

Background Conference Call by White House Official on Syria

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Via Telephone

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MS. HAYDEN: Hi, guys. Thank you very much for joining on what I know is short notice, but we wanted to have an opportunity to provide you with a little bit of context to the letters you've seen that were sent today from the White House's Director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, Miguel Rodriguez. Those letters were to Senator McCain and Senator Levin. You've probably also seen Secretary Hagel's comments, and we just wanted to give an opportunity to answer some questions.

This call is on background attributable to a White House official. With that, I'll turn it over to your unnamed official to go ahead and get started, and then we'll take some questions.

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: Thanks, Caitlin. I'll just say a few introductory comments.

You all presumably have the letter that was sent up to the Hill; if you need it we can provide that. The letter was in response to a letter that was sent to the President yesterday, April 24th, from Senator McCain, Senator Levin, Senator Corker, Senator Menendez, Senator Chambliss, Senator Ayotte, Senator Casey and Senator Graham. And the question that was posed in that letter was: Has the Assad regime or Syrian elements associated with or supported by the Assad regime used chemical weapons in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011?

I'll just highlight a few parts of the letter by way of opening, and then take your questions. What I will say is, for some time now, as you know, the President has directed the government to closely monitor the potential use of chemical weapons within Syria. Given our concern that as the situation deteriorated and the regime became more desperate, they may use some of their significant stockpiles of chemical weapons.

What we say in the letter is that our intelligence community does assess with varying degrees of confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specifically the chemical agent sarin. This assessment is based in part on physiological samples. Our standard of evidence must build on these intelligence assessments as we seek to establish credible and corroborated facts. For example, the chain of custody is not clear, so we cannot confirm how the exposure occurred and under what conditions.

We go on to reaffirm that the President has set a clear red line as it relates to the United States that the use of chemical weapons or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups is a red line that is not acceptable to us, nor should it be to the international community. It's precisely because we take this red line so seriously that we believe there is an obligation to fully investigate any and all evidence of chemical weapons use within Syria.

We are currently pressing for a comprehensive U.N. investigation that can credibly evaluate the evidence and establish what took place in association with these reports of the use of chemical weapons. At the same time as that U.N. investigation is underway -- and we're seeking to make it more comprehensive -- we're also working with our friends and allies as well as the Syrian opposition to procure, share and evaluate additional information associated with reports of use of chemical weapons so that we can establish the facts.

And I think the point here is that given the stakes involved, given how serious the situation is, and what we have learned, frankly, from our own recent experience, intelligence assessments are not alone sufficient. Only credible and corroborated facts that provide us with some degree of certainty can then guide our decision-making and inform our leadership of the international community.

So with that, I'll move to take your questions.

Q Thanks so much for doing the call, and thank you for your service. Secretary Kerry told lawmakers today that the intelligence assessments referenced, with various degrees of confidence, two instances of chemical weapons use inside Syria. Were these the two alleged uses in Damascus and Aleppo in March? Or was this also the alleged use in Homs in December? And do you believe that President Obama's red line has been crossed?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question, Josh. Let me just say a number of things. I don't want to speak in detail about intelligence assessments, because portions of them, of course, are classified and the intelligence community is best positioned to characterize in detail their assessments. I will say, for instance, the incident in Aleppo that you referenced, in March, was one of the reports that we've been following up on, and in fact was a precipitating factor in the call for the U.N. investigation. And, in fact, the Syrian government itself said that they would support a U.N. investigation. What we've made clear is that U.N. investigation needs to be comprehensive. It needs to look into all reports of chemical weapons use, and it needs to have credible access in order to ascertain exactly what took place.

As relates to the numbers of incidents, I won't go beyond what Secretary Kerry said. Again, what we are saying is that the intelligence community does assess, with varying degrees of confidence, that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria. And we'll continue to seek to gather additional facts associated with that assessment.

On your red line question, it is absolutely the case that the President's red line is the use of chemical weapons or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups. However, I also want to underscore that given how important this issue is and how important these decisions are, our standard of evidence has to build on these intelligence assessments. So the intelligence assessments inform our decision-making. We want to continue to investigate above and beyond those intelligence assessments to gather facts so that we can establish a credible and corroborated set of information that can then inform our decision-making.

