

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, 8/22/2014

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MR. SCHULTZ: Good afternoon. I'm going to let Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes lead us off here for about 10, 15 minutes, take your foreign policy/national security-focused questions. And then I will pull up the rear.

MR. RHODES: Great. Thanks, everyone. We'll just get to it. Jim.

Q Thanks. I wondered if could comment on two recent international developments. One is, NATO says that Russian artillery has moved into Ukraine and is firing on government positions. And the other one is this Chinese jet intercept of a Navy plane in international waters. And if I could follow up later on Islamic State.

MR. RHODES: Sure. Well, first of all, with respect to the Chinese jet, I know the Pentagon spoke to this earlier today. It's obviously a deeply concerning provocation, and we've communicated directly to the Chinese government our objection to this type of action. In terms of the additional details, I think the Pentagon spoke to those. But again, what we've encouraged is constructive military-to-military ties with China, and this type of action clearly violates the spirit of that engagement. And we've made our concerns known directly to Beijing.

With respect to the developments in Ukraine, we very much condemn the violation -- flagrant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty that we saw today with the movement of this Russian convoy into Ukraine. There had been negotiations during which it was made clear that Ukraine would have to accept the delivery of any humanitarian convoy into the country. It was made clear that the ICRC would have to participate in the delivery of any humanitarian assistance. That has not taken place. The ICRC is not part of this delivery. The government of Ukraine did not give agreement for this convoy to move within their borders.

I think this is part of a pattern that we've seen in recent weeks and that we've highlighted of Russian support to armed separatists in eastern Ukraine that violates Ukraine's sovereignty and destabilizes the situation. So we are deeply concerned about this. We're in touch with the Ukrainian government. We will be in touch today with our partners at the U.N. Security Council to discuss next steps. Russia should take the opportunity to remove this convoy from within Ukraine. If they don't, they will face additional costs and consequences from the United States and our partners in the international community.

Q Can you confirm that apparently NATO is saying that there are Russian artillery in Ukraine as well?

MR. RHODES: We have seen the use of Russian artillery in Ukraine in the past days. I wouldn't want to speak to an individual instance today. But it certainly has been a pattern whereby we've seen firing from within Russia into Ukraine, and we've seen a disturbing movement of Russian artillery and military equipment into Ukraine as well.

I'd say that this takes place in the context of the separatists dramatically losing support within eastern Ukraine, and the Ukrainian military making gains in places like Luhansk and Donetsk. The way, however, to respond to that situation and the humanitarian needs, the legitimate humanitarian needs, in eastern Ukraine is to pursue a path of de-escalation, not to move forward with further violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, which has only alienated Russia from the people of eastern Ukraine and isolated Russia in the international community.

Q On Islamic State, yesterday General Dempsey said that Islamic State can only be defeated if the fight is taken to them in Syria. I wondered, is that -- does the President agree with that? And if so, how does he intend to undertake it? And would it mean a significant change in the mission against Islamic State?

MR. RHODES: Well, we certainly agree that any strategy to deal with the ISIL organization has to deal with both sides of the border, Iraq and Syria. The strategy that we are already undertaking does address that in the sense that we are providing training and equipping and assistance to the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish security forces who are fighting them on the ground in Iraq. We are also providing support and military assistance to the moderate Syrian opposition. What we would like to see is those efforts squeeze the space where ISIL operates.

But there are other elements to our strategy. One is to enlist the support of partners in the region and the international community, because this poses a significant threat not just to the United States and to the Iraqi and Syrian people, but to the entire region. And there are things that we can do with partners to mobilize communities in places like Iraq to work to expel ISIL.

Then there's the question of U.S. military action. And the President has already authorized U.S. military action on the very specific missions of protecting our people and personnel and our facilities in Baghdad and Erbil. He's also authorized military action to deal with the humanitarian crisis on Mount Sinjar. Again, as we look ahead and look

forward, we are going to do what is necessary to protect Americans. And so if we see plotting against Americans, we see a threat to the United States emanating from anywhere, we stand ready to take action against that threat.

We've made very clear time and again that if you come after Americans, we're going to come after you wherever you are. And that's what's going to guide our planning in the days to come.

Steve.

Q Has the President signed off on airstrikes against ISIL in Syria?

