

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 2/4/2016

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. Let me just do one announcement at the top, and then we'll get to your questions. And it's not so much an announcement as a piece of news that was announced earlier today, and I just want to make sure all of you had a chance to make note of it.

Earlier today in London, at a conference of international donors, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the United States is providing nearly \$601 million in additional lifesaving assistance to those affected by the war in Syria. This new funding brings the total humanitarian assistance in response to the Syrian conflict to more than \$5.1 billion since the start of the crisis. This funding provides shelter, water, medical care, food, protection and other necessities to millions of people suffering inside Syria and 4.6 million refugees from Syria in the region.

The United States will also provide more than \$290 million in development assistance to support the Jordanian and Lebanese ministries of education to increase access to high-quality education and support learning for all students in those countries, including Syrian refugees that are in those countries.

These efforts build on the USAID's development support to governments and communities throughout the region that have generously hosted the massive influx of refugees from Syria.

Let me just note that the announcement from the United States today comes in the context of other leaders in the international community who have also made pledges. The EU has made a pledge of \$3.3 billion in assistance. Germany recently made a pledge of \$2.6 billion in assistance through 2018. And today, our allies over in the United Kingdom pledged \$1.75 billion in new aid to Syrian refugees by 2020.

So I think this is a good illustration of how the United States continues the lead an international response to the millions of lives that have been affected by the terrible violence inside of Syria.

So we can talk more about that or other topics that may be on your mind. Kathleen, I'll let you start.

Q Okay. I'm going to start actually with the President's deliberations over seeking new action in Libya. I wondered if -- you had mentioned before that obviously you have taken action there before. Is it wrong to describe the President is considering opening a new front in the war against ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think it would describe it that way, primarily because the United States has long been mindful of the strategy that ISIL has used to try to capitalize in other areas where there's political chaos to establish a foothold, and so we've been mindful of this risk for more than a year and a half now.

We saw that that's what they were able to successfully do in Syria. And again, that's why we continue to go back to the failed leadership of Bashar al-Assad as the root cause of this chaos and ISIL's growth. And we saw they capitalized on some weakness and instability inside of Iraq to spread there. So we've been mindful of the fact that they might be looking to spread other places, like Libya and even like Afghanistan.

And we've been mindful of that threat and actively countering that threat for quite some time. And we're going to continue to do that. We're going to continue to watch how the threat in Libya evolves, and we're going to continue to be prepared to take action.

So I think that's why I'd sort of push back against the suggestion that there is a consideration of a new front. I think we've been mindful of the fact that ISIL has tried to be opportunistic in other places that are experiencing some political instability.

Q What would you say to those who say that the White House is sort of playing whack-a-mole across the region and losing, it seems? If you go into Libya you're just going to take out another and they'll pop up somewhere else. I mean, is that the strategy at this point?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think the strategy as we've laid out has actually been to focus on ISIL's efforts to establish a caliphate inside of Iraq and in Syria. And that's why that has been the focus of our efforts. We've been mindful of these other places, like Libya and Afghanistan, where ISIL may turn some of their attention. But we know that they are focused on expanding ISIL's footprint in Iraq and in Syria.

And that's why we've been so focused on that region of the world. And there are some new numbers to point to today that demonstrate some of the progress that we've made. The latest assessment about the number of fighters who are fighting on behalf of ISIL in Iraq and in Syria was -- based on an earlier assessment -- was up to 31,500 fighters in that region of the world. There's a new assessment from our intelligence community that indicates that that number is now up to about 25,000 fighters.

Now, that means they continue to be a substantial threat, but the potential numbers have declined. And that's a testament to the efforts of our partners on the ground who are taking the fight to ISIL on the ground. As a result of those efforts, ISIL has sustained significant casualties. It also is a testament to our aggressive military campaign in the air. The United States and our coalition partners have taken a number of airstrikes that have taken a number of ISIL fighters off the battlefield. It also is a testament to the success that we're having in starting to staunch the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and in Syria. ISIL is having more difficult than they've had before in replenishing their ranks.

And we have long been aware of the need of the international community to cooperate to stop the flow of foreign fighters to the region. You'll recall the President hosted a meeting at the United Nations Security Council to discuss international cooperation to prevent the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and in Syria. So we're seeing some important progress in that area. But we know that ISIL is trying to establish this caliphate inside of Iraq and in Syria. And as we apply significant pressure on them there, it will make it harder for them

to capitalize on political instability in other places. But right now, we know that they do have that capacity, and that's why we're mindful of the threat that is posed by ISIL in places like Afghanistan and Libya.

Q And then I just wanted to turn to the Zika virus, if I could. We're reporting that U.N. and U.S. officials are saying that Brazil isn't sharing enough samples of the disease and enough data, and that that may slow down the ability to develop a vaccine and research this. And I'm wondering if the White House is aware of these concerns and if you feel like really Brazil has been helpful so far in the international effort.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the United States is certainly interested in cooperating with countries in the region to collect the kind of data and information that can provide us the insight that's necessary to fight this disease. And the President did have a telephone conversation with President Rousseff of Brazil last week, where both leaders agreed to cooperate on this effort. The President is meeting with President Santos of Colombia later today, here at the White House, and part of their discussion will be dedicated to advancing U.S.-Colombian cooperation to fight Zika. And that presumably could include greater information- and data-sharing between public health experts and Colombian public health experts here in the United States.

So we're going to seek, and so far we have received, important cooperation from other countries in the Western Hemisphere who are dealing with this disease. And we will be able to confront it successfully if we can work effectively together to fight this disease.

