

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/22/15

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

****Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.**

1:03 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everyone. Nice to see you all. I wanted to call to your attention one thing before we get into questions. We had a back-and-forth in this room yesterday about recent reports out of Afghanistan about some reprehensible conduct of some Afghan soldiers. And overnight the Commander of U.S. Force in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, issued a statement and I wanted to commend it to your attention.

In that statement, he makes clear that throughout his many tours of duty in Afghanistan that he has never been aware of a command policy to ignore suspicions of sexual abuse that's committed by Afghans against children. And he repeated that no such policy has been in place certainly while he has been commander.

In his statement, he makes clear that he has ordered all of the personnel that are under his command in Afghanistan to ensure that suspicions of sexual abuse are immediately reported up the chain of command. And he also said that those reports would be forwarded to the Staff Judge Advocate so that the government of Afghanistan could take the necessary steps in pursuit of justice against Afghan soldiers.

He took the additional step of raising this issue directly with President Ghani, and he secured a commitment from President Ghani that the Afghan government would redouble their efforts to investigate these claims and to ensure that those who are guilty of perpetrating these claims are held accountable and that justice is properly administered.

So, for those of you who that have not seen the statement, it's rather lengthy but certainly is an important one. And we can make sure that you get it.

So with all that, Kevin, you can get us started with questions. I think it's your first time in the front row. Welcome.

Q Thank you, Josh. President Obama told business leaders last week he wanted to establish rules of the road on cyber intrusions. To follow up on that, what does the administration consider to be legitimate computer hacking? And what does the administration want to make clear is out of bounds? And will the failure to come up with a road map this weekend more likely lead to economic sanctions against the Chinese entities?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, let me say a couple things about that. The United States has been quite clear about the concerns that we have about China's conduct in cyberspace, and there is a very specific way that we have described what those concerns are -- or I guess what those principal concerns are. We have a variety of concerns. But our principal concerns center around what we have described as government-sponsored, cyber-enabled theft of confidential business information and proprietary technology from U.S. companies for financial gain.

And that has been something that we have long been concerned about. It, frankly, predates the administration of President Xi. And this is a concern that President Obama has raised directly both with President Xi in their previous meetings, but also with President Xi's *counterpart predecessor on those occasions when the President had the opportunity to meet him.

There are a number of steps that we have already taken to make quite clear publicly our concerns. One of those was a decision by the Department of Justice to indict five Chinese military officials for their actions in cyberspace. And I think we got the best evidence that the Xi government understands how serious our concerns are because they dispatched a senior Chinese official, Secretary Meng, to travel to the United States and participate in conversations with a variety of U.S. government officials, including White House officials. And so I think it is quite clear to the Chinese exactly how serious our concerns are.

At this point I'm not going to preview what the discussions between President Obama and President Xi could look like other than to tell you that this issue will feature quite prominently on their agenda.

Q With Pope Francis arriving in just a few hours, what specific issues will the President raise with him? And what does the President hope will be the long-term accomplishment of the Pope's visit?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is not the first opportunity that President Obama has had to meet with Pope Francis. The President traveled to Europe last year and had the opportunity to travel to the Vatican and meet Pope Francis for the first time there.

The President is looking forward to welcoming Pope Francis to the United States later today. I understand that this isn't just the Pope's first visit to the United States, it's actually his first visit to the United States not just as Pope, but his first visit to the United States ever. And it is an opportunity for the citizens of this country to welcome him and show how warmly his message has been received in this country by both Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

He serves as a role model for so many based on the way that he has lived out the values in his life. He doesn't just talk about them, but he lives them. And I think that has really struck a chord in many people, some of whom don't even share the Catholic faith with Pope Francis. But they admire the way that he has lived his life. They admire the way that he has articulated his values, and that's one of not just respect but a lot of admiration in this country.

And the President is looking forward to the opportunity to formally welcome him to the White House tomorrow morning, and certainly is most looking forward to, I think, the opportunity to visit with him in the Oval Office. I would not expect a robust discussion of a political agenda, but rather I think it's an opportunity for the two men to talk about the values that they have in common. And there are many.

Julia.

Q Thanks, Josh. Yemen's President Hadi has returned to Aden after nearly six months in exile. Does the White House see this as a sign of improved conditions in Yemen? And will the President meet with President Hadi at the U.N. in the coming days?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any meetings on the President's schedule in New York to discuss at this point. The President's schedule for New York is still being finalized. And I would expect in the next couple of days that we'll have some more details about that schedule and we can talk more not just about the events in which the President will participate, but also some of the meetings that he intends to do with other world leaders who are also participating at the U.N. General Assembly.

As it relates to the situation in Yemen, we continue to be quite concerned about how the violence and political instability in that country has contributed to a significant humanitarian problem. And we continue to urge all parties in that conflict to participate in the talks that the U.N. is trying to get started to try to bring about a political resolution to the turmoil there.

The United States for some time now has been providing support to our partners in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries who I think are understandably concerned about the security situation along their southern border, but we have urged restraint on all sides.

We'll continue to do that. Because ultimately, like so many other situations that are often compared to Yemen, the solution there is not going to be found in the continued use of military force, but rather through the eventual success of diplomatic talks.

