

Daily Briefing by the Press Secretary, 1/22/14



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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Kind of feels like Monday, weirdly. My kids still haven't gone to school this week.

Good afternoon. I hope you're holding up in the wintry weather, today's cold. Before I take your questions I'd like to tell you that this morning the President and Vice President held a meeting in the Oval Office with Attorney General Holder, Secretaries Hagel, Sebelius and Duncan, and senior administration officials to discuss their commitment to combating rape and sexual assault in all settings. During the meeting the President and Vice President reiterated their deep, personal interest in doing everything possible to root out these types of abuse and build on the steps their administration has taken to protect Americans from it.

They discussed the findings of a report issued by the White House Council on Women and Girls that was issued earlier today and identifies key areas to focus on as part of these continued efforts, including working to change social norms, improving criminal justice response, and protecting students from sexual assault. Each of the Cabinet members briefed the President and Vice President on various actions their respective agencies are taking to lead a coordinated, comprehensive effort to combat sexual assault from the military to college campuses and beyond.

And later today, the President and Vice President and these Cabinet officials will join additional representatives of the Council on Women and Girls for a meeting in the East Room -- which I think you know -- where the President will sign a new presidential memorandum to establish the White House Task Force on Protecting Students from Sexual Assault. In his meeting this morning, the President said that he looks forward to seeing recommendations from the task force within 90 days.

Working to combat rape and sexual assault in all settings has been a priority for the President and Vice President throughout their time in office, and these new efforts build on steps that this administration has taken to combat these crimes, including last year's reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which the Vice President himself authored, and the series of executive actions that Secretary Hagel recently announced to address sexual assault in the military.

With that, I take your questions. Julie.

Q Thanks, Jay. I have a couple questions about Iran and Syria. I know the State Department has talked about this over the weekend, but what is the White House's understanding of what happened with the Ban Ki-moon invitation to Iran to the Syria talks and then having to pull that invitation back?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would refer you to the U.N. Secretary General for more detail about this. I think he's spoken to it and explained. Our position never changed and remains today what it has always been, which in order to participate in the Geneva conference you need to endorse the Geneva Communiqué. And the purpose of the Geneva II conference is the full implementation of that communique, including the establishment by mutual consent of a transitional governing body with full executive authorities.

So I would refer you to what Secretary General Ban has said on this issue. Our position is clear. And we're certainly following events in Montreux now as that conference has gotten underway.

Q Is there any concern that any tension that was created through this invitation and pulling back the invitation might bleed over into the nuclear talks between the U.S. and Iran?

MR. CARNEY: No. I think that we have made clear and the P5-plus-1 in general have made clear that the focus of the implementation of the Joint Plan of Action and of the next step, the six-month process of trying to reach a comprehensive resolution of this matter, is on how we can persuade Iran to abide by its international commitments, how we can ensure that Iran will not obtain and cannot obtain a nuclear weapon. There are other

issues, very serious ones, in the Iran account that we have and that includes our profound differences over Syria and the fact that Iran has clearly played a negative role there and a violent role there.

Q And on those talks, they're off to a bit of a rocky start. Does the administration see this round, Geneva II, as sort of the last, best chance to get Assad out? And if this round of talks ends without a positive conclusion, where does the discussion on Syria go from here?

MR. CARNEY: Well, first of all, I'd note that this is the beginning of what will be a tough and complicated negotiation to end the war in Syria. The meetings in Montreux are ongoing and the start of the Syria-Syria negotiations will begin on Friday in Geneva. That is where the two parties themselves are negotiating.

The international community is focused on the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, including the establishment, based on mutual consent, of a transitional governing body exercising full executive powers, as I just said, including over military and security entities. It's important to be clear: Mutual consent for a transitional governing body means that that government cannot be formed with someone who is objected to by one side or the other. In other words, that means that Bashar al-Assad will not and cannot be part of that transition government.

Now, the most important work will be done in the coming days, weeks, and months ahead with the regime and the opposition sitting down together to negotiate the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué and the formation of that transitional governing body, and that will be hard work. But today is the beginning of an important process that will hopefully lead to an end to that terrible war.

Q Given how hard it's been to get these parties to even come to the table, do you see this as really the last, best chance to have a political solution?

