for, and I wonder if this administration has accounted for as well, is problem of fuel poverty, which now exists in Europe. There have been many, many reports in the Guardian and the Telegraph how the dramatically escalating prices of fuel cost, in the wintertime especially, has led to an inordinate number of deaths among senior citizens, among pensioners who are not able to heat their homes properly. Are we prepared for such a thing as we transition to renewable energies in this country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Doug, there are programs here inside the United States, some of which are operated by the federal government in consultation with states to provide assistance to needy families to help them heat their homes. So there are programs in place today to offer that kind of assistance.

I think what the President has been focused on is those kinds of energy solutions that can both be a reliable source of power but also do it in a cost-effective way. And we are seeing that through greater investment in things like wind energy and solar energy, that the cost of that energy is rapidly declining. That's good news for American businesses and American consumers. It also happens to be good news for our planet.

The other step that this administration has been focused on is improving energy efficiency in this country. And my colleagues at the Council of Economic Advisers here at the White House put out a report earlier this summer that indicated that the dramatic -- most of the dramatic change in energy consumption that we've seen in the United States is a result of increased investments in efficiency. And that will have the effect, again, of driving down energy costs but also being good for the planet. And those are the kinds of investments and policy solutions that the President and his team have been in search of.

Chris.

Q Let me go back to the refugee crisis for a minute because the new numbers for this coming year and the following that were announced by Secretary Kerry yesterday don't change the number -- 10,000 -- that the President previously said. And I wonder why, particularly given not just Hillary Clinton, who had said 65,000, but a number of Democrats and humanitarian organizations in the United States who are responsible for resettlement have suggested 100,000 Syrians alone. Why just 10,000 out of that increased number?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a couple of reasons for that. The first is, there is an intensive process for considering those refugees that could be admitted to the United States. So, for example, there is a rigorous security screening process.

Q But that just doesn't cover Syrian refugees?

MR. EARNEST: That's correct. That's correct. But it is something that --

Q So the question is, what's the difference -- I mean, I guess, why is that different if it's a Syrian refugee or from another country in that region -- why 10,000 of the 75,000 or 85,000?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I don't entirely -- try again to ask your question and I'll see if I can get you a better answer.

Q So they've ramped up the number. They've ramped up the number of --

MR. EARNEST: The overall --

Q -- the overall global number of refugees. The cap, right? But it does not change the number that was announced previously of 10,000 for Syrian refugees specifically. And given the intense calls on the Democratic side and from refugee organizations to increase the number from Syria specifically, why isn't that number higher?

MR. EARNEST: Which number are you talking about?

Q The 10,000 number.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Well, we made clear when I announced this last week that the 10,000 number is at least -- the President's goal is at least 10,000 in the next fiscal year. And the reason -- there are a couple of reasons why, while this represents a significant scaling up of the number of Syrian refugees that are admitted to this country, there are some limits in our ability to scale up so aggressively. The first is, because of the rigorous security screening measures that are in place, those take time. And that's one aspect of this.

The second aspect of this is financial resources that are required. We announced this policy decision of admitting at least 10,000 Syrian refugees next year, mindful of the resource constraints that exist. Significantly scaling it up beyond 10,000 Syrian refugees next year would require significantly more financial resources -- the kinds of financial resources that only Congress can approve. So there are some financial constraints as well.

And I guess the third thing that I would say is that as we're thinking through what the most effective U.S. response can be to this particular situation, there are 4 million Syrian refugees, and most of them -- I think most people who are experts in this area would say -- harbor the hope that they can return home once the security situation has stabilized in Syria. So given the impracticality of bringing all 4 million Syrians to the United States, given the fact that I think most people assume, most experts assume that most of those Syrians eventually want to return to their homes inside of Syria, bringing them all the way to the United States doesn't make sense, even if we could do that -- and we can't.

So that's why the response that you've seen from the United States has been focused on humanitarian assistance. I just announced more than \$400 million in additional humanitarian assistance that can be provided to ongoing relief efforts. That brings the total number to \$4.5 billion over the last several years; that's \$1.6 billion just this fiscal year alone. That makes the United States the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to this crisis, and it is the best way for us to meet the urgent needs of those who are in such a desperate situation.

