

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 5/6/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

Please see below for corrections (marked with asterisks).

12:58 P.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: Hello, everyone. Thanks for being here. I hope those of you who traveled with us to Mexico and Costa Rica had a little time off yesterday. I spent it at Six Flags for my daughter's 8th birthday. I don't recommend some of the rides -- I'm still recovering from the crick in my neck. (Laughter.) But it was a lot of fun.

I don't have any other announcements. I think you saw that the President is being joined as we speak by three senators in a round of golf, which he, I know, was looking forward to. And that is happening as we gather here now.

The Associated Press -- Jim.

Q Thanks, Jay. I wanted to talk to you about Syria and events over the weekend. The Syrian government, the foreign minister on CNN said that the air strikes delivered over Friday and Saturday amounted to a declaration of war. I wondered if the President has any concerns that this might be expanding to a regional conflict all too quickly. And has the President been in touch with any leaders in the region to discuss these latest developments?

MR. CARNEY: Well, first of all, I would refer you to the Israeli government for any action they may or may not have taken. What I can say is that Israel certainly has the right to be concerned about the transfer of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah. And that has been a concern of Israel's for a long time. The transfer of sophisticated weapons to terrorist organizations like Hezbollah is certainly a concern and a threat to Israel and they have a right to act in their own sovereign interest in response to those concerns.

The fact of the matter is the terrible situation in Syria is the fault and responsibility of Bashar al-Assad. He has murdered tens of thousands of his own people. He has acted with impunity like a tyrant to hold on to power. And it is the rightful demand of the

Syrian people that they be rid of this tyrant and that they have a say in their future. And we have worked with international partners as well as the Syrian opposition to help bring about that opportunity for the Syrian people.

Q Was the administration forewarned that these strikes were going to take place? Did you guys know that --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to comment on any actions the Israelis may have taken. I can tell you --

Q I wouldn't even say Israel. I would just say did you guys know that something was going to happen?

MR. CARNEY: What I can tell you is that we are in close coordination as a matter of course with the Israelis, and continue to be. But I'm not going to comment specifically on actions that the Israelis may or may not have taken. I would certainly refer those questions to the Israeli government.

Q Some discussion today at the U.N. -- an interview given to the Italian TV or radio by one member of a commission looking into what happened in Syria on chemical weapons, suggesting that perhaps chemical weapons was conducted by rebels. The commission then distanced itself on that. Do you guys have any view on where that stands right now?

MR. CARNEY: Sure. While, as you said, the commission itself -- the independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has put out a statement clarifying that the commission has not reached any conclusive findings regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria or who used them if they were used.

The fact of the matter is, as we have said and I have said many times, we are highly skeptical of suggestions that the opposition could have or did use chemical weapons. We find it highly likely that any chemical weapon use that has taken place in Syria was done by the Assad regime, and that remains our position.

Q And the last -- Secretary Kerry is going to Russia to meet with Putin. Is the administration, is the President optimistic that something might emerge from that, that Putin might be moving in the some direction regarding his view of the Assad regime?

MR. CARNEY: We have seen over the course of these weeks and months an escalation by Assad of the brutality that he is perpetrating on his own people. And we have consistently in our conversations with the Russians and others pointed clearly to Assad's behavior as proof that further support for that regime is not in the interest of the Syrian people or in the interest of the countries that have in the past supported Assad. And we make that case repeatedly with the Russian government and others, and I'm sure we will continue to do that.

Now, we're working with the Russians and consulting with them about Syria, as we are other nations, because we believe it's in the interest of the Syrian people, in the interest of the future of the region, in the interest of all nations with a stake in the region to

disassociate from Assad and to support a political transition in Syria. And that is a conversation that is ongoing with the Russians and the Chinese and others. We have been clear in the past about our disappointment with Russia over their opposition to resolutions at the Security Council with regards to this matter, but this is an ongoing conversation.

Reuters.

Q Jay, regardless of who's at fault or who started this, is there a concern about a wider war developing in the Middle East?

MR. CARNEY: We have made clear from the beginning that one of the reasons why we need to bring about the political transition in Syria that is necessary, the reason that Assad has to go is that the threat that the unrest there, the violence and the war there cause to stability in the broader region remains and continues to increase. This is the case that we've made to our international partners, a case that we've made to members of the Security Council, that it is in everyone's interest to bring about a transition there because of the threat that further violence and a broader civil war causes to everyone in every country there.

Q You mentioned the Assad regime has murdered tens of thousands of people, in your words. Does this rise to the level of genocide?

MR. CARNEY: It is a level of violence by a regime against its own people that is worthy of contempt and condemnation. What the terminology that may be used by courts or the United Nations or others I will leave to them. But it is heinous and despicable. It is the kind of action that long ago rendered Assad incapable of continuing in power with any kind of legitimacy.

