

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes, and Senior Director for International Economic Issues Caroline Atkinson

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Friday. It's nice to see you all. We are going to deviate from our regularly scheduled briefing program today to provide you a preview of the President's visit to Europe next week, both the G8 Summit and then for a visit to Germany.

In order to efficiently use your time today, what I am going to suggest is that both my colleagues will stay here with me through the course of the briefing, and as we call on you, regardless of the topic of your question, one of the three of us will handle your questions. So that, I think, will keep things moving and get us in and out of here in pretty efficient fashion.

So with that, let me introduce my two colleagues. The first, many of you know -- Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes. And then to my right is Caroline Atkinson. She is the Senior Director for International Economic Issues on the National Security Staff. And just as importantly, she'll also be the sherpa for the G8 meeting with the President next week.

So both of them will have some opening remarks and then I'll call on you for your questions and we'll go from there.

So, Ben, you want to get it started?

MR. RHODES: Sure. I'll just start by running through our schedule and giving a bit of a preview of what we hope to accomplish at these different stops.

We will be arriving in Northern Ireland on Monday morning, and the event that we're having in Belfast is a speech from the President at the Belfast Waterfront Convention Center. This is the President's first opportunity to address at length the very important support that the United States has provided to the peace process in Northern Ireland over the years and to the development of the economy and society in Northern Ireland.

So he'll have a chance here to speak to students. We've engaged with the leaders of Northern Ireland here at the White House each year on St. Patrick's Day, and welcome their efforts to carry forward the reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland.

In the speech, the President will have a chance to talk about how young people in Northern Ireland have to advance those efforts so that the hard-earned peace that has been achieved in Northern Ireland is translated into a lasting, peaceful society and also into greater economic opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland.

Following the President's speech in Belfast, he will move to Lough Erne, where the G8 is being held. Caroline can preview for you the different plenary sessions, but the first plenary session will begin that afternoon at around 4:45 p.m. local time.

And then, following the first plenary session, the President will have a bilateral meeting with President Putin of Russia. This is the first bilateral meeting that the two leaders will have held since, I believe, Los Cabos at the G20 last year. They clearly have a very broad agenda to discuss. That will include the situation in Syria. That will include Afghanistan, where Russia has cooperated with us in securing both our transit routes for our troops and also promoting stability in the region. It will include nuclear weapons, arms control, missile defense, and the security issues that we very regularly discuss with Russia. We'll also discuss issues related to counterterrorism cooperation, as well as deepening our economic and commercial ties between our two nations.

Following that bilateral meeting -- and there will be a chance for the leaders to make statements at the conclusion of that meeting -- there will be a leaders-only working dinner. This is the dinner that focuses on foreign policy at the G8. The other sessions Caroline can walk you through. I'd anticipate a very wide-ranging conversation at the dinner.

Afghanistan will certainly be a subject. A lot of our key partners on Afghan policy will be represented at the dinner. As we approach our milestone of transitioning lead responsibility for security to the Afghans, they can discuss a transition underway in Afghanistan, as well as our plans for supporting the Afghan government after 2014.

They will clearly discuss the situation in Syria to include the most recent chemical weapons assessment that we've provided; the efforts that are underway to support both the opposition but also a political settlement in the country.

I think they'll discuss, more broadly, the transitions underway in the Middle East and North Africa. The G8 has been a good venue for that, dating back to Deauville. That will include, for instance, the types of support we can provide to security forces in countries

like Libya that are working to establish institutions of the state. And I believe they will cover some other foreign policy issues. Iran and our ongoing efforts related to the Iranian nuclear program are certainly likely to come up.

I should add the President has been consulting with G8 partners in the run-up to this meeting. He spoke to Prime Minister Abe the other night, both about the upcoming G8 and his recent consultations with the Chinese leader. He will be doing a SVTC -- the President will -- with his quint counterparts later today. That includes the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy. So the five of them will have an opportunity to discuss the agenda for the G8 in advance of the meetings.

Q The SVTC is --

MR. RHODES: Today. Sorry, a video conference. Forgive my jargon. That will conclude the first day.

The second day is plenary sessions at G8, so I will leave it to Caroline to walk you through the different plenary sessions on the second day. I would only add that, as is often the case at these meetings, we'd anticipate that the President will have an opportunity to see other leaders on the margins of the G8 throughout the course of the day.

Then we will fly to Germany on Tuesday night and spend the night in Berlin. This visit I think reinforces how critical the U.S.-German relationship is, both as a part of the transatlantic partnership and also in terms of our deep bilateral ties. We'd expect the agenda throughout the course of the meetings in Germany to focus on both economic and security issues. And I'll get to that a little bit when I get to our meeting with Chancellor Merkel.

But the President will begin the day with a meeting with the President of Germany. Following that, he will go to the Chancellery for his bilateral meeting with Chancellor Merkel. He and Chancellor Merkel have developed a very close working relationship since the beginning of 2009. They've worked through a number of delicate crises together, both economic and security.

I'd anticipate that they'll discuss the ongoing situation in the eurozone and the global economy. They'll discuss the trade negotiations associated with a potential transatlantic trade and investment partnership. They'll discuss the situation in Afghanistan, where Germany remains a stalwart ally and continues to contribute to the mission there, as well as how NATO can provide support beyond 2014. I'd also anticipate they'll discuss Syria, Iran, and Middle East peace as issues that we regularly consult with the Germans on.

Following the bilateral meeting, there will be a press conference, and then they'll have a private lunch together at the Chancellery. Then, following lunch, the President will give remarks at the Brandenburg Gate. This is an historic site for the German people and for U.S. Presidents. It comes on the 50th anniversary of President Kennedy's speech, which was not at the Brandenburg Gate but was at the height of the Cold War when West Berlin was under considerable siege.

It's also notable in one respect in that it is the Eastern side of the gate that the President will be speaking on, something that would have been impossible 50 years ago, but given the progress that's been made in Germany, and given the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the country, it's a true symbol of the partnership that we've forged together.

I'd expect the President to hit on broad themes in that speech associated with the shared history of the Transatlantic Alliance -- how far we've come together with Germany and our other allies -- but the need to take that same spirit of cooperation and activism that led us to work together through the Cold War and apply that to the challenges that we face today -- whether it's nuclear weapons and nonproliferation; our efforts to promote human dignity and democratic values around the world; some of the significant security challenges that we face. I think you'll see the President cover essentially the agenda that the Transatlantic Alliance has here in the 21st century. And we can talk more about that if you'd like.

Following the remarks at the Brandenburg Gate, the President will meet with the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Mr. Steinberg, as the principal opposition leader in the country. Then, that night, he'll be hosted at a dinner and reception by Chancellor Merkel. And that will conclude the state visit to Germany.

Before I turn it over to Caroline, I'd also note that the First Lady and Sasha and Malia will also be joining President Obama's trips. They will come to Belfast, where they will attend the President's remarks to local students there. Then the First Lady and the girls will travel to Dublin, Ireland. This is I think an important signal to send, given how close the United States and Ireland are, that she's able to visit there. They were invited to visit the last time that the President was in Ireland, and this will be an opportunity for the First Lady and the girls to accept that hospitality.