Q The largest -- clarify then -- the \$419 million is from an emergency fund? This is not something that would require additional congressional approval? That's money that is already there and can be applied?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. So this is money that is principally from USAID, which is the agency here in the United States that's responsible for guiding that funding into the right place where we can maximize the benefit of those relief efforts. I will say that we continue to be concerned by the obstruction that we see in Congress right now for the confirmation

of the President's nominee to lead the USAID. This is a woman named Gayle Smith who has worked here at the National Security Council for quite some time. She has strong bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. She is a world-renowned expert on a variety of issues, including humanitarian relief. She is the right woman to lead that organization. And we need Republicans in Congress to block -- to drop their obstruction to her nomination. It's clear that that agency has got a lot of important work to do, and we'd like them to have the best in the business in charge of doing it.

Q Let me ask about the other end of the spectrum, which is Republicans who frankly think that the number that the President has set is too large. And almost immediately after Secretary Kerry made his announcement yesterday, the two Republican committee chairs of the Judiciary Committee put out a statement and they basically said, in talking to staff members, that they are not just -- their concern, which has been expressed before, about the possibility of ISIS infiltrating and coming into this country, but they're not confident -- in speaking to staff members -- that that system that's in place now, even as long as it does take, is effective. And how confident are you, as you stand here, that that is effective, or as they put it, full-proof?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is clear is that there is a rigorous process in place that includes the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI Terrorist Screening Center, relevant agencies from DHS, DOD and the intelligence community. There is an extensive amount of information that is collected about individuals. In fact, refugees are subjected to the most intensive screening of anybody that's planning to travel to the United States.

That means that there's extensive biographical and biometric information about them that is collected. They're subjected to in-person interviews. And all of that is in place because even in the midst of making decisions about the best way that the United States of America can contribute to the solution of this humanitarian crisis, the security of the United States homeland comes first. And that's what's going to guide our decision-making process, and that's why -- that, frankly, is why it's not possible for the United States to, overnight, ramp up the number of refugees that are admitted to this country.

One other thing I'll say about this is that our experts, particularly at the State Department, have made clear that what the United States is most interested in is bringing those refugees who are in the most desperate situation to the United States. So these are individuals who may have some unique or significant medical needs. Or in some cases, these are children who have lost parents in violence or those who have been the witness to violent acts. These are the people who are described by refugee experts as the most vulnerable, and that's one part of the population that our refugee efforts are focused on.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. And I know there's a whole week and a half left, but do you expect bipartisan budget negotiations to start this week?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is clear is that Republicans have been putting off these talks for far too long. And we've been disappointed that Republican leaders in Congress have not accepted the Democrats' invitation to engage in serious budget negotiations. We believe those kinds of negotiations are required to find common ground, to avert a government shutdown, and, just as importantly, make sure that our national security and economic priorities are adequately funded.

And I've made clear that while the President has put forward his own budget proposal that reflects those investments and reflects the priority that he places on fiscal responsibility, we understand that Congress may not just go ahead and pass the President's budget proposal that he thinks would be in the best interest of the country.

That's an indication that the President is willing to compromise. The President is willing to sign into law a piece of legislation that, while not perfect, does reflect I think what are broadly shared bipartisan priorities.

We haven't seen a willingness on the part of Republicans at this point to compromise, and that is a problem that has plagued Congress for at least five years now. But as the deadline day gets closer, hopefully we'll see more openness on the part of Republicans to actually trying to work with Democrats to solve problems.

Q And do you have any assurances by either the Speaker or Leader McConnell that they will bring forward a clean CR?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not going to get into any assurances that the administration has received in public or in private. I think all of you have seen the public assurances that have been offered both by the Speaker and the Republican Leader of the Senate that the federal government of the United States won't shut down. I hope they're right. One way we could guarantee that we would avoid a shutdown like that is if they would actually agree to sit down and engage in constructive negotiations with Democrats.