Dan.

Q With the current state in that region, in Syria and Israel, when can we expect the administration to announce next steps, what it plans to do next?

MR. CARNEY: Well, you heard the President address this several times last week. It is essential that we continue to gather evidence, that we work with our partners as well as the opposition in the accumulation of evidence about the use of chemical weapons. We are continuing to work with our partners as well as the opposition in our efforts to provide assistance to the opposition. We have stepped up significantly our assistance to the opposition and we, as you know and the President said, are the single largest donor of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people.

So we are continuing to coordinate. But what I can't do is put a timeline on the end of an investigation. We obviously have made clear that we support a United Nations investigation into the use of chemical weapons in Syria. We call on the Assad regime to back its own call for such an investigation to allow that investigation to take place. But we are not waiting for United Nations action alone. We are working through other means to

try to build on the evidence that we already have of chemical weapons use, to assert in a concrete and firm way the chain of custody, when chemical weapons were used, by whom, and the full consequences of that use. But that does, of course, take some time.

Q Now, internally, here at the White House, among the President's top advisors, is there pressure for greater involvement in Syria?

MR. CARNEY: I think you have seen this administration engage in this terrible problem from the beginning and we have not waited for developments before acting. We have acted in stepping up our aid, in pressuring Assad through sanctions and other means, isolating him and his regime, working with the Syrian opposition to help prop it up, as well as -- or stand it up, to help it get organized -- as well as supply it nonlethal assistance. That assistance is flowing as we speak to the opposition. But I would point you to what the President said in the last several days about this problem and about the actions that were taken.

Q In light of what you just said, over the weekend, Senator John McCain, in talking about the attack on Syria, said, "Unlike the President of the United States, they" -- referring to Israel -- "saw a red line, and they acted. Unfortunately, this President, President Obama, will not act, and that's a tragedy." And then he went on to say that President Obama has avoided involvement in Syria much to the "shame and disgrace of the U.S." So is this an accurate or inaccurate portrayal of how the President has been handling the situation in Syria?

MR. CARNEY: We strongly disagree with those comments. The fact of the matter is jumping to conclusions and acting before you have all the facts is not a good recipe for weighty policy decision-making. We have seen in the not-too-recent -- not-too-distant past the consequences of acting before we had all the facts. And that's why this President insists that we get all the facts.

The intelligence assessments we have are extremely valuable and significant, which is why we publicly released that information in a letter of response to some senators. But it is not sufficient to make the kind of determinations that the President will make if and when we can state clearly that a red line has been crossed, that chemical weapons have been used, that the Assad regime has deployed them against the Syrian people.

And in terms of the actions we've taken -- again, the largest single donor of humanitarian aid, the most significant donor of nonlethal assistance to the opposition, active engagement with the Friends of Syria and other partners in assisting the opposition organize itself, and taking the steps we have to recognize the opposition coalition as we have -- and we have continued to step up our engagement with the opposition as they have become more organized and more capable of representing both the Syrian people and the effort against Assad.

Q One quick thing on one other subject, on guns. What's the strategy in moving forward and, realistically, what can get done?

MR. CARNEY: The President made clear when he spoke in the Rose Garden about the absolute necessity of the vast majority of the American people who agree with the need to take common-sense steps to reduce gun violence of insisting that their voices be heard; that when the Senate made the unfortunate choice -- a minority in the Senate -- of siding with the 10 percent over the 90 percent when it came to expanding background checks, the 90 percent needed to be heard. They needed to let their representatives know how disappointed they were in their failure to represent their own constituents.

We remain optimistic, the President does, that when it comes to background checks that this will happen. We can't say precisely when that legislation will pass, but we and the President remain convinced that it will, because the American people have stated so clearly that it is a sensible thing to do. A background checks system exists. It works. To the extent that it covers the transactions in the country, it has prevented a significant number of people who should not have weapons because of their criminal backgrounds from obtaining them.

The expansion of this system was simply to close the loopholes that existed in a system that works and that gun shop owners across the country participate in and that would-be gun buyers, law-abiding citizens who want to buy weapons encounter every time they purchase weapons at a gun store. And it is extremely fast and efficient. And that system ought to apply more broadly.

These loopholes need to be closed so that we can reduce the number of cases where a violent criminal who has no right by law to obtain a weapon can get one by going through -- by using these loopholes. And that's something that Americans in red states, blue states, purple states all support. It's something that NRA members, rank-and-file members support. And it will happen.

And we are working with Congress to explore ways of pursuing more legislative action. We are continuing in the implementation of the executive actions that the President laid out when he put forward his broad proposal. And we are looking for other ways to take action to reduce gun violence in a common-sense way that respects Second Amendment rights, which every proposal the President put forward does.

Jackie.

