

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/7/15

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October 7, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 07, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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

1:25 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see you all. I do have a statement before we begin and before I go to your questions.

This morning, from the Oval Office, President Obama spoke by telephone with Doctors Without Borders International President Dr. Joanne Liu to apologize and express his condolences for the MSF staff and patients who were killed and injured when a U.S. military airstrike mistakenly struck and MSF field hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, over the weekend.

The President assured Dr. Liu that the Department of Defense investigation currently underway would provide a transparent, thorough, and objective accounting of the facts and circumstances of the incident, and that, if necessary, the President would implement changes that would make tragedies like this one less likely to occur in the future.

After completing that call, the President telephoned Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to express his condolences for the innocent loss of life in that incident. The President commended the bravery of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in securing Kunduz and noted that he looked forward to continuing to work closely with President Ghani and the Afghan government to support their efforts to provide security for the Afghan people.

So with that bit of news, we can now go to your questions. Darlene, do you want to start?

Q Sure. Thank you. During the phone call with the MSF president, did they discuss Doctors Without Borders' latest call for another independent investigation into the bombing of the hospital in Afghanistan?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I won't get into the details of what they discussed, but the President did reiterate his commitment -- this is a commitment that we've offered up publicly -- that the Department of Defense would conduct a transparent, thorough, and objective investigation.

And I know that Secretary Carter had the opportunity to discuss this over in Rome earlier today, and he noted that the intention of the Department of Defense was to make public as much as possible of the report that is conducted. And I think this is consistent with something you've heard the President say in a variety of circumstances, and that is that the United States, when we make a mistake, we're honest about it. We own up to it. We apologize where necessary, as the President did in this case, and we implement the kinds of changes that make it less likely that those kinds of mistakes will occur in the future.

The Department of Defense goes to great lengths to prevent civilian casualties and certainly civilian deaths in their operations. But in this case, there was a mistake. And it's one that the United States owns up to.

Q Would the U.S. be open to a fourth independent investigation, as they're calling for? Or is the position of the U.S. that these three investigations that are now ongoing, that Doctors Without Borders should be satisfied with that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has made quite clear that over the course of these three investigations, particularly the one that's being conducted by the Department of Defense, that it will be transparent, it will be thorough, and it will be objective, and it will provide the full accounting that the President has insisted on from the beginning.

Q Secondly, the Associated Press had a report overnight on the apparent ease with which smugglers are trying to sell bomb-making materials to extremists and ISIL and other groups like that that are intent on harming the U.S. Does the White House have any reaction to that report?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen the report. The United States government is committed to countering the threat of nuclear smuggling and ensuring that terrorist groups who may seek to acquire these materials are never able to do so.

Seizures of nuclear and radioactive materials in Moldova demonstrate the Moldovan government's commitment to countering these tactics. And the United States applauds the Moldovan government's good police and investigative work, which has led to recovering smuggled materials and placing them back under regulatory control. The United States and Moldova have worked together for a number of years to strengthen capacities to counter nuclear smuggling.

And I would just note, in addition, Darlene, that the President has identified as one of his core national security priorities stopping the proliferation of nuclear materials. The President has convened nuclear security summits in three different locations, I believe, now, and there's another one that's planned for next year, where the United States essentially convenes the international community to coordinate our efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear materials. That is a top priority of the President's because it's in

the core national security interest of the United States. And the reports from the Associated Press I think document just one example of the kinds of activities that the United States pursues to protect the American people.

Q Does the U.S. think that Russia's stockpiles of nuclear material are secure? I mean, do you have a handle on how secure it is, given the sour state of relations between the two countries right now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Darlene, we often cite the aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship that are characterized by some, to be put it mildly, difference of opinion. We've also acknowledged that there are some areas where the United States and Russia have been able to effectively coordinate to advance the interests of the citizens in both of our countries.

Typically, when asked this question I've cited our experience in working with Russia as part of the P5+1 to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The highest-profile example of the coordination between our two countries I think is actually the space program where the Russian and U.S. space programs work together to explore outer space and to support scientists from both of our countries that are currently orbiting the Earth.

But I think this would be another example where the United States and Russia, for quite some time now -- I know for decades now -- have been able to effectively coordinate in an effort to secure Russia's nuclear stockpile.

And those of you who have been covering the President for a while now will actually recall that as a senator, Barack Obama traveled to some countries of the former Soviet Union as part of a bipartisan delegation to highlight the significance of this proliferation threat, but also to highlight the importance of the United States coordinating with other countries to accomplish this goal, including Russia. So this is something that President Obama has spent a lot of time working on, even before he was President, and it obviously is a top priority of his. And this kind of coordination is critical to the national security of both U.S. citizens but also Russian citizens.

Q So is that a yes?

MR. EARNEST: I think it is merely an observation that, despite the significant differences of opinion we have with Russia in places like Syria and in Ukraine, that we have been able to effectively coordinate with them to assure -- or at least take steps to prevent the proliferation of nuclear materials that are part of Russia's stockpile.

Roberta.

Q What does the White House think the ultimate military and political plans are of Russia in Syria? And how confident is the White House that it has a good handle on what Russia is thinking there and that the White House understands President Putin's current thinking on Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Roberta, I think we've been quite direct in our observations that the kind of military strategy that Russia seems to be pursuing right now is not at all likely to be successful in advancing their interests inside of Syria. In fact, we actually think that the strategy that Russia is now pursuing militarily is likely to be counterproductive. That is to say that Russia's military activities are currently focused on a variety of opposition groups, some of whom are extremist organizations, some of whom are Muslim citizens of Syria that have legitimate grievances against the Assad government, including the fact that they or members of their community have been the targets of the Assad regime's indiscriminate violence.

The failure of the Russian military to distinguish between the variety of groups inside of Syria only serves to isolate Russia from the international community. It also serves to only draw Russia deeper into a sectarian civil war inside of Syria. It also serves to heighten the risk that Russia faces from Muslim citizens inside of Syria who are angry that they're propping up a regime that has carried out terrible acts of violence against their people. This also poses a pretty significant homeland security risk for Russia as well.

So that is why we've made the case that the military strategy that Russia is currently implementing is not likely to lead to advancing their interests inside of Syria.

Q So do you feel that propping up the Assad regime then is the ultimate goal of Russia here? Is that the White House's understanding of the ultimate goal of Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, based on the military actions that they are taking, it seems that they are interested in continuing or maybe even ramping up their efforts to prop up the Assad regime. But that runs counter to their longer-term interests inside of Syria.

The reason I say that is because the Russians themselves acknowledge that a political transition inside of Syria is what will be required to eventually solve the many problems that are plaguing that country. So the fact that Russia is engaged in activity that puts off a political solution means that there's ample reason to question the wisdom of the strategy that they're currently pursuing.

Q I wanted to ask you -- a senior Shiite politician in Iraq has said that he wants Russia to be involved with airstrikes in Iraq as well. And I believe that Prime Minister Abadi has indicated that he's open to that idea as well. How does the White House feel about that idea? And what is the White House doing, if anything, or the administration doing, if anything, to try to encourage or warn Iraq away from that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, in some ways the answer that I would give to that question is not altogether different than the kind of answer that I would give to Russia's military activities inside of Syria, which is that we've long indicated a willingness to accept a constructive, properly integrated contribution from the Russians to our broader counter-ISIL efforts. But that is not what Russia has sought to do.

I think the other thing that I would observe is that the reaction from the international community to these reports I think is an indication of the kind of sectarian conflict that Russia is being drawn into. The news that Russia may be invited by some -- or at least

their possible participation in airstrikes may be supported by some in the Iraqi government was warmly received by Shiite militias and other organizations that are directly backed by Iran. And I didn't see any statements of support or encouragement from any of the 65 nations that are involved in our international counter-ISIL effort.