They will tour Trinity College, which is Ireland's oldest university, in Dublin, where she will be able to explore the archives that they've gathered to document the Obamas' Irish ancestry, which is well known to you all.

Later in the day, she will meet with the staff and families of our embassy in Dublin. She will join some Irish youth for a Riverdance performance at the historic Gaiety Theatre. She will be joined there by Fionnuala Kenny, the wife of the Taoiseach, and Sabina Higgins, the wife of the President of Ireland, who will also join that event with her.

Then, they will rejoin the President in Berlin. And the independent event that they'll have is on June 19th. The First Lady will visit the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Mauerpark, where she will tour the Wall Park with Chancellor Merkel's husband, Dr. Sauer. And Mrs. Obama will also visit the Reichstag before rejoining the President for the official dinner hosted by Chancellor Merkel.

With that, I'll turn it over to Caroline and then we'll be able to take your questions.

MS. ATKINSON: Thank you very much, Ben. So Lough Erne will be President Obama's fifth G8 Summit. And as you know, G8 members account for about 50 percent of the world's global GDP. And they also include some of our closest allies and partners.

Last year, when President Obama hosted the G8 at Camp David, he returned it to a small, intimate, action-oriented event with just those few leaders together. One example of the actions that we did then was the launch of the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. That now is up to \$3.7 billion in private-sector pledges. And we've expanded from the original three African countries that were announced that joined the G8 last year to nine countries. And more are ready to join this year.

Prime Minister Cameron said that he wanted to take a similar approach of candid conversations amongst a small group of leaders at Lough Erne. So that's just a bit of the background and atmospherics.

The first session of the summit will be on the global economy on Monday afternoon. The context for that discussion has changed a lot over the past year. In Europe, for example, financial tensions have eased considerably, but large parts of Europe remain in recession and unemployment in some countries is at record highs. In the U.S., our recovery is underway. We've successfully avoided the fiscal cliff and our budget deficit is declining rapidly. But of course we have more work to do to create jobs.

As at Camp David, we expect that G8 leaders will express a consensus that growth and jobs are a top priority. As Ben mentioned, there will then be the working dinner just amongst leaders. And on Tuesday morning, there will be another leaders-only session to discuss a range of issues around counterterrorism. That will be followed by a session on trade, tax, and transparency issues in the G8 countries themselves. That discussion this year will underscore some of the President's most important economic priorities.

On trade, the summit will take place just as we're concluding our consultation period here with Congress on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. On taxes, we expect the G8 to make important progress on the issues both of illegal tax evasion and the kind of legal tax avoidance that companies, when they use countries' loopholes, manage to shift their profits to no or low-tax jurisdictions. And international tax has been a core piece of President Obama's agenda since he first ran for President in 2008.

In 2009, he proposed legislation called FATCA to crack down on illegal tax evasion by increasing disclosure requirements for individuals and financial institutions. Congress passed FATCA in 2010. Since then, the Treasury Department has been working with -- using these tools, engaging with other governments to ensure that tax evasion is detected and punished. And at Lough Erne, we're going to be working with the G8 to expand this use of the FATCA standard.

Now, beyond that, we'll also be working at the G8 with Prime Minister Cameron and the others to improve the ability of tax authorities and law enforcement to identify the real people behind shell companies that are sometimes set up and facilitate the hiding of tax

liabilities. Increasing transparency around company ownership -- what's called beneficial ownership -- will help to prosecute illegal evasion and other illicit activity -- money laundering, terrorist financing and so on.

In addition to these efforts to combat tax evasion, illegal tax evasion, the President has been focused on international efforts to reduce what is legal tax avoidance -- when companies legally use loopholes that exist in our laws and other laws to reduce their tax liability. Tax avoidance is as much about countries and country rules as it is about companies, because the loopholes that the companies use are the result of the rules that countries set.

Last year, in February, President Obama laid out a detailed framework for business tax reform, which included proposals to take this problem on. And the G8 Summit will provide an opportunity to highlight the need to remove tax incentives that encourage companies to shift profits around, and instead replace those incentives with ones that will encourage the creation of jobs and investment at home.

And there is work underway in the G20, the broader grouping beyond the G8, and the OECD, to think through these issues and to prevent races to the bottom in tax policy. We want to avoid tax competition turning into a lose-lose proposition where countries not only lose revenue, but companies make inefficient decisions by locating where they pay the lower taxes -- or shifting their profits to the lower taxes rather than where it is most productive for them to invest and produce.

The next session on Tuesday is a working lunch, which will include African and other leaders and the heads of international organizations to talk about the development aspects of the U.K. agenda, which will include also the tax and transparency issues. We have put particular emphasis on the extractive sector and transparency in the extractive sector through Dodd-Frank. The United States was the first to require companies to disclose the payments that they make to governments in the extractive sector.

And we welcome the steps that were taken just yesterday by the EU to adopt very similar legislation, and the announcement from Canada that they were also seeking to work to align with these standards. This is an area where the G8 can actually be at its best; where it rises to a challenge and agrees to take action that we can do in our own countries that raise standards around the world and ensure that everybody is competing on a level playing field.

The final session on Tuesday will be a short session just to conclude, bring the G8 together, perhaps talk about next year's agenda. And let me just say that these summits are important, both because they set the agenda on ongoing collaborative work -- foreign policy and the global economy -- and they also allow leaders to highlight and discuss candidly among themselves important issues and then press for action.

Thank you very much.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, Ben and Caroline. It sounds like it's going to be a very busy three days next week. So with that, we'll go ahead and open it up for questions. Jim, we'll give you the first question, but we do want to try to hop around today. So, people in the back, start thinking of your questions.

Jim, do you want to start?

Q Thanks, Josh, and thanks to both of you for doing this. Ben, on Syria, will decisions -- you guys haven't talked specifically about what the military support issues are. But would decisions on military support depend in part on the outcome of the talks that the President will have with G8 leaders? And given the position that the French and the British have staked out, is there an expectation that they might accelerate their decision-making on any military support that they might provide?

MR. RHODES: Well, thanks, Jim. First of all, the decisions that we've made are already finalized. So the President's decision to increase support for the Syrian opposition, including the Supreme Military Council, the SMC, which is the principal fighting force on the ground that we've been working with, those are decisions that he's made over the course of the last several weeks, particularly as our assessment of chemical weapons use firmed up, and as we saw a deteriorating situation in general with outside actors like Iran and Hezbollah getting involved.

So this has been a steady increase for us. We have steadily increased both the size and scope of our assistance to the political opposition and to the SMC, and we've decided to take an additional step forward in providing dramatically increased assistance to the SMC going forward. At the same time, this is a fluid situation, so it's necessary for him to consult with all the leaders at the G8 about both our chemical weapons assessment and the types of support we're providing to the opposition.