MR. RHODES: Well, again, I don't want to get ahead of decisions the President hasn't been presented with, specific military options outside of those carrying out the current missions in Iraq. But we would certainly look at what is necessary in the long term to make sure we're protecting Americans. Again, the long-term strategy is going to have to involve people on the ground taking the fight to ISIL, and that is Iraqi and Kurdish forces; that is Syrians who we are supporting on the ground. But if we have a need to protect Americans and to take action when we see plotting against the United States and our interests, we'll reserve the right to do so. But I'm not going to get ahead of those decisions.

Q So you are -- it's fair to say you're actively considering airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria?

MR. RHODES: Well, again, you heard the President say we will be relentless against ISIL, and we will do what's necessary to protect Americans and see that justice is done for what we saw with the barbaric killing of Jim Foley. So we're actively considering what's going to be necessary to deal with that threat, and we're not going to be restricted by borders. We've shown time and again that if there's a counterterrorism threat we'll take direct action against that threat if necessary.

Q And last thing -- on Ukraine, the Russian convoy, do you see that as a direct invasion of Ukraine?

MR. RHODES: Well, at this point, again, we see this as part of a pattern of a flagrant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty; a direct incursion into their territory. They continue to have masses of military forces on the border, too, that would be a further escalation were they to move into Ukraine.

We're giving the Russians a clear message that they need to remove this convoy from inside of Ukraine's borders. If they don't, we will be making determinations with our international partners about how to ratchet up the costs and consequences on them. Clearly, again, this is not something that has started today. From the arming and training of Russia-backed separatists, to the shoot-down of MH17, we've seen escalation. And this adds to that escalation in a dangerous way. The Russians should take a path to de-escalation. If they don't, they're just going to find themselves further isolated, not just from the people of eastern Ukraine, but from the entire world.

Yes, Michelle.

Q From the way the administration, including yourself, is talking about ISIS today, it seems like a big jump from what the President himself said in January, calling ISIS a JV player. So would you still agree with his assessment just a few months ago?

MR. RHODES: I think what the President was speaking to a few months ago was, the fact of the matter is you have many different groups operating across the Middle East and North Africa. As we shift from a situation in which the counterterrorism threat, principally emanating from al Qaeda core, we are going to need to evaluate which of these groups pose a threat to the United States, which of these groups pose a threat to our personnel in the region, and which of these groups are more localized, militia-type forces that are potentially dangerous but can be handled by local security forces.

Clearly, ISIL, which has a long history and an origin dating back to AQI, al Qaeda in Iraq, has gained capacity in the last several months as the fighting in Syria has given them some safe haven there, and as they've advanced across Iraq and gained heavy weaponry, and as they've become better funded through various funding streams, including what they're able to sell in terms of oil and gas, the ransoms that they've been able to obtain. And that has developed their capacity in a way that has increased the threat. And they pose a greater threat today than they did six months ago, and we're taking it very seriously. That includes the direct military action we're taking in Iraq; that includes the increased support that we've provided to the Iraqi and Kurdish forces and to the Syrian opposition. And we're going to do what's necessary to deal with this counterterrorism challenge.

Kristen.

Q Ben, thanks. Former CIA Deputy Director Mike Morell said of James Foley's death, "This is ISIS's first terrorist attack against the United States." Do you agree with that assessment? Was that a terrorist attack against the United States?

MR. RHODES: Well, absolutely when you see somebody killed in such a horrific way that represents a terrorist attack; that represents a terrorist attack against our country and against an American citizen. And I think all of us have the Foley family in our thoughts and prayers.

The fact of the matter is that we've actually seen ISIL seek to advance too close to our facilities certainly for our own comfort. And so the President's decision to take military action a number of weeks ago was out of direct concern that if they were able to get into Erbil, that they could pose a threat to our personnel and our consulate there. So we have seen them pose a threat to our interests in the region, to our personnel and facilities in the region. And clearly, the brutal execution of Jim Foley represented an affront, an attack not just on him, but he is an American, and we see that as an attack on our country when one of our own is killed like that.

Q And how would you assess the threat that they pose to Americans living in the United States? Do you take their threats seriously?

