

Background Conference Call on Aerial Resupply of Forces Fighting ISIL Near Kobani, Syria

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/20/background-conference-call-aerial-resupply-forces-fighting-isil-near-kob

October 20, 2014

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 20, 2014

Via Telephone

10:25 P.M. EDT

MS. MEEHAN: Hi, everybody. This is Bernadette. Thanks so much for joining us late on a Sunday night. This is a background conference call to discuss the aerial resupply of forces fighting ISIL near Kobani, Syria. This call is on background so you may use quotes attributable to senior administration officials.

We have three officials with us tonight. I will introduce them just for the purposes of this call, and then I will turn it over to our first senior administration official to give you a laydown before we go to questions.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, everybody, for getting on the call. I'll just make some brief opening comments and turn it over to my DOD colleague.

So as you know, this evening, our time, overnight in Syria, the United States military delivered weapons, ammunition and medical supplies to the forces fighting against ISIL on the ground in Kobani. These supplies were provided by Kurdish authorities in Iraq, and they were focused on enabling forces -- including, of course, Kurdish forces in Syria -- to continue their fight against ISIL.

This is a part of the President's broader strategy to pursue a campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL wherever they are. And we've, of course, been focused on our military efforts in Iraq and Syria these last several weeks.

What we've seen in Kobani, specifically -- well, first I should say in Syria, more generally, our strikes have been focused on degrading the ISIL safe haven there. So targeting sources of financing such as mobile oil refineries, targeting command and control targets and supply lines that help support ISIL operations in Iraq. But we've also taken a significant number of strikes in the vicinity of Kobani.

And we've done so for a number of reasons. First of all, we want to help prevent the humanitarian catastrophe that could result from the complete fall of that city into ISIL's control and the massacre of civilians and Kurdish fighters that could follow that event.

Also what we've seen over the course of the last several days and weeks is ISIL surge its resources towards Kobani; masses of fighters and weapons and heavy weapons. That, frankly, has presented an opportunity. As ISIL has finite resources, we look for any opportunity to take out those resources and to degrade the organization. And that's exactly what CENTCOM has been doing -- even as brave fighters have been fighting against ISIL on the ground.

So as we've seen ISIL commit those significant resources to try to overrun the majority Kurdish-Syrian city of Kobani, we have been able to come to the support of those fighting on the ground while also achieving some significant results in degrading ISIL.

However, the fact of the matter is that the forces fighting on the ground have been in a tough fight for a number of weeks now. And it certainly came to our attention that they are running low on supplies. For that reason, the President determined to take this action now to resupply those who are defending Kobani from the air with supplies provided by the Kurdish authorities in Iraq. And as you may know, we've been discussing for a number of days now how to facilitate the resupply of these forces inside of Kobani. This allowed us to do that in a timely fashion.

I'd just say a couple of other things. I think what this represents is the President recognizes this is going to be a long-term campaign against ISIL; and that we need to look for whatever opportunity we can find to degrade that enemy and to support those who are fighting against ISIL on the ground.

We have taken steps to facilitate the urgent resupply of both military forces and civilians throughout this campaign. You'll recall, for instance, that we expedited the delivery of military assistance to Kurdish forces and Iraqi security forces earlier this summer when ISIL was bearing down on population centers, specifically Erbil and Baghdad. We also provided aerial resupply to civilians who were endangered from an ISIL siege in both Amerli and Mount Sinjar inside of Iraq. So we are going to be opportunistic in this campaign. We're going to take the steps that are necessary to provide support for those who are fighting against ISIL, and importantly, we are going to take steps to degrade ISIL. And if we, again, see ISIL massing forces, massing equipment, and presenting us with an opportunity to set back ISIL capabilities, we're going to act. And that's what we've done around Kobani here in recent days, and that's what we'll continue to do wherever ISIL targets present themselves in Iraq and Syria.