With the French and the British, they have shared our positions generally on Syria. They've been a part of the core group of essentially 11 countries in the Middle East and in Europe that have worked together to strengthen the Syrian opposition. I will leave it to them to make their own announcements. They did, of course, lift the embargo that was in place that prevented arms flowing from the European Union into Syria. But I think he'll be discussing with those leaders what the best way forward is. He'll hear from them what their plans are.

Thus far, they've been important partners, the French and the British in particular, in sharing information and intelligence related to chemical weapons. So we'll continue to do that going forward. We'd note Prime Minister Cameron's constructive statement today welcoming our assessment. But this will be an ongoing dialogue between the President and his fellow leaders.

Q And you said the President has made these decisions over the last couple of weeks. Are fighters on the ground already seeing some of this support?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, we've had an upward trajectory of assistance in general, and they have already seen certain types of assistance that has reached into Syria. Examples of that might be what we traditionally call MREs, "Meals Ready to Eat," and medical kits. But the additional types of assistance that we will providing to them going forward, it obviously takes time from a decision -- for that assistance to reach people in Syria.

Given the way in which we implement our assistance programs, I can't give you a specific timeline or itemized list of what that assistance is and when it will get there. But suffice to say, what we've been able to do, by developing a relationship with the SMC as well as the Syrian Opposition Coalition over the course of the last six months or so, is to develop relationships, to find individuals -- for instance, like General Idris of the SMC -- who we are focusing this assistance towards. That's important because it both allows you to get assistance into the hands of those who need it, but it also allows you to have protections to try to keep assistance from reaching those who we don't want to receive materiel -- for instance, al Nusra, which has generally been the most extremist element of the opposition.

Q And you mentioned Cameron's support, but not so much from the Russians. The Foreign Minister said that the data that you're citing, intelligence data, didn't look too convincing. What does that say about establishing the level of trust that you need at the beginning of the G8 meetings with Putin's presence there and in the bilat where this will clearly come up?

MR. RHODES: Well, we've had differences with Russia on Syria. And all I'd say with respect to the chemical weapons assessment that we briefed to them is that we have a broad range of evidence associated with the multiple incidents of chemical weapons use that we assess took place. That includes open source reporting. It includes intelligence reporting. It includes the accounts of individuals. It also includes physiological samples of sarin that we've obtained from within Syria.

So we assess with high confidence that sarin has been used. And frankly, the regime maintains custody of these weapons. So both because of our intelligence assessment and because of the fact that we believe that the regime has maintained possession of its chemical weapons arsenal leads us to the very firm conclusion that any use of chemical weapons would have been by the regime.

At the same time, we still continue to discuss with the Russians whether there is a way to bring together elements of the regime and the opposition to achieve a political settlement. There are no illusions that that's going to be easy. We still have a difference with the Russians, for instance, on the fact that we believe Bashar al-Assad would have to leave power as a part of that process. But we'll continue those talks.

And frankly, the type of relationship we have with the Russians is such that even as we have disagreements, and even strong disagreements in some areas, we want to work together on issues where we do have convergence of interest, such as nuclear security, counterterrorism, and the situation in Afghanistan.

Q Ben, following up on that, do you expect that President Putin will move at all on the Syria position as a result of this bilat? And do you have any more details you can share with us today, or will the President share more details with the G8 leaders who will no doubt ask about the extent of the military support that you'll be providing? And I have a question for Caroline as well.

MR. RHODES: On President Putin, I would hesitate to characterize his views. He's very good at doing that. I think what we would say with respect to the Russia position on Syria generally is that what Russia has articulated to us -- and publicly -- is that that they don't want to see a downward spiral; they don't want to see a chaotic and unstable situation in the region. They don't want to see extremist elements gaining a foothold in Syria.

And the point that we've made to Russia is that the current course in which Assad has not been appropriately pressured to step down from power by those who continue to support him in the international community is bringing about those very outcomes. So it's in Russia's interest to join us in applying pressure on Bashar al-Assad to come to the table in a way that relinquishes his power and his standing in Syria, because we don't see any scenario where he restores his legitimacy to lead the country.

So we're fundamentally making an interest-based argument to the Russians that they can best protect their interests by being a part of a political settlement that is real and that enables a transition away from Assad's rule but preserves some elements of the institutions of the state, preserves some elements of the regime, but respects the rights of the Syrian people and brings in the opposition, who we believe speaks for the majority of the country.

Q And on military aid?

MR. RHODES: I think the President will definitely be discussing the types of aid and assistance that we provide into Syria. In particular, the countries that work with us on that are our European allies, and the French and the British have been the most prominent in that regard. So I think he'll be discussing it broadly. He'll also have opportunities to see the leaders on the margins of these meetings as well.

I should have added that we fully anticipate he'll have a chance, for instance, to spend some time with Prime Minister Cameron before the G8. It may not be a formal bilat, but we expect them to have some time together. So he'll be having those discussions.

Again, given the nature of the assistance and how we provide assistance generally in situations like this, it's not an instance where we can be specific about every single aspect of what we're doing. But I think that the general point that we've made is to indicate that because of the actions we've seen taken -- including chemical weapons use -- we've decided to take the step of increasing both the size and the scope of assistance, including to the military council.

Q Just for Caroline -- on corporate tax avoidance, what sort of concrete or substantive outcomes could you expect from those discussions at the G8?

MS. ATKINSON: I think the G8 leaders will be able to give a political push to the importance of work that's ongoing on this. And just to mention, here in the U.S., the President has championed proposals to ensure that companies cannot shift their profits to places where there's no taxation -- for example, with the proposal for a minimum tax on foreign earnings that is part of his white paper. And we need to have a comprehensive solution.

What we really want to see is all of the G8 countries agreeing that there are a number of different measures. This is an important goal for them all to work towards. And we should be rewarding incentives for companies to invest and create jobs here at home, if it makes sense for them to do that and make their productive decisions here.

Q But will it move beyond sort of that rhetoric? I mean, we know that the President supports that. Will it move to anything that will actually have a concrete effect?

MS. ATKINSON: I think that these political moves by G8 leaders do translate into an effect, because they push the processes that otherwise might be going more slowly, and they also involve governments committing to take different actions.

We know that what we have put forward -- we're going to ask -- the OECD, for example, is working on a template for more transparency by companies. I expect that there will be a strong support from G8 leaders on that. Other countries, including the U.K., are now stepping forward and saying they also want to make important efforts in this area so that international tax policy doesn't develop into a race to the bottom. And that's an important outcome for -- because all of these measures require us to go home and take individual actions ourselves. But having that collective commitment to work on these issues is important.

MR. EARNEST: Let's move to the back. Nadya.

Q Thank you. Ben, can you help us understand a little bit better of why it took you so long to conclude that Assad used chemical weapons while the French and the British already said that a while ago? Because some of the cynics will say it's because of the opposition is losing on the ground and that's why you came out. And why is it that 150 dead by chemical weapons is a game changer, but not 93,000 dead by conventional weapons?

MR. RHODES: Well, I'll take the second question first. We've clearly been in strong opposition to what's been taking place in Syria for two years. The use of conventional force against civilians is what led us in the first instance to say that Bashar al-Assad had to step down; to put in place a sanctions regime; to recognize the Syrian Opposition Coalition as a legitimate representative that we could deal with for the Syrian people; and to try to mobilize an international response.