Q Jay, can I follow up on that? How exactly is he working? Is he working with Senator Reid and some others to tweak the bill in some way that will bring on board some of the senators who voted against the bill the first time and get them to switch their votes? And how soon might we expect this to show some fruit?

MR. CARNEY: When it comes to the next steps legislatively, I would suggest you ask those senators who are engaged in the process. We're working with them. We're talking to them. We're talking to other stakeholders. From the President on down -- I mean, the conversations he's been having with lawmakers of both parties, in particular in the Senate, have obviously had as a number-one topic frequently the economy and our budget challenges and the need to reduce our deficit in a balanced way. But they have included

extensive conversations about immigration reform and actions to reduce gun violence. And those conversations continue both at the presidential level, the vice presidential level, and the staff level.

We'll work with Congress on next steps in terms of attempting to pass some of the legislation that, unfortunately, did not pass recently. But I don't have a timetable for you. That would be for the Senate to decide.

Q Going back to Syria and the investigator's comments about suspicions that chemical weapons may have been used by the rebels, you've mentioned several times that this is obviously an ongoing investigation, but if there's any chance or suspicions that the rebels may have used sarin gas and chemical weapons, is the administration at all concerned about ramping up aid to the rebels?

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me just say two things. One, it is very important that we establish conclusively the evidence about chemical weapons use in Syria, and that includes who used it and under what circumstances and where. Having said that, it is also our position -- and that's why that investigation needs to continue. That's why we're working both through the United Nations and through other means to gather evidence.

Separate from that -- or related to that is the fact that we are highly skeptical of any suggestions or accusations that the opposition used chemical weapons. We find it highly likely that chemical weapons, if they were, in fact, used in Syria -- and there is certainly evidence that they were -- that the Assad regime was responsible.

But to the point of your question about why we need to be thorough and gather facts that can be corroborated and reviewed and presented, we have to be sure about the case that we're making. And the President has made clear from here and from his statements and the answers he gave in press conferences abroad that's that what he intends.

Yes, Bill.

Q When the President made his comment about the red line for the first time in an August news conference almost a year ago, did he go further than he had intended? Further than he and the staff had discussed?

MR. CARNEY: The President's use of the term red line was deliberate and was based on U.S. policy. The world knew that the Syrian government possessed chemical weapons, and we had a concern that as the regime was increasingly beleaguered, it might use chemical weapons against the Syrian people in desperation.

The message that the President delivered that day was the same message that he was delivering in private. It was one that he and others in the administration have reinforced on multiple occasions ever since. And, as I said, it was consistent with what we were saying both to the Assad regime and to others privately.

Q Was there no concern that he had hemmed U.S. policy in?

MR. CARNEY: It is, by definition, a game-changer when chemical weapons are used. There are international conventions that prohibit the use of chemical weapons, and there are international norms that are violated when chemical weapons are used. It is, by definition, a game-changer. When the President talked as he did the other day about the fact that use of chemical weapons enhances the prospect or increases the prospect of proliferation, of those weapons getting into the hands of terrorists or other non-state actors, and that by extension then, that creates further threats to the United States and our allies, that is why it is such a significant event, and that is why it is a red line that the President made clear when he said that from here and that he reiterated on numerous occasions thereafter.

Q So you're doubling down on the red line comment. Is there no concern that by doing this you're raising expectations for some kind of action? Because you're now being criticized for not acting.

MR. CARNEY: Well, what the President made clear is that it was a red line and that it was unacceptable and that it would change his calculus as he viewed the situation in Syria because the use of chemical weapons represents the kind of escalation and threat that I just described. What he never did -- and it is simplistic to do so -- is to say that if X happens, Y will happen. He has never said what reaction he would take at a policy level to the proved crossing of the red line in Syria, simply that he would consider it a red line that had been crossed and that he would take appropriate action.

And he has -- as the investigation continues and as we have said all along, he is looking at a range of options and he is not removing any option from the table, if you will. And he will take action that he thinks is in the interest of the United States and our national security as well as in the interest of the Syrian people.

Q So you're saying that he will take action if and when -- but he will take action.

MR. CARNEY: I think you've heard the President make clear that he considers it a serious transgression, and that is why we need to assemble all of the evidence to ensure that we have a case that it has been used -- that chemical weapons have been used -- and that he will look at an array of options that are available to him in response to that use.

Q And in the meantime, does a story like the one in yesterday's New York Times help to take some of the burden off by raising all of these things and suggesting the need to have all the evidence before he acts?

MR. CARNEY: The fact is -- and I think as I mentioned earlier -- there's a recent enough example of why we need to make sure we have our facts in matters like these and the dangers inherent of not having all those facts and corroborated evidence. So we don't need stories like this one to make that case.

The President I think is very clear about how serious he considers the use of chemical weapons, and very clear about the fact that we need to make sure we have all the evidence before we make policy decisions based on the use of chemical weapons.

