

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – August 28, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:53 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: All right. Good afternoon, everybody. Great to see you.

I'd like to start with one quick announcement today, and this is a continuation of a story we've talked about for quite some time about Greece. And once again, we would like to strongly condemn the release of a convicted terrorist named Dimitris Koufodinas on a five-day reprieve from his imprisonment in Greece. It is his fourth and longest furlough in the past year. Koufodinas is a terrorist who has been convicted of multiple murders, including those of our embassy defense attache William Nordeen, and United States Air Force Sgt. Ronald Stewart. These furloughs are a shameful injustice to his many victims' families and serve as further incentive for his anarchist followers to commit further violence and destructive acts in his name. Our embassy in Athens has conveyed our serious concerns about this decision to the Greek Government.

Just to put things into perspective, over the past year, he has been granted more than 11 days – actually, 11 days of furlough. We do not believe that a convicted terrorist who has murdered not just our personnel, U.S. personnel, but other – from other governments as well, including innocent civilians in Greece – we do not believe that that kind of person should be given a vacation from prison.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. AP usually starts, so – good to see you.

QUESTION: Yes. Good to be here. Thanks for this. I wanted to start off asking about North Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: After the cancellation of Pompeo's trip, is the diplomatic effort there in trouble? And then I was also wondering if you could give us some further details about why the trip was canceled. There were reports that it was canceled following the receiving of a letter from Kim Yong-chol, and I was just wondering if you could confirm that.

MS NAUERT: Sure. So let me take your second question first. You know we often don't get into the detail about our private diplomatic conversations, but I can tell you that the President and his national security team, which obviously included Secretary Pompeo – and I want to make this clear, too, that Ambassador Bolton, the national security advisor, was a part of these conversations; there were some inaccurate reports that he was not; he happened to be on the phone on a secure call participating in this conversation as well. The entire national security team discussed this. In their judgment, they made the judgment that now is not the right time to travel. The President agreed with that, and that is when the President made the decision to send out some tweets announcing that decision.

QUESTION: All right. And the diplomatic effort?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So the diplomatic effort is still ongoing. I know a lot of people are interested in sort of where this stands. The President overall remains very clear-eyed about the challenges and difficulties ahead of us. We have long said, the Secretary has long said, that this wouldn't be easy from the start, and it would be – could be a somewhat lengthy process. Overall, sometimes we move forward; sometimes we stand right where we are. We look forward to future negotiations when the time is right.

Hey, Lesley.

QUESTION: Has the Secretary spoken to his North Korean counterparts in recent days to explain it? And there's reporting that this letter was rather – it had a belligerent tone, quite aggressive. Can you confirm any of that? I mean, is that the reason why?

MS NAUERT: I can't confirm that. The Secretary, the President, the national security team made the decision that now is not the right time to travel.

QUESTION: So have you been in touch with –

MS NAUERT: That's a good question; I don't know the answer to that. I can go back and ask that question.

Hi.

QUESTION: I guess the decision to go was announced on Thursday, was taken also with a green light or in accordance to what was decided within the NSC and with the President. So what happened between Thursday and Friday that made them change their mind? Because it was the same people deciding to go, and then decided not to go.

MS NAUERT: And some of these would just fall under – and I know it's not fun for all of you to not get what you see as a sufficient answer, but some of these are just private diplomatic conversations, and they made the decision that now – then was not the right time to travel.

QUESTION: Just another question.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Secretary Mattis this morning said or warned that he wasn't planning to suspend other drills in the region anymore. But he said I will have to discuss with State Department to see how the negotiations are going and so on. Would you – would the State Department advise Secretary Mattis to keep on suspending the drills, or he can resume them?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think we would hew very closely to what the President and also what the Department of Defense wanted to do. Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mattis speak a lot about these things; we're very closely coordinated. Also, part of this is having conversations with the South

Koreans and our allies as well. So if we have any changes to that posture, we'll certainly let you know. But I think DOD did a very fulsome briefing today, so I'd refer you back to some of what they said.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: Hi, Heather.

MS NAUERT: Hey, Rich.

QUESTION: Have there been any communications between the State Department and North Korea since those tweets came out?

MS NAUERT: That's a question that Lesley just asked. I don't have the answer to that, but I'll see if I can get it for you.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you. And in the end of the President's tweet messages canceling this trip from the Secretary, he said he looked forward to seeing Kim Jong-un soon. Prior to this, were there discussions about the potential for another meeting between the two?

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything for you on that. That would be more of a White House question at this point.

QUESTION: And just making clear, people were asking about the content of the letter. Can you comment on the existence of that letter?