At the same time, the use of chemical weapons violates clear international norms. For decades, the international community sought to strengthen a norm against the use of this type of weapon, given both its potential for mass casualty, and given the type of weapon of

mass destruction that it is, and the effects we've seen it have when it's been used in past history. So this isn't just a red line for the United States in our view; it should be a red line for the international community generally.

With respect to our timing, we've been driven by our intelligence assessments of potential incidents. And even the incidents that we have established high confidence about, most of those, you're talking about things that have taken place in the last several months, in 2013.

In terms of the time from April, essentially what we had in April was an initial intelligence assessment, and the President's direction was to continue to investigate additional corroborating facts and information so that we could raise our confidence level. Because that was not a high-confidence assessment and we didn't feel like we had enough corroborated information to reach that high degree of confidence that this red line had been crossed.

What's been done in the course of the last several weeks is we've been able to piece together a broader information picture -- so you're able to take, for instance, an assessed incident of chemical weapons use, you're able to receive reporting from individuals who were there on the ground. We were able to review physiological samples that have been collected at the site. We were able to review open source reporting from social media and other things that speak to the use of chemical weapons in an area. And we were able to review our own intelligence reporting, which obviously covers a range of different means.

In piecing together that information picture, the intelligence community is able to increase its confidence level. And so that's what led to the announcement yesterday. It was driven by the firming up of this assessment over the course of the last several weeks, which the President had asked for after the announcement we made in April.

And now what we'll do is we'll share that with the French and British and others -- who, by the way, we've been in touch with on these assessments over the course of the last couple of months. And together, we want to focus on what each country knows about what's happened in Syria, but we also want to present this information to the United Nations. And today, Ambassador Rice delivered a letter to Ban Ki-moon detailing some of the incidents that we had particularly been focused on, and we're seeking to push this into the U.N. system as well, both because the U.N. investigation has been frustrated and also because the U.N. and the Security Council are appropriate venues to discuss issues like the use of chemical weapons.

Q Ben, can you tell us more -- any more than you were not able to tell us yesterday about what is going to be sent to the rebel council in any specificity? Also the timing, how soon it can get to them. As you know, the government forces are -- there are reports again of fighting around Aleppo. They seem to have the upper hand. Is it going to reach the rebels in time?

MR. RHODES: Let me start by talking about what we're trying to achieve here, because that's the best way I think to answer your question. We believe that the SMC, the Supreme Military Council, deserves our support just as the political opposition does. And what we want to do with our assistance is strengthen their effectiveness so that they have better capabilities as they are pursuing their efforts within Syria.

We want to strengthen their cohesion, because it's a very difficult situation when you have essentially fighting scattered across the country. We want to connect them well to us, but also to our other partners who are providing assistance -- countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Turkey and others -- so that they're able to receive assistance in a timely matter.

Those are the types of objectives we're seeking to meet through the decision that the President has made. I'm not going to be able to say, here's the specific list of every type of item that we'll be delivering into Syria. We do want to be responsive to the requests that have been made by the SMC and General Idris consistent with our own national interests. So we'll seek to be responsive with that very important caveat. And we'll seek to get assistance into Syria in a timely way.

And we've already established pipelines to do that. So we already have huge amounts of humanitarian assistance going to the country, significant amounts of non-lethal types of assistance, and even assistance with military uses such that I mentioned on the medical and food side earlier. So the pipelines exist to provide assistance into the SMC, and that will allow us to ramp up our assistance there.

Q But even if you don't have a complete list, can't you even say small arms, RPGs, heavier weapons? And weeks, months, years?

MR. RHODES: Well, on the first question, I obviously completely understand the interest. We're just not going to be able to get into that level of detail about the type of assistance that we provide publicly here. In terms of timelines, we have established these pipelines, so I think you should see this as a continuum. And so there's already material that has been flowing in to the opposition, and that will continue to be the case in the weeks to come. So we don't anticipate that this is something that is far off into the future. This is part of the continuum of assistance that we've provided, because we've already been dealing directly with the SMC.

And this gets to the timing issue as well. We have relationships today in Syria that we didn't have six months ago that gives us greater certainty not just that we can get stuff into the country, but also that we can put it in the right hands so that it's not falling into the hands of extremists.

Q Give us a better understanding of how -- explain how does the provision of small arms -- given the fact that most of the rebels already have small arms of that sort -- how does that convince Bashar al-Assad not to use chemical weapons again?

MR. RHODES: I'm not going to get into kind of a detailed description of different types of assistance.

Q How does this action --

MR. RHODES: What I'd say is, first of all, as a general matter, we want the opposition to be as strong as possible, because both -- frankly, for the reason that they are faced with a brutal regime that has shown no restraint and the actions that they've taken against them and also because of the fact that we've seen this increased foreign involvement, particularly from Iran and Hezbollah.

We believe that we can make a difference. And keep in mind, it's not just the United States that's providing assistance into Syria. We have a number of Arab partners who are also focused on providing assistance -- Turkey has been a partner as well.

So we believe that we have a coalition of countries that is prepared to support the Syrian opposition. And again, this will improve their capabilities. This will improve their effectiveness within Syria. At the same time, they need to continue to strengthen their cohesion so that they can function in different parts of the country. You've already seen that the fighting runs from Aleppo, in the north, down to Qasara in the south. So we need to make sure that they are also able to firm up their position and be a coordinated body across the country.

Q Given the fact they've fallen behind in a variety of cities throughout the country as per reporting from on the ground there right now, was it a mistake for the U.S. and for other allies to not take this action at this level two years ago?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, what we've seen over the course of the last two years is momentum has ebbed and flowed within Syria. And at any given time, you can assess that either the regime or the opposition has some initiative.

As a general matter, Bashar al-Assad has been rejected by the, we believe, significant majority of his people. And that's not a genie that you can put back in the bottle. So we don't think that there's any way for the Syrian regime to prevail in this conflict in a way that obtains security for them, because the leader of Syria has no legitimacy among his people.

So, again, on the momentum question, ultimately, we still believe that there's not a scenario we can foresee where Bashar al-Assad can remain in power in a country that so clearly rejects his rule, and an international community that broadly rejects his rule even as he has some basis of support.

In terms of the timeline, these are not -- the types of steps that we've taken to increase our support for the opposition are not steps that the President takes lightly for a variety of reasons. Number one, because we need to know that there's a cohesive and coherent opposition that we can work with. A year ago, the opposition was not nearly as advanced in terms of having a political entity like the SOC that was broadly representative of the Syrian people. There was not an organized entity like the SMC, the Supreme Military Council, on the ground. What you had was far more disparate groups of opposition fighters in different parts of the country.

So that type of organized opposition was not in existence. Similarly, as I said, we've been able to develop our own relations with the opposition and seek to do things to isolate the more extremist elements of that opposition. But again, we are doing this for a variety of reasons, including the fact that there needs to be a consequence for a regime that uses chemical weapons. And the opposition on the ground needs additional support, given the dire situation of being faced with a regime that used chemical weapons and has this type of foreign fighter support as well.