After all, that's what they did in 2013 after going through a two-and-a-half-week shutdown. We finally did see Republicans sit down with Democrats in Congress to negotiate a bipartisan solution. And, again, even in that situation, that agreement wasn't perfect, there was nobody who was ready to say that they agreed with every single comma in the legislation, but it did reflect the broad outlines of a bipartisan compromise. And that's why the President signed it into law. Hopefully Congress will be able to do it again, but we don't have to wait through two and a half weeks of a government shutdown to get it.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. Is the White House confident the Secret Service is prepared for all the demands it's facing this week between the papal visit and the visit of President Xi?

MR. EARNEST: Jordan, it's not an exaggeration to say that the United States Secret Service has been planning for these activities for months, if not years. And they are well aware of the significant challenges associated with trying to protect Pope Francis when he

is in the country, to protect President Xi when he is in the country, but also to protect all the dignitaries that are in New York for the U.N. General Assembly.

So this is a -- there is a unique confluence of events here, but fortunately we'll have professionals in the Secret Service from all across the country who will be here in Washington and Philadelphia and New York to make sure that the Pope has the kind of visit where he is kept safe, but also has the opportunity that he would like to have to engage with the American public. And striking that right balance is the constant challenge of the Secret Service, but these are professionals and there has been significant planning that's gone into this, and we're confident that they have what it takes to do this job right.

Q When you say they've been planning for this for years, can you elaborate a little more on that? Can you detail some of the steps that they've taken in coordination with the White House going back years?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there may not be -- I don't want to leave you with the impression that the visit of the Pope has been secretly planned for years. (Laughter.) What I'm trying to convey to you is that the Secret Service does have plans in place to make sure that they've got enough capacity to handle multiple prominent events all at the same time. And every year, around the United Nations General Assembly when we see dozens of high-level dignitaries from other countries in the United States at the same time, the Secret Service is cognizant of that planning and they're sort of aware of how they can best manage that difficult undertaking while at the same time providing for the safety and security of other dignitaries in the United States. And so that's what I'm alluding to when I say that this is the kind of event that they've planned for for quite some time.

Q So it's a good time to be a counterfeiter in Kansas?

MR. EARNEST: (Laughter.) Well, it's never a good time to be a counterfeiter in Kansas.

Jared.

Q Josh, I just want to follow up on Justin and Alexis's question about the Afghanistan story. Is it safe to say whatever we hear from the Department of Defense about the content of this cultural accommodation policy that the President has been aware of it since day one on the job, whatever it may be?

MR. EARNEST: No, Jared, I don't know what the policy is and I don't know, if there is a policy, how long the President has been aware of it.

Q You can't tell me that the President has been aware of the cultural accommodation policy in place in Afghanistan?

MR. EARNEST: I think that's what I just said.

Q Okay. And have you been briefed in your capacity as the Press Secretary in any changes of the cultural accommodation policy in Afghanistan over the past year or so that you've had this job?

MR. EARNEST: No.

Steve.

Q One of the things that Hillary Clinton said on "Face the Nation" was that she, at the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, had recommended that we train the rebels at the beginning of the conflict, many of whom had never been in the military before. And she said "that decision was not made at the time" and "a lot of what I worried about has happened." Did the President make a mistake by not listening to Hillary Clinton when she says she recommended training them at the very beginning of the conflict, and here we are, sort of four and a half years later, and we have a train-and-equip mission that she called a failure? And did the President -- should he have listened to her and others who very early on wanted a robust training-and-equipping operation back then?

MR. EARNEST: Steve, this is something that Secretary Clinton wrote about in her book that was released more than a year ago. I don't think she said anything yesterday that she hadn't already included in print. The fact is that the President has long been concerned about the possibility that there are some individuals -- well, let me say it this way. The President did not want to be in a situation in which United States policy would result in the training, arming and equipping of individuals who might later use that training and equipment against the United States and our interests.

So what the President has been quite concerned about is making sure that the vetting procedures that are in place are strict, and making sure that the individuals who are admitted to these kinds of programs are well aware of what their mission would be, but also that we are quite aware of what their values are. And many of our critics -- and I would not put Secretary Clinton in this category -- but there are many of our critics who have suggested that arming and equipping rebels about whom we know very little is the most effective way to advance the interests of the United States. And the President was very skeptical of that view. And, frankly, he continues to be skeptical of that view today.

