

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/4/2016

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I got a couple of announcements before I get to your questions. Let me start by letting you know that the President has been updated this morning on Hurricane Matthew and the potential impact in the Caribbean and in the United States.

As we discussed yesterday, FEMA has deployed officials to state emergency operation centers in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina. FEMA is also pre-positioning commodities and resources to incident support bases in Albany, Georgia and Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This is a relatively new innovation that FEMA has incorporated into the emergency response efforts. The strategy is essentially rooted in the idea that marshaling resources and storing them at a facility that is out of the path of the storm, but still in proximity to areas that could potentially be affected by the storm, can expedite the provision of assistance in the immediate aftermath of a storm. So they will be mobilizing, and already beginning to move supplies into Albany, Georgia and Fort Bragg, North Carolina, anticipating that those supplies may need to be delivered to affected areas shortly after the storm has passed.

In addition to that, an Incident Management Assistance Team is at the North Carolina Emergency Operations Center. And today, FEMA has deployed additional IMATs to Atlanta to support preparation activities and ensure that there are no unmet needs. Supplementary teams from around the country are ready to deploy on short notice to affected areas as necessary.

In addition to that, FEMA Regional Coordination Centers in Atlanta and Philadelphia will activate to 24/7 operations today. And the National Response Coordination Center, which is based -- which is here in Washington, D.C., at FEMA Headquarters, will begin 24/7 operations with full staffing on Thursday.

In the meantime, we encourage everyone in potentially affected areas, from Florida up through the Mid-Atlantic, to begin taking steps to prepare. Information on what exactly you can and should do is available at Ready.gov and on the FEMA smartphone app.

Now, as all of your news outlets are reporting, there are locations in the Caribbean that are already being affected by this storm. The USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance has deployed disaster response teams to Haiti, Jamaica and the Bahamas. Those teams were deployed in advance of the storm's arrival. And these disaster experts are actively monitoring the storm's track in real time, communicating with officials on the ground in Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, and Belize, to ensure that relief efforts are being coordinated if U.S. assistance is necessary.

In support of those goals, USAID has also strategically pre-positioned emergency relief supplies, including shelter materials, blankets, hygiene kits, household items, and water purification equipment to ensure that they can be made available on short notice to communities that are directly affected by the storm. Obviously, some of those countries that I named don't have nearly the resources that we do in this country to deal with a storm as severe as Hurricane Matthew. And the United States stands ready to provide assistance to help people in those countries who are in need.

But as I mentioned yesterday, these are countries that don't have significant modern infrastructure, and this is one of the strongest storms to come along in several decades, at least in this part of the world. So obviously we want to keep our thoughts and prayers with people in these countries who are, even as we speak, facing a rather difficult situation.

Due to the expected -- or at least the potential impact of Hurricane Matthew here in the United States, President Obama has decided to postpone his travel to Florida that was scheduled for tomorrow. The President had previously-scheduled events in both Tampa and Miami. In Tampa, the President planned to discuss some of the progress that our country has made as a result of the Affordable Care Act. And in Miami, the President was planning to participate in some campaign activities in support of Secretary Clinton's campaign.

We are hoping to be able to reschedule those events relatively soon, but that will be determined by the impact of the storm and by other components of the President's schedule. But we'll keep you posted on all of that.

I did want to make one other note before I get to your questions, which is on a very different topic. Today, the United States Supreme Court begins its fall term without its full complement of justices as it takes on important issues that impact the lives of everyday Americans, including the right to vote, fair housing, and protecting the fairness of the stock market. The Supreme Court is in the position of being understaffed, even though the President did his job and put forward an eminently qualified nominee to fill the vacancy.

The Supreme Court is in this position even though the President's eminently qualified nominee fulfilled his obligations in the confirmation process, including meeting with a variety of members of the United States Senate, Democrats and Republicans. He filled out his questionnaire. He was somebody who achieved the highest rating -- or was given the highest rating by the American Bar Association. And he's somebody who had been prepared to participate in the confirmation process, including hearings. But yet, we have seen Republicans in the Senate refuse to do their job.

The Supreme Court is essentially in this position because the partisan dysfunction that Republicans have inflicted on Congress is now affecting the Supreme Court. And Republicans have offered no substantive reason for their refusal to give Chief Judge Garland, the most qualified Supreme Court nominee in our history, a fair hearing and an up or down vote. In fact, thanks to Republicans' admittedly unprecedented obstruction of this highly qualified nominee, this will be the first time since the Civil War that a Supreme Court seat was kept vacant through Election Day.

I'll stop there. I've got more, and I'm happy to discuss this at greater length if any of you are interested. One thing I do want to commend to your attention -- the President has written an op-ed that was recently published at the Huffington Post. And I certainly commend that to your attention, as well. It's on this topic, and I think it underscores the significant questions for our democracy that are raised by the refusal of Republicans in the Senate to do their job and give fair consideration to an eminently qualified nominee that even Republicans have previously acknowledged is a consensus pick.

So with all that windup, Josh, let's go to questions that may be on your mind today.

Q Great. Thanks, Josh. Let's start with President Duterte of the Philippines telling the President that he can go to hell. He also said that he may break up with the U.S., apparently referring to the very mutual defense treaty that the White House has repeatedly said remains unaffected by the Philippines leader's more colorful comment. And in the past when we've asked you about these things that he said, you've pointed to some other elements of our cooperation, this hand-me-down ship that we gave them last year, and other things as signs that this relationship remains really strong. But I'm wondering, given these continuing inflammatory comments and also the very specific commitments on policy things, like saying we're not going to hold joint exercises anymore, is there anything that the leader of the Philippines could say, is there any breaking point where the U.S. starts to say, look, you're not acting much like an ally and maybe we want to reconsider whether this is something that's still in our interest, or something that still has an operational impact?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, I anticipated that you might ask this question today because I've seen these comments and was obviously aware of the previous comments that you cited from President Duterte over the last several weeks. Those comments are at odds with the warm relationship that exists between the Filipino and American people. There's also an important record of cooperation between our two governments, cooperation that has continued under the Duterte government, in fact.

The United States-Philippines alliance is built on a 70-year history of strong people-to-people ties, including a vibrant Filipino-American diaspora and a long list of shared security concerns. So the focus of the Obama administration right now is on the broad relationship with the Philippines, and our work together in the many areas of mutual interest to improve the livelihoods of the Filipino people and uphold their shared democratic values.

I think the best example of this is actually the response that was mobilized by the United States to help the Filipino government and the Filipino people deal with the aftermath of a historically large typhoon that hit that country a couple of years ago. Significant U.S. military assets were deployed to the Philippines to help communities that in some cases were cut off from the rest of the world because of the strength of the storm and the amount of rainfall and mudslides and other impacts that were precipitated by the storm.