In fact, what we've also seen is other countries indicate their concern about Russia's military decision-making. We've even seen the government of Turkey, a government that has repeatedly stated publicly their concerns about Assad's leadership and their preference that he no longer be in charge of that country, so, ostensibly, this sort of further highlights how Russia is isolating themselves -- not just around the world, but even in the region where they are acting right now.

Q So is the United States trying to encourage Prime Minister Abadi not to welcome Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Prime Minister Abadi is the leader of a sovereign country, so he'll make decisions based on what he believes is in the best interest of the national security of his country and his citizens. But again, I think the degree to which the Abadi government has worked with the 65-member coalition that the United States has built is an indication that they welcome the kind of international support that they've received to counter the extremist threat that they face inside that country.

Mark.

Q Josh, what changed over the past 24 hours? Didn't you say yesterday that there wouldn't be an apology until the investigation had been completed and there was a full accounting?

MR. EARNEST: I don't think that I went that far. I think I indicated that there were ongoing investigations, and I was reluctant to say more given the fact that those investigations were ongoing.

And I think what is clear is, based on what the President has learned, he believed that it was appropriate for the United States to do what we've done before, which is to acknowledge that a mistake had been made, to offer an apology, to do so in a transparent way, to own up to our mistakes, and to vow to carry out a full investigation to get to the bottom of what exactly happened so that we can learn from this incident and put in place the reforms that are necessary to make it less likely that these kinds of things happen in the future.

Q What does this mean when it comes to American culpability for the loss of life in Afghanistan?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think in this case, the President and his team have been quite clear that the deaths at this medical facility were the result of a U.S. airstrike.

Now, I'll just say once again, the Department of Defense goes to great lengths -- they go farther than any military agency in the world to prevent the loss of innocent life in their operations. But when a mistake occurs, the United States owns up to it and we vow to get to the bottom of what exactly happened. If it is necessary to hold individuals accountable, that will be done. And certainly, we're going to be looking for reforms that we can put in place that make it less likely that these kinds of things happen in the future.

Q Is there remuneration involved?

MR. EARNEST: There is a policy that the Department of Defense has for providing compensation. And I'd refer you to the Department of Defense for how that system works.

Go ahead, Mara.

Q The question about having another investigation, Doctors Without Borders is asking for something very specific. They've asked the United States and the 17-member signatory states of the Geneva Convention to activate this protocol that has never apparently been used before. It's called an International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission. Are you ruling that out? Or are you saying you want these other ones to -- these other investigations to finish first? I'm a little unclear on your position on this specific form of additional investigation.

MR. EARNEST: Our position is that we share the international community's desire -- and particularly the desire on the part of Doctors Without Borders -- to get a full accounting of what exactly transpired. And that's why the President has ordered the Department of Defense to carry out a transparent and objective investigation into what's transpired. And the President has confidence that that Department of Defense investigation can provide the full accounting that everyone seeks.

Q But apparently it only takes one member of the Geneva Convention to call for this kind of investigation. Would you actively try to block that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't speculate on that kind of thing. I think what I would merely state is that we continue to have confidence that the Department of Defense investigation that's underway will be able to yield the kind of full accounting in a transparent, thorough, and objective way that everybody seeks.

Q So you're saying that would render another investigation unnecessary?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm just saying that the President has confidence in not just the Department of Defense investigation, but also the NATO investigation, and the joint U.S.-Afghan investigation that's underway.

The President again, as he's said on many previous occasions, when the United States makes a mistake, we own up to it, we apologize where appropriate and we are honest about what transpired. And in this case, the Department of Defense is seeking to learn

what exactly transpired so that if there are accountability measures that need to be imposed that that can be done, but also that if there are reforms that are necessary to make these kinds of tragic incidents less likely that those reforms are implemented.

Ron.

Q Just to follow up on that, another specific concern of Doctors Without Borders is that they say a war crime was committed. Is the Department of Defense in a position to determine whether the United States committed a war crime?

MR. EARNEST: Ron, what I'd simply say about that is that the use of that term carries a certain legal meaning.

Q Exactly.

MR. EARNEST: And what I would point out is that the Department of Defense, as a matter of course, takes as many precautions as anybody else does, as any other military organization in the world does, to prevent the innocent loss of life in operations that they carry out. And there is no evidence that I or anybody else has -- that I've seen or that anybody else has presented that indicate that this was anything other than a terrible, tragic mistake.

Q So then, essentially, you seem to be taking this whole notion of a war crime off the table if it's a mistake. Am I -- and that is exactly the Doctor Without Borders' concern, that these investigations will not answer this central question that they've raised, whether or not the United States committed a war crime. You're essentially taking it off the table.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not in the position to render a legal judgment about the use of that term. But I am certainly in a position to make an observation and a commitment that the United States Department of Defense goes to great lengths to prevent the innocent loss of life in any of their military operations. And nobody has marshaled any evidence -- at least that I have seen -- to contradict that assertion.

We've acknowledged that this was a mistake. General Campbell made that acknowledgement yesterday before Congress. And the fact that the President offered his personal apology to the international president of MSF should be an indication that the Commander-in-Chief is owning up to this mistake.

Q And just the last on this point. When you say that persons will be held accountable -- the word "accountable" -- again, that has a judicial connotation. Are you talking about the fact that the Department of Defense and the other investigations could potentially raise criminal cases or bring criminal cases against the individuals who are responsible, if they can be identified and -- or are you just talking about accountability in terms of the mechanisms that created this situation? Again -- because again, the central concern of Doctors Without Borders is this level of accountability and this notion that there was a crime committed.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just -- let me try to answer your question this way. The Department of Defense will be, as a part of this ongoing investigation, taking a close look at the individual decisions that were made by the individuals who are involved in this incident. But they will also be taking a close look at the policies and procedures that have been in place. And I wouldn't speculate at this point about what sort of accountability measures would be necessary or appropriate.

But certainly the conduct of the individuals involved will be under investigation. And the policies and procedures that they were operating under will also be subjected to scrutiny. And if those policies and procedures, those rules of engagement, if you will, need to be reformed or modified or refined in some way to make it less likely that incidents like this happen in the future, then that's what the President will expect the Department of Defense to do.

And I think we've even seen a commitment already from General Campbell to consider that. But again, this notion of accountability and this notion of making changes when mistakes are made is something that the President takes very seriously. And since he's the Commander-in-Chief, I speak confidently in telling you that since he takes it seriously, that everybody up and down the chain of command takes it quite seriously.

Carol.

Q Just to follow up on Mark. You said yesterday that the U.S. was not going to apologize until the Defense investigation got further along. And today you said that the President had learned some new things. So it is -- do you mean that he learned some new things coming out of the Defense investigation?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I said yesterday was I said that I was not going to say much more until there was -- given the fact that there was an ongoing investigation.

What the President concluded is that he had learned enough about this matter to conclude that it was appropriate for him to offer an apology to the international president of Doctors Without Borders. And that's based on his knowledge of the incident.

Q Is that based on progress in the DOD investigation, or just separate?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't speculate at this point -- or I wouldn't discuss at this point the kinds of briefings and updates that the President has received from the Department of Defense on this, just sharing with you that he reached the conclusion that it was appropriate for him to offer an apology to the leadership of Doctors Without Borders.

