

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/3/2016

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The White House

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

****Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.**

1:13 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. It's nice to see you all. As you can see, I'm joined by some special guests today. Earlier this year, the President traveled to South by Southwest, where he challenged tech leaders, creators and entrepreneurs to leverage the latest technology, the most innovative approaches to solve some of our country's toughest challenges. And today, he's bringing that call to action to the White House, to the South Lawn, to be precise, in the first ever South by South Lawn festival. It celebrates the work of everyday Americans who are using cutting-edge technology, art, film and innovative thinking to shape a better future for Americans and across the globe.

I will briefly introduce the leaders who are standing next to me. I'll give them an opportunity to each speak briefly, and then we'll open it up to questions you may have for them.

So, standing immediately to my right is Carmen Rojas. Carmen is the CEO of the Workers Lab, an innovation lab that invests in entrepreneurs, community organizers and technologists to develop new ways to build power for working people in the United States. And to her right is Jukay Hsu. Jukay is a Bronze Star veteran of the Iraq war. He is also the founder of Coalition for Queens, which creates pathways out of poverty through technology in the world's most diverse community. And to his right is Anil Dash. Anil is an entrepreneur, activist and writer who advocates for more humane, inclusive and ethical technology industry. Anil cofounded Makerbase, an online community for people who make apps and websites.

So like I said, we'll give each of them an opportunity to offer some brief comments about what they're hoping to do at the White House today, and then we'll give you a chance to ask your questions.

So, Carmen, do you want to go first?

MS. ROJAS: Good afternoon, everyone. I am really excited to be here. This is a real honor for us at the Workers Lab to be able to share some of the most cutting-edge technologies, enterprises and organizations that are transforming conditions for working people in the U.S. And in particular, we're excited to announce the launch of a digital platform called Together We Work, which is focused on offering young people who work a set of digital tools that they can use to organize and amplify their voice and to tell their stories and connect with each other.

Thank you for having me.

MR. HSU: Hello, everyone. It's honor really for me to be here and represent my organization, C4Q. We clear pathways away from poverty through technology training in Queens, which is the world's most diverse community -- it's the most diverse county in America. For us, as the technology sector continues to change all industries and reshapes our economy, we hope that everyone has the opportunity to not only learn to code but get an amazing job in technology, and help creating these companies in innovations of the future.

Our program -- we're really fortunate -- focused on the 65 percent of New Yorkers that don't go to college. I think most Americans don't go to college, and if you never go to college, your average lifetime income in New York is \$27,000 a year. For us going through the program, we raise people's average income from \$18,000 starting out to \$85,000 a year after the program, and at the same time, represents the diversity of Queens, which is half women, 60 percent black or Hispanic, half immigrants. So we really feel that if we can do it there and help support the growth in New York's technology community we hope communities all across America can also have access to these opportunities and help grow our economy.

Thank you for having me.

MR. DASH: Good afternoon. Working in the tech industry the last 10 or 15 years, I've gotten to watch events like South by Southwest, where people in tech talk about how they want to change the world, the impact they want to have. And it's really exciting to see the dots sort of get connected from that intent to South by South Lawn today, where we're going to have this series of conversations with people doing the actual work of impact in their communities around areas like workers' rights, as Carmen said, some of the other folks who are changing around civil rights, and sort of taking that promise of what we thought technology was going to do for the world and connecting it into the arts and film and music, and some other disciplines, and also see the real impact we have in helping our communities, our neighborhoods, our cities and the whole country.

MR. EARNEST: Any questions?

Thank you all for coming and making the presentation.

Okay. Sometimes it's harder to get out of here than it is to get in. (Laughter.) Hopefully we're not going to be testing that proposition with me today. (Laughter.) But we'll see. Obviously, we're really excited about all of the activities associated with the South by

South Lawn. And those of you who are interested, we'll have varying opportunities to cover today and it also will be livestreamed. So, fortunately, the weather cooperated, and it should be a really terrific event.

So, Nancy, I'm happy to talk to you about that or anything else that may be on your mind today.

Q I wonder if you can tell us what the President's reaction was to the reports about Donald Trump's taxes, what it says about Donald Trump, or what it says about the tax code.

MR. EARNEST: I've not spoken to the President about this story. What I can tell you is that you've heard the President on a number of occasions since his very first year in office talk about the need to ensure that we have a tax code that is consistent with a smart economic strategy, but also a tax code that's fair.

And the President has worked hard -- one of his most prominent campaign promises in 2008 was to make the tax code more fair while at the same time protecting tax cuts that middle class families benefit from. And in the context of the Recovery Act that was passed within the first couple of months of the President taking office, there were significant tax cuts included for small businesses, other tax cuts that were targeted at middle-class families and, after the President's reelection in 2012, you'll recall that the President was able to finally reach a breakthrough agreement with Republicans in Congress to raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans. This is the first time the Republicans in the Congress had voted to raise taxes in a couple of decades.

So the President has made fairness in our tax code a top priority, again, because the President believes in the principle of fairness, but also because he believes it's the smartest way for us to pursue sustainable economic growth in the United States. And the President is hopeful that he will be succeeded in office by a President who is committed to not just pursuing but even furthering that strategy.

Q Do you think that Donald Trump's report on his taxes is emblematic of what's wrong with the tax code? Does it offer you an example to make that case?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's difficult for anybody to draw a firm conclusion about that without having an opportunity to look at all of the data. And I recognize that's a subject of some dispute on the campaign trail.

What I will say is, Mr. Trump's tax strategies aside, the President believes that we could do some very helpful things for the economy by closing loopholes that only benefit the wealthy and well-connected, and using the revenue from those closed loopholes to invest in things like infrastructure; invest in community college for every hardworking American student. These are the kinds of things that we know would be good for our economy both in the short term, but also would lay a strong foundation for our long-term economic growth.

So that's the strategy that the President has pursued. And, frankly, he did that before we knew all that much about the tax strategies that were designed by the Republican nominee and his accountants.

Q Also, what is the White House reaction to Russia's decision to suspend the deal on disposing of weapons-grade plutonium?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I've seen those reports as of this morning. This is an announcement that we were disappointed by. The decision by the Russians to unilaterally withdraw from this commitment is disappointing, and the reason for that is that this agreement that went into force in 2011 pledged the disposal of thousands of nuclear weapons' worth of plutonium. And this was an agreement that was reached by the United States and Russia because we're the two countries that have the largest amount of this material and both leaders in Russia and the United States have made nonproliferation a priority. And certainly the United States is interested in limiting proliferation and trying to reduce the risk associated with potential nuclear terrorism.

And again, we know that Russia's leadership has recognized this risk. The United States has been steadfast since 2011 in implementing our side of the bargain, and we would like to see the Russians continue to do the same thing.

Q Do you think it's -- that the Syria issue would spill over into this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I think -- obviously these are two different situations, and we've made clear that our relationship with the Russians is quite complex. There are areas where the United States and Russia have been able to work effectively to advance our shared interests. Our success in completing a diplomatic arrangement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, for example, would not have been possible without the constructive role that Russia played throughout those negotiations. I think that's an indication of the priority that Russia has placed on nonproliferation. They understand the national security consequences of this.

The United States and Russia have been able to coordinate our efforts in terms of trying to isolate the North Koreans for their destabilizing activities on the Korean Peninsula. That obviously is a positive development and certainly strengthens our hand as we deal with a very difficult situation there.