MR. RHODES: Well, Kristen, we have to take their threats seriously. To date, they have operated much like an insurgency in Syria and Iraq. And again, they're deeply rooted in the insurgency that we faced in Iraq for many years as the legacy organization of al Qaeda in Iraq. And they, of course, pose a huge threat to the people in that region. And it's important to underscore, as the President did the other day, that it's not simply the threat they pose to the United States; it's the threat that they pose to the entire world.

And they've killed thousands of civilians, and they've killed Muslims more than any other faith. So whatever pretense they have to establish themselves as speaking for the Muslim world I think is completely disproven by their actions in that part of the world.

For Americans in the homeland, I think what we'd say is we monitor very closely whether or not ISIL will seek to develop plots that are aimed at the West, aimed at beyond this geographic area where they've been operating. We are doing that. We're actively consulting with European partners about how to watch the threat that they could pose to the West. We take their threats seriously, because we have to take every threat that's made against the United States seriously. And we're going to deal with that through, again, the action and the strategy we have in the region to squeeze them.

We're also dealing with it through homeland security. And the President is going to convene at the head-of-state level a U.N. Security Council meeting in September to deal with the issue of foreign fighters who are heading to Syria, because we're concerned about the ability of foreign fighters to come from Western countries and seek to come back.

Q And could they pull off a 9/11-size attack? Are they capable of that?

MR. RHODES: Look, to date, we have not seen them focus on that type of planning. But that doesn't mean we're not going to be very mindful that they could quickly aim to pivot to attacks against Western targets outside of the region. And so, again, this is something we're going to monitor very closely, because we certainly take seriously the fact that this is an organization that has a cadre of fighters who are clearly willing to do horrific things, as we saw in that video and as we've seen as they massacre innocent civilians in Iraq.

They have a significant stream of funding that they've acquired over the last year or two. And again, if they show the intent, or they show plotting against the United States, we'll be prepared to deal with that as necessary.

Jon.

Q Yes, the bigger picture on what we're doing in Iraq. Is the United States now engaged in a broad counterterrorism effort to defeat ISIL?

MR. RHODES: The Iraqi government is certainly at the front of an effort to defeat ISIL inside of Iraq, and we're providing them with support in order to do that. I think the strategy is one that we want to evict ISIL from their safe havens and squeeze the space that they're operating in, and ultimately push them out of that space.

Our contribution to that will come in many ways. It comes in the form of the airstrikes that are protecting Baghdad and Erbil that have given space for Iraqi forces to push forward against ISIL. It comes in the form of military assistance and advice and intelligence-sharing that we have with Iraqi and Kurdish forces on the ground. It comes with our political support in service of a new and inclusive Iraqi government, which should be able to broaden the coalition against ISIL so that we see more of Iraq's neighbors working with, for instance, Sunni communities to evict ISIL. So this is going to have to be a team effort.

But we have very unique capabilities that we can bring to bear in supporting those on the ground who are working to fight against ISIL on the frontlines.

Q But just a basic question: Is it the objective of U.S. efforts here to defeat ISIL? Is that a U.S. objective -- to defeat this terrorist --

MR. RHODES: Absolutely, in the long term our objective would be to see an organization like ISIL defeated. Our military objectives -- and so I'm just separating out the fact that we have military objectives that the President has articulated that aim to protect our facilities in Iraq and prevent this humanitarian catastrophe. In that long-term strategy of working for the defeat of ISIL, we will participate not just through our military actions, but through our training and equipping of Iraqi security forces, Kurdish security forces on the ground -- because ultimately they are the ones who are going to have to work to evict ISIL from their communities.

And again, their efforts to form an inclusive government in Iraq I think will go a long way towards enlisting the support of those communities who have been somewhat disaffected from the government in recent years.

Q And I'd like to get you to respond to Michael Foley, Jim Foley's brother, pretty emotional comments. He said -- and I quote -- "The United States could have done more on behalf of the Western and American hostages over there."

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, our hearts go out to Mr. Foley and the entire Foley family. I cannot imagine how it must feel to lose a loved one, and to lose a loved one in such a horrible way. And I certainly understand that any family would want to make sure that we are moving heaven and Earth to find and bring home American hostages.