MR. CARNEY: There is no alternative to a political solution, a negotiated political settlement. And I wouldn't, as these talks are just starting, move ahead to an assumption that they'll fail -- although I will recognize, as we all will and the President will, that this is going to be tough and complicated work. But there is no alternative. There is no other way forward for Syria absent a negotiated political settlement; absent a settlement based

on the principles of the Geneva Communiqué, which calls very clearly for a transitional governing body that is reached to by mutual consent. That's going to be hard work, but it's important that it's gotten started.

Jeff.

Q Thanks, Jay. The President spoke yesterday with President Putin of Russia and your readout said that they discussed the Olympics and security. What more would the White House like to see Russia doing on security there? And what more would the United States like to do or to be involved in to address the mounting concerns about security in Sochi?

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me say that starting with the call yesterday that the United States has offered its full support and any assistance to the Russian government in its security preparations for the Sochi Games. Russian authorities will be responsible for overall security at the Olympics, and the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security has the security lead for United States. We will send diplomatic security and FBI agents to liaise with host nation security and law enforcement officials. And that's standard operating procedure for large events like this, where thousands of U.S. citizens -- athletes from Team USA, American corporate sponsors and members of the U.S. media are present for an extended period of time.

Now, the United States and Russia have had discussions on counterterrorism cooperation in a number of venues, as we've noted in the past, including in working groups of the Bilateral Presidential Commission. The United States has also been working with the Russian government through the International Security Events Group on Sochi preparation, specifically as we do with any host country. Now, U.S. citizens planning to attend the games in Sochi should be contact with the State Department. Potential threats to safety and security can be found on the embassy's website and the Department of State's travel website.

I'll also note that we have seen an uptick in threat reporting prior to the Olympics, which is, of course, of concern, although it is also not unusual for a major international event. And we have offered, as I said, assistance to the Russians -- any assistance that they might need to counter that threat.

Q Is Russia accepting any of that assistance that's been offered?

MR. CARNEY: I would, first of all, refer you to the Department of Defense for details on assistance that's been offered. I would also say that we're having ongoing conversations with the Russians about this and have offered any assistance that we can provide. They obviously have lead for security at the Olympics -- they are the host nation.

Q But did that offer come out of a concern that they're not doing enough?

MR. CARNEY: No, I think that this is an international event; there will be a large U.S. citizen presence there for an extended period of time, and we take the necessary precautions as you would expect. I think the Pentagon said on Monday of this week that the United States has offered its full support to the Russian government, and that includes the two U.S. ships that have been sent to the Black Sea as part of the prudent planning and preparations that are required for an event like this.

Q All right. And then one other issue -- The Washington Post today had a story quoting U.S. officials expressing concern that they would not be able to make good on the President's promise regarding the telephone records and the NSA proposals. How confident is the White House that a deadline can be met? Was it realistic?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would say the relevant agencies are already at work on implementing the directions in the President's speech that he gave. As the President said, these are complicated issues, but they are not new to us. We've already been working on them over the past six months and doing everything in our power, already we are, to meet those timelines. So it's complicated, but the word has already gone out, some of the work has already been done, and the President looks forward to progress being made and completed.

Jon.

Q On Russia, the call with Putin, who called who? Did the President call or did Putin? Who initiated the call?

MR. CARNEY: I don't know the answer to that, Jon. They speak with some frequency, but I can find out if there is an initiator.

Q And get back to us?

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q And on this question of security at the Olympics, what is your assessment, what is the White House assessment? How are the Russians doing on security? Are they doing enough?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, what I can tell you is there has been an uptick in some of the reporting, but that is not unusual. It's of concern, but not unusual for an event like this. The State Department has handled and is handling the issue of travel advisories for U.S. citizens, and we are offering the Russians any assistance that they might require or request in a situation like this.

But I wouldn't be qualified -- I wouldn't want to venture to assess overall except that these kinds of major events around the world obviously present security challenges; this one is not unique. And we take matters like this seriously because of the presence of U.S. citizens. That's why we're working with the Russian government. That's why we're offering the assistance that we're offering, as well as encouraging U.S. citizens planning to travel to Sochi to be in contact with the State Department to make sure they're aware of the advisories that are out there.

Q Can you characterize our level of confidence in the steps they have taken? You've heard -- obviously Putin has talked a "ring of steel" around the Sochi Olympics. Do we have a great deal of confidence that they have done enough on this?