Q And if Assad falls, then what prevents the al Nusra front from then taking control? What measures are being put in place to make sure that that is the regime that follows suit?

MR. RHODES: Well, that's another reason for us to make sure that we're supporting a more moderate opposition. And again, I know there's a big focus, understandably, on the military side of things. Our assistance runs the gamut to the types of assistance that allows the opposition to provide for some humanitarian and basic services for the Syrian people. But we want to be strengthening individuals within Syria and organizations within Syria that are more moderate, such that we're isolating extremist elements.

And, by the way, this is a point we've made to other countries in the region -- that those countries that are providing support into Syria should focus that support towards the more moderate opposition and seek to isolate extremist elements that could present a security challenge even after Bashar al-Assad is removed.

Q Ben, there's been, as you know, something of an outcry in some of the countries that will be represented at the G8 about the intelligence programs that have been disclosed over the past week or so. What's the President going to tell the other leaders about the telephone record-keeping that's been undertaken by the NSA and the web searches?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think he'll be able to discuss with the other leaders the importance of these programs in terms of our counterterrorism efforts in particular; the constraints and safeguards that we place on these programs so that they have oversight against potential abuses. And all of these countries at the G8 are important counterterrorism partners. And together, we've worked with them on an intelligence and security relationship to foil terrorist attacks in the United States and in Europe. And, of course, Russia shares a significant counterterrorism interest with us as well.

And that speaks to the fact that terrorism is a global threat. If you look at a country like Germany, we all remember, of course, that that was one area of staging for 9/11 hijackers. So if you don't have an ability to share information, we are going to remove -- we'd remove a tool that is essential to our shared security. But we certainly understand that, like the United States, countries in Europe have significant interests in privacy and civil liberties, so we will want to hear their questions and have an exchange about these programs and other counterterrorism programs that we pursue in the United States and in partnership.

Q First Ben -- then to Caroline on the TTIP. Ben, is the President looking forward to that he finally speaks at the Brandenburg Gate, something he wasn't able to do in 2008 to the disappointment of many? And then a second question.

MR. RHODES: Well, yes. We understood when we attended in 2008, when we went to Berlin, that the Brandenburg Gate is a site of particular resonance to the German people and it's a site that had been reserved for heads of state in the past, and we certainly accepted that judgment. At the same time, we could not have received a warmer welcome in Berlin generally, and we were able to speak essentially in the vicinity of the area.

But I think this is particularly meaningful. Any time a U.S. President is able to stand at the Brandenburg Gate, or stand in the heart of Berlin, it's an opportunity for him to speak to not just the role of Germany, and the United States and Germany, but essentially it's the role of the West and the free world. And we had challenges in the Cold War that we shouldered together, and I think his message is very much going to be that just because the threat is not immediately apparent with a wall and barbed wire, it doesn't mean that we don't have work to do together.

But Chancellor Merkel extended this invitation when she was here for the state visit that the President hosted for her, and he was honored to receive that invitation. In preparations for the trip, the government of Germany and the city of Berlin could not have been more hospitable in arranging I think what will be a very powerful event there in the heart of Berlin, where you have not just the Brandenburg Gate, but you have the new American embassy that has been built and obviously the new German government buildings that symbolize the openness of the new Germany as well. So he's very much looking forward to it.

Q Ben, German Internet users had to learn that they were among the bigger targets of the NSA's PRISM program. There's a huge public outcry in Germany about that. What kind of impact will that have on the success of the President's trip to Germany?

MR. RHODES: We understand the significant German interest in privacy and civil liberties. I think the point that we will make is, in addition to the types of safeguards against abuse we have, this is not a program that is intended to target individuals for what they're doing online other than to seek to uncover terrorist plots and nexus to terrorism. So I think our point is that this is focused very specifically on one goal, which is how do we disrupt terrorist activity; how do we mitigate security threats both to us and to Germany.

But it's a discussion that he'll have with the Chancellor and he'll obviously be able to address it publicly while he's there as well.

Q Caroline, how important is it that negotiations on a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership starts without any exclusions of certain topics like media industry, for instance, how some in Europe want to do?

MS. ATKINSON: I think we've made clear that we are very much in support of a broad and comprehensive negotiation. We understand, of course, that both sides have sensitivities, but we're watching very closely what happens in Europe. We know there's a

lot of strong support there, including in Germany, for an ambitious and comprehensive agreement. And that's obviously what we'll be looking to see. That will be the most likely type of mandate that would lead to an ambitious agreement.

Q Got a question for Ben. If you could clarify a little bit the rationale behind your decision to extend the military aid to the Syrian opposition. Is it to defeat Bashar al-Assad, or to readjust, if it's still possible, the balance of power on the ground in preparation for the Geneva peace conference? And I have a second question as well.

MR. RHODES: Well, as a general matter, the best way to resolve the situation is through a political settlement, and Geneva is the one framework that exists for a political settlement. And I think that's just common sense, given that you're either going to have an agreement reached between the two sides, or you're going to have a military conflict that continues until one side wins.

So we want to channel our efforts in support of that political negotiation. But we fully understand that there are huge obstacles to that, particularly given the activities of the regime and given the difficulty in them sending a serious signal that they're open to a real political transition in Syria and one that we believe would have to involve Bashar al-Assad leaving power.

Our assistance as a general matter is meant to accomplish a number of objectives. One is to send a signal to the Assad regime that there's a consequence for what they've done with respect to chemical weapons. Another is to strengthen the opposition. And again, ultimately, we have chosen to support them as the legitimate representative that we're going to deal with in terms of the Syrian people.

So ultimately, our objective and our stated national policy is that Bashar al-Assad should leave power. We have a preference that that be done politically, but we're going to continue to support those in Syria who are working for a post-Assad future.

Q I heard as well Jay this weekend, and yourself, you had mentioned that the objective of the U.S. policy is a negotiated settlement for the Syria issue. Does that mean that you still consider Bashar al-Assad an interlocutor in this process, in a negotiated settlement between the opposition and his regime?

MR. RHODES: Well, we certainly see the Assad regime would have to participate in any type of negotiation. I don't think we've seen any proposal that Bashar al-Assad himself would come to the table to as a part of that process.

But what we want to see in a negotiated settlement, if it can be achieved, is not a situation in which you dissolve the institutions of the state in Syria, but rather where you see Bashar al-Assad leave power and you see a governing authority come together that brings in the opposition, but maintains certain elements of the state -- certain institutions of the state, certain individuals who have been associated with the government in a government that can restore the unity of the country, respect the rights of the people, and start to begin to provide services.

So Bashar al-Assad himself we think needs to leave the stage here. But clearly, his regime is going to have to be a part of any political dialogue that we have in pursuit of that objective.