And we've obviously talked quite a bit about how the United States and Russia were able to work together to dispose of Bashar al-Assad's declared chemical weapons stockpile in Syria -- again, an agreement that would not have been possible without the ability of the United States and Russia to work effectively together.

We've obviously been quite disappointed about a range of Russian decisions however, both inside of Syria but also in Ukraine. And, unfortunately, the announcement about the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement is more in line with those kinds of decisions that have only deepened Russia's isolation in the international community. But

the plutonium arrangement is one that does reflect the shared priorities of our two countries, and we are hopeful that the Russians will recognize that and follow through on the commitments that they have made.

Q Josh, what is the United States' next step or move after the Colombians decided over the weekend to reject the peace deal? The President was obviously very involved in this. What's your next move?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, obviously the President had an opportunity to visit with President Santos in New York, and the expectation was that the peace agreement would be ratified by Colombian voters, and that's not what occurred. Colombia is a democracy. It's a sovereign country. And the leaders of Colombia had made a commitment to give the voters the opportunity to weigh in on that agreement. And the margin was quite narrow, but it's important for the decisions that are made by the Colombian government to reflect the will of the Colombian people. And that's precisely what President Santos has indicated.

Now, the good news is that all of the parties -- even the FARC leaders and even the opposition leader, Mr. Uribe -- have indicated a commitment to achieve peace and to do so in an inclusive manner. So I know that President Santos and his team is focused on figuring out what they can do at the negotiating table to move this forward. And we're hopeful that they'll be able to settle on a path that leads to the kind of negotiated settlement and negotiated peace that all of the parties have indicated they would like to see.

The United States, thus far, has played a constructive role in trying to facilitate that kind of an agreement and the United States stands ready, even through our Special Envoy, to try to support all sides as they reach an agreement that is consistent with the will and ambition of the Colombian people.

Q So you intend to sort of play a similar role that the U.S. has before? Can you be any more specific about that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the process from here is going to be dictated by President Santos and the Colombian government, and obviously that will also be determined by their negotiations with the FARC about how to move forward. We hope that all sides will continue to be focused on the goal of a negotiated peace and we want to encourage them to continue to pursue that path. But it's also important for them to be acting consistent with the promises that they've made to the Colombian people, and to be acting consistent with the will of the Colombian people.

So the President has made the observation on a number of occasions that democracy can be messy at times. This might be the latest example of that. The good news is that all sides, including the voters, I think are still focused on trying to reach this negotiated peace. And that certainly is within the national security interest of the United States to end this war. And we're going to encourage all sides to pursue that peace.

Q Moving to the Philippines. Is there a concern within the White House that the increasing hostility from President Duterte will erode the military and political alliance between the United States and the Philippines?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, the United States is strongly committed to the alliance that we have with the Philippines. And the President was able to personally attest to his commitment to that alliance when he traveled to the Philippines a year or so ago and met with President Duterte's predecessor to discuss strengthening and deepening that alliance.

You'll recall the President -- I think you may have even been there -- the President did an event at a pier in Manila, where there was a Navy -- or Coast Guard vessel that had been transferred to the Filipino government for use in their maritime security operations. This is a U.S. Coast Guard vessel that had been transferred to the Filipinos to enhance their maritime security. And I think that's an indication of the kind of military and security cooperation that President Obama is committed to and that our country is committed to.

This is also one of the reasons that President Obama had committed and intended to meet with President Duterte when he was in -- when both leaders were in Laos a month or so ago. That meeting didn't come about because it was pretty clear from the lead-up to that meeting that it was unlikely to be particularly constructive. But the President is committed to the kind of relationship that the Filipino people certainly acknowledge has benefitted their country and their national security.

There are a variety of ways in which the United States and the United States military has benefitted the Filipino people, both in terms of adding resources to their maritime security efforts; there are U.S. forces that work closely with counterterrorism and security forces in the Philippines to address an extremist threat in that country that they're countering. The United States military was also instrumental in helping to mobilize a response to a deadly typhoon in the Pacific Ocean in the last couple years -- a response that certainly was instrumental to meeting the needs of thousands of Filipinos who had been negatively affected by this devastating storm.

So that's the kind of relationship I think that you would expect between two treaty allies. And it's the kind of relationship that has the United States being held in quite high regard by the Filipino people. And President Obama and the other members of his administration are committed to continuing to strengthen that alliance.

Q But the examples that you're citing precede the hostility that I was referencing by President Duterte. So to what extent does that affect those goals? And do you take seriously his threat to end the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement? And are you concerned about the growing influence of China as a result of the hostility that I mentioned?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as it relates to the defense agreement, it's, of course, a binding one, and there's a formal process for withdrawing from it or changing it, and I'm not aware that that process has commenced in anyway.

With regard to the efforts of the Philippine government to form relationships with other countries in the region, obviously there are a variety of other examples of other allies of the United States seeking to strengthen their relationship with other countries in the region, including China. So I've been asked this question both in the context of President Park of South Korea and Prime Minister Abe of Japan when they've had conversations with President Xi or other senior Chinese officials, and what we've said at every turn is that the United States believes it's in our interest for our closest friends in the Asia Pacific to have an effective working relationship with the Chinese.

And sometimes it's difficult to determine precisely what President Duterte's intent is in offering public comments, but if his intent is to seek a more effective relationship with China, that doesn't undermine U.S. positioning in that region of the world. And that's certainly been true with regard to our relationship with South Korea and Japan, who obviously have their own diplomatic relationship with China, as well.

Michelle.

Q When you were asked about Donald Trump and the documents that came out over the last couple of days, you mentioned a fair tax code and you mentioned loopholes. So are you saying that what happened here, the claiming of a nearly billion-dollar loss that could have led to not paying taxes for years, is that unfair and is that a loophole?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'll let others opine on the political ramifications here. And with regard to the specific details of his tax arrangements, I think it's a little hard to draw that kind of conclusion without seeing the tax returns themselves. And thus far, he's not released them. So I'll let people with a little more expertise weigh in on his individual situation and what it says about his approach to doing business.

The President's priorities appear to be different, but are deeply held. And these priorities for a more fair tax code -- a tax code that advantages the middle class, a tax code that closes loopholes that only benefit the wealthy and well-connected -- those are policies that President Obama campaigned on in 2008 and that he's been pursuing since his very first year in office.

And our success in making progress in making our tax code more fair is at least part of what we would attribute our strengthening economy and our falling deficit to. There are a variety of contributing factors, of course, but there is no denying that making tax cuts permanent for middle-class families, and expanding tax cuts that benefit middle-class families in the form of the child tax credit or the American Opportunity Tax Credit, which allows people to get a credit on college tuition, are things that are good for the U.S. economy and they certainly do make the U.S. economy more fair and make the tax code more fair.

So that's been our approach, and it's one that the President has prioritized.

Q And speaking of the FARC vote, several times just in the past year we've seen a popular vote go deeply against U.S. goals or projected outcomes, or what the U.S. would have liked to have seen happen. And we've also heard the President several times say that

he doesn't think that the American people will elect Donald Trump. When you see around the world these popular votes going in a direction that may not have been expected, does that cause him to rethink what he's been saying about the upcoming U.S. election?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess the first thing that I would say is I have a lot more confidence in the kind of rigorous analysis that's been done of the U.S. presidential election than obviously I would of the Colombian political system. That seems like a more difficult system to analyze.

