

Gaggle by Josh Earnest en route Columbus, OH

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/05/gaggle-josh-earnest-en-route-columbus-oh

May 5, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 05, 2013

Aboard Air Force One
En Route Columbus, Ohio

10:29 A.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good Sunday morning, everybody. Happy Cinco de Mayo, and welcome aboard Air Force One for the trip to The Ohio State University, where the President will deliver the commencement address at ceremonies honoring the class of 2013.

You should have embargoed remarks in your in-box, but I will note in advance that you can look for the President to challenge the graduates to use their education to be engaged, active participants in American democracy. The authority of our system comes not just from elected leaders, but from active citizens. In our country's history, we've accomplished great things and brought about tremendous changes that even our Founders couldn't have envisioned because of the active engagement of the American people. The President will note that role of engaged citizens has never been more important than ensuring a strong system of American government that reflects the interests and will of our people.

So it should be an entertaining speech. And with that we'll take a few questions.

Q Josh, Israel is sharply escalating its role in the civil war in Syria with a new round of attacks, strikes there last night. How concerned is the U.S. that this situation could devolve into more of a regional thing that embroils Israel and other countries?

MR. EARNEST: Let me start by saying that we're horrified by the reports that more than 100 people were executed on May 2, in al-Bayda, reportedly by regime forces, including the Shabiha. Those responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law and serious violations and abuses of human rights law must be held accountable. As Bashar al-Assad continues to cling to power, we will not lose sight of the men, women and children who are being killed by his regime.

I wanted to get that out of the way first. In terms of the reports that you're citing overnight, I don't have any comment on those reports. I'm not in a position -- while we've seen those reports, I'm not in a position to offer you any confirmation of them.

But you did hear the President talk to Telemundo in an interview yesterday about the reports from Thursday night about actions taken by the Israeli government. The President didn't comment on those reports either. The President did note, however, that the Israelis are justifiably concerned about the threat posed by Hezbollah obtaining these advanced weapon systems. And the President many times has talked about his view that Israel, as a sovereign government, has the right to take the actions they feel are necessary to protect their people.

But in terms of the overnight reports, I don't have anything specific for you.

Q Josh, seven American troops were killed yesterday in Afghanistan. Has the President been in contact with commanders there since this happened? And is the President comfortable with these CIA payments that are going -- that President Karzai said yesterday are going to continue?

MR. EARNEST: The thoughts and prayers of the President and First Lady and everybody in the country are with the families of those who were lost -- the servicemen who were lost in Afghanistan. There clearly is -- it's a reminder once again, as if we needed a reminder, of the very serious effort and risk that American servicemen are taking to protect our interests in Afghanistan. And that's something that occurs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And like I said, these reports underscore the risks that they face and the danger they put themselves in to protect our interests there.

In terms of the reports about the CIA payments, I don't have anything for you on that. I'd refer you to the CIA.

Q Is the President comfortable with them?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to confirm any of those reports. I'd refer you to the CIA.

Q -- has the President had with any world leaders over the events of the past few days in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has been traveling through Mexico and Central America over the last three or four days. I don't have any specific calls to read out to you, but the President, as he took the trip, was joined by a number of senior members of his national security team -- National Security Advisor Donilon was with him; Deputy National Security Advisor Rhodes traveled with him. So the President was kept up to date on these reports even as he was traveling. But in terms of specific conversations that he had with world leaders, I don't have anything to read out to you at this point.

Q Josh, is the President concerned that the civil war in Syria is being used as a cover for groups like Hezbollah to transfer weapons?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have seen violence in Syria that has gotten the attention of the international community. The terrible use of weapons by the Assad regime against its own people is deplorable. It is something that the international community is united to

trying to end the bloodshed there. It's the view of the United States and many people around the world that a democratic transition in Syria cannot take place with Assad there, so Assad must leave power.

We've also talked about the threat, the destabilizing threat that this conflict poses to the region. And it certainly is one of the many reasons it's gotten so much attention that it has, and it's one of the reasons that this is a top national security priority of this administration.

But in terms of the motives of people, I can't shed any light on that. The President has talked about his concern that there might be some extremist elements who would take advantage of the chaos and the instability to lay the groundwork for other acts of violence. So the President has acknowledged that threat, and it's certainly one of the many reasons that the United States is working with our international partners to try to find a way to bring this bloodshed to an end and ensure a transition to a government in Syria that actually reflects the will of the Syrian people.

Q What's the expectation within the administration on how much information you guys have, should Israel take action, beforehand? Is there an expectation that you guys are being looped in before they would have an attack?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can tell you that the United States, and this administration, in particular, is in very close contact and is closely coordinating with the Israeli government on a range of issues, including important national security priorities. So there are conversations and communications that are happening all the time between senior members of this administration and their counterparts in Israel.

But in terms of the details of those conversations, I'm obviously not in a position to read those out. But the close coordination between the Obama administration and the United States of America is ongoing with the Israeli government.