Q Can you resolve for us the situation of the student loans? Yesterday on the Senate floor there was an attempt by Republicans to offer what they described as the President's specific proposal in the budget on extending the student loan issue that was objected to. Republicans are raising their -- what in their mind is a legitimate question as why wouldn't the President's own plan be embraced by Senate Democrats? Where are we on this? And what accounts for this apparent strategic confusion among Democrats on the President's plan?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there is a range of discussions that are ongoing between the administration and people on both sides of the aisle, particularly in the Senate, to try to broker an agreement here that will prevent student loan rates from doubling at the end of this month. So there are a number of conversations that are ongoing. I don't know that I'm the best person to try to figure out the legislative machinations in terms of the steps that are being negotiated in the Senate.

But we've laid out what we think is a pretty clear set of principles for how we can solve this problem and do it in a way that, frankly, should have appeal to both sides -- to people on both sides of the aisle.

Q Are you now at the point where not having the President's own plan put on the floor is better?

MR. EARNEST: No, I don't think so. I think we'd be happy to see our plan passed. The question is if there are people who actually have to vote on that plan who have their own ideas. And we are willing to have conversations with them to try to broker an agreement that would reflect the interests of Republicans, Democrats and the administration.

So we have our own plan. We like our plan. But if there are other people that have their own ideas -- we've laid out some principles that we would like to see. For instance, we want to make sure that students have an opportunity when they're repaying their loans to be able to work through an agreement that would limit their payments to 10 percent of their disposable income, for example -- that there are provisions that would limit the increase of the interest rate over time. For example, we've talked about locking in the historically low rates.

So there are some principles that we've put forward, but we're open to negotiations.

Q But quite clearly, you understand there's a time element here and the Senate has to pass something to get this to conference.

MR. EARNEST: There's an urgent time element. We're talking about a couple of weeks here.

Q Okay. So what's your instruction specifically to the Senate Democratic leadership that's theoretically working with you on this? Pass the President's plan, or get about something that's an alternative?

MR. EARNEST: We would like to see something move through the Senate that abides by some of the principles that we've laid out. Our plan does that, obviously. But there may be some other suggestions and we're open to some other ideas.

Q Ben, the President drew the red line. He reinforced it many times. Yet, he himself did not address this issue that the red line had been crossed yesterday. And he is not here today. No disrespect to the three of you, but this is the President's red line. What would you say to those who might think that this is not such a big deal because the President is not giving voice to this theoretically significant event? And even your own inability to describe with any specificity the arms that would be going to the rebels, this sounds like an incremental policy change that the President, by not talking about it himself, is sort of keeping his arm's length from.

MR. RHODES: Well, Major, I think what I'd say to that is the situation in Syria is an ongoing challenge and the President has repeated opportunities to speak to it. I'm certain he is going to have opportunities to speak to it, for instance, over the course of the several days that he'll be traveling to Europe.

He himself is the one who laid out the red line publicly. But people have to understand that this is a very fluid and dynamic situation and the situation on the ground will have its own twists and turns. Our own policy has been one of incrementally increased support for the opposition, efforts to pressure the Assad regime. But this is not something that's going to be resolved with the turn of a switch.

And so we've made clear what our policy objectives are. We believe that articulating those objectives can give people an understanding of what we're trying to achieve in terms of strengthening the SMC in Syria, strengthening the opposition. In situations like this, spelling out the underlying details or the itemization of material that may be going to the opposition is not something we do as a general matter. But you can fully expect that the President will be heard on these issues repeatedly in the coming days.

And the announcement we made yesterday very much reflected his guidance, because he was the one who directed the intelligence community to pull together this assessment and directed us to make it public.

Q Just one more. It's clear from those who are fighting that it's taken a long time for some of the aid that's already been announced to get there. You acknowledged in the conference call yesterday even though you have these open pipelines, there are and have been bottlenecks. Isn't it worth assuming that it will be at least a couple of months before any of this other aid arrives, because the bottlenecks are real, because the transit points are weak? And might that not be far too late?

MR. RHODES: I would not make that assumption, because frankly it's true that there have been times in which we couldn't move assistance quite as fast as we would have liked. But we've had opportunities over the course of the last several months to get better at establishing pipelines into the country. So we believe that our own efforts have improved in terms of streamlining the means by which we can work with some neighboring states to supply assistance into Syria.

So I think we have essentially an established pipeline and established lines of communication and assistance that allow us to take additional types of assistance and put that into that pipeline. So we're comfortable and confident that, given the work that we've already done, that we can flow our assistance in a relatively timely manner.

Q Quick question for Caroline. On the TTIP trade, given that the matter that our German colleague referenced, the cultural parameters for the negotiations, these supposedly are going to be settled ahead of the G8 meeting by the European Union. What, if any, material impact do you anticipate these G8 discussions will have on the framework for the TTIP agreement? Do we anticipate anything coming out of this summit that would have a real impact on the scope or ambition of those trade talks, given that this other matter is supposed to be settled in advance?

MS. ATKINSON: Yes, on the timing of that, as I said, I believe the EU is discussing this matter urgently amongst trade ministers. We'll see if they're able to reach an agreement ahead of the summit. We understand that, of course, there is sensitivities on both sides. At the summit itself, trade and the value of open trade and high standards for new -- for trade agreements will be a part of the agenda.

But the specific trade agreements such as TPP, we're negotiating, obviously, with a number of allies, including Japan and Canada, who will both be at the table there. The EU and Canada are discussing. We're in discussions separately on trade matters with the responsible EU counterparts. That is not something that leaders themselves -- the specifics of negotiation aren't something that leaders themselves, in the normal course of the sessions, would address. And we don't currently have any other meetings to deal with as scheduled.

Q A couple questions on Syria. First of all, since we've determined -- the United States has determined that there are these chemical weapons and they've been used, does the United States know where they are? And what steps would they take to destroy them?

MR. RHODES: It's a good question, Jim. We have been monitoring very closely the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile. We've been doing that; so have a number of our allies. So while we can't say with certainty that we are aware of where every chemical weapons munitions is in the country, this is something we devote a lot of attention and resources to and we feel like we have a sense of both the fact of the regime controlling these chemical weapons stockpiles and some sense of where they are generally.

In terms of securing them, this is something that would be a priority for the United States, particularly in a post-Assad scenario. Clearly, in the current environment, they remain under regime control. And there's a very active conflict in Syria.

But when we look at the types of issues that we're going to be focused on and that we want the international community to be focused on in Syria, if we can reach a resolution, if we can get to a post-Assad Syria, I think you would see a very intense focus from the U.S. on making sure that steps are being taken to secure these chemical weapons stockpiles. And again, this is something that the international community can do.

One example of that, for instance, is, in Libya there were chemical weapon stockpiles -- not nearly of the scale in Syria -- but in the immediate aftermath of the Libyan revolution, we were able to work with the relevant international bodies to ensure that experts got on the ground to secure those chemical weapons and to begin the work of destroying them.

So this is something that we'll be focused on in terms of monitoring, but also in terms of planning for post-Assad scenarios.

Q But during this scenario, now, is it just too dangerous? Is it because of the nature of the weapons themselves that you could not destroy them before Assad is gone?