MR. CARNEY: All I can tell you, Jon, is that we have had conversations with the Russian government about security in Sochi. The President spoke with President Putin about this. We have offered any assistance that they might want to avail themselves of, and we're taking, I think, prudent precautions on this matter, as evidenced by some of the steps the Department of Defense and the State Department have taken.

I wouldn't want to assess from here because this is a complicated piece of business, obviously -- an international event like this, Olympics in general -- because they, unlike already complicated events like a single day of a sporting event, the Olympics last over a significant period of time.

Q And can I ask a question on the Iran -- on the negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue? Is it the White House's belief that if you can reach an agreement with the Iranians that those sanctions can be lifted without congressional approval? Can further sanctions be lifted? Obviously there are some steps which you're able to do without congressional approval, but can you strike a deal with Iran and lift sanctions without Congress okaying it?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't seen that assessment made because it presupposes what is the only acceptable outcome to these negotiations, which is a verifiable, transparent agreement by Iran to forsake its nuclear weapons ambitions. And the promise of that for Iran is that by coming into compliance with its international obligation, by offering in a way that is 100 percent reassuring to the P5-plus-1 and our international partners and allies that they will not pursue and cannot pursue a nuclear weapon, there will be an opportunity for Iran to end its isolated state that its violation of its international obligations has brought upon it.

But how that process would work, I think it's a little early to discuss that because the six-month period that we've been talking about for the negotiations over a comprehensive solution is only just beginning.

Q Okay. And then just one last thing. The First Lady had her 50th birthday party and I believe you said that the President picks up the cost for that party.

MR. CARNEY: I think we put out information. I don't have it here. I would refer you to the East Wing.

Q And I was just wondering if you had an estimate on what the cost was.

MR. CARNEY: I don't, but I would refer you to the East Wing.

Q On that uptick in threat reporting, you said that it's something you should expect with events like this. But really going beyond that, part of that uptick is because of recent events in the area because of the region we're talking about. Is that correct?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I mean, you're asking me to assess the region. I think that international events like this always represent -- or present, rather, security challenges, and that's broadly speaking. Obviously each event presents unique challenges. But I'm not going to get into a detailed analysis of how this one might be different from another one. The approach that the U.S. government takes and the administration takes is one of prudent preparation because of any risks that might be out there.

So as I said, as you might expect in the run-up to an event like this, there has been an uptick in some of the threat reporting, and we're taking precautions accordingly. But that is not unusual.

Q And does President Putin seem welcoming of U.S. offers for assistance?

MR. CARNEY: I think that we have communicated at a variety of levels including between the two Presidents that we are absolutely willing to assist the Russian government where we can, and those conversations are being engaged. And I wouldn't characterize them -- I can point you to the Defense Department in terms of some of the conversations they've had and some of the steps they've taken. But we're going to continue to work with the Russian government and have those conversations moving forward.

Q And on The New Yorker piece, the President said a couple of things about marijuana. He said that legalization experiments in Washington State and Colorado should "go forward." He also mentioned that he didn't think marijuana was any more dangerous than alcohol. In 2010, this White House put out a policy paper on national drug policy stating that marijuana should not be legalized. Was the President setting new drug policy?

MR. CARNEY: No, the President's position on these matters hasn't changed. I think he was making a couple of points -- one, that we ought to use discretion appropriately in our prosecution prioritization -- A. B, when it comes to marijuana use, he made clear that he sees it as a bad habit and a vice and not something that he would encourage -- and this is a quote: "It's not something I encourage, and I told my daughters I think it's a bad idea, a waste of time, not very healthy."

But there's no question that we've applied our drug laws in a way that has been counterproductive and that there are issues there that need to be addressed. I think that it's important to -- because he's quoted quite extensively in that article -- to look at the full context of some of these quotes that have been taken out in phrases when, at least in this instance, there's an opportunity to see him speak at length.

Q But he does want to see those experiments to go forward in Washington State and Colorado. What does he hope to find out --

MR. CARNEY: I think the point he was -- well, see, I think again that you're probably not aware of the entire sentence. "It's important for the experiment" -- which is bracketed -- "to go forward because it's important for society not to have a situation in which a large portion of people have at one time or another broken the law, and only a select few get punished." In other words, he's talking about the issue of the disparities in our prosecution of our drug laws that an experiment like this may be addressing. He's not endorsing any specific move by a state; he's simply making an observation. His position on these matters has not changed.