Q Also reports out just an hour ago that retired General John Allen will be stepping down from his position as the envoy in the U.S. coalition to fight the Islamic State. Is that something you can confirm? And if so, what does his stepping down signal about the U.S. strategy in fighting Islamic State?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything to confirm at this point. For questions about personnel I'd refer you to the State Department. I guess for questions about the State Department personnel, I'd refer you to the State Department.

What I can say more generally about General Allen is he is somebody who signed up for a six-month tour, and he's been on the job for I believe more than a year now. So that is an indication of the commitment to his service that he's demonstrated.

He had the opportunity just a couple of weeks ago to do an interview with a television network where he discussed his ongoing efforts to build the international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

There are a variety of ways to point to the progress that that coalition has made. I think the best one I can direct you toward is the recent commitment that we've received from Turkey to more deeply engage in this international effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

And that has included stepped-up efforts on the part of the Turks to engage militarily and support ongoing military efforts there. It also reflects the recent commitment of the Turks to allow the United States and our coalition partners to use certain military facilities inside of Turkey that will facilitate the more effective application of military force inside of Syria. But as it relates to General Allen's future plans, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Q Did General Allen ever express his frustrations with the President over at the White House about the failure to get adequate resources in the fight, particularly in training Syrian opposition fighters? As we know last week, there are only four or five of them. Or were there discussions of him wanting any more resources that he felt like he wasn't able to get? Did he share those frustrations with the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't have any specific conversations to tell you about other than to say General Allen over the last year has played an important role in helping to assemble the kind of international coalition that has contributed greatly to the progress that has been made in the fight against ISIL.

But I don't have any additional light to shed on any confidential conversations that General Allen has participated in.

Jim.

Q To follow up on Julia's question about General Allen, to ask her question a different way, the news that came out last week about the four or five trained fighters, obviously, that led you to say that they experienced some difficulties in that program. Did that story, did that news in any way change the President's view or his attitude toward General Allen? Did he lose any confidence in General Allen in the last several months that he's been on this job leading this push against ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Of course not. General Allen's principal responsibility was to help build this international coalition that, as we've discussed on a few occasions here, has been far more broad and far more intensive than I think any of us expected a year or so ago.

There was, you'll recall last August, a lot of intense skepticism about how much success the United States would have in building a genuine international coalition to take the fight to ISIL and to carry out all elements of our strategy against ISIL.

But the fact is, I think there are 62 countries now that are actively participating in that effort, including Turkey. And we've seen recent indications from our partners in both the U.K. and in France that they're prepared -- or at least considering, if not prepared to expand their involvement in these efforts. Currently both of those two nations are intimately involved in our operations against ISIL inside of Iraq. And they have recently announced that they are ramping up their activities inside of Syria, as well.

All of that is a testament to the kind of momentum that is behind our ongoing diplomatic efforts to build and strengthen this coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And General Allen certainly deserves a lot of credit for that.

Q And can you talk a little bit about the symbolic importance of the President and the First Lady and the First Family and Vice President all greeting Pope Francis at Andrews? I guess it's sort of a bit of pomp and circumstance. But what does it mean to this President? Why is he going to these lengths?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Pope Francis, we have seen, has really struck a chord in people not just across the United States, but around the world. And, again, the kind of inspiration -- he serves as a source of inspiration not just for Catholics but of people of, frankly, all religions around the world that share the values of Pope Francis and certainly share the values that he has discussed and tried to live out in his life, particularly his commitment to social and economic justice.

So I do think it's an important symbol of the amount of respect and admiration -- not just that the First Family has for Pope Francis but that the American people have for Pope Francis -- that you'll see such a warm reception for him when he arrives to the United States this afternoon.

Q And I'm going to try to ask the previous question in a different way. Last year when the President had the press conference with Prime Minister Renzi in Rome after his meeting with the Pope, we were all curious if the President was discussing with the Pope this issue of contraception and the Affordable Care Act. And the President went off and said, you know what, we didn't really talk about that -- we talked about immigration, we talked about income inequality, talked about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I'm just curious, when they have discussions this week, is there some business that the President would like to see the Pope help him with? Are there some big-ticket items left in the President's agenda that he'd like to see the Pope help him on? Obviously Cuba was conducted largely in secret, the public was not aware of that. Do they still have some business to attend to in the President's remaining time in office?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have discussed the important role that the Vatican played in supporting the efforts of the government of Cuba and the government of the United States to begin to normalize the relations between our two countries. There is no doubt that the

moral influence and the trust that both the Cuban government and the Cuban people and the American government and the American people place in the moral leadership of Pope Francis was an important part of finally completing that agreement.

But when the President sits down with Pope Francis tomorrow in the Oval Office, the President will not arrive at that meeting with a political agenda. This is an opportunity for two men who have so many values in common to talk about the efforts that they are taking in their respective and quite different roles to advance those shared values.

Q Is there much business to attend to now? Is there less on their agenda than there was previously, would you say? Is this more of a social house call?

MR. EARNEST: No, I wouldn't -- I think the President is looking forward to it. I think the President thinks it will be an interesting meeting that he is looking forward to, but I wouldn't describe it as a social meeting. I think that the way that both of these men have dedicated their lives to advancing values related to social justice and prioritizing those who are less fortunate, and that they pursue those values with a sense of conviction I think gives them a lot of serious things to talk about. And certainly the way that President Obama has prioritized those kinds of issues throughout his career, even before he arrived in the presidency, I think should give you an indication of how important the President thinks this meeting is.

Jim.