MR. RHODES: Well, I'll take the hypothetical in this regard, which is that it is -- these are dangerous weapons, and the notion that you can destroy them if you aren't physically present is an extremely challenging one, just given the nature of the weapon. So the preference would clearly be to have this be a priority focus for when the international community -- and, again, it need not be the United States; a lot of the expertise lies in the international community. We'll have the opportunity to make this a priority in a post-Assad Syria.

Q If I can just ask one follow up, one other question, and that's about -- not from the White House, but all over everywhere else there is lots of talk about a no-fly zone. What is more -- is it more difficult to establish and more dangerous to establish a no-fly zone in Syria than it was in Libya? And is that why it hasn't been done at this point?

MR. RHODES: Yes, it's dramatically more difficult and dangerous and costly in Syria for a variety of reasons. One is that in Libya, you already had a situation where the opposition controlled huge portions of the country and you could essentially protect those portions of the country from the air. You do not have the same types of air defense system that exist within Syria. So in that regard, it's more difficult.

But we also look at the efficacy of a no-fly zone, and frankly, in Syria, when you have a situation where regime forces are intermingled with opposition forces, they're fighting in some instances block by block in cities -- that's not a problem you can solve from the air. So I think people need to understand that the no-fly zone is not some type of silver bullet that is going to stop a very intense and, in some respects, sectarian conflict that is taking place on the ground.

And so that's why we feel like the best course of action is to try to strengthen a moderate opposition that can be able to represent the broader Syrian public. We haven't ruled out options, but I think people need to understand both the difficulty of some of the options that have been presented, the fact that they don't solve the problem necessarily, and that we have to make these decisions based on U.S. national interest. And we don't at this point believe that the U.S. has a national interest in pursuing a very intense, open-ended military engagement through a no-fly zone in Syria at this juncture. But again, we aren't ruling out contingencies, but we're weighing them in a very deliberate fashion.

Q If this assistance to the opposition is not effective and the situation continues to escalate, could the President be forced to consider putting boots on the ground, or is that completely off the table?

MR. RHODES: The one option that we basically have taken off the table is boots on the ground, for a variety of reasons. One, nobody has asked us to do so. The Syrian opposition has not thought that that's a good idea. We certainly don't think it's in our national interest to introduce U.S. troops.

We need to be humble here about our ability to solve a problem like Syria certainly on our own. I think recent history teaches us that even when you have U.S. boots on the ground, you're not necessarily going to be able to prevent violence amongst civilian populations. We saw that in Iraq, for instance. And at the same time, when U.S. boots are on the ground, that involves us in a much more dramatic way. It has a way of making us the issue, instead of the future of the country where we are. So that is one contingency that we're not entertaining at this point.

Q And a hypothetical here, which -- I know you don't like to answer hypotheticals -- but if Russia had been willing to apply the kind of pressure that you wanted a month ago or six months ago or two years ago, would there be a different picture now? Would there have been a need for the United States to provide this kind of assistance to the rebels?

MR. RHODES: Well, they do give you a briefing when you become a national security staff person against entertaining hypotheticals, but I will entertain an aspect of it, which is that the time when we think Russian support, for instance, could have made a difference was when we were putting forward resolutions in the Security Council that would have imposed greater consequences on the Assad regime -- and that was over a year ago. And time and again, we saw international action blocked at the Security Council by a Russian veto.

That, for instance, at the time could have applied a great measure of pressure on Bashar al-Assad to consider whether or not to step down. I can't say that it would have accomplished that objective, but clearly, we believe that additional pressure from the international community -- including Russia -- could affect Bashar al-Assad's calculus. That continues to be the case today.

But at the same time, it's also Iran and Hezbollah. And you have to ask yourself why are Iran and Hezbollah so invested in what's happening in Syria. To us, there's a bit of a sign of desperation involved. Iran sees its only serious ally in the region significantly threatened. Hezbollah, a force that has traditionally not gotten engaged beyond the borders of Lebanon, has devoted a tremendous amount of resources. Frankly, we see that as a sign of vulnerability from Hezbollah and Iran, and frankly, it's turning the people of the region dramatically against Hezbollah.

If you look at the standing of Hezbollah in the region in 2006 as against where they are today, they are bleeding public support, political capital, and resources in Syria. And I think that's a sign of vulnerability.

Q And I've got one for Josh as well. On arming the rebels -- as you know, Senator McCain has said over and over that he wants to see heavy arms and he wants artillery, he wants anti-aircraft. I don't know if that's the right solution, but he keeps pushing that. Is that why you're not spelling out the details of what arms you're sending, or what aid you're sending, because it doesn't meet that threshold that the critics have set?

MR. RHODES: No, that's not the -- that wouldn't be why we wouldn't get into specifics. I think as a general matter, we're not going to get into specifics about certain types of assistance that we provide. The only thing I will say is that whatever we do, we also need to be careful in learning lessons of history, that you need to have some sense of where any assistance you're providing is going, whose hands they're falling into, and what potential dangers may be associated with heavier weapons systems.

So those types of -- I think any time when you're considering these types of issues, you have to be cautious and deliberate in your actions.

Q But I don't understand the lack of transparency and just flatly telling the American people, here's what we're sending. If you were to institute a no-fly zone -- I understand there needs to be secrecy in war and peace on some military movements, et cetera, of course. But if you instituted a no-fly zone, there would be some accounting of we're sending this many planes, here's how we're doing it. Why is there secrecy around what you're sending?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think if you were to introduce U.S. military forces through a no-fly zone and activities of that nature, activities like we saw in Libya, clearly those would be things that we would discuss in some detail. I think when you get into questions of the provision of assistance to opposition groups, we just are more limited in our ability to say, well, here's the inventory of everything that we're doing.

I understand your question and I'm sympathetic to it, Ed. I think what we can do is sketch out for you, here's the President's thinking; here's our policy; and here are the objectives we're trying to meet with our assistance to strengthen the effectiveness of the SMC, to strengthen their cohesion, to meet some of the requests that have been made of us from General Idris. Those are the types of factors that are guiding the assistance we're providing.

Q And there's one that you both may want to weigh in. There's been a lot of reporting about the President's trip to Africa -- the trip after the G8. The context should be that President Clinton spent a lot of money on a trip to Africa; President Bush took, I believe, two trips to Africa, spent a lot of money as well. But in these budget times, after the sequester, after White House tours being canceled, a lot of attention on the fact that the President may spend up to \$100 million in taxpayer money on a trip to Africa. Can you justify that expense?

MR. RHODES: Well, I'd say a couple things, and Josh may want to say something, too. We, frankly, should have -- well, let me step back. We have not traveled to Africa in the same way that we've traveled to other regions of the world. We have traveled significantly in Asia. We've taken several trips to Latin America. We've taken several trips to Europe. We've taken several trips -- or will take multiple trips to Russia by the time this year is done. And Africa is a critically important region of the world. We have huge interests there.

You've got some of the fastest-growing economies in Africa. You've got a massively growing youth population. You've got key security and counterterrorism issues that we work on with African countries. We have democratic institutions that are consolidating in places like Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania. We have some of our biggest development efforts on issues like global health, combatting HIV/AIDS, things that have broad bipartisan support that have been focused on Africa.