Q Okay. And then on Russia, some defense officials are saying that the U.S. no longer has an interest in working with Russia on a strategic approach to Syria. Is that the White House's position? Has anything changed on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our interest in working with Russia inside of Syria has been limited to Russia's willingness to make a constructive contribution to the 65-member counter-ISIL coalition. Outside of that, our only interest in dealing with Russia has been to take

prudent steps to ensure that our military activities and the military activities of our coalition partners were effectively de-conflicted with the Russian military activities.

And that involves a discussion of some very practical details -- things like ensuring that pilots are using internationally recognized communications channels and that all pilots who are operating in the airspace over Syria are following widely recognized safety regulations. That is a far cry from any sort of broader strategic cooperation with the Russians. That's something that has never been on the table as long as Russia refuses to make a constructive contribution to our broader counter-ISIL coalition.

Richard.

Q Thank you, Josh. Maybe you said it and I missed it -- can you tell us a little bit how Dr. Liu reacted, or is there anything you can tell us on Dr. Liu's reaction to the President's call?

MR. EARNEST: I can't. And it's simply that when we read out these calls, we typically will just reveal what the President -- the message that the President sought to communicate. And in this case, what the President communicated is an apology as well as a commitment to conduct the kind of transparent, thorough and objective investigation that would result in the full accounting that the President has been asking for.

Q And you can't even tell us if she said thank you?

MR. EARNEST: For her reaction, I would refer you to Doctors Without Borders.

Q I just want to go back to the decision to keep or to add or to bring back troops from Afghanistan. And you told us that it was not going to be a snap decision based on one or two incidents; it was going to be based depending on the strength or the weakness of the Afghan army. Looking at the way the Taliban has been gaining ground in the last months, are you satisfied with the quality of the training and the advising that the Afghan troops have received from the Americans and the other members of NATO?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would reiterate what the President actually had the opportunity to tell President Ghani earlier today, which is that the United States and our coalition partners in Afghanistan are committed to a strong working relationship with the Afghan government, the Afghan security forces, and the Afghan people.

The United States has made a substantial investment in that country. And the primary reason for doing so is we recognize the core national security interest on the part of the United States that's present that when it comes to preventing extremists from capitalizing on the chaos inside of Afghanistan to strike the United States and our interests.

So we've been quite forthright about what our motivation is in Afghanistan, which is to protect the interests of the American people by supporting the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces as they try to stabilize the security situation inside their country. And there has been -- or there was at the beginning of this year a change in the mission of U.S. military forces. The combat mission in Afghanistan for U.S. military

forces ended at the end of last year, and that mission changed to a mission that was focused on counterterrorism operations and a broader effort to offer training, advice and assistance to the Afghan security forces.

And that does not -- I state that just to recite the facts, not in any way to diminish the danger of the situation in Afghanistan for American military personnel. It's a dangerous place, and we certainly are appreciative of the bravery and courage that our military personnel make by -- display by serving inside of Afghanistan. It's a dangerous place. But they're advancing our core national security interests when they do that important work. And I know that President Ghani would be among the first to tell you that the contribution that is made by American military personnel in offering training and advice and assistance to his security forces is something that they appreciate and something that does enhance their performance.

But as we've said in other contexts and as I've acknowledged in other contexts, in a military conflict like this there is going to be periods of progress and areas of setback. And we've --

Q I mean, why not --

MR. EARNEST: I think we've acknowledged that particularly when it comes to the progress -- or the advances, at least, that the Taliban has made in the area around Kunduz, that would clearly be a setback. And that is something that we have previously acknowledged. But there are other places -- well, I guess, even in sustaining that setback, what we have seen from the Afghan security forces is a willingness to fight, and there has been an effort by the Afghan security forces to regroup after they'd been driven out of Kunduz and to mount counter-offenses that have made important incursions back into Kunduz. So that is an indication that there is a firm commitment on the part of many members of the Afghan security forces to engage in this fight against the Taliban, to fight for their country, and to do so under the -- alongside the advice and implementing the training they've received from the United States and coalition soldiers.

Q Just last question on this. You often describe the Syria situation as not -- as a multiyear campaign -- you see Afghanistan, even if we've been there for a decade-plus, as something that's going to be just seen to the end?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't speculate at this point on exactly what the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan will be in the future. Obviously this is part of an important policy decision that the President has to make. But I do feel confident in saying to you that the U.S. commitment to the Afghan government and to the Afghan people is something that does endure. And the United States has enjoyed a strong working relationship with President Ghani and the other senior officials in his government, including Mr. Abdullah - - or Dr. Abdullah. And that kind of partnership has been beneficial to the Afghan people; it's also advanced the interests of the United States in that region of the world as well.

Jon.

Q Can you give a little more on what the President's reaction was to, first, hearing that this hospital had been hit, and then hearing that there was sufficient U.S. responsibility and U.S. mistake that he had to make this call? What was his personal reaction to obviously a pretty horrific mistake?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wasn't with the President when he first learned of this incident over the weekend, shortly after it occurred. But I do know that the President views this like we all do, as a profound tragedy. And again, you have medical personnel that are using their training in a war zone to try to meet the needs of innocent civilians. And they know the risks; they understand how dangerous this region of the world is. And yet they leave the comfort of their homes to go and try to provide for the needs of innocent civilians.

And to learn that those individuals have been caught in the crossfire and killed is a terrible tragedy. And to learn that the United States may have been responsible because of a mistake makes the tragic incident even worse.

Q It was clearly a tragedy. Was he angry about it? Was he saddened by it? What was the kind of visceral response to something like this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President was certainly saddened by this innocent loss of life and the tragedy that it represents. I think the President, when confronted with incidents like this, is also very eager to get to the bottom of what exactly occurred. These kinds of incidents take place in a combat environment where shots are being fired, it's dangerous, and people are trying to act quickly. And so it's understandable that it's going to take some time to get to the bottom of what exactly occurred. But the President is going to insist that the Department of Defense conduct the kind of transparent, thorough and objective investigation that will yield the full accounting that the President seeks.

And the President wants that full accounting so that if accountability measures need to be imposed that that can be done, but also so that if there are reforms to the basic policy and procedures that our military personnel are supposed to follow, that those reforms can be implemented sooner rather than later, as well.

Q And this happens just as General Campbell is saying that he's going to need more troops in Afghanistan, that he's not going to be able to, in his view, continue on the current plan for a troop drawdown. Does this incident make it more or less likely that the President would approve a larger U.S. military presence in Afghanistan at the end of the year than he envisioned?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, I think the best way I can describe the President's thinking to you is that the President has been in a position over the course of the last seven years -- you've covered this as often as anybody has, whether it's here at the White House or other government agencies -- you know that the President has been faced with making a series of decisions about the U.S. military presence inside of Afghan basically since the first day he came into office. And so he's been weighing these kinds of decisions about this long-term trajectory for a long time.

And the President made decisions early on in his presidency, following through on a campaign promise that he made, to ensure that the United States was focused on the most significant threat that we faced, which is the presence of core al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan. And the President made a decision early in his presidency to ramp up our military presence inside of Afghanistan so we could apply maximum pressure to core al Qaeda. And there's no denying the significant progress that we've made in decimating core al Qaeda in that region of the world.

So the reason I highlight this is that in covering those stories, you know that there's always been this pressure that's placed on the President from -- and it comes from a pure motivation, right? It's not surprising that the Department of Defense that is given this significant task to -- at the beginning -- to decimate core al Qaeda and to bring the security situation in Afghanistan under control -- that mission is different now. That mission now is to support the Afghan forces as they try to bring the situation under control.