Q So just following up on the Pope and the meeting, which you say will largely be about talking about values, shared values. Of course, there are values that they do not share.

And I'm wondering, will the President give as much weight to listening to the Pope about issues such as abortion, Planned Parenthood, contraception, as he will listening to the Pope's values about global warming and other things they do share? How much weight will he give to listening to those things where the Pope does disagree with him?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President will arrive at this meeting with a very open mind.

And I think he is very interested in hearing what's on the Pope's mind and what's in the Pope's heart, and I think the President will join that conversation in a spirit of respect.

And I don't know whether or not those issues will come up in their meeting, but I'm confident that if they do that it will be an opportunity for the men to speak honestly with one another but also in a tone of respect that illustrates just how much they have in common.

I'm confident that there are areas where they may not see things the same way, but I do think that, certainly when it comes to the President, that he understands the motivation that the Pope has and that he is interested in pursuing these values for all of the right reasons. And the President, even if he doesn't agree with him in every respect, certainly does hold the Pope and his views in high regard.

Q And just if I can flip that a little bit, is it any less legitimate for members of Congress to reject the Pope's views on global warming or Cuba than when others reject the Pope's views on abortion or the death penalty? Is it any less legitimate to reject those views than

his views which you agree with?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's a difficult thing to discuss. I think people take -- I think hold strong personal feelings about the way they interpret and listen to the teachings of a religious leader like the Pope. I think what has been complicated for some is that they have sought in some instances to highlight those areas where they agree with the Pope and explicitly try to draw political benefit from that, and then try to explain away those areas where they might disagree. And that has left them -- at least some of them, including some presidential candidates -- in the awkward position of trying to suggest that the Pope is just making a political statement when he is talking about things they don't happen to agree with but that the Pope has a real conviction on those areas where they do agree.

I don't, frankly, think that reflects how the Pope has written about some of these issues -- climate change comes to mind. And you can look at that document that was issued by the Vatican and I think you can see the way that the views that are articulated in that document are informed by the views and teachings and theology of the Catholic Church. And I think that's been awkward for some politicians to explain away.

I think that's why the approach the President takes is quite different, which is acknowledging on the front end that this is not a meeting between politicians and this is not an effort to advance anybody's political agenda, but rather it is an opportunity for two respected world leaders with significant influence around the globe to spend some time talking about the values that they hold in common, and to do so in an atmosphere of respect. And it is an opportunity for the President to illustrate the deep admiration that the American people have for Pope Francis and his leadership.

Pam.

Q Josh, the President asked his staff to make sure that the visit of the Pope has a lasting value. Can you give us an idea of how that would be manifested? And will there be any kind of initiatives coming out of the Pope's visit?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't want to prejudge anything about the meeting at this point. But our goal here has been to ensure that the way that the Pope is received here in the United States is consistent with the warm feelings of admiration and respect that the American people have for the Pope, his teaching, his values and the way that he has lived his life.

His willingness to say what he believes and to live out those values have deeply inspired a lot of people, including many non-Catholics. And it's that moral authority that the Pope has that we're eager to show respect for. And tomorrow's meeting will be interesting.

Q The issues that come out of the Pope's -- that are his moral values -- income inequality, protecting the environment and that kind of thing -- aren't those basically political values for the President? Don't they equate to political values?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I do think that in the President's thinking, certainly the President's values -- some of which you named there -- do have an impact and do guide the kind of priorities the President has set when it comes to his political agenda.

But we've gone to great lengths to ensure that while the two men have any number of shared values, that I'd be reluctant to ascribe any political views to the Pope. He can certainly speak for himself when it comes to his view on a variety of political positions. The goal of this meeting is to give the two men the opportunity to talk about their shared values.

There will be time for politics, frankly, all 364 days -- the other 364 days of the year. But tomorrow, at least for that one meeting, will be an opportunity for the President to put politics aside and have an opportunity to talk about the values that he and the Pope have in common.

Laura.

Q Thank you. There's a very important cardinal who said that the Pope is going to enter the United States "as migrant." According to the Catholic News Service, immigration will be one of the most important themes of the Pope's visit. What's the White House reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'll let the Pope speak for himself, and he'll obviously have an opportunity to describe his views on a range of topics. And I'll let him do that. I think the President's views on many of these issues is quite well known to everybody in this room, whether it comes to fighting for common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform in this country, or ensuring that the United States steps up and continues to play a leading role in responding to the basic humanitarian needs of those fleeing violence from Syria.

As you'll recall, the United States continues to be the largest donor of humanitarian assistance. That assistance is now up to \$4.5 billion in terms of the financial contributions that the U.S. government has made to ongoing relief efforts in the Middle East. That's \$1.6 billion this fiscal year alone. And I think it reflects not just the commitment of the United States, but also the values of the American people to try to assist and make a substantial contribution to the effort to meet the basic humanitarian needs of those fellow human beings that are in a rather desperate situation.

Q But what will happen if the Pope asks the President to welcome more migrants in the United States?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't want to prejudge what may happen tomorrow, but you will recall that last week, or maybe it was the week before, we made an announcement that the United States, upon the direct orders of the President, plans to take in at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next fiscal year. And you saw the announcement from Secretary Kerry about the stepped-up efforts of the United States to take refugees from all over the world.

We've discussed before that there is a very specific United Nations designation when it comes to refugees. And in recent years, the United States has taken in more refugees through the United Nations in that specific category of United Nations-designated individuals than the rest of the world combined.