That's an indication of the deep and strong relationship between our two countries, and a genuine interest that the United States has in the strength of that alliance and in the safety and security of the Filipino people. I think it's just one recent good example of the extraordinarily warm feelings that the Filipino people have for the United States of America.

And I can tell you that the United States has not received any official requests from President Duterte or any other Filipino officials to alter any aspects of our bilateral cooperation. In fact -- and you made an allusion to this in your question -- today marks the beginning of our annual joint military exercises with the Philippines, an example of the strong partnership and alliance that is in place. This is an alliance that is robust and benefits both of our countries.

Even as we protect this strong alliance, the administration and the United States of America will not hesitate to raise our concerns about extrajudicial killings. We remain deeply concerned by reports of widespread extrajudicial killings by or at the behest of government authorities in the Philippines. The use of that kind of tactic is entirely inconsistent with universal human rights and the shared values of our two countries. And we value the strong alliance with the Philippines, but we won't be silent in raising our significant concerns about these kinds of reports.

Q And in the past when the Philippine leaders made some of these comments, the White House has said publicly that U.S. officials were reaching out to the Filipinos to get some clarity about what he meant. Can you say whether the U.S. has reached out either about the way he described the President or, more specifically, about him saying he might break up with the U.S. to get some clarity about whether he was referring to actually revoking the treaty between the two countries?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, the diplomatic lines of communication between the United States and the Philippines remains open and obviously there are a variety of channels for communicating with leaders in the Philippines, including our military-to-military channel that's being exercised just today by commencing our joint military exercises that are held on an annual basis. So we've got open lines of communication with the Filipino

government, and we have not yet received any sort of formal communication using those channels from the Filipino government about making substantial changes to our bilateral relationship.

So we've obviously seen the rhetoric, but we're also aware of the kind of communication that U.S. officials had had with their counterparts throughout the government in the Philippines. And our commitment to protecting and strengthening the alliance between the United States and the Philippines is firm.

Q And former President Clinton was campaigning for his wife in Michigan last night, was talking about what's happened under Obamacare; he called it the craziest thing in the world. He seemed to be referring very specifically to what's happened as a result of Obamacare and not our broader health care challenges, but these millions that have come into the system and then seen their premiums double. I guess what would be the question is, does the President still have full confidence in his "secretary of explaining stuff"? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: That's a creative way of asking that question. Look, I think what I would start -- I would start by expressing the President's continued strong confidence in the benefits that that Affordable Care Act has provided to millions of Americans. Twenty million Americans have access to quality, affordable health insurance today that didn't have it before the Affordable Care Act went into effect. It would be even more if there weren't Republican governors across the country who were preventing otherwise eligible Americans from being able to get access to expanded Medicaid coverage. So the numbers would be even larger.

As a result of the establishment of marketplaces in states all across the country, Americans are now in a position where they don't have to fend for themselves in the individual market, but rather, insurance companies are coming to the marketplace and competing for their business. And that has -- because of the benefits provided by the federal government in the form of subsidies, the vast majority of individuals who are shopping on the marketplace are able to afford plans for less than \$100 a month. That's an indication that most people are getting access to a good deal, and that is an indication of the effectiveness of the Affordable Care Act.

President Obama has, of course, acknowledged that with cooperation from Democrats and Republicans in Congress, there are some things that could be done to further strengthen the law. And that's something that Secretary Clinton has vowed to pursue if she is elected President of the United States, and President Obama certainly can do everything he can to support that effort.

But the President is quite proud of the accomplishment of passing the Affordable Care Act. You'll recall we've made the point many times. Presidents in both parties made a strong effort to try to pass health care reform, but failed. President Obama was able to get it done, and the American people benefitted from that significant accomplishment.

Q But it must feel like a pretty significant blow to the President personally to hear the former President, the husband of the person he's campaigning to be his successor, exasperated about what's happened as a result of his law. I mean, does he disagree with what Clinton was saying?

MR. EARNEST: Well, for the point that President Clinton was trying to make, I guess I'd refer you to his team. But I think what I would say is that the President is quite proud of the accomplishment of the Affordable Care Act. The American people benefit from the way the law has been implemented, in terms of expanding coverage, in terms of limiting the growth in health care cost, but also in terms of the many consumer protections that people who already had health insurance in the past now benefit from.

They no longer have to worry about getting kicked off their insurance because they get sick. They don't have to be worried about getting hauled into bankruptcy court if somebody in their family gets sick. They're able to keep their children on their health insurance plan up through age 26. People are able to get access to free annual check-ups, free birth control. These are all consumer protections put in place that hundreds of millions of Americans enjoy now because of the Affordable Care Act. And that's why the Affordable Care Act continues to be a source of pride for people who work here in the administration, in terms of that significant legislative accomplishment. And that's essentially our position.

You'd have to talk to President Clinton exactly what message he was trying to send.

Tim.

Q On refugees. The Turkish Defense Minister said today that the U.S. and its allies have to think carefully about retaking Mosul as it could trigger one million refugees that would be spread out to Turkey, Europe. Does the administration have any thoughts about that number, one million refugees? And would there be a way to kind of control that kind of population?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Tim, I can't confirm the number. I'd refer you to my colleagues at the State Department or the Department of Defense, who are obviously carefully considering the situation in Mosul. U.S. officials and others who are part of our counter-ISIL coalition have been closely consulting the Iraqi central government in terms of making plans to retake Mosul from ISIL forces that have controlled that city for a couple years now.

Those plans include compensating for the population that's likely to try to flee Mosul. These are people who have faced a pretty difficult situation over the last couple of years. And there has been an effort to think through the potential impacts of undertaking this operation and driving ISIL out of Mosul. That has been an important priority of our counter-ISIL coalition, and more importantly, it's been a high priority of the Iraqi central government. So even as we make progress and plan to achieve the strategic objective, we're mindful of the potential consequences of doing so, and we'll plan accordingly.

Q Are the forces that are being sent over, are they keeping refugees in mind?

MR. EARNEST: When you say the forces that are being sent over, you're referring to --

Q The U.S. to aid the Iraqi forces.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let my colleagues at the Department of Defense talk about the specific responsibility that individual U.S. military personnel will have in supporting Iraqi forces on the ground as they retake Mosul. So they can give you some greater clarity about what exact responsibilities they will have. But what we have made clear time and time again is that Iraqi security forces will be responsible for planning and leading that assault.

There will be U.S. military capabilities that we can bring to bear to assist them in that effort. In some cases, that may be U.S. Special Operations Forces acting in an advisory and assistance role. In some cases, that's U.S. military pilots that can carry out airstrikes in support of Iraqi security forces that are conducting operations on the ground. So there are a variety of ways that the United States military and the militaries of our counter-ISIL coalition partners can be used to assist and support Iraqi security forces as they pursue this goal.

Q And on Syria, I know the administration is not going to apologize for trying to reach a political solution there, but is there a chance that the administration has misjudged Russia's intent there to stick with Assad?