Q But how is it a red line if it's crossed, this so-called red line, and then there's nothing specific tied to it?

MR. CARNEY: Ed, I think we've had this discussion several times already, and both --

Q Right, but you're saying there's a range of options. So you tell someone, you cross the red line, you're in trouble -- there's supposed to be something at the end of it. What is that?

MR. CARNEY: I think we made very clear and we made clear that we were concerned and our international partners were concerned that Assad, as he became more and more beleaguered, would resort to the use of chemical weapons. It was essential that we made clear both in private communications to the Assad regime, as well as in public, as the President did, how seriously we would view the use of chemical weapons. And that is what the President did.

And we are now in the process of gathering the facts -- not rushing to conclusions, not acting precipitously based on an incomplete case, but gathering the facts -- in order to make a judgment about what policy actions the President might take in reaction to the crossing of the red line.

And I think that is entirely the right way to go and certainly what the American people would support, rather than, say, precipitous action based on strong but limited evidence, which is what we have at this time.

Q Israel acted too quickly then over -- in the last few days?

MR. CARNEY: I think you're conflating two issues here. As I said --

Q -- they took military action --

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I'm not going to comment on the actions that Israel may or may not have taken. But it is --

Q Are you really saying they may not have taken action? I mean, the world --

MR. CARNEY: But I think you need to look at -- again, just the news reports -- I'm not going to comment on the actions. And what I have said here is that Israel has for a long time been, justifiably, concerned about the transfer of sophisticated weaponry to Hezbollah. This is not just chemical weapons, but sophisticated weaponry to Hezbollah. And it is certainly within their right to take action to protect themselves and to prevent that kind of weaponry from getting into the hands of terrorist organizations like Hezbollah.

So again without -- I would refer you to the Israelis for any confirmation or denial of actions that have been associated with them. But I would tell you that as a general matter this is a concern that they have had, and it is certainly within their right to take action to prevent the transfer of those kind of -- that kind of weaponry to organizations like Hezbollah.

Q A couple quick questions on Benghazi. Last week you said from this podium that the Departments of State and Defense had told you and had told Congressman Issa that they were not aware of anyone else at either department who wanted to come forward and say anything about this. Now that there are -- it looks like at least two or three witnesses who are going to be speaking to Darrell Issa -- speaking publicly at his hearing on Wednesday, do you think they told you the whole story last week, the State Department?

MR. CARNEY: I don't understand. These witnesses are going to talk to Congress and we have said that we are not aware of anyone who has been blocked from speaking to Congress if they so choose to or want to speak to Congress.

Q So they were not blocked over the last eight months?

MR. CARNEY: We are unaware of anyone being blocked from talking to Congress that chose to or wanted to speak to Congress.

And I would point you to the fact that there was an Accountability Review Board chaired by two of the most distinguished experts in our national security establishment, nonpartisan experts -- Admiral Mullen and Ambassador Pickering -- who oversaw this review. And it was unsparing. It was critical. And it held people accountable. And it made a series of recommendations for action that could be taken to improve security to reduce the potential for these kinds of events from happening in the future. And every single one of those recommendations has been or is being implemented by the State Department.

Q If that report was unsparing, way is Greg Hicks, who was the number two to Ambassador Stevens, now going to tell Congress and tell the American people that there were U.S. Special Forces who were in Tripoli getting ready to board a plane, come to Benghazi to help these Americans, and they were told to stand down?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think the Department of Defense has addressed this. I don't have access to the interviews that I think have been referred to in some of the news reports, but in terms of that issue, the response that the Department of Defense took and the actions that the Department of Defense took in response to what was happening in Benghazi, I would refer you to the Department of Defense. They have addressed this very issue.

And I would refer you to the content of the ARB. Again, Admiral Mullen, Ambassador Pickering -- former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, one of the most respected diplomats, living diplomats in our country, served under Presidents of both parties -- oversaw a very rigorous investigation that reached a number of conclusions, including the fact that action was taken immediately and appropriately and that that action saved American lives.

Q I know what they said, but Greg Hicks is --

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're citing an interview that I haven't had access to --

Q Okay, but he's challenging the credibility of the White House. You don't care about what he's saying? Do you think he's lying?

MR. CARNEY: Again, Ed, you're citing an interview that I don't have.

Q He's saying people could have been helped.

MR. CARNEY: I'm saying --

Q He's the number two at the compound. It's not --

MR. CARNEY: I'm saying that there was an Accountability Review Board led by two men of unimpeachable expertise and credibility who oversaw a process that was rigorous and unsparing, that was highly critical in some areas, and that produced a series of recommendations that have all been acted on by the State Department, as the President insisted be the case. What he made clear from the very onset in the wake of Benghazi was that he wanted action taken to ensure that we found out who was responsible and that they were brought to justice, and that action be taken to ensure that we implement the steps necessary to improve the security of our diplomats and diplomatic facilities around the country world* so that this kind of thing can't happen again.