So currently, again, we have benefited from a lot of rigorous intelligence work. That intelligence work is based on a mosaic of information. There is evidence associated with that, including physiological samples. At the same time, we believe it's necessary to continue to investigate to corroborate that information and to have a strong, firm, evidentiary basis for the way in which we consult our friends and allies in the international community on this issue and the way in which the President will ultimately makes decisions.

So we are continuing to do further work to establish a definitive judgment as to whether or not the red line has been crossed and to inform our decision-making about what to do next.

Q Just a point of clarification on the last -- you said you need a better or a strong, firm, evidentiary basis to do what exactly? I mean, what is on the table here, both with your allies and, as you said, for the presidential decision? What are the range of those options?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: Sure. Thanks for the question. So, as you know, we currently have a number of lines of effort in Syria, ranging from our humanitarian assistance to our significantly-increasing, nonlethal support to the opposition. At the same time, though, the President has tasked that there be a full range of options for him to consider for additional action in Syria.

And if, again, we reach a definitive determination that this red line has been crossed based on credible, corroborated information, what we will be doing is consulting closely with our friends and allies in the international community more broadly, as well as the Syrian opposition, to determine what the best course of action is.

I don't want to get into those hypotheticals at this juncture, but suffice it to say all options are on the table in terms of our response, and it could run a broad spectrum of activity across our various lines of effort in Syria, which already include diplomatic initiatives,

already include assistance to the opposition. But again, at the President's direction, there are additional options and contingencies that we prepared for that we would have to consider as we make a determination about chemical weapons use.

Q Thank you so much. Senator McCain has called on the White House to establish a safe zone for Syrian civilians. In light of this new evidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, would the White House consider that? And my second question is, the President has called on President Assad to step down. He said that he lost his legitimacy. Who does he hold responsible in this incident in terms of using chemical weapons? Is still President Assad responsible for that? Thank you.

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: Sure, let me just take the second question first. As we say in the letter, we believe -- the United States intelligence community assesses that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, again, with varying degrees of confidence. At the same time, we're seeking to establish additional facts associated with that assessment. We reference the chain of custody, so in terms of our efforts to confirm how the exposure occurred and under what conditions it occurred.

What we also say is that we believe that any use of chemical weapons in Syria would very likely have originated with the Assad regime. We believe that the Assad regime maintains custody of chemical weapons within Syria, and we believe that they have repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to escalate their use of violence against the Syrian people. So we are very skeptical that the reports of use of chemical weapons could be attributed to anyone other than the Assad regime in Syria given our belief that they remain in custody of those chemical weapons.

We've also made it clear that President Assad, as the leader of the Assad regime, is ultimately responsible for the security of those chemical weapons and responsible for ensuring that they are not used. So ultimately, he is accountable for any use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. And President Assad and those around him should know that the world is going to continue to carefully monitor this issue and bring forward information as we have it and as we are doing today, and that ultimately, if it is established in a credible and confirmable way that there was a use of chemical weapons by the regime, we do believe that President Assad is ultimately accountable for that action.

With respect to the option that you referenced from Senator McCain, I don't want to get into a specific hypothetical scenario beyond saying that we will consummately have prepared contingency planning for different scenarios in Syria. I think the military has spoken to the fact that they do prudent planning in terms of preparing a range of options for different contingencies. But what we will ultimately do is going to be informed by what we believe is going to make the greatest difference. And that is a judgment that we want to reach not just by ourselves, but in close coordination and consultation with other countries -- beginning with our close allies, countries like the British and the French, who have closely worked with us on this issue of chemical weapons and on the issue of Syria more generally; also the countries in the region that we've been working very closely with -- Turkey, our Gulf partners, Jordan.

So this will be a process in which we not only seek to evaluate and confirm instances of use of chemical weapons, but as it relates to our response, we'll be reviewing our own contingency planning. But we'll also be in close consultations with our friends and allies as well.