MR. EARNEST: Well, are you suggesting that somehow there's evidence that the Russians are not backing Assad? I guess I don't quite understand the question.

Q It just seems that the U.S. has tried to reach this political solution and not thought through that maybe Russia is just going to stick with Assad the whole way through and not come to a political solution to get a new leader there.

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I think there's always been skepticism about whether or not the Russians were willing and able to exercise influence with the Assad regime. That was skepticism that you heard me express on the very first day we started talking about trying to reach an agreement around a Cessation of Hostilities. That skepticism was in place and firmly held, and for good reason. Russia has not demonstrated a lot of credibility in talking about these issues in the past.

But it would have been irresponsible for the United States and our coalition partners not to consider what we can do to try to address the root cause of the violence and chaos inside of Syria. So even though Russia has proven to be an unreliable, at best, interlocutor in these conversations, that doesn't change the conclusion that, at the end of the day, the root cause of the situation in Syria is a political challenge, is a political failure on the part of the Assad regime to effectively govern that country.

That means we need a political solution. And the United States has a variety of opportunities that we can pursue, and are pursuing, to try to address the root cause of this situation. The United States is able to work effectively through the International Syria Support Group to try to bring all sides to the table and facilitate a reduction in violence.

The United States has been engaged in conversations with other countries that have interest in the region about confronting the challenge that is posed by the Assad regime and its failure to effectively lead that country. Of course, there is work being led by the U.N. Envoy to the situation, Mr. de Mistura, who's been working tirelessly to try to negotiate a reduction in the violence that far too many innocent Syrians are being subjected to right now.

So there are a variety of diplomatic avenues that the United States has been and will continue to pursue. But what is true is that Russia has either been unwilling or unable to fulfill the commitments that they made to the United States. That has hurt their credibility certainly with the United States, but it's also hurt their credibility with the international community.

And Russia is in a situation where they are now essentially standing alone with the Iranians to support the Assad regime. And they do that in the face of international condemnation for the tactics that are being used by the Assad regime -- with the help of the Russians -- to target innocent civilians. In some cases, with cluster munitions; in other cases, using bunker-busting bombs to carry out attacks against facilities that treat civilians like hospitals, or in some cases even, underground recreation centers that are used by children. It's appalling what's taking place there. And Russia has rightly earned the stern rebuke of the international community for in some cases aiding and abetting those efforts; in other cases, refusing to use their influence and allowing those kinds of atrocities to occur.

So when President Putin arrived in New York a little over a year ago professing to insert Russia militarily more deeply into Syria and build a grand international coalition against extremists that were trying to capitalize on the chaos inside of Syria, he's failed in all of those stated goals. He has not built a grand international coalition. If anything, he has become further isolated. He has not emerged as a leading figure to confront this situation. He has emerged as the largest target of criticism from the international community for the tactics that they have employed or supported in the Syrian civil war. He has only deepened his country's involvement in a sectarian conflict that is fueling extremism and poses a greater risk to Russian individuals or military servicemembers who are in Syria. But it's also increased the risk that his country faces back home because of the extremism that's been fueled. So it's hard for President Putin to make a case that this has played out in a way that benefits his country.

And I'd just point out that all of this takes place against the backdrop of a weakening Russian economy. The Russian economy now is smaller than Spain and Australia. According to an IMF report that was released just today, the Russian economy contracted once again in 2016 and is likely to remain weak through 2017. Their credit rating is essentially at junk status. And their reserves are being depleted just to try to shore up the value of their currency.

So I'm not sure if this is -- what master plan President Putin hoped to execute, but it's not benefitting the Russian people or the Russian economy. And it certainly isn't benefitting their national security.

Mary.

Q Back to Josh's question about the Affordable Care Act. Are you concerned that the former President's comments, calling it a "crazy system," that that kind of language just gives more fuel to the Republican argument against the Affordable Care Act?

MR. EARNEST: They seem to have built up plenty of fuel on their own, voting more than 50 times to try to repeal the law without actually offering up their own alternative. We've seen Republican officials twice go to the Supreme Court to try to tear down the law. Both of those efforts were unsuccessful. In the face of that political obstruction, and the millions of -- hundreds of millions of dollars that have been spent to try to criticize the law, we've actually seen a law that performed well in terms of expanding access to health care coverage and taking some important steps to provide Americans with the kinds of consumer protections that mean they no longer have to be as worried about the financial consequences of their family's health.

So the President is proud of that accomplishment. And those, frankly, are facts. And that is evidence that can't be refuted by language we hear on the stump from Democrats or Republicans, frankly.

Q And on Iran, Jason Rezaian is suing -- accusing Iran of hostage-taking, torture, and terrorism, saying that they held him for the unlawful purpose of extorting concessions from the U.S. What's your reaction? And do you think it's appropriate?

MR. EARNEST: The United States is not a party to the lawsuit, and I don't make a habit of commenting extensively on private litigation. But what I will say is that for years, I stood at this podium and raised significant concerns about the unjust detention of an American journalist in Iran. And the President himself spoke rather powerfully about the effort that he was personally expending and that our government was mobilizing to secure his release. That effort was successful. He was detained unjustly in Iran for too long. But the President was obviously pleased to welcome him back to the United States with his wife.

Justin.

Q Prime Minister May said that she plans to have to Brexit process begin by March of next year. That's caused some concern in the markets, but I'm wondering if that concern is merited here or that's sort of in keeping with the deliberative process that you've encouraged (inaudible).

MR. EARNEST: Justin, the President has himself indicated that managing Brexit will be the responsibility of the British government. And the United States will seek to support them as they negotiate with the Europeans the nature of the relationship between the UK and the EU, post-Brexit. The United States is still committed to that process, and we're still going to encourage our allies in Europe and our allies in the UK to negotiate their differences and to negotiate the terms of what will be an enduring relationship.

It's in the interest of the United States for all sides to resolve this situation, but it's important for the individual parties to resolve it on the terms that they themselves establish. So we'll be supportive of the process moving forward, but ultimately these are decisions that should be left up to British officials and the EU officials with whom they are consulting.

Q The administration is reportedly considering a refugee sponsorship program, kind of based on the Canadian model, where private citizens could sponsor refugees to come to the United States. I'm wondering if that's a program that the President sort of sees as being feasible by the time he leaves office, and whether you'll need to or are anticipating seeking congressional approval for that, or if it's something you can do administratively.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Justin, I have to admit I haven't seen those specific reports. What I can tell you is that the President has made a forceful case on a number of occasions about the important role for the United States to play -- a leading role for the United States to play in terms of helping the world deal with refugee populations, in part because of our concern about the destabilizing impact that they're having in some other countries given how large these refugee populations are.

But the President has hastened to add at every turn that we're not going to cut corners when it comes to the safety and security of the American people. Refugees, as you know, are subjected to the most thorough vetting and screening of any individual who attempts to enter the United States. That's not going to change. And over this last fiscal year, we were able to make a significant increase in the number of refugees that were admitted to the United States, and we were able to do that without cutting any corners on the vetting process.