Ayesha.

Q Going back to Syria, I know you announced the aid, but the peace talks have now stalled. And I was wondering, does the White House blame any particular side for these talks kind of faltering? Already, Turkey has said that any country supporting the Assad regime is backing war crimes, and that seemed to be pointed at Russia. And they've called for the U.S. to take a more decisive stance against Russia's incursions into Syria, saying that the talks -- there's no need for the talks to go on if Russia is going to continue their attacks in Syria. And so, on both issues, I wonder, does the White House feel that any side in particular -- the opposition or the supporters of the Assad regime -- are at fault for the talks not going on? And then also, any response to what Turkey is saying about the U.S. needing to take a tougher stance with Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the U.N. Representative, who has been responsible for trying to mediate these discussions, did announce that the talks have been paused. He's used that terminology primarily because he expects the talks to resume before the end of the month. And we're obviously hopeful that that will happen, and we're going to continue to try to encourage both sides in that direction.

We have long expressed our deep concerns about the way in which the Assad regime has continued to target innocent populations in opposition-held areas inside of Syria. And that's been a sticking point in the talks. It's been, understandably, a source of significant concern that's been expressed by opposition representatives in these talks. And those concerns are well-founded.

And as it relates to the second part of your question, we hold the Assad regime primarily responsible for that. But those who have enabled the Assad regime, including Russia, also bear some responsibility. And I think we've been pretty blunt about expressing that point of view. And if the Turks doubt that, I guess they should go ask the Russians, because I think the Russians have not always responded favorably to the notion that they have enabled this kind of violence. But, the fact is, they have. And that's why we have run into a situation where there's a fundamental contradiction in Russian strategy here.

President Putin acknowledged publicly and privately that a political transition inside of Syria is needed, but yet they're pursuing a military campaign that undermines their political strategy. The more success that their military campaign has in decimating opposition-held areas, including claiming innocent lives, only serves to prop up the Assad regime and give the Assad regime less of an incentive to engage constructively in the talks.

But none of this is new. All of these are sort of views that we've shared before. And the effort to get this diplomatic track moving has been challenging. And the fact that we were able to advance it as far as we have represents important progress because there's been -- these talks have started and stopped so many times in the last five years I've lost count. But what we have seen is we have seen important progress that's been made in just the last few months, and that's a credit to the diplomatic skill and tenacity of Secretary Kerry, who has been prodding both sides. And he's going to have to keep doing that to try to move this process along even farther.

Q But does the U.S. need to do more -- or can the U.S. do any more other than just making statements to pressure Russia to stop doing what it's doing in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Russia understands and, as I mentioned before, they have their own incentive for these talks to advance and to eventually succeed. The Russians themselves understand that a political transition inside of Syria is needed. It's the Russians right now who have waded knee-deep in a sectarian conflict in Syria, and their only way out of that is to try to resolve the political dispute at the heart of this conflict. And we have noted that the Russians have occasionally used their influence with the Assad regime to try to bring the two sides together, and we hope they'll continue to do that. But those efforts are clearly undermined by the Assad regime, occasionally enabled by the Russians, continuing to carry out military operations against innocent people in opposition-held territory.

Q And on another topic, a U.N. panel is expected to release a report tomorrow saying that Julian Assange has been arbitrarily detained in the embassy in London. And so I was wondering, does the U.S. have any -- or does the White House have any response to this idea that Julian Assange has been arbitrarily detained? He is saying that once this report comes out, he feels like he should be allowed to leave the embassy, and there shouldn't be any criminal charges pursued against him and he should get his passport.

MR. EARNEST: Well, my understanding of the situation is that he's actually not being detained in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London; he actually has sought refuge there. He is facing serious crimes inside of Sweden, and Sweden has made a specific extradition request of British authorities. But, ultimately, this is something that the British and the Swedes are going to have to work out. And it's unclear to me exactly what impact a pronouncement from the United Nations would have on this situation.

But he is facing serious charges inside of Sweden. Sweden has asked the British for extradition and, ultimately, those two countries will have to resolve the situation.

Michelle.

Q You just mentioned some of those numbers on ISIS foreign fighters that seem promising in Iraq and Syria. But at the same time, intelligence officials are saying that the number in Libya is actually double what it was originally thought to be. So as the fight continues in the one area, are you just expecting more numbers to keep growing in Libya? And doesn't that mean that whatever the action is going to be, is going to need to be decided very soon?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what's important to note, particularly about the situations inside of Libya and Afghanistan, is that we have seen a willingness on the part of extremists to pledge allegiance to ISIL in pursuit of some sort of propaganda game. So I don't have a new analysis to share with you in terms of the situation inside of Libya, but it's entirely plausible that some of the -- that this new count actually includes extremists that we already knew about, they've just affiliated themselves with ISIL.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we downplay that threat, because we obviously take the threat from those extremists, regardless of who they're affiliated with, quite seriously. And I think the military actions that we've taken inside of Libya already are a testament to that. But the reason that the numbers inside of Iraq and in Syria are encouraging is primarily because it's moving in the right direction. We, at least for now, been able to reverse this trend. What had been sort of a steady growth in the ranks of their fighters is now declining -- slowly, but declining. And what we know is that there is an effort on the part of ISIL inside of Iraq and Syria to try to recruit people from around the world to try to replenish their ranks. And we're having an impact, a positive impact, on that.

The situation inside of Libya and Afghanistan is dangerous, but it's different.

