

Press Releases: Humanitarian Evacuations in Eastern Ghouta, Syria

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 29, 2017

The United States welcomes the urgent and long awaited medical evacuations that took place over the past forty-eight hours from Eastern Ghouta in Syria. We also extend our gratitude to the humanitarian and medical professionals on the ground for their compassion and tireless work. Their dedication and efforts to save lives in the most difficult of environments illustrate the best in humanity.

Although the evacuation and treatment of 29 of the more than 600 critically ill patients is a step in the right direction, the United States remains extremely concerned about the dire situation in Eastern Ghouta and the continued ruthless siege by the Assad regime. Hundreds in the besieged area still await medical evacuation, and many have died as they wait. It is a cruel reminder of the regime's unbridled brutality. In Eastern Ghouta, the Syrian regime continues to deliberately use tactics to starve Syrian civilians, including women and children, block humanitarian aid and critically needed medical supplies, and bomb hospitals, medical personnel, and first responders, all to preserve its grasp on power. No aid convoys were given access during the entire month of December. If proper medications and supplies were allowed, more than half of those needing medical evacuation could stay in Ghouta. Bashar al-Assad and his regime continue to regard the lives of the Syrian people as nothing more than bargaining chips. Katr Alnada, a critically ill six-month-old baby girl who ultimately died before being evacuated, is only one of many heartbreaking examples.

We repeat our call on Russia to live up to its obligations to ensure that the Assad regime ends these barbaric attacks against civilians in Syria. The Syrian regime must allow all medical evacuations in the besieged area, as well as the flow of medical supplies and humanitarian aid. Now, more than ever, Russia and the international community must vigorously support unhindered humanitarian access to all of Syria and pressure the Assad regime to credibly negotiate a lasting political resolution to the conflict through the UN-led Geneva process.

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Press Releases: Haiti National Day

Press Statement
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
December 29, 2017

On behalf of the U.S. government, I extend best wishes to the people of Haiti as you celebrate the 214th anniversary of Haiti's independence.

The United States and Haiti share a long history of close relations, and our futures are even more closely linked through the nearly one million Haitian Americans who contribute to both American prosperity and the economic growth of Haiti.

We acknowledge the tremendous strides Haiti has made over the last year. The inauguration of President Moïse in February, and the work Haiti is undertaking to stabilize its electoral system going forward, can reaffirm the Haitian people's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We also note significant progress in security, and commend Haiti's efforts to develop its agricultural sector.

As a longstanding friend and partner, the United States remains committed to supporting Haiti as it strives to increase economic growth and investment, unlocking its full potential.

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Press Releases: Full Resumption of U.S. Visa Services in Turkey

Media Note
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 28, 2017

Since October, the government of Turkey has adhered to the high-level assurances it provided to the United States that there are no additional local employees of our Mission in Turkey under investigation, that local staff of our Embassy and consulates will not be detained or arrested for performing their official duties – including communicating with Turkish officials also working in an official capacity – and that Turkish authorities will inform the U.S. Government in advance if the Government of Turkey intends to detain or arrest any member of our local staff in the future.

Based on adherence to these assurances, the Department of State is confident that the security posture has improved sufficiently to allow for the full resumption of visa services in Turkey. We continue to have serious concerns about the existing allegations against arrested local employees of our Mission in Turkey. We are also concerned about the cases against U.S. citizens who have been arrested under the state of emergency. U.S. officials will continue to engage with their Turkish counterparts to seek a satisfactory resolution to these cases.

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Press Releases: Detainee Exchange Between Ukraine and Russia-Led Forces

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 28, 2017

The United States welcomes yesterday's exchange between the government of Ukraine and Russia-led forces in eastern Ukraine of more than 300 detainees. This exchange is one step toward implementation of the Minsk agreements. We once again call on the sides to fully implement their Minsk commitments including through a true "all-for-all" detainee exchange; a full ceasefire; the withdrawal of heavy weapons; safe and secure access for OSCE Special Monitoring Mission monitors; and humanitarian access to the conflict zone.

As Secretary Tillerson told Foreign Minister Lavrov in their phone call this week, it is also important for Russia to return its representatives to the Joint Center on Control and Coordination.

The fighting in eastern Ukraine has claimed more than 10,000 lives and damaged important civilian infrastructure. Russia, which started this conflict and perpetuates it through active leadership of military units on the ground that attack Ukrainian positions daily, must commit to bring it to an end.

The United States is ready, in coordination with France, Germany, and Ukraine, to engage with Russia in support of the Minsk agreements to achieve an end to the conflict, including through a peacekeeping force with a broad mandate for safety and security across the entire conflict zone, control of the international border, and responsibility for ensuring the cantonment of heavy weapons.