What made more sense in the mind of the President was a program that would, A, be integrated with all the other things that the United States and our coalition partners are doing inside of Syria. This includes everything from military airstrikes to shutting down the flow of foreign fighters, to counter-financing efforts, and working effectively with those forces that are already on the ground to taking the fight to ISIL. And there has been important support that the United States has provided to some of those forces on the ground inside of Syria. And through our effective coordination, we have succeeded in making a lot of important progress against ISIL inside of Syria.

And in the mind of the President, thoroughly and properly vetting elements of the Syrian moderate opposition could be plugged into that broader strategy in a way that could advance our efforts. And the United States -- again, through good diplomatic work -- was

able to work with countries like Turkey and others who agreed to host some of these training facilities.

But ultimately, what we've seen from the Department of Defense is a program that has not yielded the kind of results that we'd like to see. And so General Austin, the Commander of Central Command has himself indicated that changes to that program are warranted, and he is considering exactly what changes could be implemented to improve the performance of this particular program.

Q It sounds like you're saying that the President does not regret not listening to Hillary Clinton very early on and other people who were saying, hey, let's ramp this up now.

Because it took -- we're four years into this conflict and it took years before the President was willing to even fund a robust effort. Does he still think he was right because of the concern that some of these people could ultimately be the wrong people, and she was wrong?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would just say about that a couple of things. The first is, I think there has been no question -- particularly those who have looked at the price tag for this operation -- that this has been a robust effort to try and train and equip moderate elements of the Syrian opposition. That hasn't worked very well, and it would have been quite unwise to make that the centerpiece of our strategy inside of Syria, to say nothing of the danger that would have been brought about by offering up that training and equipment to unvetted members of the Syrian opposition, many of whom could have turned out to be extremists who had used that training and equipment in pursuit of goals that the United States does not share.

So the President -- what the President was quite concerned about four years ago was the danger associated with offering training and equipment to a bunch of people that hadn't been thoroughly vetted; that that would not be consistent with our national security interests, particularly when we're talking about a place like Syria, where the security situation is so unstable and where there is a high concentration of extremists and extremist organizations operating inside that country.

Q So we could have seen -- his concern right now, if he's looking back four years at his decision-making process, that if he had decided to go along with not just Hillary Clinton but a lot of people on Capitol Hill who I remember talking to us about a robust effort to arm and equip this rebels back then, that we could have seen pictures just like we saw in Iraq of ISIS taking over a lot of American equipment, a lot of American arms, et cetera. Is that sort of how he looks at it? If he had followed that advice, we could have had a worse situation with more dangerous rebels and a stronger ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think in general the President was concerned about offering up training and equipment to those individuals that had not been vetted. And I do think that the early results of this robust training-and-equip operation that the Department of Defense has implemented over the course of the last year highlight just how unwise it would have been to make this kind of train-and-equip effort the centerpiece of our strategy inside of Syria.

So that's why the President has engaged in a strategy in Syria where one component of that strategy is this training and equipping of thoroughly vetted individuals whose backgrounds we know and whose goals we share. But ultimately what the Department of Defense will have to do is to take a hard look at this program and figure out what changes can be made to see if we can get some better results from them.

Molly.

Q Given -- to connect these two things -- that you've suggested that throwing money at the problem of the refugee crisis isn't going to solve it because the real solution is the removal of Assad; given that we're seeing more Iranian and Russian cooperation on this, we've seen Russia send military jets into Syria -- they've suggested, experts have suggested this is going to prolong that effort to remove Assad -- what is the U.S. going to be doing differently to effect change in this scenario? Should we be expecting any announcements around the UNGA assembly?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the argument, the way that you set it up, actually highlights why Russia's doubling down on Assad's power is a losing bet; that there is the potential that Russia doubling down with military support for the Assad regime could just exacerbate and lengthen the time to a solution.

