

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Washington, D.C., 9/29/2015

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to the final day of one of the more eventful seven-day stretches in the Obama administration. As Jeff alluded to, it kicked off with the visit of the Pope to the White House and to the United States, continued with a significant and consequential state visit from the President of China, and then a three-day trip to New York for the United Nations General Assembly, where the President considered a range of issues to advance U.S. interests on everything from climate change to continuing to enlarge and mobilize our international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

So it's been an eventful seven days. Fortunately, we're returning to Washington, and it does look like Congress is on track to take the steps that are necessary to prevent a government shutdown -- at least for now. But I would expect that in the weeks ahead we'll have more of a discussion about how Democrats and Republicans in Congress can work together to make sure that we adequately fund both our national security and economic priorities, while of course taking the necessary steps to prevent a government shutdown in an unnecessary injection of volatility into the national economy.

So, with that, why don't we go to your questions.

Q I have a question on Syria. Can you point to any tangible progress that was made on the issue of Syria while Obama was at the U.N. General Assembly? Is there anything you can point to?

MR. EARNEST: There are a couple of things that come to mind. The first, as you noted, there were a handful of new countries that committed to join our counter-ISIL campaign. So we're now up to 65 nations across the globe that are part of this coordinated effort to degrade and ultimately ISIL. Their contributions take a variety of forms. They aren't just military contributions, but certainly contributions to stem the flow of foreign fighters and

to choke off ISIL's financing of their terror activities are two important priorities, and we certainly are pleased to see a commitment from new nations to participate in that effort. We also saw indications from the French at the beginning of the week that they are prepared to take military action inside of Syria. So we certainly welcome the stepped-up contributions of one of our closest allies in France to this ongoing effort.

And then the President had a constructive conversation yesterday with President Putin. And we certainly welcomed President Putin's acknowledgement that a political transition of one form or another is necessary in Syria. And while there continue to be significant differences -- and this not an effort to paper over those differences; we have our stark differences over Assad -- but just the acknowledgement of what the President has been saying for quite some time, that a political transition inside of Syria will be required to address the root cause of the problems plaguing that country.

So there are some positive movements in the right direction in terms of dealing with ISIL and confronting the challenges inside of Syria. But the obstacles remain, and this will continue to be a priority of the President and his foreign policy team moving forward.

Q What do you think the prospects are that the situation there will be any better, or maybe even any worse when Obama goes up a year from now for his final UNGA? Syria has been such a big issue this year, last year.

MR. EARNEST: I thought of one other good answer to your last question, so let me do that real quick and then I'll answer your second one -- which is you saw in the readout that we put out yesterday that President Obama and President Putin agreed that it would be important to begin conversations on a practical, tactical level to de-conflict coalition and Russian military activities inside of Syria. And that's a tangible bit of progress out of that meeting, and will be important to ensuring that our military personnel who are operating primarily in the skies over Syria can do so safely, and that Russian activities on the ground will not interfere with our efforts to support the fighting forces that we're able to work with on the ground that have made some progress in driving ISIL out of some parts of northern Syria.

As it relates to sort of the longer-term outlook, I would anticipate that a year from now we'll continue to be having a conversation about what we can do to address the problems in Syria. I would not expect that the problems plaguing that country are going to be solved overnight. But I would anticipate that we will have some evidence of additional progress that we'll make over the course of the next year. We certainly have made a lot of progress over the last year.

If last year is any indication, we've built a robust coalition. I believe at the United Nations, last year, that we had just announced that we would have this coalition that would be taking strikes inside of Syria. And it was notable at the time that there were some Muslim-majority countries that were going to be flying alongside U.S. military pilots at that point. But I believe the number of nations that were participating was about 30 or so, and so now we're up to 65. That's an indication that we're making some progress in

building an international consensus in this regard. And there's numbers that we can point to in terms of the amount of territory that has been retaken from ISIL, both in Iraq and in Syria, that indicate that those military efforts have shown some progress.