Q I guess there's no doubt that the fighters -- the numbers are going down in part because so many of them are getting killed there, but there's also evidence that they're having a tougher time getting into Syria, which is one of the goals. So isn't there a real possibility that the people who aren't able to go and fight through there are just going to now flood Libya? And now that it's getting some more attention and more of that propaganda, are you worried that this is just going to explode as quickly as ISIS did in Iraq and Syria, which, you know, took everyone by surprise in a short amount of time?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what you have said does remind me of one other thing that I should note, which is one of the reasons, as you point out, that foreign fighters are having a more difficult time entering Syria is because we've been able to work effectively with the international community to make that kind of travel more difficult and to apprehend people before they make those kinds of trips. It's also a testament to some of the improvements that the Turks have made in securing the border between Turkey and Syria.

This has been the point of a number of even high-level discussions with the Turks. And we do believe that there is more that the Turks can do, but what they have been doing in terms of ramping up their efforts has shown some fruit. And they deserve credit for that, so I want to acknowledge that.

But you're also -- Michelle, you're raising a legitimate risk that exists, which is that if ISIL senses that it's getting too hard to get fighters into Iraq and in Syria that they're going to try to direct them other places. We're mindful of that. That's why we have supported a political process inside of Libya to try to build up and stabilize a national unity government inside of Libya that would make the Libyan government and Libyan security forces more effective at controlling their borders, and pushing back against the extremist elements that are already in their country.

So that continues to be a priority. We're mindful of that risk. I think what is true, though, is that as it gets harder and harder for ISIL to operate inside of Iraq and in Syria, it means that we're making progress toward our goal of denying them the kind of safe haven that they can use to plot and carry out attacks against the United States. It doesn't mean they won't consider other areas where there may be an opportunity because of political instability. But the fact that they have to consider other areas is an indication that the pressure that we're applying is having an impact.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. There appears to be a growing backlash on Capitol Hill about the President's use of executive action. Yesterday a task force was set up --

MR. EARNEST: Growing even bigger, huh?

Q Growing bigger.

MR. EARNEST: It seemed pretty big at the end of last year.

Q It's been big. It's getting bigger. They've got task forces now. Yesterday it was a task force on executive overreach. Today, Speaker Ryan has set up six different task forces, one of which to -- restoring constitutional authority. So I'm wondering if you're aware of these task forces. Do you plan to cooperate with them?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of them. Maybe somebody at the White House is. I guess if you're not actually going to be focused on passing legislation that can pass Congress and be signed into law by a Democratic President, you've got to occupy your time with something. So I guess going to task force meetings is one thing you can do.

It may keep them busy, but it's certainly not going to create jobs. It's not going to expand economic opportunity for the middle class. And we believe those would actually be more worthy pursuits for Congress to be focused on.

Q And so your position is that this President has not acceded his authority?

MR. EARNEST: Our position is that we would like to work with Congress in a common-sense, bipartisan way to expand economic opportunity, to strengthen our economy, to strengthen the middle-class, to make our country more fair, to look for ways that we can support the middle class through things like paid leave or a higher minimum wage. And we believe that's what Congress should be focused on. And the truth is, if we could make that kind of progress with Congress, it certainly would reduce the need for the President to consider executive actions that advance this goal. We would much rather prefer to work with Congress, but we have found Congress pretty unwilling to work with us.

Olivier.

Q Thanks, Josh. I'm going to seize the opportunity since you're not only willing but eager to discuss intelligence matters from the podium. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: What left you with that impression? (Laughter.)

Q You stepped up and volunteered it.

MR. EARNEST: I'll try.

Q Does this intelligence assessment update the number of Islamic State fighters who travel to Iraq and Syria from the United States and Europe and have returned to their --

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if there is an updated assessment of those numbers. I think what these numbers apply to is not just -- and I guess to clarify this, these numbers include foreign fighters but they're not exclusive to foreign fighters. This actually is a reference to all of the fighters that ISIL can draw on. And the fact that that number is now smaller than it was before is an indication that we've taken a number of the fighters off the battlefield and we have made it harder for them to replenish their ranks through foreign fighters.

Q So it should allow for the possibility that they could be going to Libya, other possibilities as well. I'm trying to figure out -- you guys at one point had volunteered that there were some -- I think 300 or some such number -- of Americans who had traveled to the region and come back. Whatever this intelligence product is doesn't give you a new number on how many Americans went and have returned?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if there is an updated assessment of that. If there is, I haven't seen it. But presumably, you could check with the IC, and if they're allowing me to discuss these numbers, it's possible that they may have other numbers that they can discuss publicly.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. You said, "potential numbers" when you were talking about, let's say, 20,000 to 30,000 range offered by the Pentagon, correct?

MR. EARNEST: We're talking about the fighters in ISIL?

Q Correct.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, the old assessment -- I'll pull up the numbers here -- the old assessment was a range of 20,000 to 31,500 fighters. The updated assessment is now a range of 19,000 to 25,000 fighters. So that's why I described it as -- the previous estimate

was they were up to 31,500 fighters inside of Iraq and Syria. The updated assessment is that they are up to 25,000 fighters now.

Q Then is it your understanding that the updated assessment for the numbers in Libya is about twice the number it was a year ago?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an updated assessment in terms of Libya. I think Michelle was citing some other reporting. I hadn't seen it. I don't know that she's wrong, I just haven't see it.