But as it relates to any sort of specific innovations that may be considered, we'll have to get back to you to see how seriously a proposal like that is being considered.

Q And on the last one, on creepy clowns -- (laughter) -- our friends at the Times reported that these sort of sightings have led to more than a dozen arrests, and some local law enforcement agencies are asking the FBI and DHS what to do about creepy clown sightings. So I'm wondering if the President is aware of this phenomenon and if the White House wants to say anything to discourage these types of pranks.

MR. EARNEST: I don't know that the President has been briefed on this particular situation. This is something that I've read about in some of the news coverage. Obviously, this is a situation that local law enforcement authorities take quite seriously, and they should carefully and thoroughly review perceived threats to the safety of the community, and they should do so prudently. But I can't speak to any advice they may have received from law enforcement experts at the federal level, but you can check with my colleagues at the FBI and DHS and see what they have to say about that.

April.

Q Josh, a couple of questions. Is the President planning on watching the VP debate tonight, especially since last week's debate was so exciting?

MR. EARNEST: Exciting? (Laughter.) I read a lot of post-debate analysis. "Exciting" was not an adjective that I saw in many of those reports. But that is the unique perspective that you bring to political analysis, April, and I think that would in part explain your popularity across the country.

Q Thank you. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Maybe even in this room. I will say, as we discussed yesterday in the briefing, the President has genuine affection for Senator Kaine, and the President believes, as we discussed, that he was an excellent choice as a running mate. And the President, I would expect, will tune in to at least part of the debate tonight. Senator Kaine is a fellow Kansas Citian, so hopefully he's going to bring some of that Midwestern charm to the debate, and I think it will serve him quite well.

Q We know who you're rooting for --

MR. EARNEST: (Laughter.) If there was any doubt it's now been extinguished.

Q Secondly, in that first debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, Lester Holt asked a question about how to heal the racial divide in this nation. Does the President feel any responsibility for -- his time is up January 20th -- that he step in and try to heal the racial divide that has been evidencing itself more and more in the last couple of months with the debate and all that's happening when it comes to issues of police-involved shootings?

MR. EARNEST: The President has spoken on this issue at much length, most recently I believe at the dedication of the new Smithsonian Institution just a couple of blocks away here.

I don't know that there's much that I could add to the eloquence that he has demonstrated in talking about this issue, but certainly issues of race are issues that the President has written and spoken about at length, even prior to becoming a national figure. And I would anticipate the President will continue to write and talk and work on these issues, even after he leaves the White House.

Q Another question. After the GSA certifies the winner, be it November 8th, November 9th, whenever it's certified, will this President do what George W. Bush did in the Rose Garden the day after the election when Barack Obama was made the 44th President of the United States? No matter who is President, will President Obama mark the occasion and speak to the American people about the transition to the new President?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know what the President's schedule on November 9th is going to be at this point. I also don't know what the weather will be on November 9th, so I don't know if it will accommodate a Rose Garden event. But the President made --

Q East Room.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just answer your question this way. The President made clear at the beginning of this year that ensuring a smooth transition to the next President was going to be a top priority of his and of his White House staff. And the President's Deputy Chief of Staff, Anita Decker-Breckenridge, has been focused on this issue, and she's been engaged in leading that planning effort. This is an effort that has involved a number of different federal agencies, and there have been a number of meetings that are already being convened that she has facilitated that includes representatives from the GSA and representatives of the individual campaigns.

President Obama has spoken at length about how President George W. Bush deserves enormous credit for the professionalism that he infused in the transition process back in 2008, and he set a very high standard for ensuring that an effective, seamless transition took place. And this administration is committed to at least meeting, if not exceeding, that very high standard.

Olivier.

Q Thanks, Josh. Back on August 30th, I asked whether is the administration ready to impose sanctions on Russia for deploying S-300 missiles in Syria. They have S-300 and S-400. The answer I got a month ago was, not yet ready to make a determination. Has that changed?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't have an opportunity to review the transcript in the same way that you did. I know that there was some discussion about Russia providing that kind of equipment to Iran. So I don't recall it being asked in the context of Syria, but I certainly am aware of recent reports that that kind of military equipment has recently been transferred to Syria.

I think I would start by observing that this equipment contradicts President Putin's own claims that their efforts in Syria are focused on extremists. I'm not aware that ISIL or al Qaeda in Syria is operating aircraft there. It's possible he may have access to different intelligence information, but I highly doubt it. So I do think it raises genuine questions about Russia's credibility and Russia's intentions inside of Syria.

With regard to sanctions, what we have indicated about the situation in Syria is that there are a range of tools that the President can use to further isolate the Syrian regime and potentially the Russians for the way they have supported the regime. Sanctions are among those tools. What we have learned over the last several years about implementing sanctions is that they are most effective and their impact is magnified when we coordinate the use of that tool with our allies and partners around the globe.

So we'll continue to have those kinds of conversations. I know there have been some legislative proposals that have been floated in Congress with regard to imposing sanctions against Syria. And what we have indicated is that that is, of course, an option that's available to the President, but we believe that that option is more likely to be effective not when it's implemented unilaterally, but rather when it is implemented in close coordination with our allies and partners.

Q All right, one more. The Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, has expressed concerns publicly, saying things like we're now going to retake Mosul, or offering similar indications about coalition intent, Iraqi intent, American intent are somehow tipping the coalition's hand to the extremists. Do you share those concerns, or why not?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we -- at least I have gone to great lengths to avoid a detailed discussion about our operational planning efforts. I know that my colleagues at the Department of Defense have undertaken similar efforts to exercise some discretion in talking about that kind of planning. So we certainly do not want to be in a position of tipping our hand when it comes to operational plans against Mosul.

That said, it shouldn't be a surprise to anybody that retaking Mosul from ISIL is one of the principal objectives of our counter-ISIL coalition, and there is no denying the important progress that we have made in taking back territory around Mosul and putting in place the kind of infrastructure that can support a large operation like the one that will be necessary to retake Mosul.

So we obviously are pleased with the gains that we've been able to make on the ground there recently. The planning is proceeding at the expected pace, but I don't have details to share about that and I've not heard anybody express any specific concerns about how discussing in general that planning process could impact the abilities to successfully execute that operation.

Victoria.

Q There's a report in the Post that last Wednesday at the White House there was a meeting of officials from State, the CIA, and the Joint Chiefs, to discuss launching strikes on positions of Assad in Syria, both to punish him for breaking the ceasefire and to discourage him from launching attacks in Aleppo, and also to get him to come back to the table. Can you confirm that that meeting took place?

MR. EARNEST: I cannot. There are national security discussions that take place at the White House frequently, many of them involve Syria. But I can't confirm any specific meetings, and I'm certainly not going to be in a position to discuss the content of any national security meetings that took place at the White House.