Q But there's also Brexit.

MR. EARNEST: True. But I think we knew all along that that was going to be close.

Look, I think the President has also gone to great lengths to make it clear that it's important for the American people not to be complacent. And I think it will be evidenced in the five weeks or so that remain in this race that President Obama intends to make a very vigorous case in support of Secretary Clinton because of his deeply held feelings about the race and about who he would like to see succeed him. And I think that is consistent with somebody who has not taken the outcome for granted, but rather is somebody who is determined to not let people be complacent, in part because they may think they know what the outcome is going to be.

Q So as we see him out on the trail, including this week, is he going to change the message? Is it going to be much the same as what we've heard before?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have remarks to preview. Obviously, the President will have an opportunity to speak on Wednesday night in south Florida. I'm not aware that the President is intending to change his strategy, but I think those of you who have been following the President's public comments over the last several weeks have noticed that the President has tailored his remarks both to the audience that he's directly addressing, but also to the news environment in which he is delivering the remarks. And I would anticipate he'll do a similar thing on Wednesday.

Q Okay. And lastly on -- just in the last couple of days we heard a piece of audio from Secretary Kerry talking to some Syrian activists, and saying that he lost the argument with the administration for using military force in Syria. Is that an argument that he continues to make?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that he delivered that -- he made that declaration in the context of discussing the appropriate response on the part of the United States to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. You'll recall the President made exactly the same argument; the President made an argument to Congress that they should authorize the use of military force. That is an argument that did not prevail.

But the President has also made the case that the outcome has been a good one; that the outcome of that situation is that the Assad regime did declare that they had chemical weapons -- something that they did for the first time. The United States was able to work effectively with the Russians to round up that declared chemical weapons stockpile,

collect it, and destroy it successfully. And that did reflect the ability of the United States and Russia to work together to get that done. That didn't just prevent the Assad regime from being able to use those chemical weapons against innocent civilians. It also prevented those chemical weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists that have essentially overrun that country.

So the proliferation risk that was eliminated by destroying those chemical weapons is significant. And that is the good outcome that I was referring to. Obviously, the situation in Syria continues to be quite troubling. And the willingness of the Assad regime, for example, to weaponize chlorine, an otherwise -- a compound that has many industrial uses -- but using that as a weapon I think is an indication of the depravity of the regime, and it is an indication of the violence that was avoided by taking the declared chemical weapons stockpile out of his hands.

Mark.

Q Josh, since you've come out here, the State Department has announced we have actually suspended diplomatic consultations with Russia over Syria. Is President Obama's patience with Vladimir Putin on Syria officially at an end?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mark, I think everybody's patience with Russia has run out. They've also spent a great deal of credibility in making a series of commitments without any clear indication that they were committed to following them.

So what we have seen from the Russians in the year or so since their military intervention in Syria is that they have not made much progress against ISIL. They claim that the reason that they're in Syria is to fight extremists, but they haven't made a significant -- they haven't achieved a significant counter-ISIL objective in more than seven months, and they've been reduced to trying to claim credit for successful U.S. operations.

I'm referring, of course, to the U.S. strike that took al-Adnani off the battlefield. He was a senior ISIL external plotter, and Russia was in the position where they were rather pathetically trying to claim credit for having carried out that operation. I think that's an indication that they don't have too much to claim credit for when it comes to fighting extremists and fighting ISIL.

You'll recall that when Russia announced this military intervention in Syria about a year or so ago, they did so with the intent to "unite a broad range of forces." Well, here we are, a year later, and Russia is standing alone with Iran trying to prop up the Assad regime while the rest of the international community rebukes them for the tactics that they have used inside of Syria, and while the rest of the international community works with the United States as a part of our coalition to go after ISIL and other extremists that are operating inside of Syria.

There's also not a whole lot that Russia, at this point, has to show for their efforts on the ground -- that, essentially, they're in a stalemate and, again, they've been reduced to either acting unilaterally or supporting the Iranians in dropping bunker-busting bombs on civilian hospitals in Aleppo. It's outrageous, and it's drawn international

condemnation not just from the United States but from countries around the world. And that's not an indication of a military force that's enjoying a lot of progress on the ground, but it is part of a concerted strategy that we've seen from the Russians and the Syrians to try to bomb civilian populations into submission. And they've enjoyed some limited gains as a result and it appears they're trying to get more that way, but after a year of doing it, they don't have a lot to show for their efforts.

Finally, I'll just say that much has been written about the theatrics employed by President Putin to try to raise his own personal profile and try to raise the profile of his country on the international stage. So you recall, those of you who traveled to New York with the President in 2015, just over a year ago, President Putin delivered a much-hyped speech to the U.N. General Assembly. He was talking about the commitment of Russia to do some of the things that I outlined before. A year later, President Putin didn't even show up at the United Nations General Assembly, in part because I think he rightly assumed that the rest of the international community was prepared to rebuke and condemn the actions that he has overseen in that country. And it was while the world was gathered in New York at the United Nations General Assembly that it became clear that Russia was complicit in an attack against a U.N. humanitarian convoy.

So the goals that Russia has laid out in advance of the military intervention have not been achieved. And the last thing I'd say about the ongoing -- or what had been ongoing talks between the U.S. and Russia on Syria is that from the beginning, President Obama was insistent that the United States would not be in a position to provide Russia what they wanted -- which is military cooperation -- until Russia had demonstrated their commitment to living up to the terms of the agreement. Russia never did that, unfortunately.

But there have been concerns raised in the past that somehow Russia was just using the cover of negotiations to try to extract concessions from the United States or our coalition partners, or to cover their efforts on the ground. But in this case, that's just not true, because the United States didn't make any concessions at the beginning of the negotiations. And I think the world has been quite cognizant and quite clear and quite critical of what Russia has been doing over the last several weeks.

Q By cutting off talks this way, do you think that's really going to affect Russia's behavior in Syria? Or doesn't this really just condemn the poor Syrians to being bombed until it's all over and the Russians and their Syrian allies win?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mark, what's clear is that there is nothing more for the United States and Russia to talk about with regard to trying to reach an agreement that would reduce the violence inside of Syria. And that's tragic. And you're right, that would likely lead -- that ongoing Russian violence, aiding and abetting Assad regime forces, means that there are likely more Syrian people who are going to get killed -- innocent Syrian civilians. And what's happening in Syria is tragic, and it is deeply concerning, and it is something that the Russians have been complicit in for a year now.

Andrew.

Q I guess the question is what now? Is there a solution -- and are you considering other options?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Andrew, the President and his national security team are always pursuing a range of contingency plans. And you will recall that when we first began discussing this, even in the context of this room, that we were quite skeptical that Russia would live up to the commitments that they had made. So the President and his team -- as the President, I think has acknowledged on a number of occasions, this is something that the President spends a lot of time thinking about, and there are regular meetings among the members of his team to develop options to present to him. And that work is going to continue. I don't have any additional announcements at this point about the path that we'll pursue, but the international community continues to be deeply concerned about the situation in Syria.

Q Another issue. This morning, Donald Trump -- I'll ask you another question about Donald Trump.

MR. EARNEST: Only five weeks to go.