Q Okay, got you. Let me ask you about the whack-a-mole, which I thought was a pretty interesting way to put it. Essentially, what you're saying is we're working very hard in Iraq and Syria, understanding that there's always going to be a possibility that they could pop up in Africa or Libya or other places. Is the administration's strategy to simply chase them wherever they go and wherever they pop up, thereby establishing a new front? Or is it the administration's idea that we'll let those who are on the ground there, locals perhaps, deal with it and then we'll come in later?

MR. EARNEST: Our strategy right now is to focus on the caliphate that ISIL is trying to establish in Iraq and in Syria. And we have mobilized significant resources from our 66 coalition partners to go after them militarily through airstrikes, by ramping up our coordination and our support for fighters on the ground both in Iraq and in Syria. And there are a number of other efforts that relate to counter-financing, countering the flow of foreign fighters, countering ISIL's online messaging that allows them to recruit extremists to their cause.

We have leveraged all of that against ISIL inside of Iraq and in Syria. And this is one way we can measure some of the progress that we're showing. We also know that ISIL has always had designs on looking for other areas that are experiencing political instability to try to establish another foothold. And we're mindful of that and we have taken military action, both in Afghanistan and in Libya, against ISIL targets that have taken leading ISIL figures off the battlefield.

We have also worked with the central governments in both Afghanistan and Libya to shore them up so that they can do a better job of providing for the security situation inside their own country. The reason that that's important is because there are already

extremists that are operating inside that country, and we know that some of them may consider affiliating with ISIL. And so we want to help both those central governments apply pressure against those extremists.

That is the approach that we have taken, and it's an approach that has been effective in advancing our goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

Q So what would you say to people who would suggest that this is essentially a kick-the-can-down-the-road strategy, meaning we're going to work with coalitions, we're going to work with governments that are established there, we're going to do what we can, but this is not about trying to end this immediately?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I think that we have acknowledged that this is not a situation that is going to be resolved militarily. In each situation, what we know ISIL is doing is trying to capitalize on political instability in these countries. And that's why the United States has been so invested in shoring up the political process in each of those countries. And each country is on a different track. Obviously, Syria is the furthest behind. But they're making slow and steady progress inside of Libya; they've got a long way to go.

We've been able to work quite effectively with the Ghani-led government in Afghanistan. They face some pretty serious security challenges inside of Afghanistan, but we're supporting them in that effort. The Abadi government in Iraq has made important progress in demonstrating to the people of Iraq they're prepared to govern that country in a way that will allow the security forces and the citizenry to be united against a threat that is posed by ISIL.

Addressing these political challenges is going to be the most effective way for us to address the root cause of ISIL. But our progress in making this political progress has been halting, bringing about this kind of needed political change in these country that in many cases don't have a long tradition of democratic governance, particularly when you consider a country like Libya that was ruled by a dictator for several decades.

Establishing a democracy there is going to be not something that's going to happen overnight.

That's why the President has been prepared to use military action and to take military action where necessary to take ISIL fighters off the battlefield. Ultimately, it's not a situation that we're going to be able to solve militarily. Ultimately, it's a political situation that will be required. And we've been, I think, upfront from the beginning that this is a problem that the next President is going to have to deal with, too.

Q Ten thousand airstrikes since August of 2014. Is that the impact when you're talking about the decrease in potential numbers that you anticipate?

MR. EARNEST: I think that's part of it. Clearly, those airstrikes have taken a number of ISIL fighters off the battlefield. So that clearly is one part of our strategy that has allowed for this progress to be made. We have seen that Iraqi security forces in particular have been more effective on the battlefield -- after all, they were able to finally retake Ramadi. And that's one measure of their enhanced performance on the battlefield. That has also caused ISIL to sustain some significant casualties.

The other thing that I would point to as part of our success here is improvements we've made in at least reducing the flow of foreign fighters to this region of the world.

Q Last one. The last couple days, the President has made it a point to reach out to the Muslim community, or at least represent not only their concerns but also his desire that they be regarded as part of the American fabric, the American family. Why is this so important to the President?

MR. EARNEST: Because -- I think the President said it much more eloquently than I'm going to be able to do it from here -- but yesterday in his remarks, he talked about how if there's any part of our broader American family that's feeling marginalized or victimized, or relegated to the sidelines because of their religion, that that has an impact on the rest of us; that an attack on one religion is an attack on all those of us of faith. And the President feels quite strongly about this.

And I think that was why the President made the visit to the mosque yesterday and delivered the remarks that he did. But, look, it was also part of the remarks that the President delivered at the National Prayer Breakfast this morning, where he talked about how our thoughts and prayers continue to be with those Christians in other countries that are facing persecution. And the President thinks that this is important.

Ron.

Q He also spoke about fear. Was he referring to the rhetoric on the GOP side of the campaign today, although he didn't explicitly say that?

MR. EARNEST: He didn't explicitly say that. I think the President was delivering a speech that I think he thinks was important for the country to hear. I think the most obvious evidence of the kind of fear that we see across the country is actually one that's driven by the profound changes that we're seeing in our society. These are changes that are wrought by technological advances that are having a significant impact on our economy, in some cases having an impact on our way of life. They're certainly having a significant impact on our communities. And it's understandable that that would arouse fears in people. I think that's an entirely human, even primal, response as the President described it.

He also talked about why it's so important for us to draw on our faith to counter that fear, to stand up and to face it, and that our ability to do that here in the United States has never been stronger. And it creates an opportunity for us to confront that change in a way that doesn't need to elicit fear, but actually could create more opportunities for the American people.