But it certainly is understandable that those who were responsible for that mission are seeking as many resources as possible to succeed in that mission. And they give their unvarnished advice to the President of the United States about what they believe will be necessary to carry out the mission that the President has asked them to undertake.

And this has been true of a variety of military officials who have had leadership roles in Afghanistan and at the Pentagon over the last seven years. And in each case, the President has to weigh those kinds of requests and those kinds of plans with the broader national security interests of the United States and the amount of risk that our men and women in uniform will have to face.

So these are complicated decisions. So as it comes to this one -- because there's another one coming up -- the President in each case has always carefully considered the situation on the ground; that as a practical matter, if you're making a decision about what kind of military presence is necessary to stabilize the security situation on the ground, it needs to start with a full and unvarnished assessment about what conditions on the ground actually are. And nobody is better positioned to offer that assessment than our men and women in the military.

There are also, of course, assessments that are offered by the intelligence community that draw on different resources, but the President takes in this kind of information and factors it against the broader national security interests of the United States that includes our diplomatic relationship with the leaders in Afghanistan.

One of the things that characterized this story early on is the sometimes rancorous relationship between the Obama administration and former President Karzai. It's no secret that the relationship between the United States and President Ghani has been more stable, and as a result, our military and security cooperation I think has been more effective. But that also will be a factor in the decision.

And then the other thing the President has to factor in is sort of what is the longer-term trajectory here; that we can certainly factor into the equation recent incidents on the ground, including significant incidents like the progress that the Taliban made in the area of Kunduz and the tragedy that ensued there, but it's also important for the President to keep a long-term perspective on our national interests. So all of that will be factored into the President's decision.

It's hard for me to say to what degree this particular incident will influence the outcome of that decision-making process -- that's hard for me to assess. But I can certainly assure you that this is a factor in the President's considerations of this complicated policy decision.

Q So just very quickly, I think what I hear you saying in the broader picture is the President would not hesitate to say no to General Campbell's request in his assessment of what's needed if the other factors you just outlined push him in a different direction. He has had said no to commanders in the past. He would not hesitate to say no to this commander if that's what he views as the appropriate thing.

MR. EARNEST: The answer to that question is, yes. But that is not an indication that the President doesn't value -- well, maybe I should just say it in the affirmative here. The President deeply values the advice that he gets from General Campbell, who obviously has a very good understanding about conditions on the ground. He also is somebody that has extensive experience inside of Afghanistan and so brings a lot of his own institutional knowledge to this policy process. But his advice and his input into this decision-making process, while significant, is not the only factor in this decision.

David.

Q Josh, a couple things. One, the Capitol Police apparently sent out a newsletter to its officers related to the Million Man March anniversary rally this weekend, warning that there could be violence. And others have objected to that kind of tone, assuming that there would be some sort of incident by those charged with protecting the public. And additionally, it seems that some mosques, local mosques are preparing for potential violence and protests directed at them from anti-Muslims groups. I wondered if the White House -- is the President aware of these incidents, if they have a message for the public related to this event, concerns about the tone of any of this.

MR. EARNEST: David, I'll tell you that I'm actually not aware of this. But typically, in these kinds of matters, there is good coordination between the Capitol Police and federal law enforcement and national security officials. So why don't I check on this with our folks and we can get you a response.

Q The President I think is out of town this weekend. But are you familiar with sort of maybe -- the Million Man March 20 years ago was a powerful moment for a lot of African American men. I wondered if the President -- if you had a sense of how that impacted the President as a younger man, and whether he was engaged at all at this event. If he's being -- sort of watching what's happening.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't had a discussion about sort of what the first Million Man March may have had on his thinking. But the President has made the observation that there is sort of a burgeoning evolution in the Civil Rights Movement as we see sort of a younger generation of not just young African American activists but activists from a variety of different backgrounds raising concerns about the plight of people of color in this country -- and whether that has to do with their relationship with law enforcement or broader concerns about the fairness in our criminal justice system, or even more basic considerations like the ability to afford a college education, the ability to support a family on minimum wage.

And some of these economic issues are actually the kinds of things that the President will be talking about later today at the Worker Voice Summit. And certainly the President has been focused on these issues throughout his career, and he's continued that work even here in the White House.

Q One on one other topic. The House Republicans are prepared to appoint a special committee -- flat committee to investigate matters related to abortion and fetal tissue procurement. Does the White House believe this is an appropriate use of congressional powers and authority and a good use of resources?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I would observe that it seems consistent with the strategy that we've seen from them over the last few months. The priority of House Republicans has primarily been focused on an ideological fight to shut down the government that actually resulted in the retirement of the Speaker of the House. We've seen that they've been quite focused on the activities of a select committee that was formed to -- if you listen to the guy who is likely to be the next Speaker of the House, it was primarily formed to hurt the presidential prospects of the Democratic frontrunner for President.

And we know that House Republicans didn't just vote to shut down the government; they also have voted to pass a defense authorization bill that would make use of a funding gimmick that some Republicans have called a slush fund to try to provide for the basic national security of the United States in a way that the President and Commander-in-Chief finds grossly irresponsible.

Those are actually the actions of House Republicans that have garnered headlines in the last couple of months. Nowhere have I seen much reference to the plight of middle-class families, the desire to create jobs in this country. There certainly hasn't been any legislative action on the transportation bill, or reauthorizing the Export-Import Bank, even though it's Republicans who led the fight to try to shut down the Export-Import Bank. And the result has been a couple of public announcements from American companies that they're going to have to shift American jobs overseas.

So I think there is ample reason to be quite concerned about the priorities of House Republicans. I do think it is a useful explanation for how Republicans find themselves at the bottom of the polls when it comes to the public's view of our Nation's Capital.

Jim.

Q Just to follow up on that. Kevin McCarthy, the Majority Leader, said that the Benghazi Committee is not political and that they're trying to get to the truth.

MR. EARNEST: He said that after he said that it was political. But, yes.

Q And that it's all about getting to the truth behind the attack that led to the deaths of four Americans. You're not giving him the benefit of the doubt here, I guess.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I'm taking him at his word.

Q Which word? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess that's a good question. Look, I think it's quite clear that in trying to make the case to conservatives on FOX News in an interview with a conservative FOX News commentator that Mr. McCarthy was trying to burnish his conservative credentials. And the best justification that he could use was the fact that he'd been instrumental in standing up a select committee that had taken its toll on Secretary Clinton presidential prospects. Again, those are -- that's the way that he described his motivation and the motivation of the committee. And when he was talking to the television news personality, he seemed quite proud of it. I guess when --

Q You're not buying it?

MR. EARNEST: No. And again, he spoke quite forcefully and with evident pride in the political success of the Benghazi Select Committee. I think the other thing is there's nobody in this room that was surprised that he said it. There's no suggestion on the part of neutral observers that, oh, there's not really any evidence for that. There's all kinds of evidence for that. That's why he made the observation, and that's why he viewed it as a conservative credential of his.

And the fact is what happened in Benghazi is a tragedy and that there were four innocent Americans who were trying to serve their country who were killed. And the fact that even three years later now, that congressional Republicans continue to politicize that effort, it's offensive. And so I can understand why Mr. McCarthy would say that he no longer stands by those remarks.

Q And I guess the follow-up to that would be, can the President work with a Speaker McCarthy given this episode, regarding what he said about the purpose of that committee?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. Look, there are plenty of things that Speaker Boehner has said that have -- that the President has disagreed with, even strongly. But it didn't prevent at least a usually functioning relationship between the Speaker's office and the White House. And whoever Republicans choose to be the next Speaker of the House I'm confident will be somebody who has a set of priorities that we strongly disagree with and there will be vigorous disagreements with whomever the next Speaker is. But the real question is, will the next leader of the House of Representatives be somebody who recognizes that

compromise and bipartisanship are not dirty words -- in fact, they're the expectations of the vast majority of the American public; that they want their government to, at a minimum, not make the economy worse and not weaken our national security.

