

Press Releases: Briefing on the Release of the 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

Special Briefing
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Press Briefing Room
Washington, DC
April 20, 2018

MS NAUERT: Ambassador Kozak will take some of your questions, and I'll kick off those questions. So thank you very much. One second. Sir, come on up. Thank you.

Let's start our first question with the Associated Press's Matt Lee.

QUESTION: Thank you. I realize that this report doesn't cover the United States and – but in this preface and in his comments just now, Acting Secretary Sullivan talked about how the U.S. is promoting – promotes and

defends rights, and that that's central to us as a country, and that the United States will lead other nations by example in promoting rule of law and respect for human rights.

And I'm just wondering how effective you think that you can be in leading by example when you take – you accuse numerous – there – a lot of countries of, say, assaults on press freedom when here, in this country, we have a President who routinely excoriates the press, calling individual media outlets – and individual reporters sometimes – fake news. I'm wondering how you can criticize countries for discrimination against LGBT people when this administration's stated policy is to exclude transgender people from serving in the military. I'm wondering about discrimination of – criticism of other countries for discriminating against religious minorities when courts and a lot of critics see the travel ban as, in fact, a ban on one particular religion. And lastly, you criticize countries for the mistreatment and refoulement of refugees, which I suppose this administration is not in that great of a position to do because it doesn't accept hardly any refugees, or at least far fewer than it ever did before.

So how is this not – how do you not open yourself up to charges of hypocrisy, and how effective do you think you can be at leading by example? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Okay, let's see if I can remember each one of those. But I think as you go through the report, you'll see the countries that we criticize for limiting press freedom, it's for things like having criminal libel laws where you can be put in jail for what you say. It's for things like yanking the licenses of media outlets you don't like or, in many cases, killing the journalists. So I think we make quite a distinction between political leaders being able to speak out and say that that story was not accurate or using even stronger words sometimes, and using state power to prevent the journalists from continuing to do their work. So I think there's an example there, and we've used that with many of our colleagues.

The other end of your stream was refoulement, which is a legal term. It's sending somebody back to a place where they are – where you know they're going to be persecuted or where they have a well-founded fear of persecution without going through due process to assess the risk to them. And of course, our law provides that people have rights of appeal through the immigration courts system and into the federal courts if they think they're going to be. So it doesn't go to the quantity of refugees; it goes to whether you're –

QUESTION: Right, I understand. But you're not in a position if you even wanted to refoule a refugee, you don't have many to do it to. But it's also mistreatment of refugees. It's not just that. So –

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yeah, and that usually involves, as you'll find documented in many countries in the report, physical mistreatment of refugees and that kind of thing. Your –

QUESTION: LGBT.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: LGBT. As we are very clear in the reports, and this has

been U.S. policy for some time, the things we're focused on are is: Has the government in question criminalized same-sex sexual activity, and that's highlighted now right up front in the reports; have they failed to prevent violence against people because of their LGBT status, or the same applies to ethnic groups and religious and so on; and then, third, discrimination in housing, employment, and government services. Usually, military and police are a slightly different form of government employment. So you can have a debate about that one, but most of the other countries where we're criticizing them, I think we would be very happy if they were following the procedures we are.

There are a lot of policy decisions in these areas that governments make that aren't internationally recognized human rights, so that's where we try to distinguish. And that's not – that's nothing new. That's been the case in the last couple of administrations as well.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Michelle from CNN.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yeah.

