

Press Releases: Briefing on Release of the 16th Annual To Walk the Earth in Safety Report

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. Hope you're having a good day. It feels weird to see you on a Wednesday, but glad to be able to be here and to bring my colleague, Ambassador Tina Kaidanow. I'm happy to welcome to the podium Tina Kaidanow today. She's our Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, and this lady really knows her stuff. You should hear her in her briefings; she is amazing.

Ambassador Kaidanow is going to talk about a newly published report. You should have it on the desks in front of you. It's called, "To Walk the Earth in Safety," and she's here to talk a little bit more about this. It's an annual State Department report that highlights the State Department's commitment to conventional weapons destruction. I'm now going to turn it over to our PDAS Kaidanow, who's going to give you a few remarks, take a few questions I'll help facilitate, and then we'll do the rest of the briefing from there.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Super. Thank you, Heather. Appreciate it.

MS NAUERT: Sure.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: All right. Good morning, everyone – or good afternoon. And thanks, Heather, for the great introduction. And thanks to everybody particularly who worked on this important report that we're releasing today and who helped organize today's rollout.

I'm really pleased to announce the release of the 16th edition of this report, which, as you can see, is entitled, "To Walk the Earth in Safety." The report chronicles the conventional weapons destruction assistance provided by the U.S. Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development to approximately 50 countries across the globe over the past year, and it describes the critical progress that we have made in reducing the threat posed by landmines and the loosely secured stockpiles of conventional weapons all over the world.

Over the years, and in my travels in the Balkans and Afghanistan and elsewhere, I have personally seen how these programs, made possible by the generosity of the American people, are saving lives and helping countries recover from conflicts while advancing key U.S. national security interests and supporting our fight against ISIS and other violent extremist organizations.

Since 1993, the U.S. has invested more than \$2.9 billion in conventional weapons destruction programs in more than 100 countries. Our work clearing landmines, unexploded ordnance, or UXO, and other explosive remnants of war has helped countless post-conflict communities recover and rebuild. "To Walk the Earth in Safety" not only provides detailed information about our programs, but it makes clear the real difference that these programs make in the lives of people who have suffered terrible upheaval and destruction.

Conventional weapons destruction aids partners and friends around the world, but it also advances key U.S. security objectives and helps protect our citizens and our allies from those who would do us harm. For example, our assistance assists partner governments to destroy poorly secured stockpiles of small arms, light weapons, and conventional ammunition that remains at risk of illicit diversion to terrorists, to insurgents, and to other destabilizing actors. And just as critically, after we have destroyed these excess arms, we help our partner governments better secure and manage the stockpiles that they do retain, further reducing the illicit proliferation risks while improving their ability to protect civilians and maintain

stability.

Our focus on conventional weapon stockpiles has intensified over the past couple of years, and it will become an increasingly important effort for us in the months and the years ahead. Our programs continue to evolve to reflect positive changes on the ground. On the one hand, casualties from factory-made anti-personnel landmines have fallen steadily in recent years, which is indeed very good news. We can be proud that investments in mine action and the hard and dangerous work of the demining teams has paid off, clearing landmines in many places and making it safe for displaced families to return to their homes and resume their livelihoods.

On the other hand, when casualties from improvised explosive devices and UXO are added to the calculus, the story is much more sobering, with a sharp increase from 2014 to 2015, according to the 2016 Landmine Monitor – sorry, according to the 2016 Landmine Monitor. Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen, countries with active armed conflicts, account for much of this disturbing spike.

The work ahead is unrelenting, particularly as we in the international community consider how to respond to the emerging threat from IEDs. And in fact, dealing with those IEDs and other explosive remnants of war left behind by ISIS emerged as our top conventional weapons destruction priority over this past year. In liberated communities across Iraq and Syria, ISIS left massive numbers of IEDs and other explosive hazards in its wake, with many devices deliberately placed to target returning refugees and the humanitarian actors who would help them.

Since April of 2016, the United States and our Defeat ISIS coalition partners have been working to clear IEDs laid by ISIS from critical infrastructure sites such as hospitals, schools, water-pumping stations, and electrical facilities. Our efforts are literally clearing the way for hundreds of millions of dollars in stabilization assistance and humanitarian aid to flow into liberated areas, which is key to re-establishing basic security, restoring essential services, and beginning to rebuild local economies. Explosive hazards removal is a critical step in ensuring that once ISIS is pushed out it stays out.