Q And, Jay, on Syria, getting back to Syria, there has been a huge cache of photos that have been released showing what appears to be widespread killings, mass killings, mass torture in Syria. Has the White House examined these photos? Does it have an opinion on what should happen with respect to those photos?

MR. CARNEY: We stand with the rest of the world in horror at these images that have come to light, and we condemn in the strongest possible terms the actions of the Assad regime and call on it to adhere to international obligations with respect to the treatment of prisoners. While we cannot independently confirm or affirm the information that was presented recently, these photos cannot be ignored or dismissed. They suggest widespread and apparently systematic violations of international human law and demonstrate just how far the regime is willing to go in harming its own people. They're very disturbing images.

Let me move around a little bit. Christie.

Q Thanks, Jay. Back on the metadata program. Can you say when the DOJ and the ODNI began working on the storage -- the new storage place for this database? Was it 10 minutes after the President speech or --

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to them. I don't know when they --

Q Well, your answer to Jeff made it sound like --

MR. CARNEY: I'm saying that on -- the examination of these issues was part of the review process. So moving forward, participants in that effort are not starting from scratch. And that was the point I'm making -- not that the President had issued specifically this directive prior to his speech, but that there's a knowledge base there that was built in part by the review the President asked for and got, and that will certainly be of assistance as the work moves forward to make some determinations about storage.

Q And do you know if the Attorney General has assured the President that he can make the deadline that he has set?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think I would point you to what I said earlier. There's work that's been done on this issue broadly speaking so people aren't starting from scratch. It's a complicated piece of business, but the President expects that action can be taken in the timeline he set.

Q Well, you also have the component of needing congressional help on this. What would happen if Congress did not act to set something up by the deadline the President is talking about? Is the President willing to stop -- he said in his speech that the government will no longer maintain this database. Would he stop doing that --

MR. CARNEY: Well, we're going to work with Congress because we think that this is the kind of thing that can enjoy bipartisan support. There's a shared interest in moving forward on this so I think that we hope and expect congressional cooperation moving forward.

Q On income inequality, the President has repeatedly made it clear recently that this is going to be a big part of the next three years. But with so little appetite in Congress to do anything about it, how much effort is he going to put behind measures that can actually reduce the trend?

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's no question, as you heard the President say in Anacostia late last year, and as you've heard him say over the years, including in Osawatomie and earlier this year, that the challenge we face when it comes to economic mobility in this country and the ability of Americans from all stations in life to achieve the American Dream is something he considers his number-one priority. And addressing that challenge, addressing that problem, making sure that there's opportunity for everyone, is something that we can do together with Congress and it's also something that he can tackle using all of the tools in his toolbox as President of the United States.

And you have seen him do that -- or rather you have seen examples of how he can do that just recently with the Promise Zones that he talked about, and the manufacturing hub in North Carolina, where we can continue to work on the renaissance of manufacturing in this country and focus on advanced manufacturing and the kind of industries that create well-paying jobs for middle-class families to live on here in the United States. You've seen it in the initiative last week with a hundred representatives from colleges and universities and elsewhere interested in improving education for Americans, and that, in turn, helps address the issue, because it's not something that a single piece of legislation will resolve.

You've seen it in efforts across the states to raise the minimum wage, state by state. The President strongly supports action by Congress, strongly supports action here in Washington to raise the minimum wage, because as a basic principle in this country you ought to be able to earn a living, i.e. not live in poverty, if you put in a hard day's work. That's certainly the President's view. And that's something that has enjoyed across the country and through the years bipartisan support. So there's an opportunity for action with Congress on that specific issue -- and others.

So the President is fiercely committed to this agenda that goes right at the heart of what he believes America has always been about, which is the foundational belief that no matter what the circumstances of your birth that you have endless opportunity in this country to advance yourself and your family if you're willing to work hard, if you're willing to take responsibility, and if you're willing to educate yourself and help your family move forward. So this is obviously something the President has spoken about before. I think you can expect that it will be something he'll speak about in the coming days and weeks, and throughout his presidency.

Q How would he measure success?

MR. CARNEY: I think he would measure success by evidence that we have improved economic opportunity in this country for everyone; that the mobility that we've seen declining in this country is on the rise again, where you don't have I think surprising statistics that suggest that countries in Europe have greater economic mobility than the United States, which sort of goes at the heart of who we believe we are in this country and what our history has been about when it comes to opportunity for people who have been willing to work hard and take responsibility. So that's an agenda that could not have more presidential force behind it.