So I would anticipate that this is something that we'll talk about at the U.N. next year, but I think we'll do that in the context of additional progress that we will have made over the course of the next year.

Q Josh, do you think, based on what you learned over the last few days in the talks with President Putin, that despite your calls, that the White House and the United States will have to assume Assad is going to be in the picture for at least some time to come?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that, I think, is hard to say. Our position certainly hasn't changed.

Q We know your position.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Just for those who are following along at home, I just want to make sure that there's no daylight here. And the reason that it's important to restate is that it is not just the view of the United States that we believe that as a result of his odious actions, where he's perpetrated terrible acts of violence against his own people, that he needs to leave. That certainly is reason enough for him to leave power.

But the other thing that is notable here is that him carrying out those terrible acts of violence against innocent civilians has also cost him the legitimacy to lead that country. And ISIL capitalized on a chaotic, essentially ungoverned swath of that country to establish this foothold and to grow rather rapidly. And we're going to need a stable, inclusive, functioning central government inside of Syria in order to bring an end to that chaos and, therefore, more effectively succeed in degrading and destroying ISIL.

So it's not just that we believe he's lost sort of the moral authority to lead that country. As a practical matter, it is impossible for Assad to lead that country. And as long as there's no functioning central government, ISIL will have an opportunity that they can capitalize on. So that's why we've talked about a political transition being a genuine priority.

The President acknowledged yesterday in his remarks that this would be a transition that would require some management, that this would be a managed transition. And it means that we're going to need to mobilize the international community to support the effort to facilitate that kind of political transition. It's unclear exactly what timeframe this will be under. As many of you guys have pointed out, we've been calling for Assad to leave power for years now. We continue to believe that; there are a lot of other countries who agree with us.

And again, we're going to make more progress against ISIL if we can make some progress on managing this political transition inside of Syria.

Q Can you give us a readout of Cuba?

MR. EARNEST: I know that the -- we're working on a formal readout. I know that the two leaders had an opportunity to discuss some of the regulatory changes that have been announced in the last couple of weeks on the part of the United States. The State Department is leading civil aviation coordination talks in Cuba right now. And these are all additional steps that are moving toward more normal relations between our two countries. And it was an opportunity for the two leaders to continue their consultations about some of the regulatory changes that are being made by the United States.

The President, as he always does, sort of reaffirmed our commitment to seeing the Cuban government do a better job of not just respecting, but actually proactively protecting the basic human rights of the Cuban people.

And we continue to believe that deeper engagement and deeper people-to-people ties, deeper economic engagement between the United States and Cuba will have the effect of moving the government and the nation in a positive direction.

Q Can I jump in quick on Syria, a follow-up? I wanted to just ask you about the role of European nations and the EU. It seems like in the last couple of days at the U.N., there has been an effort to kind of bridge the divide between where the U.S. is at and where Russia is at. Does the U.S. have a reaction to this EU official's proposal to do like a P5+1 plus Iran on Syria? And what about this idea of European safe havens -- the European idea of the safe havens or the no-fly zones?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen the full proposal from the EU in terms of this negotiating structure, so I can't comment on that directly. I would say that we obviously would welcome the participation of the international community trying to facilitate talks that would include discussion of a political transition inside of Syria that's long overdue.

And the President acknowledged yesterday that we would be open to working with both Russia and Iran to try to advance that effort. But I haven't looked -- had the opportunity to consider the entire proposal that the EU has put forward. But we can try to get you a more formal reaction to that proposal in the next day or so.

Q On the no-fly zone?

MR. EARNEST: On the no-fly zone, our position on that hasn't changed, which is at this point that's not something that we're considering. It raises a whole set of logistical questions about how exactly what would be enforced, what sort of resources would be used to actually protect that area. So that's why at this point we've indicated that that's not something that we're considering right now.