Q Last thing is there's another gentleman from the State Department, Mark Thompson, who is going to testify at this hearing that former Secretary Clinton tried to cut the counterterror unit at the State Department out of the initial hours after that attacks. Does the White House -- have you checked on that? Do you think that's accurate? Do you have any concerns about that, why they would have been cut out?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I have heard of that charge, and I would refer you to a statement put out today by the former head of the bureau, the Counterterrorism Bureau, Daniel Benjamin, and he says, "It has been alleged that the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau was cut out of the discussion and decision-making in the aftermath of the Benghazi attacks. I ran the bureau then and I can say now with certainty as the former coordinator for counterterrorism, that this charge is simply untrue. At no time did I feel that the bureau was in way being left out of deliberations that it should have been part of."

So I'd refer you to that statement.
Peter.

Q Following up very briefly on the issue of Libya, how has the power vacuum that followed in Libya affected the White House's calculus, it's decision-making process vis-à-vis Syria right now? What are the lessons --

MR. CARNEY: I think we have said -- it's an excellent question, and I think we have said that with regards to all the countries that have been affected by the Arab Spring and the turmoil and upheaval that we have seen across the region, that we look at them each distinctly and take actions according to and make policy decisions according to the distinctions that we see.

Not every country is the same, as you know. Their make-ups are different. The circumstances are different in terms of the kind of unrest that we've seen in the Arab Spring. So I think that it's impossible to draw too many parallels between, in this case,

Libya, and Syria.

As we made clear I think early on with regards to Syria when some of these parallels were drawn that the circumstance that confronted the President in Libya was one where he had the opportunity to take action with our international partners to prevent the imminent attack on a city that would have led to countless deaths at the hands of the Qaddafi regime, and he took that action because the policy options were available to him that, while not without risk, he believed could be successful. And he took that action.

The circumstances in Libya [sic] Syria* present a different array of challenges, including when it comes to the international community and nations in the region and how they view the situation and the action that they believe should be taken.

So we are working accordingly very specifically with the challenges that Syria presents to us with our international partners, with the Syrian opposition, using all the tools that we have available to us to sanction and isolate Assad, to press for action at the Security Council, and when that has been blocked, to take action elsewhere. And we'll continue that effort.

Q Given the fact that the standard of evidence that the President and this White House has set for the use of chemical weapons, that it may be impossible to meet -- not because it doesn't exist but because it's simply impossible to access it with Bashar al-Assad not allowing U.N. inspectors and others to go into that country, and the chain of custody, which is sort of Washington language for it's unclear exactly who held this evidence when it got to the folks who are able to see it in neighboring countries like Turkey. If you aren't able to meet that standard of evidence does that mean that the red line won't have been crossed? Does nothing happen unless --

MR. CARNEY: The suggestion that nothing is happening is not actually accurate in terms of U.S. policy. And yet we have, even in the weeks and months preceding the revelations about chemical weapons use, been stepping up our assistance to the opposition and changing the nature of our assistance to the opposition. And that process had been underway and continues to be underway. And I think that you have seen a significant increase in our assistance and in our engagement.

And so I just want to challenge the premise there that this is -- when it comes to assisting the opposition or taking action to help bring about the end of the Assad era, that chemical weapons is the only deciding factor -- that the provable use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime is the only issue here when it comes to the action and actions that the United States can take.

Q So is the White House satisfied perhaps that even if they aren't able to meet that standard of evidence, that even if there's a high likelihood that chemical weapons were used, that there would not be a game-changing element to do anything further?

MR. CARNEY: I think that's a hypothetical that I'm wary of engaging in. But I can say that it is absolutely the right thing to do and the smart thing to do, on behalf of the American people and our interests, to be sure that when these kinds of allegations are

made and when an issue of such seriousness as the use of chemical weapons is on the table that we get our facts right. And I think the American people, justifiably, expect that when it comes to significant policy decisions that a President makes on their behalf, policy decisions that could potentially put Americans at risk -- I'm saying that only in the sense - - I'm not trying to telegraph anything -- only in the sense that all options remain available, as the President has made clear -- that we be absolutely sure we have our facts straight, that we be absolutely sure that the evidence can be corroborated and reviewed and that there is acknowledgement that what we have presented is solid and true.

Q One last question, digressing to the topic of guns very quickly -- there is now new evidence, video evidence that a young individual has proven that with 3-D printing he can manufacture a gun that can fire off six bullets, at least to this point -- the technology rapidly changing. Given the conversation, the White House's strong position about background checks, now you don't need a background check, you can still do it in your own home and create these guns. I'm curious of the White House's view of this and whatever concerns it causes in terms of new technologies adding itself to this mix.