With that I'll turn it over to my DOD colleague to go through the specifics of the operation.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you, I'll make this short, just provide some facts here. These airdrops were conducted by three U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft that are deployed to the Central Command region. The airdrops consisted of 27 bundles

total of small arms, ammunition and medical supplies. As the previous briefer indicated, these were all supplies that were provided by Kurdish authorities in Iraq.

We are still assessing the completion of the mission, but every indication that we have is that the vast majority of those bundles were successfully delivered to Kurdish forces. Again, we're still working through a complete assessment right now.

The mission began at about 4:30 p.m. Eastern Time. That's when the aircraft lifted off, and we know that they all exited safely from the area at about 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time. The aircraft were met with no resistance from either the air or the ground. And I think that's pretty much it for the facts.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great, we'll go our State colleague now to give some context.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just add from a diplomatic side, just building on what my colleague said, obviously there's been a great amount of diplomacy over the past couple weeks regarding the ISIL campaign generally, and a very broad scale ISIL campaign across multiple lines of effort, one of which, of course, is military support to those who are resisting ISIL. And that includes the travel of General Allen and his team to Iraq, to Turkey, to the region, including up in Erbil a couple weeks ago. Tony Blinken was in Erbil and in Dohuk, just only a few days ago. And obviously, Kobani, the situation there has been an ongoing topic of conversation. And it will continue to be a topic of conversation in these diplomatic engagements and deliberations, including all the high-level phone calls that we've also been reading out.

With that, I'll close.

Q Hi, can you hear me?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, I got you, Karen.

Q A couple of questions. Can you tell me if you believe that ISIL forces in the vicinity of Kobani have any anti-aircraft capability at all? And what sort of protection accompanied the C-130s? And secondly, when you say small arms, specifically what kind of arms are you talking about?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hey, Karen. We still don't have any indication that ISIL is in possession of anti-air capability. And that's been our assessment for some time now, and that's still what we believe. The C-130s did not have escort with them, fighter escort. But I would add that fighter aircraft remain on standby throughout the region should they be needed, but there was no escort. And there typically isn't for missions like this.

I'm sorry your last question was on the specific arms. I don't think -- in fact, I don't have the specifics. These were -- this was Kurdish equipment, Kurdish arms, Kurdish ammunition that was provided to them -- small arms and ammunition, personnel-type

materiel that was provided, again, by Kurdish authorities. And I just don't have the breakdown of exactly what types they were.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add, Karen, that what we were focused on is providing the type of materiel that could help them sustain their fight. So there are very specific needs to flow out of the fact that they've been engaged in the fight against ISIL in Kobani for some time now. And so this is meant to provide resupply of the type of equipment and medical and food supplies that they need.

And again, this is something we've been discussing for a period of days now with Kurdish authorities in Iraq who wanted to help come to the aid of those who are fighting ISIL in Syria. And so therefore, as we have said throughout this campaign, the U.S. military has some unique capabilities that we can bring to bear in support of partners. And in this instance, we're able to use our unique capabilities to provide this resupply to the forces fighting against ISIL in Kobani.

Q Yes, my question is was the Turkish government given notification in advance? And was there any communication with Turkish authorities? Did they express any opposition to this mission?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure, I'll start on this, and my State colleague may want to add to it. We have made clear to the Turkish government for some days now the urgency of facilitating resupply to those forces, including, of course, Kurdish forces who are fighting against ISIL in Kobani. We've communicated with the Turkish government at a range of levels. President Obama spoke to President Erdogan yesterday and was able to notify him of our intent to do this, and the importance that we put on it.

I won't characterize the Turkish response. The Turkish General Office can speak for themselves on this matter. Clearly, we understand the longstanding Turkish concern with the range of groups, including Kurdish groups that they have been engaged in conflict with at times, even as they've also been engaged in peace talks.

However, our very strong belief is that both the United States and Turkey face a common enemy in ISIL, and that we need to act on an urgent basis to do whatever we can to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. And we've been able to enlist Turkish cooperation in that effort in a number of ways, even as we've continued to have discussions about the best way to move forward both in Kobani and in the broader campaign.