Q There have been some suggestions that there's some room to maneuver when Assad goes. I know it can't be the U.S. position that that's the case. But sort of tacitly, isn't that even what Kerry has been saying, that as long as there's a managed transition? I mean, that sort of suggests that if Assad were engaged in making commitments, there could be a timeframe sometime where he could stay in, even if we wouldn't endorse it, that you wouldn't oppose it either.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think what we have indicated is a desire to have exactly the kinds of conversations that you're talking about with the other stakeholders in the region. And again, we keep coming back to the fact that the political challenges inside of Syria are a significant impediment to our ability to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And we're not going to be able to solve our significant ISIL problem without bringing about the kind of political transition inside of Syria that's long overdue.

Q Josh, some people see the U.S. posture in the Mideast as a step back that creates a little bit of a leadership vacuum, and that the Russians are now stepping in to that take that place. Is that how you see it? And does the President think that Russian buildup in Syria is necessarily a bad thing -- or Russian leadership in this region is necessarily a bad thing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you've heard me make the case before, and I'll do the short version of it, which is that it is our view that for years Syria has essentially functioned as a client state of Russia in the Middle East, and right now Syria is essentially the last toe-hold that Russia has in the Middle East. And there are -- many analysts have observed that the renewed Russian military commitment to Syria is never to prop up the previous investments that they've made in that country.

So I think it's hard for anyone to make the case that Russia's actions inside of Syria are rooted in confidence about their position in the Middle East. In fact, I think that there was ample reason to think that they're responding to changes on the ground inside of Syria from a position of weakness, because they're concerned about the trends inside that country.

So what that prompts the United States and the President to do -- even in the context of the conversation that he had with President Putin yesterday -- is to consider what common ground we might share. We certainly share common ground about the need for a political transition inside of Syria. There's common ground about the need to de-conflict our military activities in that country. And there's common ground around the idea that ISIL does pose a significant threat not just to the region, but to countries around the world. And to the extent that we can cooperate in those areas, there's a chance that we can advance the interests of citizens in both of our countries.

But it leaves open-ended the question about how precisely the Russians will deploy the military assets that have been moved there. And they still have some decisions to make. In all cases, we want to make sure that whatever those activities are -- whether they are solely counter-ISIL activities, or whether they are tangible efforts to try to prop up the Assad regime -- that whatever they are, that first and foremost they are properly de-conflicted with U.S. and coalition military activities inside of Syria.

And we continue to believe that if Russia does commit significant military efforts to try to prop up the Assad regime, that that's ultimately a losing battle because there is a political transition that needs to take place inside of Syria. And doubling down on Assad is the sort of financial equivalent of throwing good money after bad.

Q Just to follow up on that broader point, to what extent would you say that the fact that, for example, the U.S. has declined to have a military, direct boots-on-the-ground entanglement in Syria has provided an opening for players, such as Russia? And then, just specifically in terms of yesterday in the discussion, you said that one takeaway is that Russia wants to support the government. Can you clarify at all what that entailed? Did they talk about how they'd be flying planes; to what extent they'd be intelligence-sharing? Is there any more clarity we can get on that?

MR. EARNEST: To answer your second question first, there was not a detailed conversation of that. There was, rather, a commitment on the part of both Presidents to, on a short timeframe, begin the kind of practical, tactical operational discussions about ensuring that our activities and theirs are effectively de-conflicted. There was a ready acknowledgement on either side that having our operations come into conflict did not serve anybody's interests.

Q On the broader question?

MR. EARNEST: On the broader question, I mean, in some ways the President's U.N. speech was focused on this very question -- which is, it's the President's view that the United States is acting from a position of strength when we mobilize the international community, even lead the international community, in responding to difficult international crises. And that's why we have worked hard to make sure that it's not just the United States that's invested in trying to address the problems that are plaguing Syria. In fact, we want to make sure that other countries are bought in and are actively contributing to the effort to solve those problems.

And we've seen, at the risk of understating it, the downsides of unilateral, U.S. military commitment to conflicts in the Middle East. And, in fact, the United States and even the region is still paying the price from some of those ill-advised decisions. And the President has taken a very different approach that he believes doesn't just better advance our interests, but actually is a true reflection of strength and authority in the international community.