I can assure you that we have done everything that we can possibly do to try to bring home our hostages. It's an incredibly difficult circumstance in a place like Syria, again, where you have such a violent conflict raging. But we've used all of our military, intelligence, diplomatic resources that we can bring to bear to try to pull a thread to find out where our hostages are; to try to rescue them when we saw an opportunity; to try to work with any country that might have any means of locating them. And tragically, we weren't able to rescue Mr. Foley. But we're going to keep trying for all of our hostages, not just in Syria, but around the world.

Q How many are there? If I can just ask -- how many American hostages are being held by ISIL?

MR. RHODES: Jon, we don't want to put out a specific number, again, out of respect for the fact that there are sensitivities involved with that. But this is a small number of hostages who are held within Syria. And we're going to continue to do whatever we can to try to bring them home. Every day that they're in custody there is a day that they're at risk.

Major.

Q At the White House, the President said the goal was to contain ISIL. The Secretary of State two days later said the goal was to destroy ISIL. Which is it? And how far and how long are we prepared to carry out whichever campaign it is?

MR. RHODES: Well, Major, I think the President has spoken to the fact that our military objectives in Iraq right now are limited to protecting our personnel and facilities and addressing this humanitarian crisis.

We have to be clear that this is a deeply rooted organization. They have been there for 10 years, when you go back to AQI. It is going to take time, a long time, to fully evict them from the communities where they operate. We can do things, though, in the immediate term to address the threat to the United States and our people and to push them back, and to give space for these security forces who are taking the fight to them. We can create a coalition that can support Iraqis and the moderate Syrian opposition in their efforts to squeeze ISIL. And that's what we're doing.

But it's going to take time. When you talk about an objective like the ultimate defeat of ISIL, it's going to take time to dislodge a group that has been operating in this part of the world for the better part of a decade in an insurgency. But what we can do is address the threat to the United States, give these security forces the space that they need, go on the offense, push them out of the communities that they're in, and then work towards that ultimate goal of defeating ISIL.

And as the President said the other day, Major, this is a cancer that has to be eradicated, and that's how we look at this. We have to have our near-term goals that put the safety of Americans front and center. And then in the long term, we'll be working with our partners to defeat this organization.

Q Are you saying first contain, then destroy?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think, obviously, by definition, Major, you need an immediate term to contain a threat -- so, yes. But as you're doing that, you need to make sure that if there's a threat to the American people that we have the ability to take action. And that's what the President did, for instance, when they were bearing down on our facilities in Erbil.

But we are already pushing them back. You saw after we began our airstrikes, for instance, the Kurdish forces, with our support, were able to make advances and to retake a big piece of critical infrastructure in Iraq, the Mosul Dam. So that's the dynamic that

we're seeking to foster, one that doesn't just contain, but that allows those forces on the ground to go on the offense.

Q Ben, one other issue -- and I don't know how much the President has been briefed on it the last couple of weeks, but obviously the Ebola crisis continues to mount in severity. To what degree has the President been briefed on that? And is there any serious consideration or dialogue going on with the administration of sending additional assets to the region, such as the USS Mercy or USS Comfort, which are platform naval vessel hospitals that might be able to provide some assistance to some number of people affected in those countries by this virus disease?

MR. RHODES: So we always look at whatever resource is necessary to deal with an outbreak like Ebola that we've seen. We have prioritized getting people and resources on the ground in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone, so that we're working to strengthen their public health architecture.

There are clear steps that we believe they can take to contain the outbreak and to make sure that people are getting appropriate care. That's what we focused on with the CDC and other U.S. agencies. And if there are opportunities for us to do additional things, we'll review those. But the best solution in our mind is to put the public health infrastructure in place in those countries to contain this outbreak, treat those who are suffering from it, and ensure that it doesn't spread beyond their borders.

Q (Inaudible) right now as an option?

MR. RHODES: I don't have any updates for you on additional military resources. We've focused on public health resources to date.

Last one I'll take -- Mike.

Q When the President announced the airstrikes in Iraq, he came to the American people and made a statement and he laid out a sort of specific case for what was happening, what was going to happen and what was not going to happen. Do you all believe that that case that he made then covers what you might do in Syria as well, both from a kind of public relations perspective, what he needs to tell the American people? And then on the legal side, are there things that he would -- if you all decide to take military action in Syria along the lines that you just talked about to protect American interests, would he have to come to Congress? Would there be additional legal -- either here in the United States or international legal authority that he would have to seek to do that?