MR. CARNEY: I haven't been part of any discussion about that report or development. I can simply say that the actions that the President proposed, including the executive actions that he's acting on and the legislative actions that he urged Congress to act on and he hopes still Congress will pass -- even if all were implemented would not, of course, end the scourge of violence in America.

But the President believes and experts believe that they would result in a reduction of gun violence. They would save lives, that maybe -- that certainly there would be children in America who would be alive because of these actions, and that is alone well worth the effort.

Q Should we be allowed to make guns at home? Should people be able to make --

MR. CARNEY: I don't know enough about the report that you're citing to make a comment on that. I simply make the point that the fact that we can't prevent every act of violence doesn't mean we should not act to prevent some.

Julianna.

Q Can you tell us a little bit about what's on the agenda for the President's meeting tomorrow with South Korea's President? And will they be working to devise a new strategy to confront North Korea?

MR. CARNEY: I can tell you that the President looks very much forward to meeting with his new counterpart from South Korea here at the White House, and that as is always the case there's a full range of topics that will be discussed in this very important bilateral relationship that we have. North Korea will, of course, be one of those topics, as will the United States' overall strategy of engagement with Asia, our economic ties to both South Korea and the region.

So I don't have anything more specific for you than that. I think we'll know more and learn more and be able to talk to you about more tomorrow after the meeting. But it's obviously -- as we've said both in our visits to the Republic of Korea and in visits by Korean leaders here, this is an enormously important relationship on a security level as well as economic and cultural. So the President looks forward to the visit.

Q Does he see it as an opportunity to reevaluate our posture toward North Korea?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we work very closely with our allies in Seoul on the challenge presented by the behavior of the North Korean regime, the provocations that Pyongyang engages in periodically and has of late engaged in. And the coordination between our two nations in reaction to that has always been strong and will continue to be.

I mean that just to suggest that this is not -- that this will not present a sudden, new strain of conversation here. This is a conversation that's ongoing at the leader level as well as at the lower levels between foreign ministers and defense ministers and security and intelligence professionals.

Q Also I wanted to ask about sequestration. During this pay period -- non-commissioned officers of the White House have one furlough day. Could you talk a little bit about how you see that affecting operations here at the White House?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I can tell you obviously it results, as is the case across the government when furloughs are implemented, in a reduction in staff, which limits what you can do. Everyone here works hard, and when we are a man or woman down in a certain department that affects what we can do. But we're doing our best, obviously, as is the case across the government.

Mark.

Q Jay, is there a political agenda for the golf game today?

MR. CARNEY: The President looks forward to discussing with -- and is probably discussing as I speak -- with these senators a range of topics. This is in keeping with his engagement with lawmakers of both parties, and in particular Republican senators, to see if he can find some common ground on some of the challenges that confront us.

When it comes to reducing our deficit in a balanced way, getting our fiscal house in order in a way that allows us to invest in our economy and protect the middle class and help it grow and expand, there's a broad-based consensus in the country about how we should do that. There's a broad consensus, a bipartisan consensus outside of Congress about how we should do that. There is even some consensus among -- at least at the high-altitude level -- among Democrats and Republicans in the Senate, or at least some consensus among some Republicans with Democrats in the Senate, about how we should do this.

So he has been engaging in these conversations to try to find out if there really is a willingness to move forward with a compromise on deficit reduction that allows us to reduce our deficit in a responsible and balanced way that doesn't overly burden seniors or

the middle class; allows for the investments in infrastructure and education that are essential to long-term economic growth; and would achieve the kind of deficit reduction that Republicans have long said they seek.

And it bears remembering that this President has signed into law over \$2.5 trillion in deficit reduction. It bears remembering that we are now in the midst of the most precipitous decline in our deficit since demobilization after World War II. And it bears remembering that the goal of \$4 trillion over 10 years in deficit reduction is achievable if there's a willingness to compromise on Capitol Hill, if there's a willingness to do what the President has done, which is put forward proposals that represent some difficult choices by everyone, and that includes Republicans.

And that means that revenue has to be part of the deal -- that revenue has to be part of the equation. Because otherwise you have to do deficit reduction on the backs of seniors, or on the backs of students, or middle-class families alone, and that is simply, in the President's view, neither appropriate nor fair.

Q Does President Obama believe golf is conducive to this kind of discussion?

MR. CARNEY: Well, he's willing to try anything. (Laughter.) And whether it's a conversation on the phone, or a meeting in the Oval Office, or dinner at a restaurant, or dinner at the residence, he's going to have the same kinds of conversations and test the theory that this kind of engagement can help produce the results that everybody in this country -- or at least the majority of the people in this country who care about and pay attention to these issues wants to see.