Q Are strikes against Assad under consideration by the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I'm not going to get into any national security discussions that may or may not have taken place at the White House.

Peter.

Q Josh, I saw the President's column in the Huffington Post. I'm curious if the President is concerned about the prospect of a deadlocked 4-4 court being responsible for handling any potential issues regarding the election or any potential recount needed on November 4th -- on the 8th.

MR. EARNEST: Yeah, Peter -- President Reagan, actually, back in 1987 said it best when he made reference to the fact that the business of the American people is not well served by having an understaffed Supreme Court. And we've already seen the consequences of that understaffed Supreme Court failing to reach decisions on some important issues, including immigration reform. So the President is concerned about the inability of the Supreme Court to perform at the high level that we're all accustomed to.

Q Does that concern extend to any needs that may be created by this election?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't -- I think it's hard to speculate at this point what sort of role the Supreme Court could have in this election, but I think regardless of whether or not they're needed to resolve the outcome of a national election, the President is deeply concerned about the impact that the understaffed court is having on the ability of the Supreme Court to do its job.

Q Hillary Clinton said there should be a law that major party nominees should release their tax returns. Does the President support that? And would he sign a bill if one ever reached his desk?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I saw that report. I've made this point in this briefing room once before. I think one of the things that's important about this tradition, going back at least a generation of presidential candidates in both parties releasing their tax returns, is that those candidates didn't have to be compelled to do so. There was no law that was on the books that forced them to disclose those tax returns. That's something that they did voluntarily, demonstrating their own personal commitment to transparency.

Q So the President doesn't believe a law would be necessary and that the system presently as it exists in a reasonable form?

MR. EARNEST: I guess what I would say is the President doesn't believe that a law should be necessary. We've seen candidates in both parties. This is a principle that both parties have acknowledged is important in demonstrating transparency and demonstrating a willingness to be held accountable by the American people, particularly in advance of being entrusted with the significant authorities that are vested in the office of the presidency.

Q You said that the President would be watching the VP debate today. I trust that he supports Tim Kaine as he goes there. The last time that Senator Kaine was at Longwood University, he said to a class there, he said, "We have operational plans but no strategy. We have a plan for what to do if North Korea were to move across the border into South Korea. We have a plan for what we would do if Putin decided to move Russian troops into a NATO-allied country. We have plans for all these eventualities, but we don't have a strategy." That was from the man who hopes to be Vice President, Tim Kaine. What does the President say to Tim Kaine about that commentary on this administration and our lack of a foreign policy strategy more broadly?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is the first I'm hearing of those comments. What I will say is that the President and his national security team are always working through contingency plans, and there is a focus on making sure that the American people and our interests are protected around the globe, even in the event of urgent situations like the prospect that were floated in those two scenarios.

Certainly demonstrating a commitment to our NATO alliance is something that President Obama has done throughout his presidency. And because of those efforts, that alliance has been strengthened over the eight years that he's been in office. The President traveled to the NATO Summit earlier this summer and actually made a commitment about an enhanced U.S. military presence in the eastern part of NATO, and I know there are similar commitments from the Canadians and others to demonstrate the strength of our NATO alliance.

With regard to North Korea, we've talked quite a bit about the efforts that have been put in place to ensure that the American people are safe from any provocative actions that are undertaken by the North Korean regime.

Q President Obama obviously doesn't believe that Donald Trump is fit to be President. But broadly speaking, as a businessman, given his success over the course of his life and whatever form you identify it, does the President believe that Donald Trump is a role model?

MR. EARNEST: He does not. And I think he's made that pretty clear in a variety of settings.

Q Can you be a role model even if you're not President, I guess I'm saying. Is there some bar that's he's reached? He may not be fit for President, but do you think -- is there anything that we can say positive about the way he has conducted the course of his professional career?

MR. EARNEST: Well look, there are hundreds of millions of Americans that, by the way they live their lives every day, are role models for our kids. But based on the President's deep concern about the rhetoric of the Republican nominee, I feel confident in telling you that he would not be comfortable with describing the nominee in that way.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. I want to circle back on Gitmo for just a second. Would it be lawful to place, even temporarily, the detainees on American soil while they try to be moved out of harm's way for Hurricane Matthew?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that that is the contingency plan that's been considered, but I'd refer you to my colleagues at the Department of Defense.

Q I want to also ask you about Syria. Can you draw a comparison or parallel to another circumstance in your mind that mirrors this one where the international community is aware of the mistreatment of the people of a country, potentially millions, maybe --

people not only on the run but certainly in crossfire -- and yet the international community, to this point, has been unable to stop the carnage?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, off the top of my head, I think the best example I can think of is something that Peter made reference to, which is North Korea. We know there is a murderous, totalitarian regime in North Korea that has condemned the citizens of North Korea to poverty. And because of the way that the leader of North Korea has isolated his country, the people of his country have been very poorly served by it. They are condemned to poverty. In some cases, there are flagrant violations of human rights and the use of tactics to try to shore up the stability of the regime there.

All of that is deeply concerning not just in the United States but to the rest of the international community. And I think what is true in North Korea is that the United States has worked to play a leading role in uniting the efforts of our allies and our partners in the region to apply pressure to the North Korean regime to get them to change. And we haven't seen the results that we would like to see in terms of bringing about that kind of change in North Korea.

The United States has worked in similar fashion to try to mobilize the international community to confront the situation in Syria. And again, we haven't seen as much of a change there as we would like to see. What we have seen in Syria, though, is an effective international campaign against ISIL and other extremists, including al Qaeda, that are seeking to capitalize on the chaos in that country to threaten and menace other parts of the world.

So from that standpoint, our international efforts have had a tangible and positive impact on our national security, but they have not yet resulted in the kinds of changes that we would like to see. I think the lesson from all of this -- and again, there's always a significant risk of trying to compare situations that are so different -- but I think the risk and the lesson in all of this -- and this is something the President has talked about -- is that it's important for us to be mindful of the long game, for us to think ahead about the potential consequences of actions that may be under consideration.

This, I think, is one of the lessons that the President believes we all learned, based on the ill-advised effort by the Bush administration to intervene and occupy Iraq. The long-term consequences of that decision and of those orders have had a significant and negative consequence on our standing in the international community and on our national security.

So as the President considers the options that are available to him inside of Syria, he's mindful of the need to think ahead and to look around the curve, and to think about the potential impact not just weeks or months in advance, but -- or not just weeks and months after a potential military invasion, for example, but rather to think about the years' long consequences of ordering an action like that.