Q -- that veterans who have PTSD -- post-traumatic stress -- are somehow weak and those who don't get it are strong. I wonder if you have any reaction?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President actually answered this quite directly in the town hall that he did with Michelle's colleague at CNN down at Fort Lee last week. And the Commander-in-Chief made a firm declaration that it is not a sign of weakness to get help. In fact, it's a sign of character and a sign of strength to ensure that you're taking care of yourself.

And the President has acknowledged the cultural barriers in the military to changing attitudes about this. We've made some progress on this, and that's a testament not just to the efforts of the President but that's also a testament to the efforts of the uniform leadership of the United States military that's acknowledged that this is a cultural norm that should change.

President Obama has also ramped up resources at the VA and at the Department of Defense that can be used to treat veterans and servicemembers who have sustained unseen wounds in combat. And the President also acknowledged the heroism that we've seen from our men and women in uniform who have served this country with extraordinary courage and, in some cases, unimaginably difficult situations, that have gotten help in treating both their physical and their mental wounds and are the picture of resilience. And that resilience is something that inspires a lot of pride in just about every American. It certainly does in the minds of every American that serves in the White House, I'll tell you that.

Q You mentioned that the role of the United States is going to be constructive with the Colombian peace process. Could you explain a little bit more in which ways the U.S. is going to help? And also, regarding to the \$400 million that the President compromised to

the process, what is going to happen? Is the U.S. going to frozen this millions waiting for the final and certain path of this peace process?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think the path forward is one that's going to be determined by President Santos, based on his negotiations with all parties who participated in the peace process. And the goal of the United States has been to try to facilitate the kind of negotiated settlement -- negotiated peace that would bring an end to a long-running conflict, in fact the longest-running civil war in the hemisphere.

So Colombia is a sovereign country and the United States and Colombia, over the last decade or two, have been able to work effectively to strengthen the economy and strengthen the security situation inside of Colombia. The United States remains as committed as ever, working closely with the Colombian government and the Colombian people, in pursuit of those aims.

But the next steps in this process will be determined by the Colombian government, and they will do so with the strong support of the U.S. government and the American people. Special Envoy Aronson will continue to be deeply engaged in this process as well. But we take some satisfaction, despite the electoral setback, in seeing the renewed commitment from all parties to the pursuit of peace.

Q And the \$400 million?

MR. EARNEST: I can't speak to any sort of economic assistance that may be in the pipeline. I'd refer you to the State Department on that. What I can tell you is that the United States remains deeply committed to the strong relationship between the United States and Colombia, both between our governments and our people. And the United States benefits from a Colombia that has a strong economy and a Colombia that has addressed some of the security situation -- some aspects of the security situation that have been troubling for the Colombian people. The United States benefits from improvements in those areas, and we're going to continue to support the Colombian government as they make a decision for the necessary steps to make those improvements.

Ron.

Q Is it fair to say that the United States was surprised by this outcome in Colombia?

MR. EARNEST: Ron, I think everybody was surprised by this outcome. I think many people expected that this was an agreement that would be ratified. And much of the analysis that was done in advance predicted -- I think all of the analysis that was done in advance predicted that it would be ratified by the Colombian people. It wasn't. But, again, I guess as I made reference to with Jeff, the President has acknowledged that democracy is messy sometimes, but it's important for a government to be responsive to the will of the people.

The margin here was quite narrow, and I think it's an indication that there is still some work to do to meet the needs and expectations of the Colombian people. And President Santos has rightly committed to addressing those concerns that have been raised as they

pursue peace.

Q How engaged will the United States be in trying to facilitate this process? I guess you've been asked this a couple of different ways, and I'm trying to get -- would you argue that the United States was not engaged in the process or was not trying to facilitate or affect the outcome of the vote?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the outcome of the vote is something that the United States was certainly -- the will of the Colombian people is something that should be expressed in terms of determining these kinds of outcomes. And so the United States was not trying to put a thumb on the scale. Obviously the United States made clear that we are supportive of the process and we are supportive of the negotiated settlement that had come forward, but we are also quite clear in deferring to the sovereignty of the Colombian people in making a decision that they concluded was in the best interest of their country.

But, look, the United States has been engaged in these efforts for a long time. Many of these efforts actually began under President Bush, President Obama's predecessor, who was interested in trying to help the Colombian government address this situation. Obviously President Obama had dispatched a Special Envoy to assist and facilitate in these discussions. President Obama actually met with President Santos in New York just a couple of weeks ago now, and in the context of that meeting, President Santos presented President Obama a copy of the peace agreement that had been reached. So I think that's a pretty clear indication that this was a process that included U.S. involvement and strong U.S. support.

But at each stage we've been quite clear that it's ultimately the responsibility of the Colombian people to exercise their own judgment about the best interests of their country.

Q On Syria, you continue to say that the Russians don't have a lot to show for what they've been doing there and that it's a stalemate. Is it really a stalemate? There are so many indications that Aleppo is about to become completely besieged, and obviously we know of the horrific humanitarian toll this is taking. But it looks like the Russians are accomplishing their objective of keeping Bashar al-Assad in power. Do you feel like he's threatened?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, I think we should just take -- go back and look at what the Russian objectives were at the beginning of this enterprise. And again, what President Putin said was that they were focused on confronting the extremist threat inside of ISIL. And they don't have --

Q You never thought that was really true -- you said from the beginning that they've never shown any --

MR. EARNEST: But again, in terms of evaluating their objectives, shouldn't we just take President Putin at his word? These are the objectives that he laid out in advance of the military intervention. So if we're going to evaluate whether or not his stated strategy was successful, let's go back to his stated strategy.

Q But again, based on -- do you really believe that their key objective was to go after extremists, or do you believe that their key objective was to prop up the regime?

MR. EARNEST: I think Russia is rightly and justifiably concerned about the growing extremist threat that they face inside of Syria. They recognize that there is a risk that is posed to the presence that they have in Syria. There's also a risk that Russia faces back home in fueling extremism. So I do think that they are mindful of the extremist threat.

You'll recall that the whole goal of these negotiations -- or the most prized objective of the Russians in the context of these negotiations around the Cessation of Hostilities was the extract a commitment from the United States that we would cooperate with them and operate jointly in pursuit of extremist. But in more than seven -- over the last seven months, Russia doesn't have a single significant counter-ISIL objective that they can point to achieving. In fact, they've been reduced to trying to, rather lamely, claim credit for the successful operations that the United States and our coalition partners have taken to take extremists off the battlefield.

Q So you don't think that propping up the regime was a high priority of the Russians?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't say that. We know that was part of their strategy, too.

Q Arguably, that was a huge part of their objective, no?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think, Ron, we can just sort of go back to what President Putin has said. And if you want me to go through that, I can do that again. Or we can just move on.

Q And just again, looking at the situation overall, I would imagine there's a reassessment of what the U.S. is going to do now. Is there a scenario that the President can foresee -- he's talked a lot lately about how much anguish -- my word -- this whole situation causes him and the limitations of what he feels America can do to address the humanitarian situation? I think there was another hospital that was bombed today --

MR. EARNEST: Yeah, there was.