But efforts by Republicans to use budget gimmicks to try to fund our national security or threaten a government shutdown over an ideological dispute, or even threaten -- for reasons that are not entirely clear -- not to raise the debt limit and therefore threaten the full faith and credit of the United States is just irresponsible. And somebody who will lead the House of Representatives, who, despite their differences with the Democratic President, will acknowledge those basic, fundamental requirements of the United States Congress is somebody that the President won't always agree with but somebody that I'm confident we'll be able work with to advance the best interests of the American people.

Q And yesterday -- I know you know this -- Secretary Clinton repeated her call for a no-fly zone in Syria and she added -- and I know that the White House has said repeatedly that that's not going to work -- unless you want to address that. But the second part of that is that she said that perhaps the Russians could play a role in that. And it just sort of made me wonder, going down the road here in Syria, is it possible that some kind of arrangement, some kind of -- I don't want to call it a coalition -- maybe you wouldn't want the Russians as part of a coalition, but is there a way to work with the Russians in Syria do you think, long term? Or does that just seem sort of pie-in-the-sky stuff now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a couple of things there. So when it comes to a no-fly zone, what the position of the administration has been is that that's not something that we're considering right now. We've not been in a position to take it off the table or to rule it out in the future, but we have indicated that it's not something that we're considering right now. And there are a few reasons for that, that I think --

Q It's an option on the table.

MR. EARNEST: But it's not something that is under consideration right now. So is it possible for something to be on the table even though it's not being considered right now? I'll leave that to you to decide.

Q Maybe on an end table.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, exactly. (Laughter.) The kids' table. I don't know exactly what it is. But I do think it's worth spending a little time explaining why it's not something that's under consideration right now. The first is, you have to sort of answer a fundamental question about where would you establish the no-fly zone.

There are some, including our allies in Turkey, who have previously suggested -- I don't know if this continues to be their current position, but they've at least previously suggested that some kind of no-fly zone or safe zone should be established along the Turkish border, essentially in northern and even some parts of northeastern Syria. There are others who have advocated, including Ambassador Crocker as recently as over the weekend, who have advocated establishing one on the western part of the country near

some areas where there are ongoing hostilities between the Assad regime and opposition groups. There are others -- Senator McCain -- who have been totally nonspecific about where they would put a no-fly zone.

But answering that question about where you're going to establish it is important, particularly because if you do establish it close to Damascus, near Idlib Province, for example, you would risk a direct confrontation with the Russians because there's going to be a little conflict if you try to establish a no-fly zone where the Russians are currently flying.

The second thing is a no-fly zone requires -- the enforcement of a no-fly zone requires significant resources. So it's going to require significant numbers of aircraft and personnel to fly those aircraft; significant maintenance crews, search-and-rescue teams that can be on standby in the event of an emergency would all need to be in place to effectively enforce a no-fly zone 24/7. And oh, by the way, if you're devoting those resources to a no-fly zone, you're not using those resources to hit ISIL targets. So the question then is, are you going to divert from your ongoing ISIL operations to enforce a no-fly zone, or are you going to make a significant additional commitment of U.S. resources to implement that no-fly zone?

I guess the third thing is, even though it's called a no-fly zone, there has to be some enforcement mechanism on the ground as well, that essentially -- I mean it bears repeating: ISIL doesn't have an air force. So you certainly don't want to set up a situation where refugees hear that there's a no-fly zone in some part of the country so they flock to that region and think that they'll be protected by the United States, but ISIL, who doesn't have an air force, can still come in and carry out terrible acts of violence on the ground that, in some ways, would be hard to protect against with just a no-fly zone.

And so then this raises questions about how you protect those refugees that now would essentially be under the care and security blanket of the United States and our coalition partners. So you're significantly raising the stakes about the United States and our coalition partners' involvement inside of Syria.

Finally, our Defense Department has previously noted the existence of an advanced air defense system inside of Syria, and establishing a no-fly zone anywhere in that country likely means that you'd have to reckon with that advanced air defense system.

So I went through that long explanation just to highlight, Jim, that even things that sound simple like a no-fly zone have significant consequences for longer-term strategic decisions that have to be made there, but they also have significant consequences for the kind of commitment and investment that the United States has to make. And it is precisely the failure to appreciate those longer-term consequences are what drew the United States into the mess in Iraq more than a decade ago.

So it's that principle that we continue to apply here to guide our interests and to make sure that our decision-making posture is focused directly on the long-term national security interests of the United States. And that's why the no-fly zone is something that's

not under consideration right now. If some of those dynamics were to shift, then you could imagine a scenario where a no-fly zone might make more sense.

Q Potentially with the Russians, maybe?

MR. EARNEST: Well, when it comes to the Russians, we've been pretty clear about this. If they're willing to make a constructive contribution to the international counter-ISIL coalition, then there would be a place for the Russians to participate there. But if the Russians continue to pursue the unilateral actions that they are now, they're only going to draw themselves more deeply into a sectarian conflict and isolate themselves from the rest of the world, including the 65 members of our counter-ISIL coalition.

Q And the Draft Biden people released a pretty compelling ad this morning -- I'm sure you've seen it.

MR. EARNEST: I did happen to see it, and I found it compelling as well.

Q I was curious if I can get your reaction to it, because what a lot of political professionals like yourself would say is that you need a story -- a story to sort of be one of the underpinnings of a presidential campaign. And I'm just curious if that is something that -- obviously that is something that the President knows all too well and people here at the White House know all too well. How effective do you think that ad is on that level?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just say that you don't serve in the United States Senate for multiple decades and rise to the position of Vice President of the United States without having a powerful story to tell. And certainly Vice President Biden's personal story is as powerful as any story in American politics. And he also has a uniquely powerful way of telling that story and using it to inspire other people.

And so I thought that was -- what I was most struck by in that ad and what made it particularly effective is that they used the words of Vice President Biden. It wasn't somebody else telling his story. It's him telling his own story. What was powerful about it is he was telling that story in a way to inspire other people. And he was speaking at the commencement exercises at Yale earlier this year, I believe. And many people have found Vice President Biden to be a genuinely inspirational figure. And I think that accounts for both the success that he's had in politics, but also the values that he's brought this job and every job that he's had in public life. It certainly makes him an effective leader.

But that also brings me to remind you that anybody who is making a decision to run for President is making an intensely personal one. And obviously that's something that the Vice President is still weighing.

Toluse.

Q Do you have an update on military-to-military talks between the U.S. and Russia? Have there been additional talks since I guess last week?

MR. EARNEST: What we have indicated is that the United States continues to wait for the Russians to provide a formal response to the presentation that was made last week to establish some basic de-confliction efforts. That's the way that I'm trying to describe some of the rules of the road, essentially that we would want to see the Russians agree to adhere to effectively de-conflict our military operations and ensure the safety of our military personnel who are operating in the skies over Syria. So these are basic things, like agreeing to use internationally recognized communications channels and observing sort of all of the basic safety regulations that are observed around the world.

We're still waiting for a formal response from the Russians to that offering.

Q The Russians have said that they're waiting for the U.S. to respond on specific targets that you don't want targeted -- maybe potential allies of the U.S. or people that we're backing on the ground. What's your response to the idea that they've said that they're willing to coordinate on that if you would give them a response when they said they haven't heard back yet?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I would draw a pretty stark distinction between coordination and de-confliction. Russia is welcome to make a constructive contribution to our counter-ISIL effort and coordinate their activities and integrate them with our border international counter-ISIL campaign that is aimed at degrading at ultimately destroying ISIL.