Our efforts, as I indicated at the beginning of this presentation, are making a difference all over the world. These programs reduce the tangible results documented in the report, they support overall regional stability, and they build tremendous goodwill for the American people across the globe. The work is done in close coordination with host nations, with other international donors, and the NGOs and the contractors who actually perform the mine and the UXO clearance.

The Conventional Weapons Destruction Program has also garnered tremendous support and engagement from Congress on both sides of the aisle. From stockpile security initiatives in the Sahel to the systematic clearance of landmines in Colombia, conventional weapons destruction programs play a vital role in shaping and sustaining a peaceful, just, and democratic world.

I'd be happy to answer any questions that you have on the report. We also have here today Stan Brown – Stan, there we go, over there – the director of our Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, and I'll turn to him for any more detailed questions that you might have on the nature of our programs. So I'll stop there.

MODERATOR: First question. Matt, we'll start with you.

QUESTION: Yeah. Hi, two brief ones. I just want to – going forward in terms of money, it's no secret that the administration wants to spend less, and I'm just wondering how that is going to affect these programs and where. Because I realize as the – you note the spike and the need, and the increased need –

AMBASSADOR K Aidanow: Yeah.

QUESTION: – in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine. Are those programs going to be ramped up at the expense of programs elsewhere? That's one.

AMBASSADOR K Aidanow: I don't think we've seen our budgets yet, and so obviously any calculus that we make is going to have to depend on the actual budgets that are enacted for us over the next year or two. But our requests actually and the amount of money that we've been placing towards a number of these programs has actually gone up fairly dramatically. And I can tell you that, for example, with respect to Iraq and Syria those numbers have gone up in this administration probably more than in many of the lines that we've had in previous administrations.

So to be perfectly honest with you, I can't fully anticipate what we're going to be doing over the next couple of years. It's all subject to what budgets we get. But that said, the requests have been at a high level and I anticipate, frankly, that our expenditures will continue to be at that same level.

QUESTION: Okay. And then secondly, this doesn't directly have to do with this program itself, but do you envision this administration making any changes to the position of previous administrations on the landmine ban, the anti-personnel –

AMBASSADOR K Aidanow: There is no current review of the landmine policy.

QUESTION: So in other words, it will stay where it is, which is – remind me again? It's that you don't – you're not a party to the treaty, but you don't produce –

AMBASSADOR K Aidanow: We're not a party to the convention and in most places we have hewn to those standards, with an exception, for an example, in the Korean Peninsula, where we cannot make that commitment.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Elise from CNN.

QUESTION: I was – you talked about Ukraine being one of the high areas where

your numbers have increased and your work has increased. A lot of this is – a lot of these landmines and such are laid by Russian-backed rebels and separatists. Could you talk about any talks that you're having with the Russians about this particular issue, and the acknowledgement that this is the kind of thing that's killing civilians and that it needs to be addressed?

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: It's a perfectly good question. I think I would take the question because it's more on the political side than it is necessarily on the mechanics of the landmines that we're removing from these areas. I think the –

QUESTION: Can you speak a little bit about the scope of the problem and who –

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: The scope of the problem in Ukraine specifically?

QUESTION: Yes. Well, that's been kind of increased in the last –

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Yeah.

QUESTION: – couple of years.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Yeah.

QUESTION: And where you think the responsibility lies and –

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Stan, do you want to talk specific to the –

QUESTION: Maybe we can follow up on the political angle?

MR BROWN: I understand not to address the political angle, but in Ukraine the United States is the leadership – leader of a partnership-for-peace program there. Funding for 2016 was approximately \$2 million. We're estimating funding for 2017 at \$6 million for Ukraine. And we're looking at the balance of the work that needs to be done on destroying the excess weapons that they have and clearing landmines in the areas that are contested near the lines of conflict. And we've funded HALO, which is a NGO, to do some of that work, as well as we're trying to help Ukraine build a mine action center and by staffing it with technical experts.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: One of the things I think I would highlight across the board with respect to Ukraine or any of these programs is the attempt to help build up the native capacity to deal with all of these issues, because irrespective of what happens on the political front – and I know that that's an area of interest and concern – nevertheless the landmine problem is going to persist. That's the point. And from our standpoint, that's what we want to be trying to get these countries accustomed to, unfortunately, in dealing with over the long haul.

QUESTION: I just had one other quick one on Laos. In the previous administration, Laos was a real area of focus considering the scope of the problem that was affecting the development of the country. And I was wondering, kind of along the lines of Matt's question, if you consider that Laos would continue to be an area of focus, or do you think maybe, as the

budget – as the administration seeks to reduce the budget, that those kind of Vietnam-era problems will have less of a priority?