Q Secretary Hagel had indicated that this conclusion, these assessments had been reached in the past 24 hours. Could you talk to us about what happened in the last 24 hours and whether you saw any change in the situations at Syrian chemical weapons depots? And also, just to clarify on your answer on Aleppo, you had said that that was one of the incidents the U.S. had been following up on. Did you mean that that is one of the two incidents that Kerry was referencing?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: First of all, I don't want to confirm any particular incident as being confirmed at this point, given the fact that these are intelligence assessments and they're based on a broad range of information -- some of it classified. What I was confirming is that the incident in Aleppo is one that prompted further investigation and we believe merits further investigation.

With respect to your other question --

MS. HAYDEN: Margaret, this is Caitlin. Can you just repeat the other part of your question please?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: Oh, it was Hagel, sorry, yes. So with respect to Secretary Hagel's comment about the last 24 hours, the way I'd characterize that, Margaret, is that we are constantly reviewing our intelligence as it relates to chemical weapons. We have been doing so for several months.

I would also note that we are the ones who often raise the profile of the issue of chemical weapons precisely because we saw things that were concerning to us within Syria. And as we made clear in the letter, we raise those issues publically, we raise those issues privately in seeking to deter the use of chemical weapons.

As a part of that process, we also continually kept Congress informed of our assessments of chemical weapons and our efforts to investigate reports of the use of chemical weapons. In the last 24 hours, a determination was made to respond to the letter that we received from the several senators on an unclassified basis.

Given the fact that we have been developing additional information within our intelligence community and given the fact that we want to be responsive to Congress, to the international community and the American people on these issues, we felt it was the right and prudent thing to do to respond in an unclassified form to this letter. So we took that decision last night, and the letter was delivered to Capitol Hill this morning.

As you also have no doubt seen, we were briefing the Congress on this issue as well today in our commitment to keep them fully informed. So these are constantly updated intelligence assessments. They evolve over time as we gather more information. And the

decision that was made in the last 24 hours was to finalize the assessment that we would provide, both in terms of our briefing to members of Congress today, but also in terms of deciding to respond to this letter in an unclassified fashion.

Q Thanks for doing the call. In Congress, Republicans and Democrats -- the Democrat, Dianne Feinstein, just put out a statement -- appear to believe that a red line has been crossed. And Dianne Feinstein said if action isn't taken now, the Syrian regime will see that there's no sanction to even limited use of chemical weapons. To what degree is the administration sensitive to the charge -- both leveled by members of Congress and a fear that is within the Syrian opposition -- that if nothing is done now, the Syrian regime, desperate, will only escalate its use of chemical weapons because nothing is being done after proof positive has been determined -- at least by several governments, and partially by ours -- and that the situation is so chaotic in Syria right now that the credible and collaborative or corroborative evidence standard the administration sets can never be reached?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question, Major. Let me just say a few things. First of all, we're already doing a significant amount in Syria, and we recently doubled our assistance to the opposition, including direct assistance to the Syrian military coalition on the ground. So we have now \$250 million worth of nonlethal assistance. Again, that will include direct support to the people who are fighting on the ground as it relates to things like meals, medical equipment, body armor and things that are directly relevant to their efforts. And we also have over \$400 million in humanitarian assistance that we're deploying and delivering into Syria as well -- as well as dealing with the refugee crisis in neighboring countries.

With respect to your question on chemical weapons, I would say that we are the ones who took the determination to come forward with our assessment as it stands today, just as we have consistently raised the profile of the issue of chemical weapons.

The other countries that you reference, I think if you were to ask them, they'll speak for themselves, but they are very much in the same position that we are in assessing that there is evidence of the use of chemical weapons, but there needs to be further investigation so that there is a clear, corroborated and credible basis for the decisions that we need to make.

So again, it's precisely because we take the red line seriously that we feel like there needs to be clear, factual, evidentiary basis for our decisions. And we will be continuing that investigation. And frankly, we feel like even with the chaotic situation in Syria, there are ways for us to establish the facts.

Now, the simplest way is for the U.N. investigation to have the access that it needs to do a credible investigation, and that means people being able to get in on the ground and do the evaluations necessary.

But even without that investigation, we're already working with the Syrian opposition, who can help us in corroborating reports and gathering evidence. We're working with other countries, like the British, for instance, who are also undertaking their own investigations and gathering their own information. So we are also capable of collecting further information, evaluating that information and presenting it to the public.