Major.

Q There was a report last night that the Pentagon sent to the President a report or a recommendation that there would be 10,000 U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan after 2014 provided the BSA is signed, but that those forces would be removed by 2016. A, can you confirm if that's true? And if so, does it reflect a presidential desire to wind down the war completely by the end of his term, even if the bilateral security agreement is signed by the Afghan government?

MR. CARNEY: What I can tell you, Major, is that the President has not made any decisions about final troop numbers and I'm not going to discuss ongoing deliberations. We will be weighing inputs from our military commanders, as well as the intelligence community, our diplomats and development experts as we make decisions about our post-2014 presence in Afghanistan.

As you mentioned, in addition, our position continues to be that if we cannot conclude a bilateral security agreement promptly then we will initiate planning for a post-2014 future in which there would be no U.S. or NATO troop presence in Afghanistan. That's not the future we're seeking; it's not the policy we think is best, and we don't believe it's in Afghanistan's best interest. But the further this slips into 2014, the more likely such an outcome is.

Meanwhile, as the interagency convenes to continue considering options to present to the President for a post-2014 presence, we will have to increasingly take into account the lack of a signed BSA in that planning. We'll have to frame decisions based on our clear position that we can't pursue a post-2014 mission without a BSA. And that mission, if I could just reiterate, would be one tailored to focus on counterterrorism operations and on the training and support of Afghan security forces.

So no decisions have been made. We're not going to get into ongoing deliberations. And it's important to note in the context of all of these discussions that we are still waiting for the Afghan government to sign the bilateral security agreement.

Q Does the difficulty in obtaining that signature on the BSA inject into these deliberations a new question about the utility of keeping forces for a long period after 2014 because it appears the Afghan -- we may not be welcome there and therefore the utility of us staying might be in question now?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think, in fact, the loya jirga strongly endorsed the bilateral security agreement, and as a body that represents the will and opinion of the Afghan people, we think that is significant and it reflects the fact that the BSA was negotiated in good faith with the Afghan government. And we consider that another strong reason why it ought to be signed.

Q But you know as well as I do that part of this is the succession of Karzai and this being a live issue, so that if it's not overshadowed, certainly presents itself within the succession of the Karzai government and it certainly is a factor being weighed by not just the loya jirga but whoever may succeed Karzai.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that's probably the case, but we're not basing the need for the BSA to be signed on that timeline in Afghan politics. We're basing it on the fact that we have to make decisions -- we and our NATO allies have to make decisions and make plans for 2014 that need to take into account whether or not there is a BSA that's been signed, because there cannot be a further troop presence beyond 2014 absent a signed BSA. So the further we slip into this year, the more we have to take that into account as we make plans.

Q It was suggested on a couple of Sunday talk shows that there is evidence in possession of the U.S. government that Edward Snowden may well have received assistance from the Russian government in transit on his way to Russia and that he may be cooperating in ways that is harmful to the U.S. government on an ongoing basis. Does the administration agree with those assessments?

MR. CARNEY: I would say that this is an ongoing criminal investigation; there have been charges brought. And I don't have anything to add from here on that matter.

Q Would the administration cast any doubts on those suspicions?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I just don't have anything to add. There is a case that has been presented against Mr. Snowden, charges have been brought. It is our firm position that he ought to return to the United States and face the charges against him here where he will be afforded all of the protections of due process that our judicial system provides.

Q In The New Yorker piece, the President said he was haunted by Syria. You read a statement about the images that the administration had a chance to look at. You also said there's no alternative to Assad staying in power. Why isn't there any alternative to Assad staying in power? He's been there for almost two and a half years, a wide-running bloody civil war. The military does not appear to be any less aggressive in its defense of the Assad regime than it has been from the start. The opposition is splintered. The Geneva II peace process or conversations are off to, at best, a rocky start. Why isn't it possible that Assad stays and the President remains haunted by this for the remainder of his administration?

MR. CARNEY: Because there's no future that the Syrian people will endorse for their country that includes Assad in the government or as President. He has forsaken in bloody fashion any claim he might have to lead that country into the future by massacring his own people --

Q But with respect, that may undermine his moral authority, but the practical reality is he's there, his military is there and fights aggressively to keep him there.