Q Is there something that the President sees that could -- do you think there's something that he could see that would cause him to rethink using some level of -- greater level of military engagement to try to do something there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, it's important to consider -- well, let's start by saying that the situation inside of Syria is nothing short of heartbreaking. And there are reports that one of the few remaining hospitals in eastern Aleppo was the victim of a bunker-busting bomb today. It is outrageous that a bunker-busting bomb would be used to destroy a hospital that was treating innocent people who are caught in the crossfire of this conflict. And there's no mincing words about that. It is immoral. It is unconscionable. And it is an outrage worthy of international condemnation, which Russia and Syria and Iran have all been on the receiving end of. And for good reason.

With regard to U.S. options, we obviously have been very focused on countering ISIL and other extremist groups that are using the chaos in Syria as a safe haven to plot and carry out attacks against the United States or our allies throughout the West. We're very mindful of that. And that's why you've seen the United States be quite aggressive in taking action against extremists.

My colleagues at the Department of Defense can tell you that there was an operation that was undertaken today to target this al Qaeda leader in Syria, al Masri. He is one of the leading -- one of the most senior leaders of that organization. And the United States Department of Defense took a strike against him just today. That's an indication of how focused the United States military is on taking action against figures who pose a risk to the United States. That is, of course, our number-one priority.

Q And it's still seen that the regime is not a threat to U.S. national security, therefore the objective is not to go after the regime?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is true is that the political failure of the regime to effectively govern that country has created a chaotic situation that only benefits extremists and incites violence that fuels extremism.

So we're deeply concerned about the political situation in Syria, both because of the humanitarian situation that we were discussing before, but also because of the instability that this adds to an already volatile region of the world, and we know that extremists seek to capitalize on that instability to threaten the United States.

So we have acknowledged all along that while there is great military might that is being used inside of Syria to take out extremists and protect the American people, that ultimately the solution that we need inside of Syria is a diplomatic one -- is a political one that results in a change in leadership in Syria. And the path to that kind of political transition is hard to see right now.

Q And given all the daily carnage and horrific things that have happened there -- hospitals destroyed; you describe it very graphically -- the President does not yet see a reason for humanitarian intervention in the situation right now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the United States has offered significant humanitarian assistance -- \$5.6 billion in humanitarian assistance to the situation in Syria and to countries in the region that are housing refugees.

Q A military response based on a humanitarian mission.

MR. EARNEST: Listen, I'm not going to get ahead of what sort of discussions the President and his national security team are having. But the President has been quite clear about what our goals in Syria are now, and the President has also explained the lessons that we need to have learned from the situation in Iraq, 10 or 12 years ago, which is that a full-scale, prolonged ground combat operation, mobilized by U.S. troops, is not in our interest, either in the short term or in the long term. And the President's conclusion about that tactic has not changed, but the President is going to continue to be in

conversations with members of his team. What I also anticipate is that there will be some aspects of this contingency planning that we'll be able to talk about publicly and some aspects of it that we won't be able to talk about publicly. But that's the nature of the situation in Syria.

The one other thing that I would point out with all of this -- it sort of goes back to your initial line of questioning -- is it's not just the United States that's insisting on a political transition inside of Syria. President Putin has acknowledged the same thing. He has acknowledged that the failed political leadership inside of Syria has fomented this chaos and made the situation more dangerous for everybody, including Russia. And so President Putin himself has acknowledged that a political transition inside of Syria is necessary.

Maria.

Q Yes, thank you, Josh. So I'm wondering if the President saw the Supreme Court's decision today to a re-hearing of the immigration case. And is that a blow to his goals and his legacy with the immigrant community? What is his reaction to that? And also, a follow-up question on Colombia. Just to be clear, you've said that the U.S. is committed to continuing to support President Santos and the peace process. So is Paz Colombia on or off the table?

MR. EARNEST: With regard to the immigration ruling from the Supreme Court today, the United States is -- the administration, I should say, is disappointed that the Supreme Court has once again denied the Department of Justice's petition to rehear this case. There's no practical impact in terms of the implementation of this policy. And that, of course, is a double-edged sword. The enforcement priorities that the administration has laid out in terms of focusing our efforts on felons and not families will move forward. It has moved forward in a way that we believe has enhanced the safety and security of communities all across the country.

We're focusing our enforcement efforts on recent border-crossers, on those who pose a threat to our national security, and on those that are -- and on criminals. And that has proved to be an effective way for the United States government to use our limited enforcement resources to protect the American people. And this disappointing decision from the Supreme Court does not affect those enforcement priorities.

However, there are other aspects of the President's executive actions that the Supreme Court was unable to hear. And earlier this year, the Supreme Court did announce that they were unable to reach a verdict in evaluating the constitutionality of the President's executive actions. And I think it underscores once again the need for the Republicans in Congress to do their job. Republicans in the Senate need to confirm a 9th justice to the Supreme Court so that the business of the American people can be conducted at the Supreme Court. The inability of the Supreme Court in this situation to reach a decision and put forward a ruling has a negative impact on millions of people in the United States. The American people deserve better from their representation in the United States Senate.

President Reagan, back in 1987, made a similar observation -- that the best interests of the American people are not served if there's a prolonged vacancy on the Supreme Court. He was right. President Obama has made the same observation, and it's hard to think of a better example than the Supreme Court being unable to reach a decision on a set of immigration reform proposals that would have a positive impact on the United States and our economy and on our national security.

With regard to Colombia, the United States remains committed to the process that we have laid out before, including a commitment to continuing to support the Colombian people and the Colombian government through the Peace Colombia initiative. And that process will move forward even as we continue to support the Colombian government in pursuit of a negotiated peace.

Margaret.

Q Josh, can you tell us a little bit more about when President Obama made the decision, and what prompted him to make the decision that Russia -- the calculation that Russia was unable or unwilling to broker this ceasefire?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Margaret, as you know, Secretary Kerry was the individual that was tasked with trying to broker some kind of diplomatic agreement with the Russians around a Cessation of Hostilities. He was tenacious and dogged in those efforts. And the President was relying on his advice in determining when it was no longer fruitful to engage in conversations. And, look, I think you can -- I think pretty much everybody has concluded, after the behavior we've seen from the Russians over the last couple of weeks, that there was little, if anything, to be gained from continuing to talk to them about this. They were not serious about living up to their commitments. And that has tragic consequences for the situation in Syria, there's no denying that.

Q Is this is a recognition that the policy of reaching a political agreement in Syria has failed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, no -- primarily because the, again, as I was mentioning to Ron, everybody who has looked at this situation, I think -- just about everybody -- has acknowledged that there's no military solution to this problem. There's a role for the United States military to play in terms of countering extremists and certainly taking off the battlefield those who would use the chaos in Syria to threaten the United States.

So there is a robust military effort underway to protect the American people. But addressing the root cause of this chaos inside of Syria is going to require diplomacy and a political transition. And it's not just the United States that believes that. The rest of the international community, including Russia, has acknowledged that that's the case.

So the tactic, if you will, that the United States was attempting to employ was to capitalize on one area of common ground. The United States believes a political transition inside of Syria is necessary. Russia believes that a political transition inside of Syria is necessary. Both countries also acknowledge the threat from extremism. And the hope was that the

Russians would use their diplomatic influence with the Assad regime to reduce the violence inside of Syria, allow for the flow of humanitarian assistance inside of Syria, and create space for a diplomatic solution or a political solution inside of Syria. And in --

Q But you're saying that that failed -- that entire calculation was wrong.