So it is clear that the United States, certainly under the leadership of President Obama, understands the important role that the United States can and should play when it comes to trying to address the needs of those who are less fortunate, particularly those who are in such a desperate situation that they've had to flee their homes because of violence.

Q And lastly, in front of the Pope in Cuba, Raul Castro's speech included a demand that the United States returns Guantanamo Bay to Cuba. What's your reaction?

MR. EARNEST: We've had the opportunity to discuss this a couple of times, but that certainly is not part of the policy that we envision.

Richard.

Q Thank you, Josh. I just want to -- again, the Pope's visit, on a different perspective. I just wanted to know from you, what's the feeling in the White House, behind those walls? Is it just another guest, another eminent guest coming to the White House? Is the President excited? We understand the respect you have for him, his values, his life. But in the White House, how do people feel receiving the Pope this time? Because we've seen the city -- I mean I was here for Benedict the XVI, and it was not the same feeling. The atmosphere was totally different.

MR. EARNEST: Well, certainly there is a lot of respect and admiration for Pope Francis and for the message of love and inclusion that he'll bring with him when he travels to the United States later today. But Pope Francis has also served as an inspiration to so many people -- both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. And I think that is what accounts for the kind of palpable excitement that you see not just all across the city, but even in the halls of this building. And again, I'm not Catholic, but certainly I would include myself in the broad category of those who have been genuinely inspired by the Pope's words, his message and his actions to live out the kinds of values that he preaches.

And the United States -- or the White House is the destination for many world leaders, many of whom are good friends and allies and have earned the deep respect of the American people. But I do think, with all due respect to those other world leaders, I think the Pope is a singular figure and he has really stirred the souls of people all around the world.

And people here in the White House who -- people who work in the White House do -- many people who work in the White House do this job because they also have values that have deeply influenced the kind of work that they pursue on a daily basis. And that there are people who work at the National Security Council or who work at the National Economic Council, who work at the Office of Management and Budget, in some cases these are highly technical jobs, but by and large, these are individuals who, despite their

technical expertise -- and even if it means they spend most of their time behind their computer, they're spending a lot of time at the office, sometimes away from their family because they're animated by the same kinds of values that animate the Pope.

And I think that's why the opportunity to have Pope Francis, somebody who shares those values, here in this building tomorrow makes for a really special day.

Q Josh, you've been here since the beginning. With the Pope and President Xi Jinping coming right after, is it the most busy week you will have gone through? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's certainly -- my colleagues in the Social Office would say that that's the case. From a formal arrival ceremony for Pope Francis tomorrow, the formal arrival ceremony for President Xi just two days later on Friday morning, and then a state dinner on Friday evening, to say nothing of all of the work that goes into planning for all the dignitaries who are in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly, I think it's fair for you to assume that my colleagues over in the Social Office are well aware of the microscope that they're under right now.

Deesha Dyer is the recently named Social Secretary here at the White House, so she certainly is getting a baptism by fire. No pun intended. (Laughter.) I took a little while for you guys to get that joke, I guess, huh? (Laughter.) But I have no doubt that she is going to -- that she and her team are going to perform admirably, and that both Pope Francis and President Xi will feel the warm welcome and deep respect not just of the American people but also of the President and the First Lady.

Kelly, go ahead.

Q Staying with the Pope for a moment, and then I have a second question. If you could take us in the room a bit, do you expect that they will have their conversation in English, which is not the Holy Father's preferred language? Or would you expect it to be translated? And is there a gift that's planned from the First Family to His Holiness?

MR. EARNEST: As you've seen when the President has received world leaders here at the White House there typically is a diplomatic gift exchange. And I would anticipate that that will take place tomorrow. I don't have any details about what that gift is, but we'll have some more details on that for you tomorrow.

As it relates to the actual meeting, I don't know whether or not it will be conducted in English or in Spanish. But once that meeting has taken place, we can try to confirm those kinds of details for you.

Q And on another topic, with the environment being part of the backdrop here, last weekend in Concord, New Hampshire, Secretary Clinton talked about Keystone and her need to make a decision and to make that public, and putting the White House on notice, feeling that --

MR. EARNEST: We noticed.

Q -- as she described it, that she has given time to the administration, but that she could not wait much longer, were her words. What is the status of a decision? What sort of formal notice did she provide to the White House? What can you tell us?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any formal notice that was provided to the White House, and I'm not aware that any formal notice is necessary. This is a policy process that continues to be underway over at the State Department. And for updates in terms of the timeframe in which a decision will be reached, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to ask you about something you said earlier. You said it felt like the President and the Holy Father had a lot in common, they had a lot of shared values. Can you sort of unpack that for me a little bit?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me do the best I can on this. I think the best way to describe this to you is that both men have talked quite publicly about their commitment to social justice and both men have dedicated not just their careers but their lives to that effort. Certainly the kind of commitment that we've seen from Pope Francis is unique and singular, but I think the values that both men live out have some common ground.

President Obama, after graduating from law school, turned down offers from high-paying law firms on the East Coast, and traveled to Chicago and spent time on the South Side of Chicago in a community that had been going through some significant economic turmoil, and a lot of people losing their jobs, a lot of families being separated -- a community that was really in need, and the President worked in that community to try to help rebuild it. And the President actually worked quite closely with other Catholics in that community, and the President has talked about that quite a bit.