QUESTION: I'd like to know if you think that such statements in the United States weaken the impact of this report, because the American President has called the press an enemy of the people. And I think at one point he called for a closer look at libel laws or something like that. Do you think in the eyes of people that are looking at this report, as an example and as a resource, do statements like that currently weaken its impact?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, I think the report is very clear about the kinds of things that we consider to be inappropriate restrictions on freedom of the media – as I mentioned, using the legal system to go after members of the press, using physical force and so on. It doesn't go to the nature of discourse in a country. And you can have your own judgments as to how – how strong a statement might or might not be, but I don't – I don't think we have a hard time explaining that in a lot of places. When you talk to some of my friends in Cuba, for example, who try to be independent journalists there and are routinely slapped around, they also get called names, but they – I think if it were limited to that they'd be pretty happy as compared to the situation now. So –

QUESTION: And when the State Department is talking about this represents our values as Americans, the removal of sections on women's reproductive rights – why is that not included in values as Americans?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: There's still a long section on women. And by the way, if you look elsewhere in the report, I mean, women are also activists, are also journalists. There are – yeah, now –

QUESTION: Understood. But it's so conspicuous that it's removed.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Let me – now, it was – I'm going to explain why it was removed. It was introduced six years ago into the report. It hadn't been

there before. The – it's one of the few terms that are used in the report that isn't derived from an international treaty that has a definition or derived from U.S. law, where there's a clear definition to the term.

And in this case, the previous administration intended it to mean look at the availability of contraception, at the – whether the government tried to impose or coerce people in making decisions about reproduction. In the statements that were made – this was derived from the Beijing Declaration that was done in the '90s.

At that time, it was very clear and our delegation made a very clear statement that this has nothing to do with abortion, it doesn't mean abortion, it doesn't mean abortion. Unfortunately, over the last few years, groups on both sides of that issue domestically have started to use the term, and both seem to think it does include abortion and then argue about it.

So our thought was let's just not use a term that has the opposite meaning from the one we intend. We went back to the term that's used in the U.S. statute that requires the Human Rights Report, which is coerced family planning, namely coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

I might mention too, because I went back and looked at last year's report, the question being asked was, "Were there obstacles opposed to getting contraception information and means?" The answer in virtually every country was no, there were no obstacles other than, in almost every country, including our own, the availability in rural areas is less than it is in urban areas. But we were taking a lot of space to explain that.

So what we've done, we've kept that information in there. We've done it now by a hyperlink. We used to take that information from the WHO report and put it in. We said let's just use a hyperlink, and then there's actually more information available that way.

So that's the rationale behind that. It's not a diminishment of women's rights or a desire to get away from it; it was to stop using a term that has several different meanings that are not all the ones we intend.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Dave Clark from AFP.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you very much. When countries around the world are looking at the U.S. for leadership on human rights, should they be looking at this report, or should they be looking at President Trump's embrace of Rodrigo Duterte, of meeting with Sisi, and with the very warm relations with Mohammed bin Salman, who runs a country where women have no rights at all? Is – what sends the stronger signal, the President's close personal friendship with Xi Jinping and his golf tours at Mar-a-Lago or you at that podium decrying human rights abuses?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, this is a official report, and by the way, I think it's one of the most widely read U.S. Government documents in the world when we do the hit counts on the internet. It's put out in the name of the Secretary of State, who was just here to deliver it, and he certainly is

reflecting the President in this.

I think this is showing what we assess to be the human rights situation in all of the countries you've just mentioned, including – now even more so – the responsibility of the government for the abuses that are occurring there. They're not – we're not just saying there are these societal problems in the country; we're saying the government either has done these bad deeds or not. And I'll give you some examples.

In Russia we highlighted the fact – their response to an increase in domestic violence there – and they have a terrible problem, I mean tens of thousands of deaths of women being killed in domestic disputes every year. But since it went up, the government spokesman who went into the State Duma said, "Well, we have to decriminalize this, because it's better that our women be beaten than that our men be humiliated by their behavior." So – and this was Putin's party, they decriminalized spousal beating. So not a very good thing.