Q I'll ask you about Afghanistan. How big a deal does the White House think the takeover from the Taliban of Kunduz is? Does it throw into question your draw-down strategy at all? And what are the steps forward for the U.S. there?

MR. EARNEST: So I have a little language on this I can share with you. The United States strongly condemns the Taliban attacks in Kunduz, and we stand with the Afghan people in our commitment to Afghan peace and security. Afghan forces have begun to retake Kunduz city and have successfully retaken several government buildings. The United States and our coalition forces that are in Afghanistan are currently providing advisory support in that effort.

I believe the Department of Defense does have some more specific details on which government facilities have been retaken. It's obviously a fluid situation.

Let me add one more thing, which is that, as we affirmed during the September 26th High-Level Event on Afghanistan, the United States, Afghanistan's neighbors, and our international partners will continue to strongly support Afghan President Ghani and the National Unity government to improve Afghan security, continue to target terrorists, and preserve the gains we have made together.

The kind of cooperation between the United States, our coalition partners, and the Afghan government is something that has grown over the last 13 years. And the United States remains invested in supporting the Afghans as they take responsibility for the security situation in their own country.

Q It sounds like you're not saying anything specific about troop numbers.

MR. EARNEST: At this point, other than condemning the violence and noting that we have taken -- or we are offering some advisory support to them, at this point I don't have any sort of immediate indication that this would change the longer-term strategy that's in place in Afghanistan.

Q Josh, one last one. The first couple years that the President came to the U.N., he was sort of a rock star. How does that feel now in your seven?

MR. EARNEST: I noticed the hall was packed when the President walked up to the podium to speak. And I think that says something about the President, but it also says something about the United States -- that when the President of the United States, regardless of who that person is, is prepared to address the international community, the world is there to listen and is eager to hear about our country's priorities and our values.

And that's an indication that the United States continues to be the country that the international community looks to when confronting significant international crises. And the case that the President made is that the interests of our country and the interests of the world are more effectively advanced when the international community is working together. And ultimately, and all too often, in order to work together the United States needs to lead the way. And whether it's climate change or fighting Ebola or even countering ISIL, that's exactly what the United States of America is doing under the leadership of Barack Obama.

Q Are there any scheduled (inaudible) to the President's schedule that we should be aware of for the rest of the week?

MR. EARNEST: Nothing at this point. We've sort of left the schedule intentionally flexible knowing that we were sort of facing this fiscal cliffhanger. Hopefully that will get resolved before the end of the day tomorrow. But we'll have some more details tomorrow.

Q Is Merkel where you need her to be on the Syria stuff?

MR. EARNEST: Sorry?

Q Merkel -- Angela Merkel. Are your European allies where you need them to be essentially on Syria and Assad and Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have recently seen our European allies step up and make additional commitments to the effort inside of Syria. And those kinds of relationships are critically important to our success, and we're going to continue to closely partner with our European allies as we confront this challenge.

Q And was Kazakhstan -- was that meeting just about the membership issue, or was there a broader issue with --

MR. EARNEST: We coordinate with them on a range of national security issues. They are a particularly important partner when it comes to certain nuclear nonproliferation priorities. There's an establishment inside of Kazakhstan of something called a low-enriched uranium bank. And that is important to our international efforts to promote nonproliferation. And that was among the things that were discussed in the context of that meeting today.

Q Will there be a readout?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, we'll get you a written readout.

Q Did President Castro ask President Obama whether the U.S. will abstain on that upcoming Security Council vote? Or did the President make him any assurances?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a detailed readout of their meeting beyond what I told you.

Q Even a vague one would be -- (laughter) --

MR. EARNEST: Check with my National Security Council counterparts and they may be able to get you something.

Q Do you know how long each of those two bilaterals were?

MR. EARNEST: No, but we can get that for you.

Okay, thanks, guys.

END

2:17 P.M. EDT