

Press Releases: Background Briefing on the Secretary's Travel to Austin, Texas; Mexico City, Mexico; San Carlos Bariloche, Argentina; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Lima, Peru; Bogota, Colombia; and Kingston, Jamaica

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us for today's background call to preview the Secretary's upcoming trip to Texas, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and also Jamaica. Today we're joined by [Senior State Department Official One], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official One. We're also joined by [Senior State Department Official Two], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Two. As a reminder, today's call is on background; it'll be embargoed until the end of the call.

And with that, I will turn it over to our senior State Department officials for opening remarks, and then we'll take a few questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Thanks, [Moderator], very much. The Secretary is planning to leave on February 1st, and he will actually depart for Austin, Texas from the Greenbrier, which is in West Virginia, where he'll be giving a speech that morning. He will then speak to a group at the University of Texas of approximately 250 people, and he'll be greeted and hosted by the university president, Gregory Fenves. It's the Secretary's alma mater, so he's looking forward to returning. That speech should last about an hour. It'll be in the early afternoon. It'll be open. It'll be streamed on Facebook and all other vehicles. And there will be a Q&A after the speech, and that Q&A will be open to other questions, and so there might be questions relating to Latin America, which is what the speech will be about, but then there will – could also be questions relating to other countries in the world, and he'll be happy to answer those too.

He'll then leave mid-afternoon and will go to Mexico City. And that evening, he's meeting with Mexican Government leaders at the ambassador's residence.

And he'll stay overnight in – will stay overnight in Mexico City. And that morning, they'll – he'll meet with chiefs of missions. This is where the Secretary of State brings together chiefs of missions from certain countries and is able to talk to them in an informal setting about how things are going within their nation and listen to any concerns they have or anything they need from the Secretary. So at this particular chief of mission conference will be chiefs of missions from Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama, Costa Rica, Belize, and the Caribbean. That's in the morning.

And then later that day, late morning, he meets with the – Videgaray, the foreign minister. And then there'll be a joint press avail after that sometime before noon. And then some time in the early afternoon, he's going to meet with President Pena Nieto. And around mid-afternoon, probably around 3 o'clock or so, he'll probably go to the Zocalo, or the Metropolitan Cathedral, although that is not definite.

Then later that day, will fly to Panama City, so just – where there'll be refueling, and then he'll immediately go on to Bariloche in Argentina, arriving on Saturday morning. That day will then start around noon, where he'll go to – is expected to go to the Nahuel Huapi National Park. And right now, he's expected to ascend the summit on horseback, but there will also be a chairlift for those people that – reporters and others that want to go on the chairlift and film him coming up on the horseback, or who don't want to go on horseback. It will be your choice. And that takes care of that afternoon.

On Sunday, it's Bariloche to Buenos Aires. So he'll arrive at Buenos Aires sometime closer to around noon. There'll be a wreath-laying at Saint Martin Plaza – at Saint Martin Palace, I'm sorry, with the foreign minister. Then a meeting with the foreign minister and key cabinet ministers. There'll be a joint press avail sometime around 2:00, and then he'll meet that afternoon with chiefs of missions from that part of the world, and that would include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. He is planning to meet the Panama ambassador when he – when the plane lands in Panama City.

The – there'll be a mission personnel meeting that afternoon, and then that evening is the Super Bowl, which he, along with many other people, will be watching. The next day he'll meet with President Macri in the morning. And then late morning, he'll leave Buenos Aires for Lima, when he – arriving in Lima around 2:00, where he'll meet with the foreign minister, Aljovin. There'll be a press avail for that. There'll be a meeting with the ambassador, the American ambassador to Peru, and that will take care of that evening. That – all that should take until around 6 o'clock or so.

On Tuesday he meets with the president of Peru, President Kuczynski, and will leave late morning to Bogota, where that afternoon he'll meet with the ambassador and then sometime around 4:00 meet with the president of Colombia, President Santos. There'll be a joint press avail, and then later after that he'll meet with the foreign minister, Holguin. That evening there's an informal working dinner with President Santos.

On Wednesday morning he flies to Kingston, Jamaica. He'll meet with the prime minister, Holness, and Foreign Minister Johnson-Smith. And there'll be an expanded meeting after that, so basically a 20-minute meeting first and then another meeting. And then later that day he'll meet with the chargé d'affaires at the embassy, and will then fly back to Washington, landing somewhere around 7 to 8 o'clock.

