

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – August 15, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

3:09 p.m. EDT

MS

NAUERT: Good afternoon. How is everybody?

QUESTION: Freezing.

QUESTION: Freezing cold.

MS NAUERT: Freezing. Well, it will – it will keep you awake.

QUESTION: It is so cold in here and it smells like a walk-in freezer.

MS NAUERT: You know what? I –

QUESTION: You could store meat and ice cream in here.

MS NAUERT: That's right, we could. But I do remember one time last summer, it was so warm in here that some of you – I won't name who – were dozing off in the front row. (Laughter.) So keeping it cool keeps you awake.

QUESTION: It must be somebody who's already just – (laughter).

MS NAUERT: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm not going to say who it was. A couple announcements to bring in, starting out with a very serious topic, and that is the suicide attack that took place in Afghanistan.

The United States Government strongly condemns and is appalled by today's suicide attack at an education center in a community in Kabul that killed 48 innocent civilians and injured many more. We send our deepest condolences to the families of those who were affected and their friends and wish for a speedy recovery for those who were wounded. The horrific attack is a clear effort to foment sectarian violence and hold back the Afghan peoples' hopes for a future of peace and security. It reminds us, once again, the importance of reaching a peaceful solution

to the conflict in Afghanistan. The United States continues to stand with the Government of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan and will continue to support their efforts to achieve peace and security in their country.

Next, I'd like to mention something related to Iran – and I know many of you have watched this with great interest – the continued human rights abuses in that country. We are closely monitoring reports of numerous human rights defenders and members of minority groups, such as the Gonabadi Dervishes, who are unlawfully or arbitrarily incarcerated in Iranian regime prisons. Yesterday I tweeted about Narges Mohammadi. She is a mother of two with a critical health condition who was recently sentenced to a total of 16 years in prison for peacefully advocating for human rights reforms. Today we are especially concerned about a prominent human rights lawyer, named Nasrin Sotoudeh, who has been detained in Tehran's Evin Prison since June 2018, and who is facing national security charges for legally representing an Iranian woman who was charged for removing her headscarf in public. The Iranian regime jails people for peacefully exercising their rights and then jails people who are asked to defend them. These daily human rights violations and arbitrary arrests are simply unacceptable. We call on our partners around the world to join us in urging the Iranian regime to stop persecuting its people for exercising their human rights and their fundamental freedoms.

And last, I'd like to address something that has taken place recently in Cambodia, and as many of you are aware and we've discussed here, their recent elections, which the State Department has characterized as flawed and neither free nor fair. As previewed in the White House's July 29th statement on Cambodia's election, we are expanding the visa restrictions initiated on December 6th, 2017 on individuals involved in the undermining of democracy in Cambodia. The expanded entry restrictions may apply to individuals both within and outside the Cambodian Government who are responsible for the most notable anti-democratic actions taken in the run-up to the flawed July 29th election. In certain circumstances, their immediate family members will also be subject to restrictions. We reiterate our call for the Cambodian Government to take tangible actions to promote national reconciliation by allowing independent media and civil society organizations to fulfill their vital roles unhindered and immediately release Kem Sokha and other political prisoners and ending the ban on political opposition.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Oh, but I do have one more announcement. I'd like to say "Happy Birthday" to Elise Labott from CNN. Happy Birthday, Elise. She's off, as she should be today. Okay.

QUESTION: Celebrating.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Happy Birthday to Elise, indeed. Just on Cambodia real quick.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: When you say you're expanding the visa restrictions, expanding from how many to how many?

MS NAUERT: I don't have the numbers before me on that, but they're reviewed obviously on a case-by-case basis.

QUESTION: How do we know then they're actually being expanded?

MS NAUERT: They are being expanded in –

QUESTION: To include –

MS NAUERT: Well, because the Secretary has a broad authority under the Immigration and Naturalization Act to restrict the visas of those who want to come into the United States that would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences. And so the laws are confidential, as you well know. The visa laws are. So we're not going to be able to release a list of those who will fall under this.

QUESTION: I'm not asking for a list.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: But I mean, what does it mean to expand them? If you can't say with a number that you started with and now the number that they are going to be, I mean, I don't know how you can say you're expanding them.

MS NAUERT: We are expanding them. I will see if our consular people can get you additional information on that.

QUESTION: Does it include a new category of people now?

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: Does it include a new category of official?

MS NAUERT: It's a way that we can review –

QUESTION: I get that, but –

MS NAUERT: – who is coming in and applying for visas and provide – and make a determination as to who can come into the United States and who cannot.

QUESTION: I know, but this is the problem with these kinds of things. It happens with Nicaragua. It happens with other. You say that you're doing this, and then we – the public and the Cambodians themselves – have no idea what actually this means if we don't know – it's expanding the scope of the category of people who can be – who will be excluded or will be denied visas, or is it just a number?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I will see what additional –

QUESTION: From three to nine or 12?