Q He seemed to have linked directly the rhetoric to violence that's happened against the Muslim community. Rhetoric that he's heard on the campaign trail to violence that's happened in various communities. That's what he was doing, correct?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President was making a direct link between political rhetoric that we hear on the campaign trail running into direct conflict with a core American value, which is protecting the right of law-abiding American citizens to worship God in the manner that they choose.

And the notion that anybody in this country is marginalized or targeted or belittled or mocked because of the way they observe or practice their religion runs directly contrary to the founding values of this country. This country was founded on the values of religious tolerance and religious freedom. And I think the President made that point poignantly, standing at the Islamic Center yesterday.

Q Is there anything new and significant on the Flint water crisis front that the administration can report?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can tell you that the EPA, earlier this week, sent a letter to the governor's office sort of outlining and updating the important contributions that the federal government has made to the ongoing state and local response to that situation. I can get you the letter, but just an overview -- there's some additional testing that's been provided by the EPA, a range of expertise that's been provided by our public health experts at the HHS who are dealing with this obviously significant situation. So I can sort of get you the full rundown. There's also been material supplies provided by FEMA that has enhanced the response.

Q I ask because, as you know, the hearing yesterday that was on the Hill was sort of -- many of the principal players didn't participate. They're taking the fifth, so on and so forth. The FBI is involved now. The energy bill and the water bill are kind of mired in the Senate. And I know that's not your branch of government, but the overall worry there is that we're still bogged down and that there is not a solution forthcoming. And certainly things don't happen overnight, but as you know, the enduring concern of people there is that their concerns are not being taken seriously enough and there's not enough of a sense of urgency. Do you think the President will -- do you think that's a valid concern? And is there any response that the President anticipates addressing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's an entirely legitimate one, given how poorly served the people of Flint were by their government. And I think everybody at every level has acknowledged that the people of Flint were let down by their government. And so it's understandable that they might be skeptical, or at least suspicious, of how serious the government is to solving this problem. And I think the only way that you can restore that kind of trust and earn that kind of faith on the part of the citizens of Flint is through actions.

And I think that's why you've seen the federal government mobilize such an aggressive response. I know that state officials have worked hard to try to demonstrate their commitment to following through and finding a solution. It would be nice if Congress did the same. And as you and I discussed last week, it is our view that Congress should pass legislation to assist in the response. They're going to have to figure out what the appropriate way is for them to do that. But passing legislation that would do that would certainly go a long way to demonstrating to the people of Flint that, look, even after the

television cameras leave, the federal government, the state government, and the local government are all going to be committed to following through on the kind of response that will be necessary to allow Flint to recover and come back stronger than ever.

Q Can you say anything about why the FBI is involved?

MR. EARNEST: Well, because there are questions that had been raised about -- well, let me just -- there have been public questions that have been raised about the actions and decisions that were made by environmental regulators. And the FBI, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Michigan has indicated that they're going to take a look at some of those decisions to determine if there's any wrongdoing. So I don't want to say too much about that because I don't want to interfere in their ongoing investigation.

Q Because it's unclear to me whether this was new or whether they'd been there for some time -- the FBI, that is. It felt like this was something new.

MR. EARNEST: I don't know the answer to that. The Department of Justice could probably give you some idea of when the investigation they announced actually started.

Angela.

Q Thanks, Josh. The White House announced last night the proposed changes to the Cadillac tax. And those have been pretty roundly criticized by the business interests that would be affected by the change and that didn't like the Cadillac tax in the first place. Was the President trying to make any particular constituency happy with the changes? Or is it a way of preserving the tax in a different way?

MR. EARNEST: I think the goal of the Cadillac tax has always been consistent with the goals of the President's domestic policymaking agenda. One of the President's top goals has been to figure out how we can put upward pressure on wages in this country. One thing we know that employers do is that they will try to beef up the benefits associated with their health care plan as a source of compensation to their employees. If we limit their ability to do that, or give them an incentive not to do that too much, to provide the

kinds of benefits in their health care plan that many workers wouldn't even use, then employers are going to have to consider other ways to compensate their employees. And one of the ways they could do that is by raising their paychecks.

And many economists who have taken a look at this, including the CBO, has concluded that that's exactly what would happen. If we implement the Cadillac tax, we're going to see upward pressure on raises. And the CBO, again -- the Congressional Budget Office -- neutral entity, estimates that the tax would increase workers' paychecks by around \$50 billion in 2026. That's a substantial contribution to this goal that the President has long sought.

Another one of his goals, particularly when it comes to the Affordable Care Act, has been trying to put downward pressure on health care costs, at least in the growth of health care costs. And what the Congressional Research Service has concluded is that implementing the tax would make health plans more efficient and would reduce national health expenditures by more than \$40 billion annually in 2024.

The President has talked a lot about steps that we can take to reduce the deficit and be more fiscally responsible. It's not surprising -- it shouldn't be surprising to you that the Cadillac tax would have a positive impact in bringing down our deficit. It would reduce deficits by nearly \$100 billion over 10 years, starting this year and going to 2026 -- \$100 billion is not pocket change, and when it comes to lowering our deficit, we should not leave any stone unturned in looking for ways to do that.

The last thing I'll say about this is all of this can be done by having a pretty minimal impact on the broader health care market. Only 70 percent -- I'm sorry, only 7 percent of enrollees will be in plans that are in any way affected by the health care tax, by the Cadillac tax in 2020. So we're talking about the vast majority of Americans are not affected by this in a negative way, but do enjoy the benefits of upward pressure on wages and downward pressure on health care costs and the deficit.