MR. CARNEY: And there's an ongoing civil war there, and there is no solution, there is no end to that war absent a negotiated political settlement. And that settlement has to be based on the Geneva Communiqué, which calls for a transitional governing authority based on mutual consent. And there's no achieving mutual consent in Syria of the members of that governing authority that could include Bashar al-Assad in the government. It won't happen. It can't happen.

So our view that Assad can't be part of Syria's future is not one that we make on our own; it's one we observe in the fulfillment of the Geneva Communiqué, because there's no way the opposition would agree to -- nor should -- a governing transitional authority that would include Assad among those participants.

Q Jay, on that point, is a U.S. military strike against Syria -- a potential U.S. military strike still on the table?

MR. CARNEY: Well, Ed, I don't think that we would ever rule out options when dealing with matters like this. But what I can tell you is that we foresee no U.S. troops in Syria and that there is -- the only resolution here -- I think that suggesting the use of force somehow answers the mail when we said there's no resolution here that doesn't include a negotiated political settlement --

Q The President very publicly considered U.S. force, was right up to the line of it, and then went to Congress. All that only played out a few months ago. My question is two summers ago, the President from that podium had a news conference and drew the red line and that was on chemical weapons specifically.

MR. CARNEY: As was the threat of the use of force.

Q The threat of force. And the President, though, then when he drew that red line in August of 2012, said that if they crossed the line there would be enormous consequences. Now, in addition to the mass killings that were just talked about a moment ago, chemical weapons were used in mass fashion, and as result, in a positive step, Syria started turning over some of those chemical weapons. But my question is, Assad is still in power, as Major suggested. He's still killing his own people. What is -- what can the U.S. do about it?

MR. CARNEY: Well, Ed, if I could briefly clarify the history that you recounted, the President made clear that it was a red line for Syria to use chemical weapons. And he then very clearly and forcefully threatened force when the evidence demonstrated that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons. It was because of that credible use of force -- threat of force, rather, that something happened that I don't think anybody would have predicted, which is that a government that had long denied that it even possessed chemical weapons agreed to give them all up. And that process is underway.

What remains the case is that there's an ongoing civil war. What the President has said is that we will do everything we can through provision of humanitarian assistance, through pushing the Geneva process forward, including the meetings underway now, including help and assistance to the opposition, to help bring about an end to the war and a negotiated political --

Q But all of that has been going on for a couple of years now is my question, I guess. And if the President is haunted by it, does he feel paralyzed? Does he feel --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I guess, Ed, I would point you to the words of the President when he's made clear that we cannot intervene in every -- militarily into every civil war, but we can do what we have done in this case, which is work with international partners to help try to bring about a negotiated political settlement.

And we can, as we did, working with our international partners, help bring about the commitment by Syria to give up one of the largest collections of chemical weapons in the world. And that is obviously something that's very positive and that work is ongoing.

Q Last thing on health care. The Hill newspaper reported a couple of days ago that a procurement document from late December says that federal officials decided to bring on Accenture for the healthcare.gov contract. And they did it quickly; they did it without open bid because they justified it, administration officials, by saying they had to move quickly because they said the health insurance industry was at risk if the site was not fixed. They also went on to say, "The entire health care reform program is jeopardized if these fixes are not made by mid-March."

MR. CARNEY: Who said that?

Q Federal officials who were quoted in --

MR. CARNEY: Which officials?

Q From CMS, I would expect. Not from the White House.

MR. CARNEY: I didn't see the article. I'm not aware of those statements --

Q But you've been saying the website is turning the corner. Does this document suggest that there are still concerns here in the administration?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not aware of the document. What I can tell you is there has been an enormous effort expended and an enormous effort that continues to be expended in making sure that the website functions effectively for the millions of Americans who have so clearly demonstrated that they desire the product on offer here. And I certainly hope that as those improvements have resulted in significantly increased numbers of Americans enrolling in and purchasing insurance through the exchanges, that that story is getting the full coverage that it merits.

Margaret.

Q Thanks. I wanted to go back to Sochi for a second. Just to clarify, there were some reports beginning yesterday that the U.S. was using counterterrorism operatives to help the Russians look for potential suicide bombers inside the security zone. Can you confirm that? And even if you can't, is the U.S. concerned that there may be suicide bombers inside the security zone?

MR. CARNEY: Margaret, I just don't have more. I don't have -- I have not seen that report. What I can tell you is that we are having conversations with the Russians. We have made clear that we are prepared to provide any assistance that we can if Russia asks for it. And we're going to continue to work with them and take steps as we've been taking out of prudence, given that this is the kind of event where security is an issue.