MS NAUERT: I will see what additional information I can get you, if we can provide you numbers on that.

QUESTION: All right. On Turkey, you may have seen today that the person or the guy who was the honorary chairman of Amnesty International who had been in jail there was released today.

MS NAUERT: Right. And I believe we provided statements about that case in the past, certainly.

QUESTION: Yeah. And – but I'm sure you've seen that a judge denied Pastor Brunson's appeal.

MS NAUERT: I have.

QUESTION: And I'm also sure that you have seen the Turk tariff announcement from the Turkish Government, so I'm just wondering what you have to say about all three of those.

MS NAUERT: Okay, let's start first with Pastor Brunson. Of course, we are very aware of the decision on the part of the court in Turkey. We're certainly disappointed by that announcement. We would like Pastor Brunson to be brought home to the United States. We have said for far too long that Pastor Brunson has been held for far too long and we look forward to Pastor Brunson coming home. We'd like that to happen very soon.

QUESTION: Okay. And the other two?

MS NAUERT: Sure, go right ahead. The second one was what again?

QUESTION: Well, I mean, the Amnesty International and the tariffs.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, we're certainly –

QUESTION: And also – and then on – and then on Brunson or on the tariffs, which I guess your White House colleague made a point to separate them, saying that the U.S. tariffs that were imposed did not have anything to do with the Brunson case but that the sanctions on the two officials, the justice minister or the interior, did.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So in terms of the Amnesty International person, we're certainly pleased that he has been released. We have put out statements in the past on his case, and for that matter the case of many others. We've seen has – as the Turkish Government has detained people, many of them journalists, activists, members of civil society, accusing them or putting them in prison on what many would regard as trumped-up charges. So we're pleased that we – that they made that announcement today.

In terms of Turkey and tariffs and our overall relationship with Turkey, I'm not going to characterize the extent of our relationship with

Turkey. I mean, there's clearly work that is left to be done. The diplomacy continues. I anticipate that we will be talking with the Turkish Government at some point in the future about the case of Pastor Brunson and the case of other Americans.

QUESTION: Is there – are you aware of anything scheduled or anything ongoing?

MS NAUERT: No. No, we have nothing scheduled. No meetings or calls or anything of that sort to announce.

QUESTION: One follow-up.

MS NAUERT: Lesley, go right ahead.

QUESTION: So is the administration – given what happened today with Pastor Brunson, given the tariffs, is the administration considering any retaliation?

MS NAUERT: Lesley, you know we don't get ahead of sanctions, we don't forecast sanctions. I don't know personally what is going to happen in the future, but those are things that are always, as a general matter, things that the U.S. Government is able to deploy.

QUESTION: The Vice President just tweeted that – saying he's demanding his release. I mean, has the Secretary made that message clear to his Turkish counterpart today?

MS NAUERT: I think we've discussed this before that the U.S. Government, whether it's the Vice President, the President, the Secretary, we've made our expectations very clear: We want our people home.

QUESTION: Do you have any –

QUESTION: Wait, just – just –

MS NAUERT: Hi, Michelle.

QUESTION: Sorry. Just now the White House said that the U.S. is prepared to bring sanctions against Turkey until Brunson is free.

MS NAUERT: Okay, I've not seen that so I'm not going to comment on that.

QUESTION: Oh, that's – well, I mean, I'm just telling you –

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: – so that I can ask the question. But given that that has been sort of the policy so far along with diplomacy, it's obvious it's not working. So why continue down that path, and is there something else that you feel the State Department can do or work on to change the course?

MS NAUERT: Well, look, I think what we do here is we talk with other

countries, and that is something that the State Department just simply does. So we will continue our diplomatic approach, and you would characterize it as it's not working. We don't have Pastor Brunson home yet, we don't have other Americans home yet, but we will keep working on it. It doesn't mean that we're going to stop trying.

QUESTION: And do you have any comment, Heather, on –

MS NAUERT: Said, go right ahead.

QUESTION: – the fact that Qatar is infusing \$15 billion to shore up – apparently to shore up the Turkish lira, do you have anything on that?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So I saw that report. I'd just have to refer you to the Government of Qatar and the Government of Turkey.

QUESTION: You don't have – both are your allies.

MS NAUERT: I don't have any comment for you on that. I'd have to refer you to those governments. Okay.

QUESTION: Do you welcome this step –

QUESTION: A follow-up on –

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: Do you welcome this step that Qatar has made?

MS NAUERT: I think that's between those two countries and I'm not going to comment on that, so I'd just refer you to those governments on that issue.

Hi, Nick.