MR. EARNEST: And in exchange, the United States would be in a position where we would offer to coordinate our efforts militarily with the Russians to strengthen our focus on extremists.

From the beginning, there's been skepticism about whether or not Russia would live up to the commitments that they've made in the context of applying that pressure to the Assad regime. And unfortunately, this is situation where the healthy skepticism turned out to be right. But it does not change anybody's view here in the administration that for all of our military efforts inside of Syria to keep the American people safe, the ultimate solution to the situation in Syria is not one that can be solely military in nature. We're going to need to see a negotiated political transition inside of Syria. The Russians themselves have acknowledged this. And that's what will be necessary to bring an end to the violence and the terrible humanitarian situation that we see in that country.

Q But to be clear, with this suspension and the withdrawal of the personnel for future military coordination that's not going to happen, that with this suspension are you not saying that the Obama administration is done trying to seek a diplomatic solution with Russia in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is clear is the Obama administration has concluded that Russia has no intention of living up to the commitments that they've made in the context of negotiations around the Cessation of Hostilities. And once you've reached that conclusion, I'm not really sure what else there is to talk about.

And again, I'm not papering over the tragic consequences that this is going to have for Syria. This was our -- this was a reasonable, thought-through strategy for applying pressure to the Assad regime in pursuit of the aims that we were seeking to achieve. We're going to have to pursue an alternative approach. But I don't have much to say about that right now.

Q But do you not stand to note the Russian Foreign Ministry has put out a number of statements this morning -- Vladimir Putin himself signed off -- as you've talked about, the suspension of the destruction of plutonium that they previously pledged to go through with. They're talking about destruction of any trust between the U.S. and Russia. I mean, it would seem that tension with Russia is escalating here. Do you not see these statements and these pledges from Vladimir Putin as him trying to exert some leverage on the United States? Do you not see that as linked in any way to this failure?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think to discern the actual motivations and intentions of President Putin, you probably have to ask him yourself, and you'd have to determine whether or not he's being honest with you. What is clear is that Russia is isolated more than they've ever been before, and they have been subject to rounds of international

condemnation because of either actions that they have taken directly, or actions that they have aided and abetted inside of Syria that have led to widespread death and destruction among civilian populations. And that might lead some people to start making increasingly outrageous claims to try to avoid that isolation or to try to avoid that international condemnation. So again, for Russia's true intentions, you'd have to consult with them directly.

But look, there's disappointment that Russia has not -- was unwilling to live up to the commitments that they'd made. The agreement that Secretary Kerry worked tirelessly to try to reach acknowledged Russia's inherent and healthy self-interest in this situation. Russia has acknowledged that a political transition in Syria is necessary. Russia has acknowledged that they face a very serious and urgent threat from extremists that are using chaos in Syria to plot and carry out attacks around the world. Russia has a lot on the hook -- Russia has a lot on the line. And right now they don't have that much to show for it. Are they going to continue to pursue a strategy where they bomb civilian populations into submission? And over time, will that allow them to make more progress? It might. We'll see. But a whole lot more innocent people are going to die, and the Russians will be increasingly isolated, and there will be an international price to pay in terms of their weakening standing in the international community.

Q But because of that kind of mass murder you're talking about, some people do feel that there is a sense of urgency, or there should be one. So, right now, what's the consequence for continuing to carry out what other countries have called war crimes in Aleppo? Is the U.S. considering sanctions against Russia? I mean, now it does look like the artifice is gone, there is a lot of tension with Russia on this issue and many others. I mean, what is the White House thinking when it comes to actually perhaps taking any kind of action to stop the humanitarian catastrophe inside of Aleppo if you can't bargain the Russians out of it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I think there was a lot of tension around this relationship even in the midst of these negotiations. I think what's also true is we've acknowledged previously, I've acknowledged previously, that there are range of tools available to the United States, including the use of sanctions that have proved to be an increasingly effective and powerful tool. But look, the United States also worked effectively with our European partners to implement sanctions against Russia because of their violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. And we haven't seen the kind of change in strategy in Ukraine that we'd like to see yet either.

So the President is going to consider a range of options, and the President is regularly being updated by his national security team about the options that are available to him. And this is something that they certainly will be talking about more frequently in the days ahead, considering that the United States is no longer engaged in talks with the Russians.

Q Thanks Josh. I got a couple on the Russians and then something unrelated. Will the United States continue to implement the plutonium arrangement even if the Russians have dropped out?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Olivier, we've just heard this announcement from the Russians today. So the United States has been very serious about keeping our commitments all along, and we certainly would like to see the Russians do the same thing. I don't have any changes to our posture to announce at this point.

Q You've seen the Russian conditions for resuming the plutonium arrangement, I think - end to sanctions, some kind of compensation, and a drawdown of NATO. I'm going to guess you don't embrace these with open arms, but what is the administration's position on those condition?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't looked at them in detail. I think what I would just point out is that the United States and Russia reached an agreement in the last decade that's been in force for five years. We've kept up our end of the bargain, and they should do the same thing. I'm not really sure what the goal of renegotiating an already-agreed-to agreement would be.

Q All right. Bear with me, I'm going to read this; it's from the New York Magazine interview with the President: "I think you could see over the horizon a situation in which, without Congress showing much interest in restraining actions with authorizations that were written really broadly, you end up with a President who can carry on perpetual wars all over the world and a lot of them covert without any accountability or democratic debate."

What struck me was, "over the horizon," because it feels to me like that is potentially the situation we're in now. Libya wasn't congressionally authorized. There are covert actions all around the world. What's the difference between the current state of affairs and this "over the horizon" state of affairs?

MR. EARNEST: Olivier, what the President was referring to in that quote, and I'm glad you asked this question, is he was talking about the situation that he inherited.

In the early days of the administration, he was considering the tools that had been made available to him and considering the way in which they were being used, and he was considering how "over the horizon" was a scenario in which there would not be sufficient transparency in place to constrain this extraordinary authority that, based on new technology, could be wielded by the President of the United States.

And what the President and his team have steadily worked to do is to try to impose greater transparency and to impose constraints that would address those concerns that the President had from his earliest days in office. Does that make sense?

Q It does. I hadn't read it at all as a state of affairs inherited. It sounded more down the road.

MR. EARNEST: Got it. Yeah, so the way that the story was set up is, the President was sort of evaluating different points in his presidency where he'd made decisions that had long-term consequences. So he went back to when he made this decision to make this a priority.

Karen.

Q Josh, has the President received the briefing of the potential impact of Hurricane Matthew? And the Pentagon has partially evacuated some personnel from Guantanamo. Is there any concern about the storm having an impact on operations there? And what's the plan for 61 detainees?

MR. EARNEST: Thank you for asking. I was just contemplating that I was going to have to do that at the very end, so I appreciate you bringing this up.

With regard to the situation at the U.S. military facility at Guantanamo Bay, I'd refer you to my colleagues at the Department of Defense. They obviously are engaged in planning to ensure the safety and security of all the personnel on the base in advance of the storm.

I can tell you that the President was first briefed over the weekend in the aftermath of the unexpected and rapid strengthening of Hurricane Matthew. The President expects he'll continue to be updated as necessary, at least daily, on the forecast track for Hurricane Matthew and the latest analysis about its potential impact on the United States and the Caribbean.