So I expect that this will continue to be a topic of discussion with the Turkish government in the days to come. And what we want is to work cooperatively with our ally in this effort.

But I don't know if you want to add.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, I would just build on what I said in the opening about the level of engagement with Turkey. And so to trace it from two weeks ago with General Allen's trip, he spent about 48 hours in Ankara for very in-depth and detailed talks on just a host of range of issues, including the situation of Kobani, which is

one of many issues. And then that was followed by a trip from CENTCOM and EUCOM on a mil-to-mil conversation last week, and also just the regular communications at high-level. On Friday, Secretary Kerry spoke with Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu on a number of issues. And then the Turks remain one of our closest partners here, a very valued NATO partner. We welcome their agreement to host training sites for the Syrian opposition, which was a big step forward of recognition that we face this common threat in ISIL, have to combat it together. And we're working with them on a whole host of other initiatives.

I'd also say the Turks on Kobani have about 180,000 refugees that they're caring for across their border. They've provided some artillery support for the fighters in Kobani. So this is really a multi-faceted campaign. And even as the operation tonight to resupply the fighters in the town, we're continuing on an ongoing basis to explore other ways with talking to the Kurds, talking to the Turks as well, to provide additional support on a more sustainable basis. So this is kind of a continuum here, and you might see more in the days ahead.

Q I just wanted to ask if the Syrian-Kurdish militia is calling in airstrikes for the U.S. and how these airstrikes are getting called in.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What I can tell you is that we use various sources of information at our disposal to make sure that we're -- that our airstrikes are as precise and as effective as possible. And it would not be prudent for us to talk about the various ways that we go about getting the information that we do. But that's as far as I think I'm going to go.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I got one thing on the -- kind of traces back on the immediate fall of Mosul and the decisions that were made by the President immediately not only with the intelligence surge we talked about, setting up of joint operation centers in Erbil and in Baghdad really just almost immediately after that very urgent situation. And what we meshed and placed on a very fast basis and then built from that time has given us the platform in a number of ways to be able to act with precision and real efficacy when the President made the decision to act.

So I think if you go back and build the number of steps that led to the things that we're doing now, the fact that we're striking with such precision is because of the decisions that were made very early on as we built this platform that has allowed us to take the fight to ISIL. Again, I think it's been a continuum, it'll continue to be a continuum. This will be a long-term effort, but we're able to do these things because of our extraordinary colleagues at the Department of Defense and the pilots who fly these airplanes, and the -- crews and everything. It's just really amazing. And we've just been (inaudible) seen our joint operation center in action. But it's really just the decisions that were made on a really rapid basis during the crisis this summer, and that foundation has allowed us to do a lot of the things we're doing now.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add one quick point to that because I think it's important. The sequencing has allowed us to build this platform for action in both Iraq and Syria. So in both cases we were able to dedicate important ISR resources

and intelligence-gathering resources to support our efforts in Iraq and Syria, just as we are able to support forces on the ground who are fighting in Iraq and Syria.

I think what we are aiming to demonstrate is, over the course of the last several months ISIL has sought to be able to control the battlefield in this space. And I think the message we're sending is that they're not going to be able to do that anymore. We're going to be opportunistic in taking whatever action is necessary to target ISIL forces until we see those targets present themselves.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would only add one other thing. The Kurdish resistance against them on the ground has been impressive, and the airstrikes have certainly made a difference in stemming some advances. But these fighters on the ground have also taken out targets. And the targets keep presenting themselves, we keep hitting them from the air, but these guys are hitting them from the ground as well. And again, this airdrop was meant to help sustain their efforts to do exactly that.

Q Is this the first time that the United States has provided weapons that is lethal assistance, albeit from a third party, to the Syrian rebel fighters? Secondly, why did the United States military not simply provide U.S. arms and small weapons directly to the Syrian Kurds? And third, the Defense Department last week, I believe, estimated that there were hundreds -- only hundreds of civilians remaining in and around Kobani. So why does this now appear to be a potential humanitarian catastrophe if it were to fall to the Islamic State fighters given that the majority of civilians are long gone?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure, I can take those. Good question. On your first question, we have for some time provided support to the Syrian opposition rooted in, again, our determination initially to develop not just a counterweight to ISIL but a counterweight to the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad. And so, as you know, we've been ramping up that assistance for some time now.