MR. RHODES: Well, on your first question, Mike, look, the President always keeps the American people updated about the status of any military action and major foreign policy and national security actions. Even since he announced those airstrikes earlier this month, I'd note that he's spoken a number of times to developments in Iraq and developments associated with our efforts against ISIL. So, clearly, I think any additional action that he would take is one that he would explain to the American people, whether it's in Iraq or anywhere else. And we will keep the American people fully informed.

And I think the American people understand that this President is very deliberate about the use of force. He doesn't rush towards a military option. He takes very seriously when we put U.S. military action on the table, when we have our pilots flying missions like the airstrikes we're undertaking in Iraq.

However, I think the American people also understand that there are some threats that have to be dealt with, and we're dealing with the threat from ISIL in Iraq by protecting our people there. And as we've done against al Qaeda around the world, we'll take whatever action is necessary to protect our people. And President Obama has shown that he'd do that, whether it's in Pakistan with the bin Laden operation, in Yemen, in Somalia. We will take direct action against terrorists who threaten the United States even as we develop long-term solutions that empower partners on the ground.

With respect to legal matters, I wouldn't want to prejudge an action that we haven't taken. I would say that the actions we're taking in Iraq are obviously at the invitation of the Iraqi government and consistent with the President's constitutional authority. The action that we took to try to rescue hostages in Syria was entirely legal, of course, because we were seeking to save Americans from imminent danger. And that is at the core of justification for military action.

I think that any additional actions that we take we would want to consult with Congress.

Q But, I mean, the things that you had drawn about Iraq was that you were invited in, what you just mentioned. In Syria, that obviously wouldn't be the case. So isn't there a distinction? And wouldn't you have to --

MR. RHODES: I don't want to speak hypothetically about an action we haven't taken. But to take the example of what we did, you don't need to be invited in if you're trying to rescue your people from imminent danger. And so that was the basis for the action that we took to try to rescue our hostages.

Going forward, we would obviously have a legal justification for any action we take. And I do want to be clear -- we would consult with Congress. This is, again, a problem that we have to deal with as a nation, and so whether it's our ongoing operations in Iraq or additional steps that may need to be taken against ISIL, we would carry those out in very close consultation with Congress about their support and their role in providing support for our efforts.

Q Can I just follow? Does the U.S. need to rethink its policy of not paying ransom for hostages?

MR. RHODES: We obviously understand that Americans who have loved ones who are in harm's way want to do anything to try to bring them home, and we provide support in any way we can with our military, our diplomacy, our intelligence resources, our law enforcement resources. But as a matter of policy, we do not provide ransom or any funding for terrorist organizations. We feel very strongly that it is not the right policy for governments to support the payment of ransom to terrorist organizations. In the long run, what that does is it provides additional funding to these terrorist organizations,

which allows them to expand their operations. It incentivizes the kidnapping of foreigners in ways that we've seen, frankly, with organizations like ISIL and some al Qaeda affiliates.

So, again, as a matter of policy, I think the U.S. government remains absolutely committed to the notion that we will not provide funding for terrorist organizations that we believe that only creates perverse incentives for those terrorist organizations going forward, and a source of funding. And we want to cut off and choke off their sources of funding. What we will do is use all the resources of the U.S. government to try to find and, if possible, bring home those Americans who are missing. And as I said, that will include our military, our intelligence, our law enforcement and our diplomacy.

Thanks.

MR. SCHULTZ: Before we get started, just a quick note mostly of appreciation as we wind down our past few weeks here on the Vineyard. It's been a busy few weeks, and I appreciate your patience and flexibility as we move through a lot of breaking news and a lot of developments both up here, in Washington, and around the world. So I appreciate you working with us. I appreciate your flexibility and also your feedback as we try to make sure we're getting you the best and accurate and quickest information we could.

With that, I will open it up to your questions.

Q The President has taken a lot of flak for going golfing this week during some of these tumultuous times. Could you just explain why he does this?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. I am not going to get into the President's mindset on that. I will say that, generally, I think that sports and leisure activities are a good way for release and clearing of the mind for a lot of us.

Jon.