So I think the point I'm trying to make here is that this has been a value that has animated the President's career choices since he was a young man and long before he'd become famous.

There's a similar story to tell about Pope Francis -- that prior to rising through the leadership ranks of the Catholic Church that Pope Francis earned a reputation in Latin America for somebody who was willing to roll up his sleeves and try to meet the needs of those who are less fortunate, particularly those who were economically destitute.

And I think what is -- one of the things that I think so captured the imagination of people around the world is the way that Pope Francis has strived to try to continue that humility and that kind of commitment, even in an office as celebrated as the Papacy. And, again, I think that's one thing that has inspired so many people about the Pope.

And again, the Pope's dedication to these kinds of issues are singular, and I don't think anybody can claim to have the kind of dedication to these issues that the Pope has displayed. But certainly I think that you can say that both President Obama and Pope Francis have, over the course of their careers, both demonstrated a commitment to values related to social and economic justice.

Q I want to ask you about a report from China that an American business person, Phan Phan-Gillis, has been arrested and has been accused of a number of crimes there. Do you have an update or a White House response to that report?

MR. EARNEST: We have seen these reports, Kevin, and this is something that the United States State Department has been working on for quite some time. Shortly after her initial detention, State Department officials were in touch with Chinese officials raising questions about her detention. And since then, in a variety of formats and at a variety of levels, both in China and here in the United States, some direct questions have been asked of Chinese officials about her status.

And what's disconcerting to the administration is that many of those questions have gone unanswered. And I can tell you that today, just earlier today, the White House was in touch with the Chinese Foreign Ministry to continue to ask these direct questions about her current status and to insist that all of the rules are followed that govern her access to her attorneys and providing her appropriate information about her status. But other than that -- for additional details about this, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Q Would it be fair to say this casts, at least in some ways, a pall on the coming visit of President Xi?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, I certainly couldn't rule out that it would come up in the conversation between the two leaders. As I pointed out, the United States at a variety of levels, both in China and in the United States, has asked direct questions about her status that, thus far, have gone unanswered by Chinese officials.

Toluse.

Q To go back to a General John Allen -- I know you don't want to confirm whether or not he is stepping down, but that story also quoted several military officials that have kind of had the same theme -- the theme of being under-resourced and specific challenges in Syria and the fight against ISIL. And we heard from General Petraeus the same theme -- that the U.S. has not done enough to invest resources in the fight against ISIL. So I'm wondering if you can comment on that theme that we're not investing where we should in terms of the resources going into the fight against ISIL.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think I would just say that we have been quite clear about what exactly the strategy is to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And General Allen has played an important role in that strategy, because at the core of that strategy is the assembly of a coalition of 62 nations to implement it, and that is a much broader coalition with members who are more intimately involved in this effort than any of us would have predicted a year ago. And that's a testament, first and foremost, to the President's leadership, but it certainly is a testament to the effectiveness that General Allen has displayed in his current role.

I think the other thing that's important is you're citing military officials who -- I guess most of whom anonymously -- are offering some critique. The President has made quite clear that, A, there is no military solution to the challenges that are plaguing Syria, and

that, B, our strategy encompasses a whole lot more than just military might.

Now, certainly the use of U.S. and coalition military airpower has been incredibly effective in driving ISIL out of areas of both Iraq and in Syria. And we have been able to cooperate quite effectively with both forces on the ground that are taking the fight to ISIL, particularly Iraqi security forces, and that has allowed us to make some progress. But we've also been in a situation where we have been able to engage in counter-financing efforts. We've been able to engage the international coalition in efforts to stop the flow -- or at least reduce the flow of fighters, if not shut it down entirely.

So all of these are efforts that require the United States to use our influence through diplomacy, through technical expertise related to the financial system and others to advance our goal. And there's no denying that over the last year or so, we've made important progress, but there's still a lot of work that remains to be done.

Q Just bouncing off that, General Petraeus said, "We are not where we should be at this point." Do you disagree with that in terms of the progress that's been made?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there certainly -- I guess the fact that I said that there's a lot more important work that needs to get done I think should be an indication to you that there's progress that we still hope that we can make in the years ahead.

Q If I can switch topics to the impending potential government shutdown. The Senate I think is going to vote on a CR that would continue to fund the government through the end of the year, through December, but it would strip that funding for Planned Parenthood -- potentially, I guess, shift it over to other community health centers. Do you have a response to that strategy from the Senate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen the specific piece of legislation that they've put forward, but I think the first place to ask your question is actually to Democrats in Congress.

Ultimately, I think the one thing that is crystal-clear to everybody, including the Republican leadership in Congress, is that they're not going to succeed in passing budget legislation strictly along party lines. They're going to have to cooperate with Democrats in order to reach the kind of agreement that would prevent a government shutdown and ensure that our national security and economic priorities are adequately funded. So we're hopeful that that's what they'll do.