Q Was the White House hoping for a more positive reaction from any of these constituencies, or had you already figured that that wasn't going to happen?

MR. EARNEST: Look, their longstanding opposition to this policy is not a surprise to anybody here. So I think it is an indication, though -- the fact that we have put forward this proposal -- of the degree of conviction that the President has about a policy like this

going into effect because of the positive benefits it would have for workers and middle-class families all across the country.

Q One other topic. The President and Speaker Ryan had a chance to exchange a few words after the prayer breakfast. What did they talk about? It didn't seem long enough to discuss a task force, but what did they say?

MR. EARNEST: I saw the President briefly after the prayer breakfast, too, but his conversation with Speaker Ryan didn't come up. But it didn't seem like a conversation where they were doing a lot of official government business. I think most of their conversation was in the spirit of the morning.

Margaret.

Q Josh, Julian Assange said he fears being extradited to the U.S. if he is actually -- ends up in Sweden to face those criminal charges that you laid out. Is it correct to have those fears? Is the White House going to pursue that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you'd have to check with the Department of Justice about this. I don't believe he is actually facing charges in the United States as of right now. But, ultimately, a decision about whether to charge him with anything would be a decision that's made by independent prosecutors at the Department of Justice, and they would make that decision independently.

I guess the other thing that may be relevant here when we talked about the possible extradition of El Chapo, we noted that fugitives that are wanted by the United States, whenever they're captured, the United States makes a formal request as sort of part of our standard operating procedure for the extradition of those individuals. So I don't know whether or not that will apply in Mr. Assange's case because I'm not aware of any charges that are against him, but the Department of Justice could sort of walk you through how all that shakes out.

Q It sounds like you're leaning into yes on that.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I'm leaning into the fact that any decision to charge Mr. Assange and extradite him would be made by the Department of Justice.

Q Can I come back to Syria? You laid out yet another donation, another big check written by this administration for humanitarian aid in Syria. It is well needed, but many would say this is treating the symptoms of the illness, not the core issue itself.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I would agree with that assessment.

Q So what is being done for the core issue itself, given that Russia continues, as you said, to bomb the very people that you're asking to negotiate with the Assad regime and that this political negotiation is going nowhere?

MR. EARNEST: The contribution that is made by the U.S. government, and ultimately the American people, to try to address the urgent humanitarian needs and suffering of the Syrian people, I think reflects just how terribly millions of innocent Syrians have been affected by the situation. And they are facing urgent needs. There are other countries in the region that are straining to try to meet those basic humanitarian needs. And the United States has done more than anybody else to try to offer financial assistance to those countries that are on the front lines of this.

What we're doing to try to address the root cause here and not just the symptoms is to try to bring about this political transition that's long overdue. And, look, I acknowledged that these kinds of talks have started and stopped more times than I can count over the last five years.

Q Now that you have Russia as the active air force for the Assad regime, which is a new dynamic, and they've continued to bomb while that political process has, at least in name, been started up -- so that is a different dynamic -- are you still saying that Russia is a partner for the U.S. to bring about a political transition?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is true is that Russia, because of the military support that they've offered to the Assad regime, does have a unique influence with the Assad regime. And we have been pretty blunt in asking the Russians to use that influence to try to bring the Assad regime into this process in a constructive way.

And surely there's more that they could do on that. But one thing they could do is they could tell the Assad regime to stop bombing innocent civilians in areas that are held by opposition fighters. What we'd prefer is that rather than trying to bomb territory that's held by opposition fighters, that the regime should actually sit down at the negotiating table and work out a political transition with those opposition fighters.

But, look, that is a goal that we're pursuing alongside the Russians because the Russians say that they share that goal. And it is important for the Russians to ensure that their strategic approach to Syria, including their military approach to Syria, reflects the solution that we all believe is badly needed.

Q What you're saying and acknowledging is that Russia is doing something different than what it is telling you it intends to do, right? They're not keeping their word. They are seeking solutions on the battlefield, not at the negotiating table. So why still believe that talking to them is the way to get to the solution?

MR. EARNEST: Well, primarily because the Russians themselves have said, both publicly and privately, that a political transition is needed. And I don't think they're saying that as some sort of subterfuge. It's patently obvious to anybody with any sort of equities or concerns about Syria that the political situation there is the root cause of all of the chaos and violence. The only reason that we've seen ISIL establish a safe haven inside of Syria is because the political situation in Syria was a mess, and ISIL capitalized on that and flourished.

The reason that people have been fleeing violence inside of Syria is because the Syrian government totally lost control of the security situation of that country. And we see innocent civilians that are dodging attacks from ISIL and other extremist organizations, and in some cases, even dodging attacks from their very own government. That reflects an utter failure of the political system and of the government inside of Syria.

And, look, we've talked about why the Russians have a stake here. The one military base that they have outside of the former Soviet Republics is in Syria, so they have to protect this asset.

And the kind of violence that is wracking that country, and the fact that it is on the brink

of being torn apart poses a pretty significant risk to the investment that Russia has already made there. That's why they have their own built-in interest to trying to resolve this situation.

And what they have to do is they have to reconcile their military strategy of trying to prop up the Assad regime with the understanding that this isn't going to go away until Assad goes away. And that's why the United States has continued to mobilize the international community to respond to the humanitarian situation. We've tried to mobilize the community to respond to and put pressure on ISIL to ultimately degrade and destroy that organization, but also to try to bring to the table the disparate parties involved to bring about a political transition that is the root of the problem.