Q Given the gravity of the events that he's had to struggle with while he's been up here, has there been any consideration, any internal discussion of saying, hey, maybe a day off from golf might not be a bad idea? I mean, particularly yesterday, when you're -- or particularly dealing with, in the wake of what happened with James Foley, and the President comes out and gives a very powerful statement on that murder, and then he goes right from here to a golf course. Is there any discussion of maybe, in a circumstance like that, it's best to stay off the links for a little while?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jon, you are right the President did give a powerful statement in this auditorium Wednesday afternoon. I think that anyone wondering his views on both the situation with ISIL, that video, or his concern for the Foley family should go back and review that statement. It was delivered from the heart. It was candid. It was honest and it was open. And I think anyone trying to assess how seriously he takes the gravity of that situation should go back and watch that, or read it, or listen to it again.

Q I have no doubt about that. What I'm asking is, is the optics in what people see. And you saw the kind of split-screen photos that we've seen in newspapers yesterday -- the President making that statement, the terrible tragedy that the Foley family is dealing with, and then the shots of the President kind of laughing it up at the golf course right afterwards.

MR. SCHULTZ: I understand you're asking about the optics. But let me just take a minute to explain how we approach this. First and foremost, the President is focused on doing his job. And to us, that's paramount. And what I think you've seen is that just because the President is in a different location doesn't mean he's not doing his job. And I don't think anyone in this room who's been covering this or following the President for the past few weeks could deny that the President has been deeply engaged on issues both domestic and abroad.

It's important for us to understand, and I think that's been evident, is that the issues the country is facing both on the international stage and back here at home have absolutely captured the President's attention while we've been here.

Q And can I just ask a quick follow-up to what Michelle was asking Ben about, about the President's comments last January, saying that these al Qaeda affiliates, like ISIL, are the "JV team." And Ben said, well, in the last six months they have certainly grown in power and scope. So is it fair to say now, based on what Ben just told us, that the President's comments, when he called groups like ISIL the "JV team" of al Qaeda, are no longer operative? Is that no longer the President's view?

MR. SCHULTZ: That would not be my take. I'm not going to do too much --

Q So he still thinks this group is the JV team?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think the President spoke about ISIL about 48 hours ago, and the brutality they committed, the barbaric acts, and everything the President is going to instruct the United States government -- both military, diplomatic and intelligence -- in order to see justice served. So I don't think there's any dispute right now, discrepancy right now about how the President views ISIL, because he spoke to you a few days ago about that.

Michelle.

Q So would the President agree with what Secretary Hagel said yesterday then, that this is beyond anything we've seen? I mean, there seems to be these big differences of the way the administration words it, depending on who you're talking to. So can you sort of iron this out, and what is the view of what the Secretary said yesterday?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure, I'm happy to iron this out, but I am going to, again, refer to what the President said a few days ago in which he said that ISIL has "rampaged across cities and villages -- killing innocent, unarmed civilians in cowardly acts of violence. They abduct women and children, and subject them to torture, [and] rape and slavery. They have murdered Muslims -- both Sunni and Shia -- by the thousands. They target

Christians and religious minorities, driving them from their homes, murdering them when they can for no [other] reason.” And they have “declared their ambition to commit genocide against an ancient people.”

So I don't think we are equivocating or parsing our approach on this.

Q So in those terms, is that beyond anything we've seen?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think that, A, Ben addressed this a little bit ago; B, the President has addressed this a little bit ago. I'm not going to be here to sort of parse the differences between al Qaeda and ISIL. Both are clearly terrorist organizations. Both want to do harm to innocent people. And I think the President's record on counterterrorism speaks for itself.

Q Does he agree with Secretary Hagel's assessment, though?

MR. SCHULTZ: That what?

Q That this is beyond -- a threat beyond anything we've seen, or that ISIS is a force beyond anything we've seen.

MR. SCHULTZ: I think how the President views ISIL has been articulated a couple times now.

Major.

Q On domestic policy, could you give us the White House take on new accommodations made for those who had opposed legally and through other means the birth control requirements for some religious-affiliated groups, or private businesses that have registered objections? I understand there's some new developments on that.