Q One more on General Campbell, the statement in Afghanistan. I get the sense that from that statement, the General is saying that things should go up through the chain of command and there's no policy against reporting these things. But it seems like in The New York Times story, there were soldiers who were punished for actually intervening at the time and stopping this abuse from happening. I didn't get a sense from the statement whether or not that punishment would continue -- people who intervened rather than just reporting would be punished, and if that's the new stance from the administration -- soldiers will be allowed to intervene and stop this from happening.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just read you the relevant paragraph from his statement, where he says, "Recent media reports citing alleged cases from 2010, 2011 and 2012 have claimed that in the past, a command policy existed within the Afghan theater of operations that U.S. forces were to ignore suspicions of sexual abuse committed by Afghans against children." General Campbell said that, "I personally have served multiple tours of duty in Afghanistan and am absolutely confident that no such theater policy has ever existed here, and certainly no such policy has existed throughout my tenure as commander."

So as it relates to the cases of individual soldiers, I'm not going to talk about that from here. You can talk to the Department of Defense about that. But what General Campbell I think has stated rather unequivocally here is what his expectations are of U.S. military personnel who encounter these kinds of situations.

I want to actually go back to one other thing that related to the ISIL effort that I think is relevant to the kind of progress that we can highlight at this point. And this is something that was just announced by the Pentagon that I'm following up on here. The Pentagon today has confirmed that al Qaeda operative and explosive expert David Drugeon was killed in a coalition airstrike on July 5th, 2015 near Aleppo, Syria. Mr. Drugeon was a French national and was a member of a network of veteran al Qaeda operatives occasionally called the Khorasan Group. He was an explosive expert who trained other extremists in Syria and sought to plan external attacks against Western targets.

The Department of Defense also announced today that ISIL senior leader Abu Bakr al-Turkmani was killed in a coalition strike on September 10 near Tal Afar, Iraq. Mr. Turkmani was a legacy al Qaeda-in-Iraq jihadist before he joined ISIL. He was a close associate to multiple ISIL senior leaders in the Mosul and Tal Afar, Iraq area. His death will serve to disrupt ISIL operations in Tal Afar, impacting the terrorist group's freedom to maneuver in ISIL-controlled areas.

So again, I think this is evidence of the kind of progress that we're making against ISIL and other extremists that are operating in Iraq and in Syria. This is not an indication that we've done everything we need to do. There's still more work that needs to get done. But this is an example of the kind of progress and the kind of pressure that the United States and our coalition partners are applying to ISIL and to other extremists that are seeking to harm the United States and our interests.

Francesca.

Q Thank you, Josh. This predates my time at the White House and I know it predates your time at the podium, but back on Petraeus -- do you know if he ever apologized to the President?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of -- I can't speak to the details of any private conversations that Mr. Petraeus may have had with the President.

Q And while you've been up at the podium -- so I'm just going to read a little bit to you because I know you haven't seen this, necessarily -- but Mike Huckabee has been on Twitter today. He's a little bit upset.

MR. EARNEST: Sounds dangerous. (Laughter.)

Q Yes, he's been on Twitter today and he's been a little bit upset about the reception that we've been discussing with the Pope tomorrow at the White House. And a few of the key things that he said was that "Obama admin respected bin Laden's dead body under Muslim tradition. Why no respect for Pope and Catholics?" And then he said, "POTUS bowed to a Saudi king and a Japanese emperor. Why no respect for Pontiffs and Catholics?" So I wanted to know if you have any reaction to that.

MR. EARNEST: I don't.

John.

Q Thanks, Josh. I just wanted to ask you some questions about the fight against ISIL. You cited a number that I believe you cited numerous times here in the Briefing Room of the number of coalition partners that are taking the fight against ISIS, and you said 62 coalition partners.

MR. EARNEST: I believe that's the correct number.

Q Can you give a sense about that number, 62? Because we don't hear a lot about what those other nations are doing. Are they primarily involved in a military effort? Or is it primarily counter-financing?

MR. EARNEST: This would actually be a good question for General Allen and his office. General Allen has the responsibility to work in a diplomatic role with nations around the world that are ready to contribute to the effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. He also plays an important role in facilitating the efforts of those countries to integrate their efforts into the broader efforts of our coalition.

I think what I would just say -- he can answer it in much more specific fashion than I can. What I can say is that we've talked quite a bit about the multifaceted strategy that we have designed and implemented against ISIL, and this certainly includes the use of military airpower. That is the aspect of our strategy that gets the most attention. And it is also the aspect of our strategy that yields important results like the deaths of these two leading extremists that I just mentioned. So it's understandable that that gets so much attention.

And we've gotten significant contributions from a significant number of countries to those kinds of efforts. I think the best example I can cite for you is that there was initially and understandably skepticism about whether or not Muslim-majority nations would join the United States in taking airstrikes against ISIL targets inside of Syria. And, in fact, there are a number of our Gulf partners who have been active participants in that effort, and we certainly have welcomed the important contribution that they have made.

They've also made some sacrifices as a result. And we've talked at one point about the detention and death of a Jordanian pilot who was engaged in those operations.

So that's an indication of the depth of the contribution that countries in the coalition are making to the military effort. But some of those countries are also engaged in other aspects of our strategy. This is the counter-finance strategy that you alluded to. This certainly is an important role for many countries in the region to play when it comes to trying to counter the online radicalization strategy that ISIL has pursued to try to inspire other people around the world to carry out acts of violence.

We have welcomed the kind of support that we've gotten from countries around the globe in trying to stem the flow of foreign fighters to the region.

We've gotten significant contributions from a range of countries for this training-and-equipping effort. That includes both the effort that's underway to train and equip some members of the moderate Syrian opposition. That also applies to the train-and-equip effort that's underway of Iraqi security forces in Iraq. There's also been important logistical support to many of those efforts that have been provided by members of the coalition.