But I would say that given our own history with intelligence assessments, including intelligence assessments related to weapons of mass destruction, it's very important that we are able to establish this with certainty and that we are able to present information that is airtight in a public and credible fashion to underpin all of our decision-making. That is I think the threshold that is demanded given how serious this issue is.

But I think nobody should have any mistake about what our red line is. It is when we firmly establish that there has been chemical weapons use within Syria, that is not acceptable to the United States, nor is the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist organizations. And the people in Syria and the Assad regime should know that the President means what he says when he set that red line. And keep in mind, he is the one who laid down that marker. He's the one who directed that we provide this information to the public. And he's the one who directed that we do everything we can to further investigate this information so that we can establish in credible, corroborated, factual basis what exactly took place.

Q Two questions. One, could you give us any more detail on the physiological samples? Are we talking about soil samples, some other form of material? And secondly, on the question coming up, what Major asked earlier -- if you're having to wait until you establish this comprehensive case, this evidentiary case you talked about, is there a risk that Assad, who has kind of ratcheted up the use of weapons steadily throughout this war, might feel emboldened to take it to the next level? I mean, if this is something that's going to take you weeks or even months to establish definitively, isn't there a risk that Assad will somehow see that as a pretext to go even further in his use of weapons?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: On your first question, I don't want to get into the details of the physiological evidence because it's still rooted in intelligence gathering. The fact is these assessments, which the intelligence community can speak to, are based on a broad mosaic of information. Some of it is physiological.

The point I'd make that's relevant here to our follow-through is that we do have the ability to gather that type of information, precisely because we are working with countries in the region and we're working with the Syrian opposition. So we continually gather that type of evidence ourselves. We do believe that the United Nations should have more direct access into Syria to form a credible investigation of their own. But in the interim, we're also going to continue to work with our friends and allies in the opposition to gather as much evidence as we can.

With respect to your second question, I think what the Assad regime needs to know is that we are watching this incredibly closely. And just the fact that we were able to establish the assessments that we already have collected points to how closely we are monitoring

chemical weapons within Syria. Were he to undertake any additional use, he would be doing so under very careful monitoring from us and the international community.

With respect to the reports of use already, we are already gathering facts associated with those reports so we can establish the type of evidentiary basis that I spoke about. So I think the message to the Syrian regime should be perfectly clear, even with what we are doing today, which is that we are going to be methodical, rigorous and relentless in gathering the relevant information and putting it together so we can establish exactly what happened around these reports of chemical weapons use. And if there are any additional reports, we're similarly going to be following through on those as well, and we're going to be doing so in the context where the entire world, the international community, is focused on this issue.

So there should be no mistaking our determination not just to get to the bottom of these reports, but to send a message that as we establish the facts here and as we continue to stick to a red line that makes clear that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable to us, the United States of America is committed to following through on what the President said, which is that Bashar al-Assad and his regime will be held accountable for these types of actions. And I think we're joined by other like-minded friends and allies who share that view.

Q Can you tell us whether the physiological samples that you received are associated with any deaths?

WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL: I don't want to get into the details of the physiological samples, just because they're rooted ultimately in intelligence. What I will say is that as we have a mosaic of information that informs our intelligence judgments, we also have a capability to gather this type of evidence. And that's an ongoing process that's underway.

And we're not the only ones who are engaged in that effort. We're able to speak to the Syrian opposition, for instance, in our efforts to corroborate this information. So this information picture continues to fill in. That's what informed the letter that was delivered to the Hill today. And that's what will inform our continued efforts to establish the facts of what happened associated with these reports of chemical weapons use, and associated with the broader challenge of chemical weapons in Syria in general.

I'll just conclude by saying that we, number one, will continue to be deeply engaged in the situation in Syria. And I think you've already seen the upward trajectory of our assistance and our contact with the opposition as representative of our commitment to bring about a transition in Syria. The President has been consulting with other leaders. He had the Emir of Qatar here the other day. We have King Abdullah coming here shortly. So we have an ongoing set of consultations about Syria already on chemical weapons. We'll continue to provide information to Congress and the public as we gather it.

And that's I think what you see today with the effort to be transparent with what we know, which is reflected fully in the letter that was delivered and the briefings that have been delivered on the Hill. And so we'll continue to keep people informed going forward as this

situation develops.

END

1:49 P.M. EDT