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes. Thank you, Major. As you point out, today the administration took several steps to ensure women, whose coverage is threatened, receive coverage for recommended contraceptive services through their health care plans at no additional cost, as they should be entitled to under the Affordable Care Act, while continuing the administration's goal of respecting religious beliefs. The rules, which I believe you're referencing, are in response to recent court actions and balance our commitment to helping ensure women have continued access to coverage for preventative services important to their health, while respecting the administration's goal of respecting religious beliefs.

Q So non-profits? And some of these companies that object can now opt out of paying directly for these birth control services? Is that correct?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I actually think that what these rules do are help ensure that women have access to contraceptive coverage. The administration believes the accommodation is legally sound. But in light of the Supreme Court order regarding Wheaton College, the departments are augmenting their regulations to provide an

alternative for objecting non-profit religious organizations to provide notification, while ensuring that enrollees in plans of such organizations receive separate coverage of contraceptive services without cost-sharing.

Q And can you help me understand who pays?

MR. SCHULTZ: I know there's two separate rules -- one for the non-profits and one for the closely held profits. I'm going to refer you to HHS on how those are implemented.

Q And do you think this will be the end of this?

MR. SCHULTZ: Do I think this will be the end of it? I'm not sure. I know that -- well, we, first and foremost, want Congress to act. That's going to be our sort of bedrock principle on this. We believe that Congress can and should act to ensure that any women affected by recent Supreme Court actions get the same coverage options that everyone else has offered. Legislative action is the quickest and best way to ensure that women get access to the services they need, and we call on Congress to act quickly.

Q But until then, this is your final regulatory move in this sphere?

MR. SCHULTZ: I'm not sure. I know that this particular step will have a few steps along the way, so I'm happy to get back to you on that.

Wendell.

Q The GAO has ruled that the administration broke the law in the Bergdahl swap by not notifying Congress and by using federal funds inappropriately. What's your reaction to that? Are you going to challenge that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Wendell, it's not going to surprise you to know that we strongly disagree with GAO's conclusion, and we reject the implication that the administration acted unlawfully. The President has the constitutional responsibility to protect the lives of Americans abroad, and specifically to protect U.S. servicemembers.

It's important for everyone here to understand that the GAO report expressly does not address the lawfulness of the administration's actions as a matter of constitutional law.

Q So what's going to be your reaction to it then?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think I just read one.

Q Will you just -- is there recourse on the part of Congress? Is there recourse -- the GAO has issued a finding that you disagreed with. Are you simply going to ignore it?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I could tell you that the administration's actions occurred only after the Secretary of Defense determined that the risk posed by the detainees to the United States or U.S. persons of interest was substantially mitigated and that the transfer was in the national security interests of the United States, as required by the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2014.

At the time, Wendell, you'll recall, the President was very clear that our commitment to men and women serving overseas to leave none of them behind is a bedrock principle for him, one that doesn't come with caveats. And that's why he acted in that manner.

Q So help me understand the impact of the GAO ruling. Is there any?

MR. SCHULTZ: You've asked for the White House's reaction. I've given that to you. In terms of the impact of the GAO, you might want to check with the GAO.

Peter.

Q Eric, has the President spoken to Attorney General Holder since Holder was in Ferguson? And what does the President think of the current status there and what should happen going forward?

MR. SCHULTZ: Thanks, Peter. The President has been in touch with the Attorney General since the Attorney General was in Missouri. I think it's fair to say that we've been encouraged by what we've seen in the past few days. The President, last week and then on Monday, I believe, called for a de-escalation in the tensions. That was paramount for him. And so far we've seen the developments of the past few days.

To answer your question, the President has been in touch with the Attorney General. The President and many of us at the White House are closely monitoring and receiving regular briefings on the situation in Ferguson.

As you know, the Department of Justice opened an investigation -- an independent, federal civil rights investigation into the death of Michael Brown. And both the President and Attorney General have committed to a fair, thorough and independent investigation.

Q What did the Attorney General tell him? What were his impressions that he shared with the President?

MR. SCHULTZ: I'm not going to get into their sort of internal communications. I think the Department of Justice has put out a lot of readouts of that trip. And I know it's well covered by your colleagues.

I can tell you that the President felt that the Attorney General had a very good and worthwhile trip to Ferguson. He met with members of the community, the congressional delegation, local officials, along with FBI agents and DOJ personnel conducting the federal criminal investigation, and he received an update on each of their progress. He also met with the parents of Michael Brown.