Now, does that mean that the President should never speak to these people? This is what – we're trying to keep the report as the factual baseline for what we're going to do in policy terms or sanctions as the secretary was mentioning. So we can learn a lot from this, and we can use it to formulate a policy. But usually part of your policy is engaging with the people whose behavior you're trying to change at some level. And I don't think those two things are in distinction. The fact is, these other governments and their populations do read the report, and I don't think they discount it because the President speaks with their leader or otherwise. And when the President speaks to their leader, often he's talking about these issues, so it's – it's complementary, it's not a – two things that are in conflict

QUESTION: Since we're citing examples, what does Saudi law say about spousal abuse?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Saudi law is very, very restrictive on women. We've tried to encourage changes in that, we've seen the minor changes that are reflected in the report, that they've started to say they're going to allow women to drive cars and so on. That isn't very much, but it is a baby step in the right direction, and we're trying to encourage more of that kind of reform at the same time that we're calling out the areas in which they're deficient, which are many.

MS NAUERT: All right, Rich Hudson from Fox News.

QUESTION: Thanks, Heather. Ambassador, I want to follow up a little bit on Saudi Arabia, the conversation you were just having with Dave. You note in the report – and a lot has happened on the government level in Saudi Arabia in just the past year, and you note in the report the jailing or hoteling of 200 officials there.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yep. Hoteling, that's a good – (laughter).

QUESTION: Are you – overall, in Saudi Arabia, are you encouraged by some of the things that are happening? Are you discouraged by what's happened over

the last year? Where do you see the trend going in Saudi Arabia?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, of course it's always hard to predict trends, but I think – I'm always encouraged when you start to see things break out of a static holding pattern. When you see a little bit of change as we're seeing in Saudi Arabia, and the hoteling was connected to – ostensibly anyway – to more of concern about corruption, which is not – another one of our issues, insofar as corruption and human rights abuse seem to – tend to go together.

So we're trying to encourage that kind of movement on the part of the Saudis. At the same time, you can look at that and say, "Well, you didn't do this with sufficient due process," and I think that's also well spelled-out here. So it's trying to get that right balance of, hey here's where we think you're deficient, but we're seeing some movement and we're trying to encourage the movement in the positive direction and see more. But I'm usually more encouraged when I see some movement going on than when things are just stuck in the same rut for years and years and years. So in that sense, at least there's an opportunity there. We'll see if it comes to anything.

QUESTION: So is hoteling now going to be standard language in –

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: I think your colleague just came up with a new term with –

MS NAUERT: Cindy with Voice of America. We have a few minutes left.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. We were talking about press freedoms, and you're probably aware that in Nicaragua, the Ortega Government ordered at least five television stations off the air for their coverage of massive protests. What is the U.S. Government prepared to do to stem this new wave of repression?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, Nicaragua is – and I think if you looked at the report – is going to wrong direction on many fronts and that is one of them, of media freedom. But also on all the basics, I mean, it's a long litany of torture, extrajudicial killing, the elections were a sham. And so we've put more and more pressure on – I think you'll see some of the sanctions programs will start to affect some people in that country. But it's a tough one; the Ortega Government has basically shut down a lot of the opposition, a lot of the independent civil society organizations as well as the free media.

So I mean, in our policy everywhere, and certainly in Nicaragua, is to try to provide both moral – and to the extent we can support NGOs and so on that are working to keep – to help them keep working, help free media keep working, and bring about a change in that dimension. But it's – it's tough, but we can't do it ourselves. We have to be in a position of supporting the people in those countries that are trying to bring about change, and we try to do that through a variety of means.

The Secretary – I'm not sure he met with any Nicaraguans – but at the Summit of the Americas had meetings with civil society activists from Cuba, Venezuela – same camp as Nicaragua – and it was in part just to give them that – show that we stand with them and that we're trying to be supportive of what they're trying to do to bring about change in their own country.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question about Gaza and –

MS NAUERT: Janne. Janne, go right – excuse me, Janne, go right ahead.

QUESTION: On North Korean human rights issues, as the North Korean nuclear issue is an important issue and the North Korean human rights is also serious issues, unless the regime of the North Korean Kim Jong-un changes, the North Korean human rights abuse against the North Korean people will continue. What is the U.S. solutions on this?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Okay. We have – I mean, we are concerned about the nuclear issue in North Korea, but we're equally concerned about the human rights issues, and they both derive from the same problem. And I think you see in the report we've laid out pretty starkly the kinds of abuses, and over the last year or two, we've supported, like, a commission of inquiry on North Korea, we support NGOs that are working on North Korea and exposing the human rights abuses that occur in the camps there and so on. But some of the stories that are contained in the report are just overwhelming. There's one about 11 people who were arrested for supposedly making a pornographic film and they were executed by shooting anti-artillery weapons at them, and then they brought out tanks and ran over the bodies, and this is supposed to be a civilized country.