Last spring, we announced publicly after the initial finding of the use of chemical weapons on a smaller scale than they were later used in Syria that we were going to begin to provide military assistance to the Syrian opposition. And we have said that that would include assistance to the armed Syrian opposition.

We do not describe the specifics of what types of assistance we provide to the opposition for a variety of reasons, but I'd just note that the decision to provide military assistance is one that we took last year, and we've also been able to coordinate the types of assistance we provide to the Syrian opposition with friends and partners in the region -- well, particularly in the region and some around the world.

I would add though that we needed, when the campaign against ISIL ramped up, to be able to substantially ramp up our ability to train and equip the Syrian opposition. And that's why we went to Congress and very much appreciated their support for the program that will allow us to train and equip a fighting force that can counter both ISIL and serve as a counterweight to Assad in Syria. And one of the lines of effort that we're focused with the coalition is standing up that program to train and equip the Syrian opposition.

What we have here is a specific and urgent need for resupply for these specific forces fighting in Kobani, and that's why we took the action of using our unique capabilities to facilitate a resupply from Kurdish authorities in Iraq. And as you know, we've been discussing this notion of how to facilitate this resupply for a period of days now. And the fact of the matter is that this was the quickest way to get the job done -- we continue to explore how we can support those who are fighting in Kobani going forward.

Of course, the best way that we're supporting them is with airstrikes. And we've already seen our airstrikes have an effect on ISIL. We've seen those airstrikes have an effect on the battlefield. But ultimately we also want to make sure that those who are fighting bravely on the ground have the support that they need.

In terms of why Kurdish resupply -- again, our concept in this campaign has been that the United States is going to use its unique capabilities in the effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, but we very much want to empower those forces who are fighting on the ground first and foremost. And what we've seen is forces step up in Iraq, both the ISF but also Peshmerga forces. And they wanted very much to be able to facilitate this resupply of Kurdish forces who are fighting in Kobani. And so, therefore, we were able to work cooperatively with them to get the job done, drawing of course on the close coordination we've had with them through the joint operation center and through our coordination over the last several weeks.

In terms of the numbers of civilians and how that relates to a humanitarian crisis, look, the bottom line is, what we've seen when ISIL moves into a town or city is them massacring men, women and children without any regard for basic standards of humanity and decency. And so insofar as there are hundreds of civilians in Kobani, those civilians are at risk of massacre. Now, insofar as there are Kurdish forces fighting in Kobani, they're at risk of a massacre -- because what we've seen is ISIL not take prisoners and abide by international conventions, but rather we've seen the slaughter of forces who have found themselves in ISIL's way, and particularly when there's forces that put up a tenacious battle as these forces in Kobani have done.

I would note, however, that this is not simply the humanitarian interest that compels this action, as important as that is. This is an opportunity to strike blows against ISIL. And what we've seen is ISIL determined that Kobani was important to them, and surging their finite resources to this town. And that's provided opportunities for us to target ISIL from the air, just as these forces have also fought them on the ground.

And so when we see, again, opportunities to target ISIL, we're going to take them and we're also going to -- want to work in support of those forces on the ground when we can. And again, that's going to take different forms; obviously, in Iraq, we're able to coordinate with security forces -- Iraqi security forces, Peshmerga forces, who are organized, who we can have a joint operation center with, who we can share information with, who we can continue a train-and-equip relationship with.

In Syria, we're going to have this train-and-equip relationship with the opposition. But where we can be opportunists, again, in supporting forces fighting on the ground, we'll look for ways to do that. And that's certainly been the case in Kobani.

We've got time for a couple more questions.

Q Yes, is this a one-off airdrop? Or if supplies run low again, will you do this again?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So that's a good question. Again, we've been looking at ways to provide resupply -- for instance, discussing ways that there could be resupply over land into Kobani. That's something, obviously, we have to discuss with the Turkish government.