So you're asking an important question about the wide variety of ways that people who are part of this coalition -- nations that are part of this coalition can contribute to this effort, and it's only because of that commitment that we've seen from these countries that we've been able to make as much progress as we have.

Q Have you ever put out -- or put together a list of those 62 countries? I've never seen it and I'd love to get a look at that. And sort of with that list, cite what each country is actually doing in terms of that effort to defeat and destroy ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: It is possible that there are some limitations on what can be made public. But certainly we can provide you a list of the nations that are part of the coalition. And if there are specific countries that you have questions about, hopefully we can at least give you a sense of what their contribution is. But General Allen's office would be the best place for you to take those questions.

John.

Q Thank you, Josh. Two brief questions. When you mentioned the many values that the President and the Holy Father have in common, you mentioned prioritizing those less fortunate. Would that column for discussion include the plight of Christians in the Middle East, notably from Syria and Iraq who have been forced to flee for practicing their faith? This is something many leaders of the Catholic Church have highlighted lately -- notably the Archbishop of Iraq, who was recently here in Washington.

MR. EARNEST: Well, John, I certainly would include in the category of values they share in common is a commitment to religious liberty and certainly standing up for the rights of religious minorities around the world. And we've talked a lot about how one of the things, particularly early on in this ISIL campaign, was there was a concerted effort on the part of

the United States military to make sure that we were taking actions to try to protect religious minorities in Iraq. So that has long been a value that President Obama has prioritized.

I don't know, frankly, whether or not this is something that will be discussed by the two leaders in the Oval Office or not. But it certainly gives me an opportunity to talk about another value that they share in common.

Q All right. And my other question is, given the President's statement about allowing 10,000 refugees in the United States and then Secretary Kerry calling for 100,000 yesterday, does the administration also have a plan along the lines of Operation Safe Haven, which was the plan in 1956 that the U.S. had that brought in political refugees from Hungary fleeing communism, and allowing them eventually to become citizens through mastery of English and military service in the United States.

MR. EARNEST: And what's the question?

Q My question is, does the administration have a plan similar to Operate Save Haven for Syrians that was used to bring in Hungarian refugees?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me answer your question a couple different ways. The first is, the 10,000 number refers to what the President has described is the minimum number of Syrian refugees that he would like to see brought into the United States in the next fiscal year. The 100,000 number that Secretary Kerry was talking about actually applies to fiscal year 2017 and it applies to the overall number of refugees admitted to the United States from anywhere else in the world. So those are sort of two different numbers that and I just want to make sure that there's some clarity about what those numbers describe.

For the details of what refugees to the United States have to do in order to eventually qualify for citizenship, I'd refer you to the State Department. There is an established process -- it's not an easy one, but it is a long-established process for this.

And this is one of the things that -- again, this is one of the things that characterizes and distinguishes U.S. generosity. There are many other countries who, when they take in refugees into their country, that they are essentially put on notice that they are only there temporarily until they can be returned home. Refugees are afforded a somewhat different status here in the United States and many of them are given the opportunity if they take the prescribed steps to eventually qualify for citizenship. And, again, I think that sort of reflects the history of our nation and the fact that other than the Native Americans among us, that all of us have ancestors who came to this country as immigrants.

Charlie.

Q Yesterday, Governor Scott Walker dropped out of the Republican primary. And I know the President isn't following the race closely, but he has singled the Governor out for criticism in the past, and I wondered if he has a reaction to that news.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to him about it. I'm not sure that he does. There certainly has been a lot of speculation and analysis from those of you who are following the race closely about Governor Walker's decision, but I wouldn't add my own analysis to that.

Q And any reaction from the White House regarding reports that the Syrian trained rebels turned over their weapons and went to al Qaeda?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that specific report, but you can check with the Department of Defense against that.

Drew.

Q A couple questions on Syria. Does the U.S. government have any indication that Russia is preparing to deploy assets to additional military sites in Syria, namely Istam weapons storage complex and the Al-Sanobar military complex.

MR. EARNEST: Andrew, I cannot confirm those reports. We certainly are aware that Russia continues to ship a variety of materials and weapons to Syria, and we've made quite clear that it would be destabilizing and unproductive for Russia to continue to use that military firepower to back Assad. The President was quite clear in saying that he believed that a Russian decision to double down on Assad's leadership is a losing bet.

And so it continues to be true that Russia's precise intentions inside of Syria are not clear. But we continue to be interested in Russia sending a signal about their willingness to constructively support the international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. They say that that is a goal that they share, and we would welcome the kinds of actions that reflect that rhetoric.

Q What Russia is doing in Syria -- there seems to be a bit more clarity, as the Secretary of State has just said, that some of the aircraft deployed to Latakia was purely to protect the base. But I'm wondering how ground attack, aircraft and fighter aircraft would be used to protect a base. I mean, it seems like a rather offensive system.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't have any information about sort of the latest analysis about what material is there and what it may or may not be used for. We continue to urge the Russians to find a way to constructively support the international coalition that's been assembled to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. Russia has been quite clear about sharing that goal. But further supporting the Assad regime through the use of military force would contradict that goal and, in fact, undermine the ongoing international effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

And the reason for that is ISIL has been able to gain strength in the midst of the chaos that was sown by President Assad's failed leadership. And that's why we believe a democratic transition -- a political transition inside of Syria needs to occur. And that's why the United States continues to be strongly supportive of efforts to do that.