QUESTION: Hey, Heather. Just following up on Turkey. Can you say what the last time was there was actually a discussion between whoever it is whose handling of the Brunson case –

MS NAUERT: Well –

QUESTION: – with the Turkish Government –

MS NAUERT: – as you know, Ambassador Bolton, National Security Advisor Bolton, spoke with the Turkish ambassador two days ago, Monday, this week here in Washington. I believe that that was the last conversation, but I certainly can't rule out that our embassy or other State Department personnel or U.S. Government personnel would not have talked to Turkish officials about other matters.

QUESTION: But is it – is it your policy right now that there will be no discussion about this issue until he's released?

MS NAUERT: We don't have – we don't have any policy on that that I'm

aware of. Okay?

QUESTION: Heather, I mean –

QUESTION: Why is it –

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Hey.

QUESTION: Why is it important, this one American, to put global financial stability at risk, put U.S. base presence in Turkey at risk, put a NATO ally – an alliance with a NATO partner at risk, for one American who's being put through the Turkish justice system?

MS NAUERT: So you're saying this is our fault?

QUESTION: No, I'm saying why –

MS NAUERT: This situation is our fault?

QUESTION: Why escalate it to that level for a single American who has –

MS NAUERT: I think –

QUESTION: – not been tortured or treated – he's being put through the Turkish justice system.

MS NAUERT: I think that I would take issue with the premise of your question. In terms of the financial situation in Turkey, we addressed this yesterday, and Turkey's financial situation has been in the works for quite some time and it dates prior to the imposition of sanctions on August – I believe it was August the 1st. So this has been in train for quite some time and you cannot blame the U.S. Government for that.

We have a very broad relationship with the Government of Turkey. Of course, with all nations, as a general matter, we will often have areas where we don't always agree, where we don't always see eye to eye, but we also have areas where we do work together and cooperate, and Turkey would be one of those governments where we sometimes have areas where we disagree and we certainly sometimes have areas where we cooperate as well. Okay.

QUESTION: But this isn't one thing that you simply disagree one area. This has been put to the forefront of everything.

MS NAUERT: And your question is?

QUESTION: So why is this one more important than all the others, it seems?

MS NAUERT: You're trying to single out one individual, and I have stood here repeatedly, as have many of my colleagues, to speak about other people who have been detained in that country. Our chief mission is the protection of American citizens. That would obviously include Pastor

Brunson. We also have three locally employed staff. I spoke about them just yesterday and was very clear with all of you that that is a major concern of ours. There is also a NASA scientist who has been detained by the Turkish Government; that is important to us as well, and you've heard that come out of the State Department, you've heard that come out of the White House, and from our other colleagues as well.

Okay, Laurie, go ahead.

QUESTION: Secretary Pompeo spoke with the KRG and Iraqi prime ministers yesterday, and I saw your readout on that. Was there a particular reason now for his call and the presumed concern that would have prompted the call?

MS NAUERT: No, we have those calls as just a matter of diplomacy, have those calls regularly with other governments and other officials, and I think it was just a matter of checking in.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: On Turkey and Russia, the Russian foreign minister was just in Turkey to prepare for a summit on Syria that's going to take place in Turkey in September, and which will include France and Germany. Are you invited to that summit, and if not, what's your view of the meeting? Is it replacing Geneva?

MS NAUERT: No, nothing is replacing Geneva, and I think this is another example and another reason for us to reaffirm our commitment to the Geneva process. We see the Geneva process, the UN-led process, as the only viable way forward for a long-term political solution in Syria. I can tell you that the Secretary met earlier today with Staffan de Mistura, who's running that Geneva process. A readout is in train right now; I hope to have that to all of you within short order. But that just goes back to our commitment to Geneva and many other countries that have committed to the Geneva process. Russia, in fact, was one of them that had committed to the Geneva process. So we stand firmly behind that and the work of Staffan de Mistura and the United Nations in that.

QUESTION: Will you be at –

QUESTION: The Geneva process –

QUESTION: Will you be at the summit in Turkey in September?

MS NAUERT: Will who?

QUESTION: Will the United States be attending this summit that the –

MS NAUERT: I am not aware of any participation in that. If that changes, I will certainly let you know.

Hi, Michel.

QUESTION: The Geneva process is frozen and nobody is talking about it. There is no meetings; there is nothing. And what's the –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: I'm talking about it, and there are a lot of other countries, including the United States, that have backed the Geneva process and continue to back the Geneva process. The reality is that that is the only viable solution going forward. You have these sidebar meetings, things like Astana and other things, okay, but the best one, the best way forward that the United States believes in, that the United Nations and many other countries believe in, is the Geneva process. Perhaps that process needs to be goosed again, but I think you'll be hearing in the coming days that that is something that we are doubling down our efforts in supporting that process going forward.

Hey, Abbie.

QUESTION: Hey. Staying in that area. There was a UN report that came out this week saying that around 20,000 to 30,000 ISIS fighters still remain in Iraq and Syria. Is that an assessment that the U.S. shares? And if so, how do you – what do you see is the timeline in the U.S. staying in Syria considering –

MS NAUERT: Okay, so you know we never talk about timelines.