We felt that there was a unique window here where there was both the emergency of forces running low on supplies on the ground, the opportunity to provide this resupply from the air, and Kurdish authorities in Iraq stepping up to the plate to offer their support and assistance.

I think going forward what we're going to do is just assess both the needs of those forces fighting in Kobani as well as the different vehicles available to provide continued support. So it's not necessarily going to be a sustained effort that will take this particular form, but we'll do what's necessary.

And again, what we're committed to doing is looking at this as a long-term campaign, looking at steps that we're going to need to take to adapt to circumstances, to stay one step ahead of an opportunistic enemy. And we'll continue to consider what the best way is to support these forces even as we remain very focused on supporting the opposition that we've been partnered with in Syria for some time now who will be the focal point of our train-and-equip efforts.

Q Hi. The (inaudible) U.S. officials kept saying that despite the U.S. strikes on Kobani, the city may fall. So to what extent those talks can prevent the immediate fall of Kobani, in your intelligence assessment?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Obviously, there are no guarantees in what is a very difficult fight on the ground. We do know our airstrikes are able to make a difference in degrading ISIL, have removed hundreds of ISIL forces from the battlefield, degraded its equipment.

What this resupply will do is provide -- fulfilling an urgent need for those forces who are fighting against ISIL on the ground. But it still remains a very fluid and contested situation.

What we've already made clear is ISIL is going to suffer significant losses with forward focus on Kobani. And what we're trying to do with this resupply is support those who are seeking to inflict greater losses while also defending their own homes and their own town.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, we've conducted more than 135 airstrikes against ISIL I think in Kobani alone -- in and around Kobani alone. And combined with the resistance on the ground -- and that's an important point to make -- combined with that resistance on the ground, we believe that the strikes and all that activity have definitely slowed ISIL's advances into the city.

As the previous briefer mentioned, we know we've killed hundreds of their fighters, and this is just around Kobani. And we've destroyed or damaged scores of pieces of their equipment and their fighting positions, and we continue to do that. I mean, it's a very dynamic process and it changes from day to day as they change their tactics and change their positions in and around Kobani.

But I would agree that the situation there, we assess that to remain uncertain and tenuous. And as the Central Command Commander mentioned just last week, we still think it's possible that the town could fall. But that said, again, the Kurdish resistance has been very impressive. They have slowed the advances into the city. They're fighting hard. And this resupply will allow them to continue to fight hard, and again, to hit targets as they are presented.

The more this enemy wants that town, the more targets they're presenting, the more resources they're adding to it, the more opportunities we have to go get them, not just from the air but from the ground. This resupply will allow them to continue to go after ISIL.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just add -- this is official number three -- I would just add, in terms of the multifaceted nature of this -- I mean, as we're -- the activity over Kobani (inaudible) we're also -- there are strikes recently in the vicinity of Bayji, Iraq supporting Iraqi security forces there. We've also been very aggressively engaged with Iraqi political officials in terms of completing their cabinet, which was completed yesterday, with a minister of defense, a minister of interior, a new minister of finance -- it is a Kurd, Hoshyar Zebari, which really kind of helps between the Baghdad-Erbil cooperation.

So there's an awful lot going on. Again, to kind of build a foundation and the platforms we're going to need to succeed, to help our partners succeed over the long term. So Kobani is important because ISIL has made it one of its main focal points, has flooded resources to it. And as this is going on, there's a number of other things going on here which are all kind of part of this comprehensive campaign.

And then even beyond the theater, in terms of shutting down the foreign fighter network, shutting down the finances, the de-legitimization -- all of these things are going on in parallel, it's all part of the comprehensive nature of this.

MS. MEEHAN: Thanks, everyone, for joining the call tonight. Just as a reminder, this call was on background. You're welcome to use quotes from the call, but they must be attributed to senior administration officials, no names.

Thank you very much, and have a great night.

END

10:56 P.M. EDT