There are some actions that have already been taken. Let me just walk through a couple of those with you right now. FEMA is deploying officials to state emergency operations centers in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. It's my understanding that that should hopefully be completed by the end of the day today, and there may actually already be personnel in some of those places already.

FEMA also has incident support bases in Georgia and North Carolina in order to pre-position response supplies. This is a relatively new strategy that you've seen from FEMA, which is that they will look for locations that are just outside the track of the storm to pre-position supplies so that there is a shorter distance for those supplies to be transported in the immediate aftermath of the storm. That can expedite needed assistance.

In the meantime, the impact of this storm is not likely to be felt in the United States for several days, but we certainly encourage anyone potentially in affected states, from Florida through the mid-Atlantic, to take steps to prepare. And information on what to do is at Ready.gov and on the FEMA smartphone app.

In addition, you should also be aware that the USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance has deployed two disaster response teams to Haiti and Jamaica in advance of the storm's arrival. These disaster experts are actively monitoring the storm's track in real time, and communicating with officials in Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, and Belize to coordinate relief efforts if they are requested.

USAID has also strategically pre-positioned some relief supplies in anticipation of the storm. Obviously, the concern that we have with regard to Jamaica and Haiti in particular is that these are countries that are, based on the current forecast, likely to take a pretty significant hit from the storm. And these are countries that don't have the kind of infrastructure or the professionalized response operations that we do here in the United

States. And given our longstanding relationship with both of those countries, the United States is prepared -- or at least is making preparations to ensure that we can assist in those recovery and response efforts. The President is also being briefed on those efforts. That's something that he's also going to continue to watch closely. And there should be a lot of people saying a lot of prayers for people in the Caribbean right now.

Q And one quick. Is there any validity to a Daily Mail piece that the President offered to get Secretary Clinton a medical check-up at Walter Reed, given her health concerns?

MR. EARNEST: I have not seen that report, but I'm not aware of any such request.

JC.

Q Follow-up a little bit on what Olivier was talking about "over the horizon." What is really not clear is, what is the endgame for Mr. Assad? I mean, he's not going to just walk away and live in the villa in the South of France somewhere, like a deposed putin-tate -- potentate, I should say. Actually Freudian slip --

MR. EARNEST: You just coined a new term.

Q It was actually intended, I think. Since he it --

MR. EARNEST: Please attribute to Jon-Christopher Bua, everybody, when you use this in your pieces. (Laughter.)

Q JC, whatever. The fact is that, that Assad is Putin's guy, and it seems like Putin will not allow what happened to Muammar Qaddafi to happen to his boy, Assad. So the question is, what is the endgame? What will happen to Assad? What's the thought here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, JC, you've asked a provocative question. I don't think anybody knows exactly how this gets resolved. Everybody, including the Russians, has acknowledged that a political transition is necessary.

Q Everyone has stated that.

MR. EARNEST: Everyone has stated that. And look, what is clear is that President Assad -- Putin's guy, as you described him -- has gotten Putin into a mess.

You'll recall that Syria used to be -- and still is -- the only country outside of the former Soviet bloc that was home to a Russia military base. So the strategic significance of Syria for Russia was significant. And, as a result, Russia had invested pretty deeply in the country because of their military presence that was tolerated there. The stability of that country has been shattered, and Russia is now investing significant resources to try to protect the previous investment that they've made there. Russia has, we know, sent significant quantities of military equipment. They've sent military personnel. They've spent significant funds -- funds that they don't have. We've talked at some length about the declining strength of the Russian economy.

As a result of their actions inside of Syria, Russia is deeply isolated and has earned the stern rebuke of the international community for their actions. Russia has also gotten themselves knee-deep into a sectarian quagmire that fuels extremism and only increases the risk to Russia's security back home. All of that because President Putin is looking out for his guy.

So, that being the state of affairs, that is the hope that the United States had previously had, that Russia would be willing to broker some kind of diplomatic agreement where they would use their influence with the Assad regime to reduce the violence, to increase the flow of humanitarian assistance, and sharpen the ability that they have to go after extremists. But that is an agreement that Russia was unwilling to live up to. And it's unfortunate, both when you consider Russia's national security interests but also when you consider the lives of millions of innocent Syrians that are still trapped in that country.

Q So, in a sense, Assad has it both ways. He's being protected and he's being allowed to continue his ways.

MR. EARNEST: Well, he is allowed to remain in power because he's being propped up by the Russians and the Iranians. And I think the question really is, what are the Iranians and the Russians getting out of it. And we know that they are paying some significant costs, and we know that the Russian economy is such that they don't have as many resources to pay those costs as they used to. But we'll have to see what happens from here.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. I want to follow up on Karen's question about the detainees over at Gitmo. Given the trajectory of Matthew right now, the President would still have a hand in determining whether or not those detainees were removed from Gitmo and where they might be placed, is that true?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Department of Defense officials will take all the necessary steps that need to be taken in order to ensure the safety of everybody at Gitmo.

Q Including the President's determination for the destination of the detainees, correct?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not quite sure what you're getting at.

Q Ultimately, it's his call where they go.

MR. EARNEST: Well, he is Commander-in-Chief, right? But when it comes to something like the safety and security of a military installation, there are people a little further down the chain of command who can make the appropriate decisions about what precautions need to be taken to ensure everybody's safety and security at a major military facility.

Q Let me ask you about Obamacare. Open enrollment about four weeks away. I read a report over the weekend about rates skyrocketing in Minnesota, for example, some 67 percent. There are now four states with just one single insurer, a couple in the south. You

and I have talked about that -- Arkansas and Alabama. The others are Oklahoma and Wyoming. What's the President's assessment of where Obamacare is at this stage of this presidency? Does it need a fix? And if so, does he have one that he's proposing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, the President is quite proud that Obamacare, as has been dubbed by many, is one that has expanded health care coverage for 20 million Americans. Millions more Americans who already had health insurance now benefit from the kinds of consumer protections that were included in the Obamacare legislation. These are things that allow you to get a free annual check-up every year, or giving you the comfort of knowing that you're not going to get thrown off your health insurance if you get sick, that you're never going to have to go through bankruptcy court just because somebody in your family gets sick.

Those are protections that the American people didn't previously enjoy. Now every American that has health insurance enjoys those kinds of protections. And that is a -- that's why you've heard me say on many occasions that Obamacare is here to stay. And it's why the President is so proud of that domestic accomplishment.

What I would also say is that since the very first day the President signed this bill into law, he acknowledged an openness to working with Democrats or Republicans in Congress to further strengthen it. And we have seen a sustained commitment on the part of Republicans to trying to tear down that law. They voted some 50 times to repeal it. They've gone to the Supreme Court a couple of different times to try to have it invalidated. All those efforts have been unsuccessful. Basically, every day Republicans promised to offer up their own alternative. They haven't yet. That's an indication that Republicans have not been interested in having a serious conversation about what can be done to strengthen the health insurance reform proposals that have already been enacted under President Obama's leadership.

The President does have some ideas for things that we could do to further strengthen Obamacare. The first is to find a way to ensure that every state across the country is expanding Medicaid, consistent with what was envisioned in the law. There are too many Republican governors that have resisted that effort. And that means that there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Americans, that could have health insurance right now, today, paid for almost entirely by the federal government that aren't just because of the political differences that some Republican governors have with the President of the United States. That's petty. It's small-minded. And it's having a consequence for the lives of millions of Americans. And it's rather unfortunate.