So for the United States to say we're a world leader except in this continent doesn't make any sense. And just as we put a premium on developing our ties in emerging regions like Southeast Asia and Latin America, we need to be present in Africa.

And I can tell you that there are other countries that are quite present in Africa. You've seen significant investments in Africa from China, Brazil, Turkey, and the U.S. would be ceding its leadership position in the world if the President of the United States was not deeply engaged in Africa. And that's what he's going to do. And this is a deeply substantive trip and one that has been highly anticipated on the continent. And frankly, there's been great disappointment that the President hasn't traveled to Africa until this point, other than a brief stop in Ghana.

And so Senegal, you have a country that is an emerging democracy; that is a partner with us in situations like Mali; that we want to invest in issues like food security and the development of civil society.

In South Africa, a leading country on the continent, partners with us on just about every issue from Sudan to Congo to Zimbabwe, to the provision of our global health assistance, and also the iconic democracy of the continent, as we've all been reminded in recent days with Nelson Mandela.

Tanzania, similarly, has been a key partner in East Africa. Every major development issue we have -- on food security, global health, democracy promotion -- Tanzania has been a solid partner.

And so the President is not going to retreat from an entire continent. In terms of the cost, we don't determine the cost of the President's security, just as President Bush didn't and President Clinton didn't. The Secret Service is going to do what they think is necessary to protect the President. That's going to come with its own costs. But we don't sit here and say we want to spend X amount of money on a trip.

But we do know that from a foreign policy perspective, in some respects people believe this trip is overdue and, frankly, it will be a great bang for our buck for being in Africa, because when you travel to regions like Africa that don't get a lot of presidential attention, you tend to have very longstanding and long-running impact from the visit.

Q One last thing. There's a movement on Capitol Hill among some lawmakers who exempt lawmakers and congressional staff from having to comply with the President's health care law and enter in the insurance exchanges. Does the President disagree with that? Do you want to stop that, since they're essentially trying to say we don't have to go into this but the rest of the country does? The President, as I recall, has already pledged that he would join an insurance exchange. So my question is do you have any plans to stop this movement on the Hill? And do White House staff, the Cabinet, do you all plan to join these insurance exchanges?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that a lot of discussion has taken place over the last 18 months or so about how to implement the Affordable Care Act, and to do so in a way that ensures that the large number of Americans that can take advantage for the first time of quality, affordable health insurance and quality, affordable health care have access to it.

That is a critical domestic priority that the President has laid out, and that's something that we are devoting significant time and resources to get that done.

Q So why would the lawmakers try not to join it, then?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think this is actually -- part of the law as it was originally passed would actually require lawmakers to participate in the exchanges.

Q But they're trying to get around it I guess now. There's a movement to --

MR. EARNEST: I know that there's been some talk about how to sort of best -- again, best implement the law as it was passed. It is my understanding -- and I know this is something that we're working through as we work through this implementation -- is that we're going to make sure that there's nothing that lawmakers can take advantage of that the general public can't. And that is for, I think, rather obvious reasons and an important principle.

But our most important focus here is making sure that the millions of Americans across the country that don't currently have access to health care are going to get it for the first time, and that we're also going to create opportunities for small businesses and families out there who right now are paying an exorbitant cost for their health care to offer them tax credits that are going to lower those costs.

We've already seen how -- and seniors have gotten some assistance to afford their prescription drugs -- that millions of Americans across the country have gotten the opportunity to get cancer screenings and other preventative health care measures for free. So there are a number of benefits of the Affordable Care Act that we're working to implement, and that will continue to be a priority through the end of this year, particularly as the marketplaces get up and running at the beginning of next.

Andrei, I'll give you that last one.

Q Thank you. One for Ben and one for Caroline.

Ben, I just want you to respond directly to a couple of a criticisms that one hears all the time in Russia about Syria. One is selective use of evidence. There have been instances -- most recently I think in Turkey -- where chemical weapons were intercepted that were meant for the rebels. So how do you respond to that?

The other criticism is about Geneva II, where it seems that the U.S. originally made the commitment to a genuine effort to make peace without a predetermined result. Now people are saying the Americans seem to have decided everything in advance and are pushing through their agenda. So what is your response to that?

MR. RHODES: Well, on the first question, Andrei, as we said yesterday, we have not seen any evidence that the opposition possess chemical weapons. In fact, what we see is the opposite; that the regime has maintained custody of these weapons. We detailed to the Russians several incidents. We had dates associated and places associated with those incidents. As I said, we have multiple streams of information from intelligence, but also open-source reporting, physiological evidence of the use of sarin, reporting from individuals that was corroborated. To us, that adds up to a very convincing information picture that chemical weapons have been used and they've been used by the government.

I've seen those statements by the Russian government about this. But again, we believe with a high degree of confidence that, clearly, chemical weapons were used. We've got physical samples that demonstrate that point. And we don't see that the opposition has possession of these weapons. But we'll continue our dialogue with the Russian government on this.

With respect to Geneva II, we share the goal with Russia of seeing if there can be a political settlement to the challenge within Syria. We have a difference with the Russian government about the fact that we believe that there is no solution in which Bashar al-Assad can stay in power.

That's been a longstanding disagreement that we've had. But we still believe, given the fact that everybody has a preference in a peaceful resolution to the conflict, in making an effort, together with Russia and other countries, to bring the parties to the table, but it has to be serious. And frankly, where we've seen some lack of seriousness is on the regime side where they offer the kind of traditional pledges of dialogue without kind of a concrete plan here to transition to a different type of governing authority that can bring in the broad representation of the Syrian people.

But we'll continue to pursue that objective. And like I said, we have a relationship with Russia and with President Putin where we can have disagreements -- strong disagreements -- on a set of issues but still work together on an agenda where we do share some common interest. And we've been able to do that with President Putin on counterterrorism, on economic issues, on Afghanistan.

MR. EARNEST: I'm going to leave the last one for Caroline.

Q For Caroline -- simply, you mentioned FATCA. FATCA is an American law, and if you want your international partners to comply with it, what are you offering in terms of reciprocity?

MS. ATKINSON: You're right that FATCA is an American law. And what we're seeing is general support, and what we're hoping we will see is G8 support for the development by the OECD of a standard that would be based on FATCA. So there would be a single global standard for the kind of information exchange that is involved in FATCA. And we believe that's a very powerful tool. We've already seen it having a powerful effect on tax havens and illicit activity using such tax havens. So that's what we're --

Q Do you know, are the Russians joining the regime? To the best of your knowledge, what is the Russian position?

MS. ATKINSON: Well, we'll have to wait and see what comes out from the G8 communiqué.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. The last thing is just for the week ahead. You got a pretty detailed readout at the beginning of this briefing.

The President will -- let me finish here. The President is going to leave on Sunday night for his trip to Europe. He'll be there Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday; return to Washington late on Wednesday night.

On Thursday and Friday, we don't anticipate at this point that we're going to have any public events, but the President will be here at the White House for meetings at that point.

So thanks, everybody. Have a good weekend.

END

1:56 P.M. EDT