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Press Releases: I Am Proud of Our Diplomacy

Op-Ed
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

The New York Times
December 27, 2017

Over the past year, the United States has faced immense challenges in its dealings with North Korea, China and Russia, and in its efforts to defeat international terrorism. But Americans should be encouraged by the progress the State Department and United States Agency for International Development have made in pushing for global peace and stability.

When President Trump took office, he identified North Korea as the United States' greatest security threat. He abandoned the failed policy of strategic patience. In its place we carried out a policy of pressure through diplomatic and economic sanctions. This year, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted three of the strongest sanctions resolutions in history, including bans on a wide array of North Korean exports such as coal, iron, seafood and textiles.

The United States has asked allies and partners to exert unilateral pressure against North Korea in order to force the regime to change its behavior. Many have responded with positive steps like shutting down trade, severing diplomatic ties and expelling North Korean laborers. Our peaceful pressure campaign has cut off roughly 90 percent of North Korea's export revenue, much of which is used to fund illegal weapons development.

We hope that this international isolation will pressure the regime into serious negotiations on the abandonment of its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. A door to dialogue remains open, but we have made it clear that the regime must earn its way back to the negotiating table. Until

denuclearization occurs, the pressure will continue.

A central component of our North Korea strategy is persuading China to exert its decisive economic leverage on Pyongyang. China has applied certain import bans and sanctions, but it could and should do more. We will also continue to pursue American interests in other areas of our relationship, including trade imbalances, intellectual property theft and China's troubling military activities in the South China Sea and elsewhere. China's rise as an economic and military power requires Washington and Beijing to consider carefully how to manage our relationship for the next 50 years.

Defeating terrorism remains one of the president's highest priorities. The administration's aggressive strategy to counter the Islamic State delegates greater authority to American military commanders on the battlefield, giving our forces more freedom and speed to do what they do best, in partnership with indigenous fighting forces. As a result, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has accelerated operations and has recaptured virtually all of previously held Islamic State territory in Iraq and Syria. While our military was helping clear Iraq and Syria of Islamic State forces, our diplomats were following up with humanitarian aid and assistance, such as clearing land mines, restoring water and power, and getting children back in school.

A commitment to stopping Islamist terrorism and extremism also motivated the administration's decision to adopt a new South Asia strategy, which focuses on Afghanistan. That country cannot become a safe haven for terrorists, as it was in the days before the Sept. 11 attacks. Pakistan must contribute by combating terrorist groups on its own soil. We are prepared to partner with Pakistan to defeat terrorist organizations seeking safe havens, but Pakistan must demonstrate its desire to partner with us.

On Russia, we have no illusions about the regime we are dealing with. The United States today has a poor relationship with a resurgent Russia that has invaded its neighbors Georgia and Ukraine in the last decade and undermined the sovereignty of Western nations by meddling in our election and others'. The appointment of Kurt Volker, a former NATO ambassador, as special representative for Ukraine reflects our commitment to restoring the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Absent a peaceful resolution of the Ukraine situation, which must begin with Russia's adherence to the Minsk agreements, there cannot be business as usual with Russia.

While we are on guard against Russian aggression, we recognize the need to work with Russia where mutual interests intersect. Nowhere is that more evident than in Syria. Now that President Vladimir Putin has committed to the United Nations-backed Geneva political process for providing a new future for Syria, we expect Russia to follow through. We are confident that the fulfillment of these talks will produce a Syria that is free of Bashar al-Assad and his family.

Lastly, the flawed Iran nuclear deal is no longer the focal point of our policy toward Iran. We are now confronting the totality of Iranian threats. Part of this strategy entails rebuilding alliances with our partners in the Middle East, and in November we helped re-establish diplomatic ties between

Iraq and Saudi Arabia. We will continue to work with our allies and with Congress to explore options for addressing the nuclear deal's many flaws, while building a like-minded effort to punish Iran for its violations of ballistic missile commitments and its destabilizing activities in the region.

I am proud of what our State Department and Agency for International Development teams around the world have accomplished this year, and our progress will continue in 2018 and beyond. To that end, we have undertaken a redesign of the State Department to strengthen our teams' ability to deliver on our mission.

Our redesign doesn't involve simply shifting boxes on an organizational chart. Our changes must address root problems that lead to inefficiencies and frustrations. By making changes like streamlining our human resources and information technology systems, better aligning personnel and resources with America's strategic priorities, and reforming duplicative processes, we are giving our people more opportunities to flourish professionally and spend more time confronting the global problems they have dedicated their careers to solving.

When I wake up each morning, my first thought is, "How can I and my colleagues at the State Department use diplomacy to prevent people around the world from being killed, wounded or deprived of their rights?" In spite of the challenges, I remain optimistic about the power of diplomacy to resolve conflicts and advance American interests. My confidence comes from the knowledge that our efforts are carried out daily by patriotic and dedicated State Department employees who make sacrifices to serve with patience and persistence and who, by advancing democratic values the world over, are protecting our citizens' rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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