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Again, I can't anticipate necessarily where our budgets are going to go for these things, but I can tell you that we, as a government, have reaffirmed our 2016 commitment to Laos specifically, and there is – I have every expectation, again, that we will find dollars to continue a number of those programs.

MS NAUERT: Just a couple more questions. Barbara.

QUESTION: Thanks. Mr. Tillerson has talked quite a lot about stabilizing liberated areas in Syria and that demining is a big part of that. Is dealing with conventional weapons as well part of that, and is – can you give us any detail about what's actually happening on the ground in terms of State involvement or –

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: In terms of the actual stabilization of stockpiles of weapons or –

QUESTION: What's the actual – what are people actually carrying out with that sort of thing?

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: I think at this – right now, at this juncture, the primary focus has been stabilizing in the sense of making it safe for communities and refugees and those who are displaced to return to those communities. That, generally speaking, involves clearing infrastructure to a certain extent. We can't be clearing every – you've seen some of the reports on the extent – and it's pretty pervasive – the extent of the IEDs that were laid and some of these other – so irrespective of the sort of arm stockpiles, we're really talking about, in the first instance, trying to make – whether it's dams, roads, primary elements of communities – hospitals, some of these other things – safe enough that, again, these communities can return. So I think that's the first emphasis.

Stan, I don't know if you wanted to add anything to that.

MR BROWN: When you hear the words "clearance," our teams on the ground are actually clearing everything they come in contact with. While the conversation is mostly about IEDs, they're also clearing other unexploded ordnance if they come in contact with that.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Right, but it's – again, I think the primary purpose of what we're trying to do is make it safer and possible for a number of these communities to come back. So it's in service of a larger set of goals.

MS NAUERT: Al Jazeera, (inaudible).

QUESTION: Thanks very much, Heather. The countries that you mentioned specifically in the Middle East, when do you decide to fund demining operations in a particular country? When do you decide it is incumbent on that country to fund the operations, particularly if it has resources like Iraq, for example?

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: That's a good question. I mean, I think what we're trying to do, as I said before, is we're trying to get them to a place where they can do this. I mean, that's the whole point, is to get them trained so that they have – and in Iraq, there's a mine action center that we are working with and so forth. So it's not so much a function of who pays for it. It's a function of capability, creating that capability, ensuring that they are in a place that they can utilize those skills. And then at an appropriate point whenever we decide is – together with them, that it is the right moment, then we can transition some of that to them. But we're still – again, both in Iraq and in Syria, we're both – in both of those places, we are very, very much engaged.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Final question, Robert, Foreign Policy.

QUESTION: Yeah. So just to expand on Syria, I noticed the country profile you have is only a couple sentences there and it's kind of vague. So I was wondering if you could expand on what exactly the U.S. is doing on Syria in regards to demining. Are we working with any local governments there? Do we have any teams on the ground and in what capacity?

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Stan – we have a primary contractor right now who is doing a lot of the work. We don't – the State Department itself is not doing the work. We contract to another company, and they have been the ones that have been doing the primary work on the ground. But I'll let Stan describe that for you in a little bit more detail.

MR BROWN: Sure. As the ambassador said, we're on the ground in Syria; we're training local Syrians to be able to do this work. Kind of a follow-up to her previous answer, we always go into these situations trying to develop a capacity for them to continue the work after we're gone regardless of where we are. In Syria, we've trained approximately 120 Syrians in different levels of explosive ordnance disposal. They are continuing the clearance process, working primarily, thus far, in Manbij, Tabqa, and Raqqa. They're clearing critical infrastructure to enable the follow-on humanitarian assistance to flow into the area to provide a level of stabilization so civil society can come back up and begin to run normally again.

QUESTION: Are you coordinating with the Syrian Government on that?

MR BROWN: No.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: No, we undertake our own efforts.

MS NAUERT: Okay, everybody. Thank you. Ambassador, thank you.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: And Stan, thank you.

AMBASSADOR KAIDANOW: Thanks.

MS NAUERT: (Inaudible.)

AMBASSADOR K Aidanow: Get this (inaudible) – oops. Right, follow through.

MS NAUERT: Thank you so much.

AMBASSADOR K Aidanow: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: It's so nice to have so many experts here, and happy to always bring them to you. By the way, if anybody has a briefing like that that you are interested in particular, I'd be happy to see if we can try to pull something together for you.

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