So that's why we have made the case that there's no military solution to the challenges inside of Syria. Certainly we need to confront very seriously the threat that is posed by ISIL, and that includes using some military force by our coalition partners to degrade and ultimately destroy them. But the root cause of ISIL's growth is the failed leadership of Bashar al-Assad, and that's why the United States has strongly supported and tried to facilitate the U.N. efforts to affect a political transition inside of Syria.

Q But given that -- and that's been the U.S. position for four and a half years, and now we're seeing signs that we could be further away than ever, given this increased Russian involvement toward the removal of Assad, what will the U.S. be doing differently to effect change toward that goal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not sure that I would agree with the characterization that we're farther away than ever. The fact is, there is a lot less territory that Bashar al-Assad controls than he used to. The fact is that just in the last year, we have seen ISIL driven out of thousands of square kilometers of area inside of Syria that they previously held. The fact is that just in the last year, the United States, under the leadership of President Obama, has been able to build a 60-member coalition of nations to take the fight to ISIL. So we have made important progress, but it is clear that doubling down with military support for the Assad regime does make it more difficult to find a political solution and it's why we've described any potential Russian decision to do that as destabilizing and counterproductive.

Q So no strategy changes are being considered, and we shouldn't expect any announcements to come out of the general assembly?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any announcements to preview before the U.N., but I will say what I have said here many times, which is the President constantly reinforces with his national security team, particularly when it comes to issues like Syria, that they always need to be taking a hard look at the strategy and the consequences for that strategy. And if there are opportunities to refine that strategy to yield better results, then they should implement them.

So there is no formal policy review that's underway, but there surely is a persistent effort on the part of the President's team to take a hard look at our strategy and look for ways to improve upon it.

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

Q Got it. A couple things. First, a clarification. You've mentioned a couple times the \$4.5 billion in aid to Syria. Is that all humanitarian aid, or are you including the military operation in that?

MR. EARNEST: That is all humanitarian aid. So this is \$4.5 billion on the part of the United States to the ongoing humanitarian relief effort in the region, but also including inside of Syria.

Q Over and above the bombing some military -- whatever.

MR. EARNEST: Correct.

Q Second, back to the Pope. The Pope, after being -- the President will greet him at Andrews, he's going to see him here Wednesday morning. After that, there are two big events -- the mass at the Basilica; Jeb Bush is going there. The address to Congress the next day; Vice President Biden is going there. Does the President plan to attend either of those events?

MR. EARNEST: No, the President will not attend either of those. But the President is very much looking forward to another event, which is the opportunity that he'll have to sit down and meet with the Pope in the Oval Office after the arrival ceremony on Wednesday.

Q The arrival ceremony.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q And then finally -- so maybe the centerpiece of this visit is his address to members of Congress. And as Jim pointed out -- I mean, the Pope is pretty consistent in what he talks about. He talks about income inequality. He talks about climate change. He's talked a lot about Cuba. He's supported the Iran nuclear deal. That's going to kind of fall on deaf ears in this Congress, isn't it? I mean, does the White House really expect the Pope to change any hearts and minds on Capitol Hill?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's hard to say. I think it will depend on the spirit in which individuals choose to attend that event. I think it is quite clear that if it were a political figure who were giving that speech, that there would not be a lot of people persuaded

inside the United States Congress. I'd be willing to stipulate to that -- at least on those issues that you've described there.

We live in a pretty polarizing times, and there's no place in America that's more politically polarized than the United States Congress. But the Pope obviously comes at this from quite a different perspective. And he is somebody who has earned the respect, I think, of so many people in both parties, and it might cause members of Congress to listen to him in a different way, on a variety of issues. But ultimately, the Pope will make a decision about what he believes is his priority when addressing the United States Congress, and I'm confident that he will be well received.

Q So, to get biblical, you would not call it, casting "your pearls before swine"?

MR. EARNEST: (Laughter.) No. I think what I would say is --

Q Leading the witness. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I think simply that the Pope will decide for himself what is the most effective way for him to deliver a message to the United States Congress that reflects both the values that he holds dear, but also the kinds of issues that the United States Congress is confronting right now. And so he'll make that decision. I'm confident he'll be well received.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:26 P.M. EDT