Q If I could just ask a question that we've been asked by media in St. Louis. Do you foresee the President ever going there to personally address what happened?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have any scheduling announcements at this time. I do think you've seen the President speak about this again so very openly and candidly over the past few days, speak at length about how he views the situation in Ferguson. The Attorney

General went out there earlier this week. And so he's continuing to monitor this, and his first and foremost priority is with the safety of those in Ferguson.

Kristen.

Q Eric, thanks. Can you update us on where the President stands in terms of his decision-making process for announcing a potential executive order on immigration?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. As I think you'll recall, on June 30th, the President spoke to you all in the Rose Garden, and that was on the heels of being informed by Speaker Boehner that the House Republicans were not going to bring up immigration reform for a vote. As you may also recall, we believe that that bipartisan bill passed by Democrats and Republicans in the United States Senate should be brought up for a vote. We are not even asking House Republicans -- or the House leadership to vote for it; we're just asking for them to bring it up for a vote -- because I'd bet you a good deal that that would pass with both Democrats and Republicans in the House.

That said, Speaker Boehner did inform the President -- we were fairly forthcoming in that. And on the heels of that, the President announced in the Rose Garden that he was directing the Director of Homeland Security and the Attorney General to identify additional actions the administration can take on its own within the President's existing legal authority to do what Congress refuses to do, and fix the broken immigration system that's been plaguing our country for many years now. If Congress is not going to do their job, the least we can do is ours. And the President expects their recommendations by the end of the summer.

I don't have any additional updates for me to read out at this time.

Q So he hasn't gotten any of the recommendations yet? He hasn't sort of begun his own decision-making process yet?

MR. SCHULTZ: I believe -- I'm not sure the status of the recommendations incoming to the White House. I can tell you the President has put a great deal of thought into this already, as you've heard many times. And as soon as we have anything definitive, any announcements, we'll make sure you get those.

Q And just given that this number of 5 million people potentially being able to stay in the United States has been floated around -- I know that's a number that has come from some of the advocacy groups -- but is the President open to going that far, allowing 5 million of the 11 million illegal immigrants who are currently here to stay here?

MR. SCHULTZ: As you point out, those numbers are in the newspaper. They were not put out by us in the administration. We are preserving the sort of integrity of this process to allow the President to receive those recommendations from the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. We're going to review those. And as the President said, he wants to act by the end of the summer.

Jim.

Q I have one final question, following up on Wendell, on Bergdahl. We heard Ben describe the U.S. policy as paying no ransom for hostages, yet the U.S. released Taliban operatives in order to get Bergdahl back. Why does one policy lead to more kidnappings but the other one does not?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think, again, what the President made clear at the time of the Guantanamo transfer was that his commitment to the men and women that serve overseas is a bedrock one that we will leave no man or woman behind. That's what he was keeping faith with, and that's something that's unshakeable for him.

As we've made previously clear, the administration determined that it was lawful to proceed with the transfer in order to protect the life of a U.S. servicemember held captive and in danger for almost five years, notwithstanding that Congress did not receive the 30 days' notice.

Again, we disagree with GAO's conclusion and reject the implication that the administration acted unlawfully.

Q Week ahead?

MR. SCHULTZ: Steve, it is with great regret that I do not have a week ahead for you -- despite my best efforts. But we will have that on paper later today.

Q Thank you.

MR. SCHULTZ: Michelle.

Q The growth of ISIS that you guys have talked about, rapidly, even in the last six months, how much of that would you attribute to the payment of ransoms by other countries? And how much will the administration be working with other countries or pressuring them not to keep paying these enormous ransoms?

MR. SCHULTZ: I will reiterate what Ben said, which is our policy is clear: The United States government, as a matter of longstanding policy, does not grant concessions to hostage-takers. Doing so would put more Americans at risk of being captive and would be a funding stream for these terrorist organizations.

But let's be clear that this isn't just U.S. policy; this is a growing international norm. In January of this year, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2133, an unprecedented resolution which identifies kidnapping for ransom as a source of terrorist financing, expresses the Council's determination to secure the safe release of hostages without ransom payments or political concessions, and calls upon all member states to prevent terrorists from benefitting directly or indirectly from such concessions.

Thank you, guys.

END

2:41 P.M. EDT