Q I know you mentioned the Rezaian lawsuit earlier, and it's a private lawsuit, obviously. But I think people will find it interesting considering the suit, at least at glance, seems to be targeting a country, a sponsor of terror, and given the conversation that you and I have had about JASTA, do you think this is a direct reflection of that, and maybe in a positive way, at least in the case of the Rezaian family?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I do think this is a good illustration. So I'm happy to have the opportunity to talk about this. What this situation illustrates is that U.S. citizens who have been the victim of a state sponsor of terrorism do have an avenue through the courts that they can pursue to be compensated for it. We have a mechanism in the U.S. government for holding state sponsors of terror accountable. And there is a standard that is set, based on an evaluation of the evidence by the executive branch, to label a particular country a state sponsor of terrorism.

And that does have a variety of consequences. It serves to isolate that country from the international community. It subjects that country to significant financial sanctions that can take a toll on their economy. And it does give U.S. citizens who have been victimized by that terrorism an avenue to pursue to be compensated. I think that is an indication that we've got an effective mechanism in place for holding accountable state sponsors of terrorism.

With regard to JASTA, that was a piece of legislation and now a law that sought to target Saudi Arabia, a country that has not been designated a state sponsor of terrorism. It does open up a scenario where you have judges at a variety of levels and a variety of different courtrooms, reaching different conclusions about whether or not another country is complicit in sponsoring terrorism. That's not an effective way for us to confront state sponsors of terror. We should do so with a united front, and we should do so with penalties that are laid out in advance.

That's the system that we have. By rolling back that system, not only do we detract from the effective confrontation and forceful confrontation of state sponsors of terrorism, we also further degrade this principle of sovereign immunity that protects the United States of America more than any other country in the world.

And the concerns that I've just laid out about this specific legislation are now concerns that Democrats and Republicans in Congress say they now share. It would have been helpful had they acted on those concerns before voting on the law -- either voting to approve it in the first place, or voting to override the President's veto. But we certainly are hopeful that Congress will act in bipartisan fashion to correct the significant problem that they have now created.

Q You mentioned Chief Judge Garland. What's happening with him right now? Is he in conversation with leaders on the Hill? Is he getting briefed by the White House? What happens during this long, protracted period between his nomination and obviously where we are today?

MR. EARNEST: It has been a protracted period: 202 days he's been waiting since the President nominated him for him to be treated fairly by Republicans in the United States Senate. This is somebody that Republicans have not articulated a substantive objection to. He's somebody who received the highest rating from the nonpartisan American Bar Association. He's got more federal judicial experience than any other nominee in Supreme Court history. He's somebody that Republicans have described as a genuine consensus nominee.

So his treatment by Republicans in the United States Senate has been terrible. And he has met with some Republican members of the United States Senate. I believe that he's met with almost every member -- Democratic members of the Senate, if not every single one. He did have an opportunity, when the Senate was actually in town, to meet with some of the Democratic leaders just a couple of weeks ago. But, of course, he's not meeting with them today because they're not in session.

But, look, the President continues to make a case that he nominated the very best person to fill a vacancy in the Supreme Court, and he hopes that Chief Judge Garland will have an opportunity to serve this country with distinction on the United States Supreme Court. The President is confident that he would do so if given the opportunity.

Q Last one for me is the Assange story. Did the President hear about that? Did you watch sort of with any interest about last night, the Assange release of new information on WikiLeaks? Has that been an interest of yours at all?

MR. EARNEST: It has not.

Michelle.

Q So it doesn't sound like you think that Bill Clinton was overly critical in describing Obamacare as it stands now.

MR. EARNEST: It's not exactly clear to me what argument he was making. And so I'll let him and his team explain it.

Q Whatever argument he was making, do you wish that he had used different words than "crazy," and "craziest thing in the world"?

MR. EARNEST: Of course. (Laughter.)

Q Just checking. Okay. And we talked a little bit about some of the things that Duterte has said. We've also seen his actions within his own country. Do those things alone do damage to the relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines?

MR. EARNEST: Well, they certainly don't do anything to strengthen them. Fortunately, there is a long history of a steadfast alliance between the United States and the Philippines that stretches back some 70 years. It's rooted in our common values. It's

rooted in the warm feelings that the citizens of our two countries have for one another. It's certainly rooted in the fact that there is a large Filipino-American population here in the United States that's interested in seeing warm relations between these two countries.

But it's a commitment to these shared values that prompts the United States to speak out so forcefully in raising concerns about reports of extrajudicial killings that have come at the behest of the Filipino government that's entirely inconsistent with the kinds of values that are the bedrock of our alliance. And that's why the President nor anybody else in the U.S. government is going to hesitate to raise these strong concerns.

The United States stands with the Filipino government and the Filipino people in helping them confront crime and narco-trafficking that has eroded the security situation in some parts of the country. We stand ready to support them, and we're going to continue to support them as they confront that threat. But we're going to insist that a commitment to human rights be maintained, if not strengthened.

And there is an opportunity for the Filipino government to pursue a smart strategy to counter narco-trafficking and better protect the Filipino people while also protecting human rights. In fact, that is the responsibility of the government to do that. And they can count on the support of their allies in the United States if they're willing to do that. But these reports about extrajudicial killings coming at the behest of the Filipino government are deeply troubling.

Q Okay. And we talked a little bit about, yesterday, what's next after the ending of talks between the U.S. and Russia on Syria. And you said that the President is considering a range of options. So safe to say that that's what he's going to be discussing with Ash Carter this afternoon?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sure it will be part of the discussion. The meeting that the President has with his Secretary of Defense today is part of the regularly scheduled meeting that he has with Secretary Carter when both men are in Washington, D.C. I'm confident this and other things will be on the agenda.

And Secretary Carter's role has principally been focused on mobilizing U.S. military resources to provide to the counter-ISIL coalition that is applying such significant pressure to ISIL targets in Iraq and in Syria.

There have also been military assets that have been deployed against other extremist leaders in Syria, and the Department of Defense announced just yesterday that they had carried out a strike against one of the leading al Qaeda figures in Syria. This was an individual that was prominently featured in a video that was released by that organization earlier this year. The results of that strike have not been conclusively determined at this point. But the fact that the United States was able to carry out a strike against this individual is an indication of just how much pressure the United States is applying not just to leading ISIL figures in the context of our counter-ISIL coalition, but also to the kinds of extremist targets that we've been worried about inside of Syria since day one.

You'll recall, back in the summer of 2014, when the President first initiated military airstrikes against extremist targets in Syria, the targets of those strikes weren't just ISIL targets. There were other extremist targets that were hit in that raid. And that's an indication that from day one the United States has been very focused on countering the threat from al Qaeda that's emanating in Syria. ISIL is the organization that has succeeded in generating some attention for themselves, but we are also mindful of the threat that emanates from al Qaeda. And we're going to continue to be diligent in countering that threat. And I'm confident that will be a subject of some conversation today, too.

Q So what can you say about this range of options? And can you say that the possibility of strikes against certain regime targets is at least one option?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have obviously been disappointed, as I expressed yesterday, that the Russians proved either unwilling or unable to exercise the kind of influence with the Assad regime that they hoped they would use to reduce violence and allow for humanitarian assistance to flow to those in need.