And I'd like to introduce [Senior State Department Official Two], who can give you some more color relating to the purpose of the trip and why we've chosen those particular countries.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Thank you, and thank you for joining us today. Secretary Tillerson's going to be making – embarking on his first multi-country trip to Latin America and the Caribbean this week. It's appropriate, as there are some very important events occurring in this hemisphere where U.S. leadership will be on display. There's the Summit of the Americas in Peru in April; in June, the G7 summit will take place in Canada; and later in the year, at the end of November, Argentina will host the G20 summit for the first time in South America. U.S. leadership will be on display as we work with our Latin American partners throughout the region.

The Secretary is engaging with regional partners on this trip to promote a safe, prosperous, energy-secure, and democratic hemisphere. We stand with the region as a steady, enduring partner. We're working hand in hand with partners to disrupt the transnational criminal organizations and trafficking routes that harm our hemisphere's citizens and drive illegal migration. The United States trades twice as much with this hemisphere as we do with China, and we will continue to enhance our trade and energy relationships to foster prosperity for our region.

We remain steadfast in our shared respect for democracy and human rights. The Secretary will continue to advocate for increased regional attention to the multiple crises in Venezuela. With our partners, we plan to continue to pressure the corrupt Maduro regime to return to democratic order.

With that, I'll stop and take questions.

OPERATOR: For our first question we'll go to *The Los Angeles Times* and the line of Tracy Wilkinson. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. How are you? Thank you for doing this. Gosh, I have a gazillion questions. Let's start with – [Senior State Department Official One], did you say that the Secretary will be meeting with Venezuelan officials in that meeting in Buenos Aires, or did I hear wrong?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I – well, not officials, the – he's definitely not meeting with Venezuelan officials.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I think he was talking about there will be a chief of mission conference –

QUESTION: I see. Okay. So a U.S. official from – who is stationed in –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, and our chargé will –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Right. So when I mentioned –

QUESTION: Got it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: – all those countries, those are American chargés – chargé

QUESTION: Yes, that was my confusion. Okay, got it. Thank you.

All right, so on – let's start with Colombia. There has been a lot of concern and talk on the – in Congress about the surge in coca production. Is this something you're going to be – or the Secretary will be raising with President Santos, and do you – is the position of this government, this administration, of you guys that the peace process has facilitated coca production, which is what some people claim?

And then on Mexico, I know there's a lot of concern that the NAFTA talks could spoil other cooperation between Mexico and the United States in terms of immigration and drug trafficking and all of those things. So what will the Secretary's message be to Mexico vis-a-vis those talks? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: On Colombia, the Secretary absolutely is going to discuss the surge in coca production and cocaine production, but he's also going to note how we continue to work in close collaboration with the Colombian Government and its security forces to combat this problem of drug trafficking as it affects Colombia, as it affects the entire hemisphere, and the threat it poses to the United States. So we will most certainly raise that in Colombia.

With regard to the question of NAFTA in Mexico, the Secretary's visit will once again underscore that the U.S.-Mexico relationship is deep and broad. He will talk about our joint efforts against transnational criminal organizations. He will underscore how our two governments are cooperating to prevent illegal migration from reaching our southwest border and how we're working together to address the underlying conditions that are prompting illegal migration from Central America through our joint efforts in Central America and in the Northern Triangle countries.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, Nora Gamez from the *Miami Herald*.

OPERATOR: Your line is now open.

QUESTION: Hi, hi, hello. Thank you for doing this. Senator Marco Rubio has sent a letter to the President asking to impose sanctions against Diosdado Cabello, and I wonder if State Department support that position, like imposing sanctions against Cabello.

And a quick question on Cuba: Will the Secretary Tillerson be addressing the situation in Cuba on his trip?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: The State Department, in line with the

White House, will use all economic, political, and diplomatic tools at our disposal to address the situation in Venezuela. The upcoming undemocratic transition of political authority in Cuba is likely to be raised at multiple stops throughout the Secretary's trip.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please. Nick Wadhams from Bloomberg.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks very much. Can you just talk a little bit more about the intent of the Secretary's visit to Bariloche? What – aside from the visit to the national park, what message is he trying to send by visiting Bariloche and what does he hope to achieve there?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Well, very importantly, he's going to be meeting there with people who run the national park but also a Fulbright scholar. He's going to be talking about the kinds of scientific and research exchanges that are going on between the two countries. And at the national park, he will underscore how conservation at the park is advancing important goals as well.