Separate from that -- and Russia's activities thus far have been separate from that -- what the United States seeks is just to establish some basic rules of the road that will allow us to effectively de-conflict their operations from ours so that our pilots and our other military personnel can operate safely. And that's the response that we are -- that's the formal response that we're still awaiting from the Russians.

Q On another topic, on Iran. I heard that the Supreme Leader there said that he's banning future talks with the U.S. on -- I guess on any topic on the deal or potentially any solution in Syria. I'm wondering what your response is to that.

MR. EARNEST: Well, what you've often -- I've been asked on a number of occasions, particularly in the last few months, to respond to statements from leaders in Iran. And what you've typically heard me say is that we're going to reserve our judgment for their actions. But in an effort to try to be at least a little helpful, let me just say that the President made quite clear that the international agreement that was reached between Iran and the rest of the international community basically to prevent them from obtaining a nuclear weapon was not predicated on the idea that Iran would become a constructive and cooperative member of the international community. It was predicated on the idea that it was a national security priority for the United States and a whole bunch of other countries to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And it's precisely because Iran has often not been a cooperative, constructive member of the international community that we wanted to prevent them from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

So that has been our approach thus far. If we were to see some kind of change in tenor and tone and tactic from Iran, that's something that we would certainly welcome. But it's not something that we're counting on. And in fact, the fact that it's not something that we can count on makes the success of our efforts to prevent them from obtaining a nuclear weapon all the more significant.

Q Just one more topic. On the President's trip to Oregon on Friday, there have been some news reports that residents there aren't happy that he's coming, that there are people who've said that they don't want to be part of a political visit or anything related to gun control. I'm wondering what your response is to some of those reports.

MR. EARNEST: I think my response would be that those individuals have nothing to fear. The fact is the President has made clear that the goal of his visit is to spend time with the families of those who are so deeply affected by this terrible tragedy. And that's the purpose of the President's trip, and that's what he'll do when he's in Oregon in Friday.

Margaret.

Q Can you explain, in the phone call between President Obama and the Doctors Without Borders chief, did the President offer any explanation as to how the hospital ended up mistakenly bombed by the U.S.?

MR. EARNEST: He did not. He was -- he merely offered his heartfelt apology, consistent with the commitment that he has often made to own up to mistakes that are made by the United States. And what the President did promise was a transparent, thorough, and objective accounting of the facts. And there's three ongoing investigations including a Department of Defense investigation that is aimed at getting that full accounting of the facts that, as Secretary Carter noted earlier today, will be shared with the public, or at least as much of it as possible will be shared with the public.

Q How long did they speak for? And did they make any commitment to speak again?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know precisely how long they spoke. It was not planned to be a lengthy call. And I'm not aware of any future calls that are planned at this point.

Q Let me ask you, on Syria and Russia, in the last 24 hours Russia has carried out its first naval bombardment. They've got a battalion-sized force in the country. I mean this is a significant, impressive buildup. Does the U.S. view this as a game-changer? There's been a difference on the ground in their behavior. What has changed in your view in the past 24 hours?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we have seen from the Russians is a willingness to use some different tactics, but it's entirely consistent with the tactics that we've seen the Russians employ certainly over the last week, but even before that. Russia for years now has been pressed to take significant action to prop up their remaining client state in the Middle East. And because of the increasing weakness of that leader, Russia has had to more deeply invest and make an even more significant commitment in propping him up.

So, again, the United States is not particularly impressed by the significant commitment that the Russians have made in Syria. In fact, our analysis is that it reflects the weakness in their position. Five years ago, Russia was able to reliably count on the client state that was in good standing in the Middle East. But over the course of the last five years, because of the tyranny and murderous actions of Bashar al-Assad, he's lost the legitimacy to lead that country. He's carried out terrible acts of violence. It's led that country into chaos. And now Russia -- even when faced with a shrinking economy -- is now having to make a significant investment just to try to help that leader survive.

So again, the escalation of Russia's military involvement in Syria is something that they're doing from a position of weakness, not strength.

Q But at the same time, the U.S. has said the flow of foreign fighters, this hemorrhage of refugees, the threat of terrorism, all of this makes what's happening in Syria of direct concern to this country's national security. So with this escalation, isn't it a more immediate threat if it's worsening the situation and thus making all those problems last longer?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the principal concern of the President when it comes to our national security interest in Syria is our ability to prevent extremists from using the chaos in Syria to carry out attacks against the United States. And we've made a lot of important progress just in the last few months by taking military strikes that take many of those extremist leaders off the battlefield. And that includes leaders in ISIL. It also includes dangerous leaders in other extremist organizations, as well. That is our top priority. And those efforts continues unabated.

What we've also sought to do is to build a broader international coalition so that the United States is not confronting ISIL on our own. And the fact is we've built a significant coalition of 65 nations. And even in the face of these aggressive but not particularly impressive Russian military actions, we haven't seen any weakness in our coalition. If anything, we've seen members of our coalition criticizing Russia, or at least expressing significant concerns about Russia's behavior inside of Syria.

Our coalition is strengthening and tightening. And we don't see a situation right now where there are members of the coalition who are seeking to side with Russia. That's why I've made the case that Russia is only, through their increased involvement, is only serving to isolate themselves in the international community even further.

And the fact that we are seeing these foreign fighters, principally from Iran, flocking to Syria to support Russia's military activities there only underscores the depth of the sectarian conflict that Russia is inviting. And Russia is getting -- being dragged deeper and deeper into a quagmire. And the long-term interests of Russia are not well-served by this stepped-up military investment inside of Syria.

Q But at the same time, Russia is taking some of the moderates that the U.S. would like to see in power off the battlefield as well. Doesn't the U.S. have a commitment to protect them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what the United States has done is that there are a variety of opposition groups inside of Syria that the United States has supported in one way or another. And the fact is, the Russians have failed to distinguish between the kind of moderate opposition groups that could be part of an eventual political transition inside of Syria and the kinds of extremists that are essentially rampaging across the countryside in Syria. And their failure to draw those kinds of distinctions does, again, serve to pose an increased risk to Russia, both in terms of deepening their involvement in a sectarian conflict, but also opening up Russia to the anger and enmity of an otherwise moderate Muslim Sunni population, both inside of Syria but also inside of Russia.

Q But in the meantime, is the U.S. just going to continue to allow them to bomb, as you say, these moderates and not distinguish between terrorists and moderates?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has made quite clear that Syria is not going to turn into a proxy war between Russia and the United States. That certainly would not be consistent with our interests. But what's also -- what's not consistent with Russia interests is putting off into the distance the political solution that even they acknowledge will be required to address the many problems plaguing Syria right now.

Q How long is the U.S. willing to wait? At least on the military-to-military front, you said the U.S. is still waiting on Russia to respond to that offer. Is there a timeline on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly would welcome a formal response from the Russians because we believe that even securing a commitment on those basics -- things like established communications channels and the observance of basic safety regulations -- is important to the ability of our military personnel to operate in the skies over Syria. So that is a priority. And the Russians understand that that's a priority for us, and we're hopeful that we'll receive a formal response from them soon.

Q It appears reactionary, though. It appears to be waiting on Russia. Do you dispute that concept, that impression?