Q So, in the meantime, when you're talking about the humanitarian aid, is the President willing to consider airlifts of food into the besieged areas? John Kerry just said this weekend that less than 1 percent of the food aid had actually made it through in 2015 because landmines are being laid that block workers from even delivering these supplies. Would the White House consider airlifts?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any announcements about that particular tactic. I know that what one of Secretary Kerry's priorities has been to try to negotiate ceasefires that would allow humanitarian relief workers into the area. And the announcement that we're making today is consistent with our desire to make sure that those humanitarian resources continue to be available to the workers that are in a position to distribute them. But there is no doubt that the efforts to distribute that much-needed humanitarian aid is impeded by the violence that's being waged by the Assad regime and to a large degree enabled by the Russian military.

Q But looking at ways to actually deliver the aid that you're paying for is not something that the White House is looking to do right now, beyond continuing to call for things that the U.N. --

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't rule that out over the long term, but I'm not aware of any discussion in the near term of doing something like that. Obviously, that's something that we've done before. There is humanitarian assistance that the U.S. has provided, for example, to the Yazidis when they were trapped on Sinjar Mountain. There was humanitarian relief that was provided by the United States. The United States has

provided some military assistance to opposition fighters on the ground in Syria using airdrops. But I don't have any announcements about the potential use of airdrops for additional humanitarian assistance, but it is obviously something that we've done before.

Q One quick question on Libya. The Italian President is coming. Is there going to be a request for the Italians to play a direct role in perhaps fighting ISIS in Libya?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have much of a preview of that meeting. I can say that I'm confident that our counter-ISIL campaign will be a topic of conversation. In particular, we've noted the resources in expertise and experience that the Italians have in Libya, based on the proximity of Libya to Italian shores. And so we already are partnering with the Italians in a meaningful way to deal with the situation inside of Libya. And any additional actions that are taken will require consultation and cooperation between our two countries.

Dave.

Q The head of the Border Patrol Agents Union testified to Congress today that the Border Patrol agents have gone back to this -- what's known as catch-and-release program because he said they're not arresting many of the people who cross the border because they don't show up for court later, and then the agents waste a lot of time sitting around in court for hearings that don't happen. Is the President okay with this?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't see that testimony, Dave. We'll have to follow up with you on our position on what that individual may have said.

John.

Q I want to turn to 2016 just real quickly. On Tuesday after the tied caucus, you kind of downplayed the impact that the 2008 election, the drawn-out primary between then Senator Obama and Senator Clinton. Yesterday on Twitter we saw Sanders and Clinton really going after each other, kind of arguing who is the more progressive candidate. I'm wondering if you think that that sort of debate is healthy to have in a really tight contest like this, or if there's any concern on the White House's part, the President's part, that it could alienate some Democratic voters.

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I mean, what I said about the 2008 series of primaries and caucuses that both then Senator Obama and then Senator Clinton competed in was that it did have the effect of sharpening the skills of the individual candidates and flexing the muscle of the campaign's organizing activities in states where Democrats had previously not been particularly active.

So I cited the example of Indiana. There as a competitive primary in Indiana in 2008 for the first time in at least a generation. And there were some who said, well, the fact that Senator Obama and Senator Clinton are debating and still arguing in Indiana is going to have a negative impact on the prospects of Democratic candidates in the general election. The fact is the opposite was true -- that by continuing the campaign for that long, anybody who watched that campaign saw that Senator Obama's skills as a candidate improved, particularly on the debate stage, but also on the stump.

And my friends who worked in Indiana who are the experts in this said that there was a direct correlation between the intensive organizing efforts on the ground inside of Indiana in the lead-up to the May primary that had a material and positive impact on the Democrats' ground operation in Indiana in the general election.

So I don't know if that will be true in 2016. I think it's dangerous to sort of compare one year to the other because the candidates are different and the dynamics in the race are different. I've cited that example to make clear that I wouldn't, at least, automatically assume that a Democratic primary campaign that lasted a little longer than expected is bad for Democrats. I think there's at least as good a chance that that ends of being a good thing for Democrats.

As it relates to the ongoing debate, I'm certainly aware of the charges that have been traded back and forth. But ultimately it's going to be the responsibility of the two candidates to engage in a debate. And it's my hope that they will focus on the issues and values that are central to our party and important to voters. But I'm not going to be in a position to referee their dispute.

Q Just a quick follow-up. Last week, in the President's podcast with Politico, he said that Hillary Clinton would be the most qualified candidate based on her résumé -- without endorsing a candidate. Does he believe that she's the most progressive candidate in this race?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know that he's weighed in on that, so maybe you can ask him.

Lauren.

Q At the prayer breakfast and at the mosque, the President said that an attack on one religion is an attack on all religions, that Christians should support Muslims in persecutions and Muslims should support Christians. Yet ISIS is committing genocide against the Yazidis, and they've been kicked out of their lands. Their homes have been spray-painted. Priests have been killed -- tens of thousands of people have been killed. Yet why won't the Obama administration call this genocide -- Christian genocide?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that the use of that specific term has legal ramifications. And so there are lawyers that are considering whether or not that term can be properly applied in this scenario. What is clear and what is undeniable, and what the President has now said twice in the last 24 hours, is that we know that there are religious minorities in Iraq and in Syria, including Christians, that are being targeted by ISIL terrorists because of their religion. And that attack on religious minorities is an attack on all people of faith. And it is important for us to stand up and speak out about it. And I think that's why the President said what he said, not just in the mosque yesterday, but also at the National Prayer Breakfast this morning.