Q Just a final question on China. When Xi Jinping visits on Friday, would you expect the President to voice concerns about Chinese NGO law?

MR. EARNEST: About the Chinese --

Q NGO law -- the draft NGO law that would force organizations working in China to register with the State Security Services.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a number of policies that the Chinese government has implemented, often in the name of national security, that have prompted concern by the United States. And in the same way that President Obama routinely raises concerns about Chinese behavior in cyberspace, in every interaction that he has with Chinese officials, President Obama makes clear that respect for the universal human rights of the Chinese people is something that the Chinese government should also prioritize.

And I'm confident that the President will have an opportunity in the context of this state visit to once again raise concerns about China's human rights record and the tendency that they have to implement policies that don't show proper respect for those human rights, and that, frankly, some of their claims about national security considerations are not sufficient explanations for the steps that they've taken.

Jared.

Q Josh, you emphasized that Republicans in Congress need to work with Democrats in Congress to sort out this budget situation over the next few days, and obviously your answer about the social calendar, -- the President really probably could not be more occupied over the next few days. What's his role at this point, given that you've said that Republicans need to work primarily with congressional Democrats?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the first observation is that Republicans have, for months, rebuffed the invitation from Democrats on Capitol Hill to engage in these discussions. And you didn't exactly have to be clairvoyant to predict that we'd be a week before a government shutdown deadline and Republicans still scrambling to figure out how they're going to keep the government open.

We, for months now, have been discussing what that path is. What's clear is that Republicans will not succeed in passing budget legislation only along party lines. They're going to have to work in bipartisan fashion. They're going to have to work with Democrats to build bipartisan support for legislation so that it can advance through both the House and the Senate, and land on the President's desk.

And we're hopeful that at some point, Republicans will begin to engage in those discussions. If they don't, we'll see that Republicans for that second time in two years will have engineered a government shutdown. And that is not something that I think the American people are going to look on too kindly.

Q Sorry, my question was what the President's role is over the next few days.

MR. EARNEST: And I think what you can expect the administration will continue to do is to encourage both sides to come together for talks. If those talks begin, you can certainly expect that the Obama administration will offer technical support and we'll participate in those discussions.

As I've said before, if those discussions occur, if administration officials are in the room, they'll be sitting on the same side of the table as Democrats. We certainly share the kinds of priorities that Democrats have sought to champion in the budget process that ensures that both our national security and our economic needs are adequately funded. But at this point, those talks haven't started yet. And that's a disappointment.

Q Does the President need to be in some capacity at the negotiating table before he returns a week from now from the United Nations General Assembly?

MR. EARNEST: No, not necessarily. There's no reason that the discussions need to wait for the President for any reason. There are a variety of ways to ensure that the President remains in the loop on those discussions without the President sitting at the table.

Fred, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. With respect to Planned Parenthood funding and the possible shutdown there, if that money is re-diverted over to community health centers -- first question on that -- what would be the main reason for opposing that? Because apparently health care funding would not be cut. And secondly, would it be worth risking a government shutdown just to protect funding for one organization?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Fred, I think what's quite clear is that Planned Parenthood is an organization that provides health care to millions of families all across the country and they do not use any of their taxpayer funding to perform abortions. That's expressly prohibited by law, and it's a law that's been enforced by the Obama administration. And that's why the Republican effort to shift funding away from Planned Parenthood would take away access to health care that millions of Americans rely on.

Q But it wouldn't if it went to other community health care centers.

MR. EARNEST: It would, because there are Planned Parenthood facilities whose very existence would be threatened by the stripping of this funding. More importantly, Fred, there's no legitimate explanation that anybody in Congress can offer up for that tactic. They say that it's because they're opposed to abortion, but no taxpayer funds are used to perform abortions. That is a law that's been on the books for quite some time and it's a law that's been enforced by the Obama administration.

What's clear is that there are Republicans that are trying to gain a political advantage of one sort or another by championing this issue. And it certainly is not in the best interest of our economy; it's not in the best interest of expanding -- protecting access to health care for the American people. It's certainly not the first time we've seen Republicans go to great lengths to try to prevent the American people from getting access to health care.

Why they support that is beyond me, but it certainly is something that may garner a short-term political benefit for some members of the United States Congress, but it certainly is not going to be in the broader interest of the United States of America.

Q And the President will definitely veto any -- if the CR did make it to his desk without Planned Parenthood funding, he would definitely --

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has made clear that he is strongly opposed and would not sign legislation that would result in the wholesale defunding of Planned Parenthood. But as you point out, Fred, there is no indication that that piece of legislation would even arrive at the President's desk.

Colleen, I saw you had your hand up. Do you want to do the last one?

Q Thanks, Josh. Has the White House made a determination on whether a meeting with Putin would be productive? And should we expect that they'll have some sort of interaction next week, or is it a possibility that they wouldn't have any conversation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I discussed before that the President will only be in New York for a short period of time and so his schedule will be filled with a variety of meetings and events. I assume that President Putin will have a similarly busy schedule when he arrives in New York as well.

At this point, I don't know yet whether or not their paths will cross, but once we have a better sense of what the President's schedule looks like and whether or not that includes a meeting with President Putin, we'll let you know as soon as we can.

Thanks a lot, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:15 P.M. EDT