MR. EARNEST: I do. Russia is the one that is reacting to a terrible situation inside of Syria. This is a place where they had a stable country that was a client of theirs that was essentially hosting the largest military base that they have outside of the former Soviet Union. The fact is this is now the only military facility they have outside the former Soviet Union, and the leader that they have relied upon to govern that country has lost control. And that means that Russia, despite the fact that they are isolated internationally and they don't have the kind of economic fundamentals to support it, is having to make an increasingly larger investment to try to protect that previous investment that's already been made. There are some costs, if you will.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. What can you tell us about the El Faro. I understand that the Coast Guard, earlier this afternoon, suspended its search. Is there anything that the White House can do to make sure that something like this doesn't happen again? It just seems so odd, given technology, given forecasting, that an accident like this can happen.

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, I can tell you that as of right now, the United States Coast Guard is currently conducting a multi-agency search for the El Faro. The El Faro, of course, is a U.S. flagged cargo ship with 33 people aboard, including 28 Americans. The last known communication with this ship was on October 1st, as the hurricane in the Atlantic was gathering. The Coast Guard is currently employing three cutters in that search --

Q I don't mean to interrupt, but I think they may have suspended it.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what the Coast Guard -- well, the Coast Guard would certainly be the place to go for the latest on this. My understanding is that they had planned an announcement for sundown today where they would provide an update on the search. But they have been expending significant resources in the search for this vessel. But for an update on those efforts, I'd refer you to the Coast Guard.

Q Let me ask you about the Defense authorization. You used the expression "gimmicks" and "slush fund" and that sort of -- for lack of a better description -- of rhetoric. Is there a way you can explain to people how this isn't a game of political chicken, with major, major stakes on the line, particularly given all the military theater work that we're doing right now all over the globe?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I think I would cite a couple of things. It's Republicans who have described this funding mechanism as a "gimmick" and as a "slush fund." And we can get you those specific citations. So I'm not the only person that is using that kind of rhetoric -- even Republicans have used that kind of rhetoric to criticize this gimmick in the past.

The second thing that I would cite to you is that there is a lot of frustration even among our national security leadership -- including the Secretary of Defense himself, who has expressed concerns about using a gimmick like this to fund our basic national security priorities.

I think the frustration is rooted in the fact that both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill and the Democrat who sits in the Oval Office, all of them agree that the current funding levels established in the budget for our national defense priorities are insufficient, that there is widespread agreement that there is additional funding that is required to ensure that our men and women in uniform have the tools they need to keep the country safe. And so rather than resorting to tucking this gimmick into an authorization bill, we would rather see Democrats and Republicans actually work constructively to find a responsible way to identify our national security priorities that aren't adequately funded and make sure that they have the resources that they need.

The President has put forward his own budget; he certainly made those kinds of decisions. Our civilian and military leadership over at the Pentagon, they've testified before Congress about what exactly those priorities should be. So there is shared agreement that we need to adequately fund those priorities. The administration, including our national

security team, has been crystal-clear about what exactly those priorities are and what those funding levels should be. The only resistance we get is from Republicans who aren't willing to sit down and negotiate those kinds of agreements.

And that is frustrating. It's mildly frustrating when it comes to domestic priorities that the President really cares about. It's intensely frustrating when you're talking about national security priorities that are critical to the basic national security of the American people. That has always been the chief responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief. It has always been the responsibility that the President has taken most seriously. And that's why the President has made clear that he is going to veto an NDAA bill that includes this gimmick.

Q Just a couple more. I want to ask you about labor, and this is sort of political. Given TPP and given some of the reservations that many of the labor groups in this country have, is it fair to say the President is concerned that he doesn't lose their support for the party and, in particular, in 2016? He has to have big labor if they're going to have a coalition to win, but he's going to have to bring them onboard, somehow, despite TPP. Is that a fair assessment?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Kevin, the observation that I would make is simply that the politics of the trade issue, particularly on the Democratic side of the aisle, are really tough. And there is a vigorous disagreement inside the Democratic Party about the wisdom of the approach that the President makes.

Now, we've got a very strong case to make. The agreement that the President and his negotiating team reached with 11 other countries over the weekend -- I guess it was Monday morning, include the toughest labor protections that have ever been included in a trade agreement before. They also include the toughest environmental protections that have ever been included in a labor agreement.

This agreement would also eventually eliminate 18,000 import taxes that are currently slapped on U.S. goods when they're shipped overseas. And we're talking about some of the most dynamic, fastest-growing economies in the world. So there's enormous economic potential here because this will enhance our ability to ship goods stamped "Made in America" to countries around the world. That's a good thing, and that is consistent with the kinds of progressive values that the President and leaders in the labor community have long fought for.

But we have a disagreement of opinion here and I'm not trying to paper over that difference. What I'll merely observe is that based on what I've just said, there are a number of reasons why Democrats in Congress would support a trade agreement like this, and we certainly will make that case to a number of Democrats on Capitol Hill. I'll also note that there was intense opposition from people who are typically on the same side of the issue as the President over the summer when it came to Congress voting on Trade Promotion Authority.

And the fact is, despite that opposition, the President did succeed in building a bipartisan majority in both the House of Representatives and the United States Senate to secure the passage of that legislation. And so we certainly are hopeful that Democrats will remain open to the strong case that we have to make on TPP. But we understand that that's something that we're going to have to work for given the tough politics of the situation.

We're heartened, however, by the fact that we've succeeded as recently -- just a few months ago in this regard.

Q And I want to throw you a little bit of a curveball. This is a sports question. I'm not sure if you've heard of this big FanDuel DraftKings controversy. There are people who feel -- and this is something that -- more than 40 million people take part in fantasy sports, and there is --

MR. EARNEST: I've certainly seen the commercials. (Laughter.)

Q Yes. Ubiquitous. There's concern that there are activities that are going on inside that make it seem sort of like insider trading. Does the President -- is he aware of this sort of controversy? Does he feel like there needs to be more oversight and regulation into an industry, quite frankly, that is impacting tens of millions of people?

MR. EARNEST: Well, based solely on what I've seen in the published reports -- I haven't spoken to the President about this -- but there are public reports that have raised concerns about the fairness and integrity of what the organizers call gains. And I do, based on -- I understand that this has actually attracted the attention of regulators and law enforcement officials, so I'm hesitant to comment on it too directly given the ongoing investigation. But I have certainly read the reports that do raise questions about the fairness and integrity of these activities.

Charlie.

Q Regarding the Benghazi committee, is the President -- does he believe that it should be shut down, it should be ended?

MR. EARNEST: Charlie, what we have indicated is that the administration will cooperate with legitimate congressional oversight. And that's why this latest iteration -- this is the eighth iteration of a congressional committee to investigate this particular tragic incident -- and the administration, time and time again, has cooperated with those efforts.

The fact is, legitimate questions have been raised about the legitimacy of the investigation, particularly given the comments of Mr. McCarthy. At this point, I wouldn't -- I don't have a change to announce in terms of our continued cooperation with that committee. There are thousands of pages of documents that have already been provided to that committee, and I know that there are a number -- at least a number of former administration officials who have made their own personal decision to be interviewed by the committee or even testify before it. So I do think that Democrats and administration officials, both current and former, have made a legitimate effort to cooperate with this investigation even if legitimate questions have been raised about the true purpose of this committee.

Q Are there any legitimate questions that need to be answered in the hearing? Is he prepared to publicly announce -- I mean, Democrats like Harry Reid have come out and said it's time to end it. Rather than let his former Secretary of State twist in the wind, is he prepared to say something publicly?

MR. EARNEST: I think based on the public comments that we've seen from Secretary Clinton, I think she's rather looking forward to the opportunity that she'll have to face the committee. So it seems apparent that she'll have the opportunity to do that later this month.