Based on that Russian failure, it's apparent there's not a whole lot more for us to discuss with them bilaterally. So we need to consider what other diplomatic options are available to us to try to address the root cause of the situation inside of Syria.

So there are a variety of channels that we can use. The first is supporting and facilitating the continued efforts of the U.N. Special Envoy, Mr. de Mistura, who is working to try to facilitate negotiations that would reduce violence there.

There is this International Syria Support Group that's been stood up by a variety of countries, including Russia, who are concerned about the situation there and believe that, working together with countries throughout the region and around the world, that our shared interests can be addressed. So the United States will certainly work through that channel.

We also know that there are a number of other bilateral relationships in the region that we have with other countries who are concerned about the situation there, and there may be an opportunity for the United States to work bilaterally through some of those channels to try to address some of the concerns that we have about the increasing violence and the need to expedite the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilian populations there.

So there are a variety of diplomatic options that we will pursue. These are all options we have been pursuing, just to be clear about it, but we're obviously going to have to redouble our efforts in those channels because the Russians have failed to live up to the commitments that they made in the context of that bilateral channel.

Q So when you talk about the President looking at this range of options, those were all diplomatic options that you were talking about?

MR. EARNEST: Well, when you consider what our approach has been to Syria from the beginning, our approach has been to use our military and intelligence might, in coordination with our counter-ISIL coalition partners, to apply significant pressure to ISIL's leadership, to apply pressure to their capitals, and to support forces on the ground who can retake territory from ISIL. That's been the core focus of our military strategy in Iraq and in Syria. And those efforts have been important to enhancing the national security of the United States and our allies.

And again, the fact that we took this strike against an al Qaeda target just yesterday I think is the latest indication that that effort that's underway against extremists, militarily inside of Iraq and in Syria, is vigorous.

At the same time, we have acknowledged -- also from day one -- that there is no military solution to the chaos and violence inside of Syria. The United States and the international community will not be able to impose a solution on the situation, and the solution that we settle on will not be military -- will not be a military one alone. What even the Russians acknowledge that a political transition inside of Syria must take place because it is simply not possible for a leader like Bashar al-Assad to continue to govern Syria. He has engaged in a reign of terror over the last five or six years against his own people, using barrel bombs, using cluster munitions and other terrible tactics to attack innocent civilians -- to kill children, to bomb these populations into submission. It's disgusting. It's horrifying what we've seen.

And that is exactly why it's impossible for President Assad or any of his supporters to make the case that he can effectively reunite and govern Syria.

So the United States is going to work diplomatically through all the channels that I described to try to bring about a reduction in violence, enhanced provision of humanitarian assistance, and facilitate in political talks that will allow for that transition to take place. That's the only way we're going to succeed in addressing the root cause of the chaos in Syria and ultimately address our most urgent national security concerns about what's been taking place there.

Q You're saying that, potentially, strikes against regime targets would sort of ruin that goal of working this out diplomatically and longer term? Or strikes like what we just described -- is that at least an option that's being discussed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to get into all the things that are being discussed by the President and his national security team. What I will say, though, is the President continues to be mindful of the absolute need to think through the consequences of deploying various options. There's a risk associated with taking strikes at regime targets. That risk includes attacking a regime that does continue to maintain a robust air defense system. It also edges U.S. and Russian military forces closer to confrontation. That doesn't serve anybody's interest.

So I'm certainly not going to stand here and take anything off the table when it comes to the decisions that the Commander-in-Chief can use to protect our interests around the world, particularly in a place as dangerous as Syria. But the President, as he thinks through those options, is going to think very carefully about the consequences of taking individual actions. And that's just one example.

And I think it's why that for all of the public concern and even criticism that we've seen directed at the President of the United States about the situation in Syria, we haven't seen the suggestion of specific alternatives. Everybody is heartbroken about the innocent loss of life in Syria, even across party lines. But for all the criticism that is put forward, principally by Republicans, we haven't seen realistic or constructive proposed alternatives that would actually address the concerns that they claim to have.

Q Thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. John.

Q Thank you, Josh. On September 16th, in answer to my question about Congressman Babin of Texas's letter, saying that it would be a danger to let more refugees in the United States, you said that the national security experts he cited in writing his letter were people that probably gave themselves that title, and questioned their credentials. The following Monday, he gave reporters a list of quotes from FBI Director Comey, from Jim Clapper, and from Secretary of Homeland Security Johnson, all warning that more people coming from that region would be dangerous to the United States. Your response to that.

MR. EARNEST: I don't think that is at all an accurate representation of their views. But you should go ask each of them and find out.

Q I will. The other thing is, the President has had a very good relationship with Donald Cardinal Wuerl of the Archdiocese of Washington. He's met at the White House with him a number of times over the years. It was noted on Sunday that since the John Carroll Society has had the Red Mass honoring the judiciary here in Washington since 1953, President Obama is the first President who never came to a mass in all his eight years in office. Is there any reason for that, or is it just a matter of his schedule?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific reason why the President hasn't attended, so I assume it's a scheduling situation. But we're happy to take a look at it for you.

Q Thank you, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: All right. Pam.

Q Josh, Senator McConnell said last week again that the Supreme Court seat would be filled by the next President. If, in a little over a month from now, Hillary Clinton is elected, do you have any hope that they will act on Garland's nomination? And if Donald Trump is elected, would Senate Republicans be justified in holding up any of his nominees?

MR. EARNEST: You mean Senate Democrats?

Q Yes.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me -- a couple of relevant facts here. Even Senator Flake, who I think, to his credit, articulated rather concisely the concerns that we have expressed about this situation -- Senator Flake was quoted in the Daily Beast saying, "Our position shouldn't be that the next President ought to decide. Nobody really believes that, because if this were the last year of a Republican presidency, nobody would say that." Now, presumably, he was saying nobody who was a Republican would say that.

That is a pretty clear distillation of the administration's concerns with the way that Republicans have infused partisan politics into the federal judiciary. Republicans are now essentially making the case that the only Supreme Court nominees they can support are the ones nominated by a Republican President. That's not historically how this situation has worked. Our country, in fact, has been well-served by efforts among leaders in both parties to try to prevent partisan politics from infecting the process of confirming justices to the Supreme Court.

Even Democrats, when faced with a similar situation, they were being asked -- Democrats were at the majority in the United States Senate. They were being asked by a Republican President in his eighth year in office to confirm his nominee to the Supreme Court, in an election year. And those Senate Democrats came forward and voted to confirm Justice Kennedy in 1988. It wasn't just a couple of Democrats that came around and decided to do the right thing. Every Democrat came around, considered Justice Kennedy's track record, and even though he was nominated by a President in the other party, they voted to confirm him because they believed he would serve on the Supreme Court with honor and distinction. And I think many, if not every observer of the Supreme Court would conclude that that's exactly what Justice Kennedy has done. And I say that even as somebody who hasn't agreed with every decision that he's handed down.