I get asked a lot about inside game, outside game. He has long engaged in both. He's having one-on-one conversations, group conversations, meals, golf games, hard-headed negotiations with legislators, and he is going out to the country and talking to regular folks out there about the issues that matter to them and about the need for them to speak up and engage in a process to demand that Congress take action and do the most -- do the responsible thing to help the economy grow to help the middle class.

Q A follow-up on that. The trip to Austin later this week, what is the objective there? Are there specific things that he wants Congress to do related to that trip? Is he trying to call on them to pass certain measures, or is it more broadly speaking about the economy and the middle class?

MR. CARNEY: It is an effort to demonstrate that, in spite of some of the obstacles that we face here in Washington to doing the right thing and helping our economy grow, and some of the actions that Washington takes or inaction that Washington engages in that actually inflicts wounds on our economy, out in the country there are positive things happening, and that that only reinforces the need for Washington to do some very simple things to help facilitate economic growth and job creation, to help enhance the prospects of the middle class rising and thriving.

And we're in a situation now where, on Friday, we had another month of positive private sector job creation. We had numbers that exceeded some expectations but by no means were what we need in the end to get where we want to go, which is what the President has always said -- as long as there is someone out there in the United States of America looking for a job who wants a job and can't get one, he's going to keep working to improve our economy and improve the lot of the middle class.

And that's what this trip will be about. It will highlight the fact that we need to -- I mean, you remember the President talking in the State of the Union address about the need to ensure that good jobs for the middle class are available here in this country. And that includes the kinds of improvements we've seen in manufacturing and in industries in manufacturing that represent the future of the economy here and around the world. It means making sure that Americans have the skills to fill those jobs, and that reflects the education component, why we need to continue to invest in education to ensure that our people have the skills necessary to take these jobs that are available and will be available in the industries of the future.

And finally we need to make sure that those jobs, those middle-class jobs provide a decent living so that the American Dream can be achieved by Americans in the middle class.

And taken as a whole, the proposals the President has put forward in his budget, including the key investments in the future that he's talked about, as well as the reasonable balanced deficit reduction that's a part of it, will help bring about a stronger and bigger middle class. And you'll hear him talk about that on Thursday.

April, and then Christi.

Q Jay, I want to go back to Syria just a little bit. Now, when you were talking about the red line, are you saying basically from what I'm gleaning, the red line is for the use of chemical weapons against Syrians, not for the transport of sending weapons to rebel groups? Is that what you're saying that's what the red line is for?

MR. CARNEY: No, no. I think that the President made clear when he first discussed this issue -- I just want to clarify, you're absolutely right that the use of chemical weapons --

Q On the Syrian people by the Syrians.

MR. CARNEY: By whomever is a red line. The proliferation of, the transfer of chemical weapons is also a red line. One of the serious concerns that we have and our allies and partners around the world, and especially in the region have is that these kinds of weapons would get into the hands of terrorist organizations, other non-state actors who mean nothing but harm to the U.S. and our people and our allies.

So both are of a concern. So the rebel question I think you're raising is the use by Assad the issue. What we have said is that we find incredible -- not credible that the opposition has used chemical weapons. Obviously, that's a matter that's under investigation. But we think that any use of chemical weapons in Syria is almost certain to have been done by the Assad regime. But any use would be a red line crossed.

Q Also with what's happening this weekend in Syria, or with Israel and Syria, is there a thought in the White House if gas prices, oil prices are going up -- are you looking at that? Because when there is any kind of conflict in that region, there's also a hike in gas prices. Are you looking at that --

MR. CARNEY: Well, we monitor oil and gas prices regularly. There are a host of factors that go into the rise and fall of prices as you know. The instability in oil-producing regions is one of them. I don't have any specific comment about where prices are now, but we monitor them regularly. We are always concerned about oil prices.

I think that that general concern that we have and that every American has reflects the need -- or reinforces the need to take every action we can to improve our energy security, to make sure that we're producing as much energy as we can here in the United States and taking every action that we can to reduce our dependence on foreign imports.

And as I think you've heard me say many times, we are at -- we have reduced our imports of foreign fuel significantly as we have hit new levels of production here in the United States. And as we have made significant inroads into the production of alternative energies here in the United States, which in turn helps create some of the industries that create the jobs of the future that I was talking about with Phil.

Q But, Jay, in the short term, you have Iran and Syria talking about they're going to retaliate. This is in that region. Again, gas prices, the possibility going up. We're talking about the economy right now. Summer months going -- and there is a real possibility of gas prices, this affecting us here in our pocketbooks with gas prices.

MR. CARNEY: Well, there is no question that instability in this particular part of the world is always something that we watch, and that it has -- it certainly can have an impact on global oil prices. I just don't have a comment specifically on the current price or the level of impact that the situation in Syria is having on prices now.

Christi.