Laura.

Q Thank you. Two questions on two different topics.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q Afghanistan. To the best of the White House's knowledge, was there a high military target by you inside the hospital?

MR. EARNEST: Laura, what the Department of Defense is doing right now is they are conducting an investigation to get a full accounting of what exactly transpired. And the kind of question that you're raising is certainly material to understand exactly what happened and why it happened. So at this point, I can't speculate on that kind of detail, but I'm confident that it's among the questions that are being asked today by Department of Defense investigators.

Q So the White House does not know at this point if there was maybe someone inside the hospital?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, the White House is reluctant to comment on this publicly while there's an ongoing investigation by the Department of Defense to get to the ground truth on this.

Q A completely different story. You're talking a lot about the worker summit today, and talking also about the global economy. How does the White House see what happened in France, when some workers, in the fear of being laid off, tore down the shirts of their bosses at Air France?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't heard of that particular story.

Q Did you not see the footage? Because it's very global at this moment.

MR. EARNEST: I didn't. Apparently, I've not been watching enough TV this morning so far.

Q It's very dramatic. I mean, people are really afraid to be laid off, and they tear down the shirts of their bosses. Do you think it could happen in the United States? Do you understand that?

MR. EARNEST: What I think is that there is a genuine need for workers in this country to have the ability to collectively bargain and make sure that they're not taken advantage of by large companies, and that certainly the management of these companies understand that the success of their company rides on the success of their workers. And that's a simple proposition.

And the success that the broader labor movement has had in helping workers look after their own rights hasn't just been good for workers, it's been good for companies, and it's been good for our broader economy. And the President -- even in the kinds of changes that we're seeing in the current economy, the President believes that there continues to be an important role for organized labor and protecting the interests of working people around the country.

And you'll have the opportunity later today to hear the President talk about this in somewhat more detail and likely more eloquent terms than I just did.

Q So you don't condemn people who are -- tear down shirts of --

MR. EARNEST: It's hard to say whether or not something like that would take place in the United States.

Q But you're not condemning them? That's my question.

MR. EARNEST: I just haven't seen it, so I'm reluctant to condemn it without having seen it.

Q Has anyone in the administration reached out to officials in either Israel or Palestine about the violence that's happening in the occupied West Bank? And how concerned are you that this could be the beginning of the third intifada?

MR. EARNEST: Patty, let me just say that the United States is deeply concerned about recent violence and escalating tensions in the West Bank and Jerusalem. The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms violence against Israeli and Palestinian civilians. We call upon all parties to take affirmative steps to restore calm and refrain from actions and rhetoric that would further enflame tensions in that region of the world. We continue to urge all sides to find a way back to the full restoration of the status quo at the Temple Mount in Haram al-Sharif, the location that has precipitated so much of the violence that we've seen there.

This has obviously long been a volatile region of the world, and we continue to urge all sides to refrain from violence and refrain from the kind of activity that would only make tensions worse there.

Q This could be the beginning of the third intifada?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't predict at this point what the future holds. What we're hopeful for is that, despite the significance of the disagreements that cooler heads will prevail at least in preventing further violence and preventing further escalation of an

already tense situation.

Q One on Yemen. When King Salman was here, you said that he was committed to reducing civilian casualties. Well, Amnesty International has now come out and said that Saudi Arabia, the coalition has committed war crimes because so many civilians have been hit. Do you still believe that the coalition is committed to not targeting civilians?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we've said is that we have routinely urged the coalition to appreciate the need to prevent civilian casualties. And obviously, the situation on the ground in Yemen is exceedingly chaotic and there are legitimate concerns that the Saudis have about the impact of that chaotic situation on their own country's security, particularly along their southern border. So the concerns are legitimate when it comes to the broader security situation there. But that certainly does not eliminate the need for everyone in that region of the world to do everything they can to avoid the innocent loss of life in that war-torn country.

Q Last one. The NSC put out a statement saying that the U.S. doesn't provide targeting information to the coalition. In light of how many civilian casualties there have been, is there any discussion about changing that?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of at this point. There has been logistical support that the United States has provided to the coalition there, but that has been the extent of our involvement, at least as far as I know. If there is an update on that we'll get it to you, but that's my latest understanding of the situation.

Q Following up on the Draft Biden ad, you said you were compelled by it, but there is another way to look at that. Long-time advisor David Axelrod said today that it was "tasteless and exploitative." Has the President seen this ad? Does he agree with Axelrod?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to the President about this issue today. It certainly is possible that different people can have a different reaction to it. David Axelrod probably knows more about politics than I've -- he's probably forgotten more about politics than I have learned, so he certainly is justified in expressing that opinion. My own personal reaction when I saw the ad was different. But it doesn't make his reaction any less legitimate than mine.

Q And then on another subject, a bipartisan group of lawmakers have introduced legislation to reform the mental health care system and Republicans argue that that's the solution to reducing gun violence. Does the White House agree?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me answer that question in a couple ways. There are some more common-sense, obvious steps that Congress could take that we know would have a positive impact in reducing gun violence. The best example I can point you to is closing the gun show loophole. This is a change that would do more to prevent criminals and others who shouldn't get guns from being able to purchase them. And this is a change that is strongly supported by Democrats and Republicans all across the country. And there's even some public data to indicate that a majority of gun owners support that kind of change. So that's the kind of obvious thing that we believe that Congress should do.

I know there are a number of Republicans, probably in an effort to avoid a discussion of obvious solutions, have raised other concerns about access to mental health care in this country. And we certainly have seen situations where there are obviously mentally unstable individuals who have gotten their hands on firearms and use them to carry out heinous acts of violence.

We would welcome a genuine effort on the part of Republicans to expand access to mental health care in this country. The thing the Republicans could do is they could actually support the successful implementation of the Affordable Care Act, which has done more than any law in recent history to expand access to mental health care to people all across the country.

Instead, we see Republicans voting as recently as *this last week to once again repeal that law. The other thing that we could see is we could see Republicans cooperate with the administration as we try to expand access to Medicaid. There are millions of Americans right now that could get the mental health care that they need if Medicaid was expanding in their state. But too many Republicans in too many states have opposed that effort.

And I guess that's why I'm a little skeptical of Republican claims that they're actually interested in the solution when they're unwilling to support the most obvious solutions to that problem.

I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you very much. I'm waiting for a long time. I have two questions for you. Do you have any information on the South Korean President upcoming visit to the United States next week? Also the nuclear issues and U.S. and Iran's nuclear deal, how does the U.S. concern about the North Korean nuclear situation -- does the U.S. have any plan to (inaudible) nuclear negotiations before the end of the Obama administration?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any update on our efforts to pursue our policy of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. Obviously, the United States values the strong alliance that we have with South Korea. And we've been able to work effectively with other countries in the region -- including China, by the way -- to encourage North Korea to live up to their international obligations.

Unfortunately, we haven't seen the kind of cooperation instructive -- cooperation that we'd like to see from the North Koreans. But we continue to stand strong and shoulder-to-shoulder with our close allies in South Korea.

Q In the seven years since the last six-party resumption ended in 2009 -- after that, Obama administration (inaudible) seven years and none other meetings at all. So do you think there will be a resumption of the talks --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly wouldn't rule it out. I certainly wouldn't rule out a continuation of those talks. But we have not seen the kind of willingness on the part of the North Koreans to engage in those discussions constructively. But that continues to be

an option that's available to the North Koreans if they're ready to begin to take steps to become a legitimate member of the international community once again.

Thanks a lot, everybody.

END

2:59 P.M. EDT