MODERATOR: Okay. Rafael Bernal from The Hill.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for having this. With the chiefs of mission talk in Mexico City, you mentioned El Salvador and Honduras are going to be there. I wanted to know if the Secretary will address questions related to TPS. And on that question, I know Senator Cardin is holding up the OAS ambassador subject to the State Department releasing the documents that went from the embassy to State and then to DHS. Do you plan to release those to the Senate?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah. We're aware of the senator's request. I will have to get with our Legislative Affairs bureau to get a fuller answer to that question. But Temporary Protective Status is a Department of Homeland Security decision ultimately. There's no doubt that in our meeting with our ambassadors from that group, we will internally discuss the challenges and the opportunities that the TPS decision presents to our partners in the hemisphere.

MODERATOR: All right, thank you. Luis Alonso from AP.

QUESTION: Thank you. Good morning for doing this. I would like to ask – well, it's a two-part question. First, the – it's the first multi-country trip to Latin America by the Secretary after he's been a full year in the job. Is – how the region should be reading the fact that it took him a year to visit several countries in the region?

And the second part of the question is specifically about Venezuela. There are some reports in the Spanish-language press saying that Secretary Tillerson may use this trip to the region to sound out regional leaders on a possible U.S. oil embargo against Venezuela. And also, now that I'm at this, is the U.S. – does the U.S. have a preference on whether Peru, as the host of the summit, should invite or should not invite Venezuela to the summit? Thank you very much.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I don't think there's any doubt that the

Secretary's priority and attention towards – towards the Western Hemisphere began with his first bilateral trip abroad, which was to Mexico. And I think this trip builds on his engagement in the Western Hemisphere throughout the past year, and the meetings he's had here in Washington with different leaders demonstrates that he has been engaged, and this trip will allow him to deepen and broaden those relationships.

Regarding the Summit of the Americas, we look forward to participating in that summit. The summit's theme of democratic governance in anti-corruption efforts will allow us to underscore and highlight the corrupt practices that are occurring in Venezuela under the Maduro regime. President Maduro, if invited and if he attends, will have to answer to the rest of the democratic nations of this hemisphere while he has pursued – why he has pursued illegitimate elections over the last year, and we would look forward to that discussion.

MODERATOR: Okay. Last question, is that what you're saying, or another one? Okay. Maria Molina with Radio Colombia.

QUESTION: Hi. I wanted to ask you if there is a further strategy from the U.S. apart from the sanctions to Venezuela, because right now, apparently, they are not seeming to be really, really effective. So I wanted to ask if there – if you were thinking about a further strategy not related to sanctions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Our strategy on Venezuela has been extremely effective. Over the last year, we sanctioned more than 50 individuals. The Lima Group has joined this effort and created an additional hemispheric pressure entity on Caracas. The Canadian Government has also sanctioned individuals in Venezuela, and just last week, the European Union joined the international pressure campaign to hold individuals who are violating human rights in Venezuela, who are responsible for antidemocratic practices and who are robbing the national treasury of the country, by imposing their own international sanctions. The pressure campaign is working. The financial sanctions we have placed on the Venezuelan Government has forced it to begin becoming in default, both on sovereign and PDVSA, its oil company's, debt. And what we are seeing because of the bad choices of the Maduro regime is a total economic collapse in Venezuela. So our policy is working, our strategy is working and we're going to keep it on the Venezuelans.

MODERATOR: And our final question, Christina Garcia from EFC.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for having this call. I just want to confirm that the – Secretary Tillerson is going to the Summit of the Americas, and also, is President Trump also going? Thank you so much.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: The Summit of the Americas invitations are due out in the next couple of weeks, and we will make decisions on the – the U.S. Government participation at that time.

MODERATOR: Okay. And any final comments that anyone want to wrap up with

here? [Senior State Department Official One]?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No, I think it's fine. We're looking forward to seeing you on the trip.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: And I just – I just also want to underscore in talking about our sanctions. They are targeted at the responsible – members of the regime in Venezuela. And it's really important that our financial sectors are targeted at the placement of additional debt by the Venezuelan Government. Not a single corn – ear of corn – not a single medicine container, not anything that could help the Venezuelan people is blocked by our sanctions. Our goal is to help the Venezuelan people deal with this economic crisis, but also restore democratic order so that they can be in charge of their future again.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much, sir. Thanks, everybody. The embargo will now be lifted, and we look forward to talking with you again soon. Thank you.

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