What I will say is that this does raise significant concerns about the establishment of a new precedent. Senator Lindsay Graham earlier this year acknowledged in a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee that to treat Chief Judge Garland so unfairly is to establish a new precedent, and that does -- it's not a good one. And I don't think Senator Graham was referring to it as a good precedent.

So hopefully the question that you have posed is not one that we will have to consider, but the President is certainly hopeful that, at some point, people like Senator McConnell will move away from the position of spending their seven-week vacation bragging about not doing their job and actually start to focus on the best interests of the country. And the country is best served by having somebody like Chief Judge Merrick Garland, the most experienced Supreme Court nominee in American history, confirmed to the Supreme Court where he can protect the liberty and freedom of every single American.

Q So how much damage has been done to the process by this?

MR. EARNEST: The process has been deeply damaged. Chief Judge Garland has been waiting 202 days to even get a hearing from the Senate. Democrats have been uniformly supportive of him getting a hearing, so we know where the blame lies -- and it lies with Republicans, just to be clear. And what Senator Flake indicated is correct, that the concerns that have been expressed about Chief Judge Garland are rooted solely in the fact that he was appointed by a Democrat President. And if nominees are -- if the only criteria for evaluating nominees is looking at the party identification of the President who nominated them, then we're essentially going to have a partisan judiciary. And that's not going to enhance people's confidence that they're going to be treated fairly by the judiciary, regardless of their own partisan identity.

If judgment about laws is reduced to the evaluation of people not wearing black robes, but red and blue robes, that's going to change the nature of our justice system, and not in a positive way. So I think the President is hopeful that there will be course correction implemented, probably not under Leader McConnell's watch. He's the one that's broken the system. But the President is hopeful that it is one that can be fixed. And if it is, it is something that I think will send an important message to the American people about how our laws, even at the highest level, are applied without regard to partisan affiliation.

Q And on another subject, do you expect the Paris climate deal to be officially -- become official this week in terms of the 55 countries signing on?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update in terms of timing. What we have said is that we expect that this is an agreement that would go into force before the end of the year. And I know that there is some reporting out of Europe indicating that a substantial commitment would be made to the agreement there that would allow the agreement to go into force, but I don't want to get ahead of any announcements that need to be made by individual countries as they consider fulfilling the commitments that they've made in the context of those negotiations.

Q And how significant will that be in terms of the overall fight against climate change?

MR. EARNEST: Look, it would be historic. And the President has talked about how this is the first time that we've seen 190 countries come together and make a series of significant commitments to fight climate change. What's also significant is these kinds of multilateral agreements that are negotiated under the auspices of the U.N. typically take multiple years, if not decades, to enter into force. And the fact that this agreement will take effect in less than a year is not just a historic accomplishment, it's a historic commitment to fulfilling the terms of the deal in a way that will have enormous positive benefits for the planet.

Now, the President has also been clear that this agreement is merely a first step. But it's important because it codifies a structure that commits countries every five years to making new commitments about steps that they can do to more effectively and more comprehensively fight carbon pollution. So initiating this process is enormously

important. And the fact that it is on track to take effect less than a year after being negotiated I think bodes well for the long-term impact that this agreement can have to protecting the planet.

Gregory, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you. Reuters is reporting that Yahoo! began last year complying with some kind of a classified directive ordering it to turn over to the National Security Agency specific inbound emails using certain keywords. I guess my question to you is, given the scope and the ramifications of that, are those kinds of directives, be it a national security letter, a FISA Court order or whatever, something that the President of the United States would be aware of, would sign off on? Can you kind of give us -- tell us what the protocol is in the post -- era for what the White House, perhaps through the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board, or National Security Council or something, to do some oversight of the sweeping orders, ordering private information of citizens to the National Security Council [sic]?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Gregory, let me start out by saying I have not seen the Reuters report that you're referring to. And given the fact that it apparently makes reference to a classified document of one kind or another, even if I were aware of it I probably would not be in a position to comment on it.

But in the spirit of your question, let me just say that the President, over the course of his two terms in office, has been committed to implementing a series of reforms that more effectively balance the country's national security needs with the privacy rights of American citizens. And the President, when he took office, expressed some concern that the privacy and civil liberties of some Americans were not given enough weight in some of the decisions made by the previous administration. And it's taken time throughout the eight years of the Obama presidency to understand the consequences of those decisions and to implement needed reforms to protect the privacy and civil liberties of the American people.

At each turn, the President has been mindful of the need to protect our national security. And the kinds of reforms that the President considered were focused on making sure that our intelligence professionals and our law enforcement professionals and our military professionals had the tools they need to keep us safe, even as we protect the civil liberties of American citizens.

But I'll have somebody follow up with you, Gregory, on the specific report and see if there's more information that we can provide that may be relevant to this.

Since the President's travel tomorrow has been changed, I'll see you all here tomorrow. Thanks.

Q Josh, what's he doing all day besides Ash Carter?

MR. EARNEST: The President has got a series of meetings, but in anticipation of his busy and late day tomorrow, the President had a lighter than usual schedule. But I guess the one other thing that I didn't point out that I probably should point out here is the other thing that has been added to the President's schedule tomorrow is he will travel to FEMA Headquarters here in Washington. It just occurred to me -- talking about the President's schedule, I failed to --

Q You buried the lead.

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughter.) I did bury the lead. My apologies. You'll have to do a write-through, or whatever it is you guys do here.

But the President will be going to FEMA Headquarters tomorrow. He will get a briefing from FEMA officials. I don't know yet whether or not FEMA Administrator Fugate will be at headquarters tomorrow. But if he is, he will be the one who will be delivering the briefing to President Obama. There will be representatives from a variety of federal agencies who are mobilizing efforts to response to potential impacts of Hurricane Matthew. So the President will get an update on the weather forecast, and he'll also be updated on the operational aspects of preparing for potential impacts of the storm. He'll also have an opportunity to thank some of the professionals at FEMA who are manning the response center who have already worked some really long hours in advance of the storm to prepare for the potential impact and ensure that sufficient federal resources can be mobilized to meet urgent needs in those communities that are affected.

So you'll hear from the President about this tomorrow.

Q In the morning?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not sure of the timing yet on the schedule. We're still -- we had to overhaul the whole schedule because of the last-minute change. But we'll let you know before the end of the day when that will take place. Obviously, we know you'll have keen interest in covering all that. And then, at some point either before or after the President does that event, we'll do a briefing here.

Q Josh, was it Director Fugate that briefed President Obama today?

THE PRESIDENT: The update that the President received today was from Lisa Monaco, who is his homeland security advisor. But Ms. Monaco is in regular touch with senior officials at DHS, including Administrator Fugate. So I know that she's been getting updates from them on preparations for the storm.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:09 P.M. EDT