Q But there is a difference in talking about it and making the distinction of genocide, which provides these people who have been persecuted with the ability to come to the United States seeking refuge. When will this happen? Will it happen?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I do know that this is something that -- this is an open question and one that continues to be considered by administration lawyers. But I can tell you that the President I think was quite blunt in talking about the responsibility that all people of faith have in standing up for individuals who are targeted because of their faith, particularly religious minorities, and particularly the people who are marginalized because of their minority status based on the religion that they practice.

And, look, when it comes to ISIL, there is the potential that they would carry out an act of genocide against Yazidis that prompted a significant mobilization of U.S. military assets to prevent that genocide from happening. What did not get as much attention is that

there was a similar military operation taken by the United States in the town of Amirli, where there were Shia Muslims who were also at potential risk of being slaughtered and being victims of genocide by ISIL-affiliated extremists.

So this administration has worked hard to try to protect religious minorities who are being victimized by ISIL. And there is no doubt that Christians are among those who have been and are being targeted. But as it relates to the specific use of this word -- I guess the point that I'm trying to make is this: The decision to apply this term to this situation is an important one. It has significant consequences, and it matters for a whole variety of reasons, both legal and moral. But it doesn't change our response. And the fact is that this administration has been aggressive, even though that term has not been applied, in trying to protect religious minorities who are victims or potential victims of violence.

John.

Q Thank you, Josh. Two brief questions. First of all, I was away and someone may have asked this and you may have answered it. You've talked a lot about Adam Szubin and the importance of his being confirmed finally.

MR. EARNEST: Some of you have noted -- raised that a few times.

Q Now, one of the things Mr. Szubin said in his capacity was that President Putin is corrupt, has been corrupt for a long time. He made the remark 10 days ago to the BBC. Does the administration have any comment about the presidential appointee's comment on President Putin?

MR. EARNEST: I was asked about this. This was an interview that was actually conducted over the summer but did just air about 10 days ago on the BBC. And what I said then -- I can give you the short version now, which is that we have long raised concerns about corruption in the ranks of the Russian government. And nobody is better positioned to render a judgment about that than the financial expert over at the Treasury Department who's responsible for monitoring those kinds of situations. So obviously what he said reflects a longstanding concern that this administration has about the situation inside of Russia.

Q The other question is: In Haiti right now, President Martelly's term will end February 7th. A source close to the President tells me he may remain in office if the confusion about the election is not decided. This is a time that the Zika epidemic is spreading in that country. Is what is happening in Haiti -- the political uncertainty coupled with the epidemic -- something the administration is watching closely and has any comment on?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update on the political situation inside of Haiti, but we're surely concerned about the Zika virus and the way that it is expanding in certain parts of the Western Hemisphere, including in Haiti. And the United States and a variety of other international organizations are surely going to be focused on taking the steps that we believe can be effective in preventing the spread of the Zika virus.

At this point, I feel like I should sort of deliver what is becoming a more frequent public service announcement about the actual risks of the Zika virus. The concern that we have about the Zika virus is that it is linked to a particular birth defect. And the concern is that some women who contract this virus while pregnant may see that this birth defect crops up, and there seems to be a correlation there that our scientists are taking a close look at and have certainly aroused concerns.

Outside of that, the symptoms of the Zika virus are relatively mild. They take the form of a rash and some swelling and a fever. And typically, these kinds of symptoms go away after about a week; they're relatively mild. The other thing that people should know is that the symptoms of the Zika virus are only manifested in about 1 in 5 people that actually contracts the virus.

But the significant concern that we have is related to the potential that a pregnant woman could contract the virus and that her baby could suffer from this pretty serious birth defect. And we're taking steps to learn as much as we can about this disease, about its transmission, and about potential steps that we could take to fight it, either through treatment or through a vaccine.

Q Final question about the definition of "genocide." The Holocaust Museum is also looking at this and is going to make an announcement on whether that's genocide. Is the decision of the Holocaust Museum something the administration would rely on as to whether to use the term?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously we value the opinion and presumably any evidence that would be marshaled by the Holocaust Museum. But there is an independent determination that needs to be made based on a very specific legal definition that our lawyers are considering right now. And while that legal consideration and while that legal definition is important, and I certainly wouldn't downplay the significance of the use of that term, we have been quite aggressive in both speaking out against but also taking tangible steps to try to protect religious minorities who are the victims of persecution.

Bob, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. President Obama and the President of Colombia will be meeting a little later today to celebrate the 15th anniversary of Plan Colombia. And General McCaffrey was in The Washington Post this morning expressing concerns that the pending peace deal with the FARC could create a blind eye on the drug production and profits and creation of heroin and cocaine coming to the United States, which would reverse the progress that Plan Colombia made. Is President Obama going to express that concern to the President of Colombia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Bob, one of the reasons that we've been able to make important progress in implementing Plan Colombia is that we have developed an important counter-narcotics efforts with the Colombians. And, look, previous Presidents deserve some credit for this. President Clinton and President Bush also were instrumental in terms of laying the groundwork and implementing this plan that is benefitting the United States. But certainly the Colombians are well aware of the risk that narcotics trafficking poses to the security of their country. And I would anticipate that our ability to continue to work with the Colombians to counter narcotics trafficking will only be enhanced if we can continue to make diplomatic progress in the peace talks.

But, look, I'm confident that this is something that the two Presidents will have the opportunity to discuss both in private but also in public today.

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

END

1:53 P.M. EST