In addition to that, the President has also put forward an idea that was discussed, actually, in the original legislative debate around the Affordable Care Act, which is implementing a so-called public option, allowing essentially a publicly funded health care plan that would compete with private sector proposals, and that this would have the effect of encouraging more competition in the marketplace and limiting the growth in health care costs. Republicans have been resistant to that, unfortunately.

So the President has some ideas. The President put these ideas forward. The President is under no illusions that those kinds of reforms to strengthen Obamacare will be initiated while he is still in office, but he's hopeful that maybe under the leadership of a new President and a new Congress that those kinds of reforms would take place.

Q Can I also ask you about some of the issues that are going on today? Skyrocketing costs for consumers in Minnesota, for example; single insurers in those four states that I mentioned. That's not what the President promised when he promised that Obamacare, or the Affordable Care Act, would not only expand health care opportunities, it would also drive down costs.

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we have seen, Kevin, is we have seen that for the vast majority of people who do get health care coverage through their employers -- so it's about 15 *less than 5 percent of Americans that turn to the marketplaces that you're referring to -- that there are encouraging statistics about the way that growth of that employer-provided health insurance has been limited.

But, look, the President believes that there's more that can be done. It's important to remember that before the Affordable Care Act went into effect, we saw every year significant skyrocketing health care costs. So this is not a new phenomenon. And the question is, to what extent has the Affordable Care Act been effective in limiting the growth in their health care costs. And what we have seen is that they have been effective in limiting some of that growth, but there is more that we could do to make it much more effective. And we're going to need some action from Congress in order to get that done.

Q Lastly, I want to follow up on JC for just a second. Is the administration concerned about Julian Assange and his planned video appearance on Tuesday? And what's the White House's view on the allegations that he cancelled his original plans for what he called security reasons?

MR. EARNEST: I have no idea what he's talking about.

Toluse.

Q Thank you, Josh. In some leaked audio from a Hillary Clinton fundraiser earlier this year, she expressed some doubts about the President's -- or the administration's nuclear modernization efforts, saying the last thing that we need are sophisticated cruise missiles that are nuclear-armed. Does the White House have a reaction to her expressing some doubts about the rationale behind what it's doing on its nuclear program?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Toluse, I actually have not seen the authenticity of those comments be verified, so I'll let Secretary Clinton and her team discuss her position on those issues. President Obama has spoken at some length about the priority that he's placed on nuclear security, limiting nuclear proliferation, while also preserving the kind of nuclear deterrent that protects some global stability until we reach a point in time that we can live in a world without nuclear weapons.

And the President has made some important progress in pursuit of those goals, including some commitments that we've seen from other countries to secure and, in some cases, even dispose of loose nuclear materials. The President convened a summit every two years with world leaders to consider what countries around the world could do to make commitments to enhance nuclear security in a way that didn't just benefit the United States, but actually benefitted the entire international community.

So the President's track record on this is strong. But this is also -- this falls in the category of long-range policy planning. And the President has certainly done his part, but there will be future presidents that will need to do their part to improve our nuclear security and to eventually envision a -- to make real the vision of a world without nuclear weapons.

Q I also wanted to ask you about something the President said in a radio interview with the Steve Harvey Morning Show. He said it's never been easier to cast your ballot -- he was talking about voting. It seems to contradict some of the things he's said about Republicans making it harder to vote. And at South by Southwest earlier this year, he said, "We're the only advanced democracy in the world that makes it harder for people to vote...and we systematically put barriers and make it as hard as possible for citizens to vote." So does he believe it's as easy, it's possible, or easy as it's ever been to cast a ballot? Or how do you sort of square that --

MR. EARNEST: Toluse, I think he was short-handing a little bit. He was basically making the case it's never been easier to make a decision about who you should cast your ballot for. But, yes, it is unfortunate that in too many states Republicans have made it much more difficult than it needs to be for people to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

Q Finally, the South by South Lawn event -- do you have any information about how much this costs, who pays for it, whether or not there's any type of sponsorships or anything like that, like how this compares to South by Southwest event?

MR. EARNEST: We can get you some more information about that. I don't have that off the top of my head, but we can follow up with you on that.

Anita, I'll give you the last one.

Q Two quick things. One -- by the way, I don't know if you can hear it, but it's like you can hear screaming from outside.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. I assume they're cheering for me.

Q I assume it's all happy.

MR. EARNEST: They're really just loving these answers, and really a lot of enthusiasm from the crowd.

Q I was wondering, tomorrow obviously there's the vice-presidential debate, and I know that the President and Senator Kaine have gone way back and are good friends. I wondered if you knew if he had talked to him and sort of given him any advice. This is probably the biggest political moment he has had in his career so far -- will be tomorrow. Any thoughts about that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President does have enormous respect and admiration for Senator Kaine. And Senator Kaine was one of the first statewide elected officials in the country to announce his support for Senator Obama's presidential campaign. That kind of political courage and loyalty that Senator Kaine has shown is something that the President deeply values.

And Senator Kaine did that at a time when that was not an obvious political decision to be made. In fact, the rather obvious political calculation was to not announce your vocal support for then-Senator Obama's presidential campaign, because at the time President Obama was polling in the teens, as I recall. But Senator Kaine, to his credit, showed some courage and made a decision early on to support Senator Obama's presidential campaign, and the President enormously respects that show of political courage that is all too rare in the current political environment.

I'm not aware that they've had an opportunity to speak recently. President Obama obviously saw Senator Kaine at the convention in Philadelphia. They spoke on the same night. And so I know they had the opportunity to visit then. I don't know if they've had a chance to talk since.

Q Do they talk regularly?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know that they talk regularly, no -- particularly now that Senator Kaine is keeping a very busy schedule that he is as a running mate who is campaigning for the vice presidential job. So I don't know -- I know that they do not talk regularly. I don't know that they have spoken since they were in Philly together a couple months ago.

Q Last week, at one of the briefings, you mentioned that -- and a new month has happened, it's now -- it's October. I think last week you mentioned that we were going to see President Obama doing a couple events a week for Hillary Clinton. Are we now at that moment that it's October -- was that what you were referring to? Or was there a time on that --

MR. EARNEST: The only campaign travel that I'm aware of for this week is President Obama's trip to South Florida on Wednesday. I'm not aware of any additional political travel this week. But stay tuned and we'll keep you updated on travel for the rest of the week.

Q -- it was a couple times a week, you said.

MR. EARNEST: A couple times a week. I'm actually reminded of a conversation I had what seems like hours ago, but it was shortly before I came out here, which is that the President is traveling to Chicago this weekend and will be engaged in some political

activities there. Obviously, I do not anticipate that Illinois is going to be a battleground state. You can consult the Trump campaign to see if they have a different calculation. But I would expect that the President will be engaged in some activities there that will be helpful to Secretary Clinton's campaign. So stay tuned on that.

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: I know there's been some talk about that. We'll keep you updated on the President's schedule as we get it. Okay?

Q Do a couple of activities mean fundraising, too? Is that what you meant? I just want to clarify.

MR. EARNEST: As the President's schedule gets determined for Chicago, we'll keep you posted.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:40 P.M. EDT