So I don't think you will see a diminishment in our concern about that issue even as we try to work the nuclear issue. It's not a trade-off. I think the President's laid out a vision there that North Korea can get on a much better path, but it needs to make progress across the board, not just on one issue.

QUESTION: Do you have any –

MS NAUERT: Michel.

QUESTION: Yeah, thank you. Sir, you – the report considers China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea forces of instability. What do you mean by that? And will there be any consequences?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, I don't know that we've called them as forces of instability in the report. Perhaps –

QUESTION: Yeah, in the –

QUESTION: In the preface.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: In the preface. Okay.

QUESTION: Yeah, exactly.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, I think that has to do with their international behavior as well as their internal behavior. I mean, sometimes, internal behavior – you can't really separate them because when you start oppressing your own people, you generate refugee flows, you generate humanitarian crises like you're seeing in Venezuela, for example. So – but there's not – saying something is a force of instability is saying or characterizing a set of

facts. It doesn't necessarily have a prescribed policy flow. None of this does.

This report doesn't say countries that reach a certain level we're going to cut off aid or something like that. It's the factual predicate for making those decisions, but those are policy decisions where the President and his advisors will have to weigh a whole number of factors.

MS NAUERT: And our final question –

QUESTION: Can I ask – can I ask a question on the Gaza and the West Bank.

MS NAUERT: – Kylie from CBS News.

QUESTION: Because, I mean, he pointed to –

QUESTION: Can I just go back to the reproductive rights for a second? So you said there are no obstacles for women to get contraception in any country except for if there's a remote issue, right?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: I said with some exceptions, and the exceptions were and still are – and we've really gotten at it by flipping back to the original U.S. statutory language. It's in places like China, where in order to enforce their two – now two-child policy, that there are reports of coerced abortion and involuntary sterilization. In North Korea, where the government also coerces or forces abortion – although sometimes that's for political punishment rather than family planning. And we uncovered it – so as we were digging through trying to reduce the bulk of some of this report, I found in the old country I served in, in Belarus, that it turns out that the doctors in the state hospitals, and particularly in the institutions there, if they have a woman who is pregnant and who is a woman with disabilities, the doctors insist on an abortion. Or if they believe the fetus has a disability, they'll insist on an abortion. So we've called that out too.

So it's not – those were the cases, though, in the – under the previous formula where you would say there was a restriction on family planning, freedom of family planning. For most countries, it said, there isn't any restriction except for the ones imposed by economics and rural-urban type thing. So –

QUESTION: So just to be clear just on that, so taking out the language about those cases therefore means that the U.S. doesn't believe that the inability for women to get an abortion physically or by law is an abuse of human rights?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: That – correct under the previous administration and this one and the one before that. We have never taken the position that abortion was a right under – a human right under international law. This is supposed to be internationally recognized human rights, and it's an issue on which – some countries prohibit abortion, some countries, like our own, pretty much no restriction on it, and we don't say one of those is right and one of those is wrong. We don't report on it because it's not a human right. It's an issue of great policy debate, you can have a good discussion, but there's no

internationally recognized standard as to what's the right treatment.

But the other, yes. The – it is internationally recognized that somebody shouldn't coerce you to have an abortion or force you to be sterilized, so that's –

MS NAUERT: Thank you, sir.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question on the Palestinian –

MS NAUERT: We – the ambassador has to go. Thank you so much.

QUESTION: Yeah, one quick question on the Palestinian (inaudible).

MS NAUERT: We have to go. Sir, thank you. Thank you. We'll get you another time.

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