Q You said that the United States believes Israel has a right to defend itself. The Syrian government is calling these strikes a flagrant violation of Israel's international obligations and all that. So I just want to be clear. Do you think that Israel does have the right to violate another country's sovereignty, like Syria, to defend itself against weapons that might be --

MR. EARNEST: I appreciate the opportunity to clarify. You're asking about reports from overnight that I'm just not in a position to comment on. I can say what the President said last night as a general matter that the Israelis are justifiably concerned about the threat posed by Hezbollah obtaining advanced weapon systems including some long-range missiles.

But in terms of how that relates to specific reports overnight about military action, I'm not in a position to comment on that. If you do have questions about reports of Israeli action, I'd refer you to the Israelis to talk about that.

Q Following up on his question, you talked about the constant contacts that the administration has with Israel. How comfortable is the administration with the contact just in the past three or four days, the past week?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to evaluate those communications just because I don't want to talk about them publicly. But I will just assure you as a principle that the way this administration has operated has been to closely lash up our posture and our intelligence and other security arrangements closely with the Israelis.

Q So that's in general, but not in specific to the past week?

MR. EARNEST: That's correct. I'm just not going to get into the details of those conversations, other than to assure you that our posture has been that we're going to closely coordinate with the Israelis on a range of issues. And that is continuing.

Q What does the President plan this week to try to get the immigration bill moving?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you heard over the last few days the President has talked quite a bit about the bipartisan effort to try to pass comprehensive immigration reform in the Congress. The President is pleased with the efforts that are underway, that they are making progress, that there have been -- there is an emerging bipartisan agreement. The President has acknowledged that the agreement that is moving through the Senate right now doesn't reflect every single thing that he believes should be included in the legislation, but he does believe that the compromise does fulfill the principles that he's laid out.

The President has put out four clear principles about ensuring that we have the resources necessary to secure the border; about ensuring that employers are held accountable for taking advantage of the broken immigration system. The President wants to try to streamline and improve and modernize the legal immigration system. And he wants to make sure that there's a clear path to citizenship for undocumented Americans [sic] who are already here.

The compromise fulfills those four principles. And I think the President is going to continue to have conversations with members of Congress and will continue to talk publicly about why he believes this compromise is important, why it should move through the Senate, and why the President hopes it will land on his desk in the months ahead.

Q Senator Rubio is taking a lot of flack from the right for his role in trying to put together a bipartisan compromise. Has the President spoken with him since that one meeting with a number of senators or does he have any plans to?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know of any future plans to, and I'm not in a position read out any calls they may have had recently.

Q -- yesterday the incoming president said that President Obama's push for gun control is based on revenge. What is your response to that? And then also, with senators starting to get heat in their home districts, is the administration going to try to reach out to some people who they think might be swayable?

MR. EARNEST: I have to admit I didn't see any of the comments at the NRA convention so I wouldn't comment on them at this point. What we have seen is we have seen a response at the grassroots level from American citizens who are concerned about the outcome of the initial effort to try to close loopholes in the background checks system. The President has indicated -- and he indicated in his remarks at the Rose Garden a few weeks ago -- that this will continue to be a policy priority of his; that there is no reason that we shouldn't be able to continue to work in bipartisan fashion to make progress on a range of common-sense measures that would reduce gun violence in communities all across the country.

The background check proposal was a bipartisan proposal -- it was put together by a conservative Democrat and a conservative Republican. So there's no reason that we shouldn't be able to see some progress on this in the Congress. And the President is going to stay at it. You heard the Vice President talk about it a little bit last week as well. This is going to continue to be a priority of ours.

The way that we're going to eventually be successful on this -- this actually goes to some of the remarks that the President will make in his commencement address today -- that we're going to need to see the American people get engaged in this debate. And there's plenty of polling data to indicate that there's strong public support for this -- overwhelming public support for this, actually. But what we need to see is we need to see Americans get engaged in their democracy and make their voices and opinions heard to members of Congress, and to make it clear that there will be consequences for the way that members of Congress vote on these common-sense measures.

The President has been very clear about his support for and belief in the Second Amendment of the Constitution. The President doesn't have any desire to undermine that fundamental constitutional right for law-abiding Americans. But he doesn't believe that that should prevent us from taking common-sense steps to close loopholes in the background checks system. And I think the vast majority of the American people support that. And we're going to make progress on that as the American people make their voices heard on this issue.

Q Speaking of those consequences, a number of senators who voted against the measure -- Senators Ayotte and Flake, for example, have taken a beating in their poll numbers since that vote. Does the White House attribute some of their declines to the fact that they voted against this measure that you say the Americans overwhelmingly support?

MR. EARNEST: I think some of those senators themselves have acknowledged that their poll numbers have suffered as a result of their votes. So they're much more sophisticated consumers of polling information than I am. But I know that Senator Flake, for example, talked about the impact that that had on his standing in the state of Arizona with voters in

Arizona, including with gun owners in Arizona. So I'll leave it to Senator Flake and others to assess their own poll numbers and the consequences of their vote on common-sense background check legislation.

Anybody else? Okay, enjoy your breakfast, guys.

END

10:44 A.M. EDT