Q Thanks, Jay. On the plant explosion in West, Texas, is the President still focused on this? And is he asking questions about whether federal regulators maybe did everything they were supposed to do to prevent this from happening?

MR. CARNEY: He is focused on it, and I think you saw him on a number of occasions -- because of everything else that was going on, in particular with the attacks in Boston -- make sure that he was speaking about the tragedy in West, Texas, that those families know that they were not and will not be forgotten.

And from what I understand, the issues involved in the -- of the industrial facility there are being investigated, so I don't have any insight to shed on that process or progress in the investigation. But when it comes to doing everything we can at the federal level to assist Texas and the town of West in dealing with this tragedy and rebuilding, the

President is committed to that. He made that clear when he visited for the memorial and spoke with Governor Perry and other state and local officials as well as the families of the victims.

Q When he's talking about industry in Texas this week, do you expect that he'll talk about this in any way, about worker safety, about the responsibility of the federal government?

MR. CARNEY: I just don't have a preview of his remarks. He is -- broadly speaking, he'll be talking about economic growth and development, but I don't have specifics for you.

Ann. I'm sorry, Jackie again, then Ann.

Q When he is in Austin, will he be talking at all -- that's the state of two senators who have opposed him on both guns and immigration. Will those two issues come up?

MR. CARNEY: Anything is possible. I think that the focus will be on economic matters. I think that he would encourage those senators and every senator to embrace the kind of common-sense deficit reduction -- balanced deficit reduction that allows for the investments in the economy that are so necessary that the President supports. I'm not sure they'd go along with that, but he would welcome it if they did.

Q But will he do that publicly while he's there?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I wouldn't want to preview the remarks entirely because then you might not actually pay attention to them, so -- (laughter.)

Q On a separate matter, has the President gotten any briefings or information from -- other than from the media -- on what's happened in Bangladesh with the factory there that's killed four times as many people as the Triangle Shirtwaist Company --

MR. CARNEY: Terrible.

Q -- since there are so many U.S. retailers who get their goods from there?

MR. CARNEY: He has as part of his regular briefings been kept up to date about the tragic developments in Bangladesh and the tremendous loss of life. And I know that his thoughts and prayers go to the victims of that tragedy. I don't have specific information about some of the issues you raise that go into questions about how this happened, but he is absolutely being kept abreast of that development.

Q Jay, just so we don't misunderstand, did the President choose these three golfing partners because there were specific issues with Senator Corker that he wanted to discuss, like Senator Corker did not support the gun background check compromise, or Senator Udall because Golf Digest ranks him as the best golfer in Congress? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: Does it? I didn't know that. Maybe he did. (Laughter.)

Look, I think that it is fair to say that there are a host of relevant issues, policy issues that the President could and would discuss with any one of the hundred members of the United States Senate. And he looks forward to these discussions that he'll have today, and they'll probably range across the set of issues that he and the Senate are dealing with.

And he will I'm sure make a pitch for his policy agenda, make a pitch for the kind of action that poll after poll show the American people support when it comes to our economic policies or reducing gun violence or comprehensive immigration reform, actions to enhance our energy independence. These are things that have broad support from the American people. They're very common sense, and he's looking for partners anywhere he can find them, including on the eighth hole.

Mara, last one.

Q Just to follow up on this, the dinners and the golf game are really become objects of fascination in Washington, his outreach to Republican senators. I'm wondering if you could give us a sense of the frequency. I mean, other than the public-type events that we hear about, the restaurant or he has them over to the residence, does he talk to Republican senators on a daily basis, weekly? Like how intense is this effort other than the --

MR. CARNEY: It certainly -- I don't have a running list of every conversation he has, at least not one that I can provide to you. But he speaks frequently with lawmakers, senators.

Q Republican senators in particular?

MR. CARNEY: Including Republican senators, and I would say certainly -- I mean, frequently, certainly weekly. But more than that, the engagement that you have seen is only part of the picture. And that's true of his involvement as well as the involvement of other senior officials in his administration -- the Vice President and others.

So he's looking to get things done. And he wants to talk to anyone who has that as his or her objective too, and is willing to accept that they may not get everything they want out of a compromise -- in fact, by definition, they will not -- and they can live with that. Partisan purists are not what he's looking for. He's looking for people who want to go about the business of building the economy, helping the middle class, responsibly reducing our deficit, reforming our immigration system in a way that will help our economy and the middle class, and taking action to reduce gun violence.

So if there is anybody who meets that standard, anybody who is willing to say, you know what, I accept that I'm not going to get my dream partisan agenda, I accept that I'm going to have to give a little bit, that I may have to compromise in order to achieve these objectives, then he wants to have that conversation.

Q So he -- at least once a week he talks to Republican senators?

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

All right. Thanks very much, everybody.

END

1:55 P.M. EDT