QUESTION: Well –

MS NAUERT: Those things are all conditions-based, and we certainly have a lot of work that is left to be done in Syria. Our role and mission in Syria is in dealing with ISIS. We remain committed to that. We have a lot of U.S. service members who are working very hard there, along with our diplomats and our folks on the ground from the State Department, who are helping out in Syria as well. So we anticipate we will certainly be there and continue to support efforts there.

In terms of your question about the number of ISIS fighters, I've seen various numbers. I think those numbers are – hard to really pin down those numbers because of the complex nature of Syria and the difficulty that people would have in actually counting things, getting good information from the ground. So I don't have a U.S. Government estimate to provide for you. Perhaps another department or agency has additional figures that they could provide, but I just – I can't verify those numbers. The estimates that we've seen vary a lot.

QUESTION: Can I have one follow-up on that?

MS NAUERT: Sure.

QUESTION: One of the things that the President said in April is that he thought the coalition was close to retaking 100 percent of the territory

that had been held by ISIS. So if there's 20,000 to 30,000 ISIS fighters that still remain in Iraq and Syria, where is it that – what is the U.S. doing to prevent them from leaving the area? And is there concern, considering what's happening in Turkey right now, that they may be going across the border into other countries?

MS NAUERT: I haven't seen any reports about Turkey, and a lot of this would be best addressed by the Department of Defense. So I don't want to get into their lane, and would really hesitate doing that. But in the past – I can speak generally about how there have been pockets of ISIS fighters in very difficult areas. You remember how long it took – we talked about this last summer – how long it took to get ISIS fighters out of Mosul and liberate Mosul, especially west Mosul and the western part of that city, from ISIS.

This is tough work. We have consistently said that we know that this is going to take quite some time. We know that this process is not going to be easy. You have some successes, and then sometimes things backtrack, and then you have success again. So I think it just goes to show that this is a long fight. We are continued – we continue to be committed to this fight, and we're not backing down from that. ISIS needs to be defeated, and the U.S. Government stands firmly by that.

QUESTION: I wanted to – go ahead.

MS NAUERT: Hi, Cindy.

QUESTION: I know we touched on this yesterday, about the risk of economic fallout from the worsening Turkey dispute. Are there conversations going on to try to mitigate sort of the risk of market contagion?

MS NAUERT: I think that would be for another department to address that, but I'll go back and say this one more time: The financial situation in Turkey had been in train, in process prior to the imposition of sanctions on the part of the United States Government, okay.

QUESTION: Can I go back to –

MS NAUERT: Hey. Hi. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Just to follow up on your statement at the top of the briefing.

MS NAUERT: Sure.

QUESTION: In addition to the attack that you mentioned, there was a Taliban siege started over the weekend on Ghazni.

MS NAUERT: Yep.

QUESTION: And there's been a lot of violence in the last week or so. We're coming up now on a year of the President's launch of the South

Asia Strategy. Is it time to maybe re-evaluate that strategy?

MS NAUERT: No, it's not. I think what we're seeing here is there are some factions, some elements of the Taliban that clearly are not on board with peace. Others do want to have peace negotiations and peace discussions. There are those who don't support peace; I think we are seeing them act out at this time. And that does not dissuade us from our commitment to Afghanistan or our commitment to the overall Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.

We've seen approximately three attacks take place in I think just as many days – two attacks on military outposts, and the attack that I just mentioned at the top of the briefing today on the education center. They're appalling. They are appalling attacks. But we remain firmly committed to working with the Government of Afghanistan for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.

The Afghan people deserve better. We had seen some glimmers of hope in the past with ceasefires that have been successful – granted, for a relatively short period of time, but that is something that President Ghani has supported, and he says that they will continue to try to pursue peace. And we firmly support him in that effort. And let me just add that we want to offer our deepest condolences to the Afghan people for what they've experienced over the last several days.

QUESTION: Can I have a follow-up on that?

QUESTION: A follow-up?

MS NAUERT: Okay. Yeah, okay. Go right ahead.

QUESTION: Have you seen any sustained interest from – you said some factions of the Taliban, but –

MS NAUERT: Well, I think that's what we're seeing. I mean, that's just evident in what's going on.

QUESTION: In peace talks with the United States?

MS NAUERT: No, no, no. It is evident that some are not supportive of peace because we see some attacks taking place. Okay.

QUESTION: But is the inverse then true? Are there – is there sustained interest by factions in talking to the United States? Have there been renewed talks?

MS NAUERT: I have no information for you on that. I can only tell you that in our past conversations with President Ghani and the Government of Afghanistan that we continue to support their peace efforts.

Hi, Said.

QUESTION: Very quickly on –

MS NAUERT: Sure.