Q On the President's call with Mr. Putin, the one thing in the readout that I didn't notice was any mention of Edward Snowden. Can you tell us explicitly, did they -- is this like in the agree-to-disagree category and they just don't talk about it? Or they talked about it and it's just not going in the readout because there's nothing you could possibly tell us about what they said?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have more detail on the phone call. What I can tell you is that our position on Mr. Snowden I think is abundantly clear to everyone, including the Russians, and our view that he ought to be returned to the United States where he will be afforded all the rights and protections in our system. That hasn't changed. So I don't think there's any doubt in Moscow or elsewhere of our position on that matter.

Q Can I do one more?

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q There's an ally of Angela Merkel's who is like the foreign policy spokesman for her party in the Parliament, and what he had said is that it's their view that what the President has promised or offered in terms of the foreign leader aspect of the NSA role last week isn't quite enough and that -- he said, "Transatlantic relations are in the deepest crisis now since the Iraq war." I'm just wondering if the President is concerned about the sort of ongoing steps to repair the relationship with Germany specifically and what he is doing in the wake of the NSA remarks?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we have had direct country-to-country and, in some cases, leader-to-leader consultations on these matters as they have arisen. And we've certainly been clear about that when it comes to the United States and Germany and President Obama and Chancellor Merkel. And I would say that at Chancellor Merkel and President Obama's direction, we have undertaken extensive, close consultations on our intelligence cooperation in recent months, which has resulted -- those consultations, rather, have resulted in a better understanding of the requirements and concerns that exist on both sides. And those consultations will continue among our intelligence services. And I think they reflect the very close relationship we have across the board, including on issues of and matters of intelligence.

Peter.

Q Jay, clearly, there was a greater degree of sharing in past Olympics -- in London, in Vancouver, and even Beijing before that. What specifically would you like to see with Russia that would give this administration more confidence in the safety of Americans not just in Sochi, but throughout Russia?

MR. CARNEY: Again, Peter, I just don't have more on this beyond what I've said, which is that we are in conversations with the Russians, we've made clear that we are prepared to offer any assistance that they might require. Russian authorities are, of course, responsible for overall security at the Olympics -- they are the host nation -- and the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security has the security lead for the United States. As part of that responsibility, we will send diplomatic security and FBI agents to liaise with host nation security and law enforcement officials.

I think that reflects the actions that we take in situations like this; they're fairly standard. But these are obviously events that present security challenges, so we work with host nations and we take actions that we think are necessary to make sure that the precautions we can take are taken.

Q So at this time, is the White House satisfied that Russia is prepared to host a safe games?

MR. CARNEY: I think that Russia has responsibility for overall security in terms of the steps that they've taken, and assurances that they can make are ones that they have to make. Our view is that we partner with host nations and liaise with them. We also, in this case, are offering security assistance and we'll continue to work with the Russians as the event approaches and begins.

Q Senator Angus King said a couple of days ago, "I would not go and I don't think I'd send my family." Americans are making those decisions right now. Should Americans go? Should they feel safe sending their family?

MR. CARNEY: Sure. I think there will be, as I understand it, a lot of Americans in Sochi, which is why, of course, we pay close attention to an event like this. There will be Team USA members there, as well as corporate sponsors. And our advice to Americans who might travel to the games is to avail themselves of the information provided by the State Department in the form of travel advisories related to this and to take the standard precautions that those advisories recommend. And beyond that, we're just going to continue to work with -- to take the necessary precautions and to work with the Russian government.

Q As for Chairman Rogers, who this weekend discussed his suspicion or belief that Edward Snowden received some help -- this is going to a question that was asked earlier -- but he made these -- you could call them allegations or accusations -- at least it was his belief system that there was help provided to Edward Snowden. A senior FBI official told us on Sunday that it's still the Bureau's conclusion that Mr. Snowden acted alone. So I guess I'm curious right now if Chairman Rogers and others using language like that somehow hinders the relationship the U.S. is trying to develop right now with Russia by making those suggestions when it appears the administration has no evidence of that.

MR. CARNEY: I think the disagreement we have with Russia over Edward Snowden I think has been publicly expressed with some frequency. I don't think that --

Q Is he helping or hurting by saying that if there's no evidence?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't think that that's really an issue because we have -- the President spoke with President Putin directly and does so with some frequency, as Presidents of Russia and the President --

Q Wait, about -- I'm sorry, about Edward Snowden?

MR. CARNEY: No, I'm just saying in general that we don't -- that the President can talk to President Putin, and does. And in our relations with Russia, we have areas of significant cooperation where our interests are aligned and we have areas of significant disagreement, including but not limited to the matter of Edward Snowden. But I don't think we're anything but transparent about that. And we have expressed that very clearly both on that matter and other matters. That's been the approach the President has taken in our relations with Russia because he thinks that best serves the interests of the United States, which is a very clear-eyed approach to U.S.-Russian relations that allows for cooperation on matters that are vital to U.S. national security and U.S. interests, and can also allow for the clear expression of disagreements -- and that happens.

We are still able to move forward and cooperate with the Russians on a host of areas. That includes the P5-plus-1. It includes counterterrorism cooperation in general. And it includes obviously the ability to discuss security around the Sochi games.

Q Finally, very quickly, we're under the impression you'll get back to us on who delivered -- who placed the phone call, whether it was President Putin or President Obama yesterday. But we're under the -- we've been told that the conversation was apparently several days or even weeks in the making. Did the two of them agree to have other conversations and have other conversations been set before the games where further decisions will be made in terms of cooperation?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any previews of additional phone calls that may or may not happen. As I said, the President speaks with President Putin with some frequency, as you might expect, but I don't know when the next call might be.

Yes, Jess.

Q On the U.S.-Africa summit that you announced earlier this week, can you talk about what prompted that, and also why Egypt is not among those that are invited, especially given what's going on there right now?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I can tell you that what prompted it is the hope that the summit will build on the progress made since the President's trip to Africa last summer that it will advance the administration's focus on trade and investment in Africa and highlight America's commitment to Africa's security, its democratic development and its people. I think that on matters of the invitation list, on Egypt -- I know I have this here somewhere. Hold on. I can give you -- Egypt has not been invited because it is suspended from the African Union, and that's the reason why Egypt was not invited. I can read you the entire list of the invitees, but I think you've probably seen it. But that's why Egypt was not invited.

Q Is there any concern that that is a missed opportunity to have discussions that you'd like to be having with Egypt?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think we have regular discussions with Egyptian leaders and authorities focused on the bilateral relationship, on security matters, but also on developments in Egypt and our belief that Egypt needs to transition to a civilian-led government in a process that is inclusive where Egyptians from all walks of life get to express their views and be heard.

Reid.

Q Jay, yesterday after he was indicted, former Virginia Governor McDonnell and his attorneys both described his actions while he was governor as similar to things that President Obama has done in the White House. They said in the legal brief the President routinely participates in corporate events which lend credibility to his major benefactors, invites benefactors to events in the White House, allows his photo to be taken with benefactors, and includes benefactors in policy discussions with senior administration officials, in describing or explaining Governor McDonnell's actions with Jonnnie Williams. I'm sure you're going to refer questions about the prosecution to the Justice Department. But does the President sort of concede the point that a lot of the people who are involved in some of these policy discussions are people who have contributed to his campaign?

MR. CARNEY: Reid, I have no comment on what is obviously an ongoing matter of prosecution, and I'll leave it at that.

Q Thanks, Jay.

MR. CARNEY: Mark.

Q Jay, how will foreign leaders know if they are among the friends and allies whose phone calls the United States will not conduct surveillance on?

MR. CARNEY: Mark, what I would say is that we have direct conversations through diplomatic channels on these issues and will continue to do so. I think you can address those questions, that question elsewhere, but I think that we -- as has been the case since these revelations began, where they have affected our relations with a specific country, there have been direct and substantive conversations between the two countries using diplomatic channels, which is the tradition.

Q So you're saying you'll tell them, you're okay, your phone calls won't be surveilled?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not sure what other method you might suggest, Mark.
(Laughter.) I can simply tell you that we have close relationships with our friends and allies -- our close friends and allies, and these kinds of discussions take place through normal diplomatic channels.

Q And have you responded to the ad yesterday in the paper from Europe 1 Radio requesting an interview with the President? And would you suggest that's a way for many of us to request interviews from now on? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: No, I think CBS has requested interviews through more traditional means successfully, as have many of the news organizations here. But I wouldn't rule out that as a means to request. I think it's an expensive way to do it. But keep those invitations coming.

Thanks very much.

END

1:48 P.M. EST