MS NAUERT: I cannot confirm a letter, and I certainly can't confirm the content of any diplomatic conversations. And when I say conversations, that also encompasses any kind of talks that we would have about those types of things, okay. Hi, Janne.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks, Heather. Usually on North Korea immediately response about these issues. But this time, they not talking anything or have you heard from any mentions about cancelations or –

MS NAUERT: Have – I'm sorry. Start – have I heard any mentions about –

QUESTION: Yeah. The Secretary's visit North Korea cancelations, about how did you expect North Korea going to be response about the cancelation? Did you ever contact UN North Korean delegations?

MS NAUERT: Well, we – I mean, we certainly expect the North Korean Government to adhere and to go along with the pledges and promises that they made at the Singapore summit, in accordance to what they agreed to with the President.

I have a statement from the Secretary that he provided me earlier today, which I'd be happy to give to you, his take on the situation there. He says: Despite the decision to delay my trip to Pyongyang, America stands ready to engage when it is clear that Chairman Kim stands ready to deliver on the commitments that he made at the Singapore summit to President Trump to completely denuclearize North Korea. The world is

united behind the need for Chairman Kim to fulfill that commitment. Every member of the United Nations Security Council voted to call upon North Korea to abandon all nuclear weapons, existing nuclear programs, and other weapons of mass destruction. The goal of final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea, as agreed to by Chairman Kim, is the world's goal. The United States, like the rest of the world, is looking forward to North Korea's compliance with these resolutions, which will enable Chairman Kim to provide a brighter future for his own people.

And for folks who need a little nighttime reading, those UN Security Council Resolutions 2371, 2375, and 2397 – they lay them out very clearly. So when you hear other governments or other individuals criticizing the United States, that the United States is perhaps upending these negotiations, I would point you back to these unanimous UN Security Council resolutions, which clearly lay out the world's unanimous expectations of the North Korean Government to denuclearize and all the other things we just mentioned. I can read for you those resolutions if you like.

QUESTION: No thanks. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: No? Not today. Okay. Another time. All right.

QUESTION: The letter –

MS NAUERT: Hey, Kylie.

QUESTION: Hi. So you said now is not the time for the trip. Is the State Department and Pompeo still committed to making a trip to North Korea at some point in the near future or potentially never again?

MS NAUERT: I think that's entirely a hypothetical. We stand ready to talk when the North Koreans stand ready to do so and we think it can be productive.

QUESTION: How else –

QUESTION: And –

QUESTION: How else could it be done that – sorry.

QUESTION: Well, and you also spoke specifically about the President's tweet, which cited no progress on denuclearization, so –

MS NAUERT: No. Actually, he said we feel that they are not making sufficient progress. There's a big difference there.

QUESTION: So they are making –

MS NAUERT: We feel that they're not making sufficient progress. There is progress being made.

QUESTION: On denuclearization?

MS NAUERT: The Secretary is not just hopping on a plane and flying to North Korea for his health. He is going there to have serious, substantive talks. Those talks have, obviously, occurred. Many of you have been on those trips with us. But in the President's view and in the national security team's view, sufficient progress with respect to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was not being made.

QUESTION: And one last question.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Ambassador Sung Kim was also at the White House on Friday. And I'm just curious, why was he here in Washington? Was he here to meet Mr. Biegun? What was the genesis of that trip?

MS NAUERT: I actually can't confirm that Sung Kim was here, if Ambassador –

QUESTION: There was a photo at the White House.

MS NAUERT: Okay. I did not – I have not seen that picture.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: I don't know why he was here, other than that he's an important part of the team and has advised the Secretary and the overall team on the effort regarding North Korea. And in terms of our Special Representative Steve Biegun, we're thrilled to have him on board.

Okay. Hi, Conor.

QUESTION: Just a couple follow-ups on this.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Ambassador Haley said today that it's possible North Korea has changed its mind on its commitment to denuclearization. Is that a view that the Secretary shares as well?

MS NAUERT: I haven't asked the Secretary that question. All we know is that Chairman Kim has made certain commitments to the President at the Singapore summit.

QUESTION: And then just one more.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, sure.

QUESTION: A close ally of the Secretary, Senator Marco Rubio, also said today – he tweeted that talks have failed. Just get your reaction to that? Obviously, this is someone that the Secretary is –

MS NAUERT: Yeah, you know I tend not to comment on things that other world leaders or even U.S. politicians would say. I would certainly say that when you look at some of the things that have taken place in the

last year: One, we're in a very different spot today than we were one year ago, where there were ballistic missile launches, where there were nuclear tests. We all remember very well what last summer looked like and the fear that many Americans felt at that time. Today, we are in a very different place.

Two, we are in conversations and have been in negotiations with this government that we have not had any kind of real relationship with for just about a decade. Now, the fact that we're having conversations, I would call that progress, and I would call that diplomatic progress, and that's exactly what we do out of this building.

The maximum pressure campaign – the world came together to impose sanctions against North Korea. When we were just at ASEAN, we heard so many of those ASEAN nations thanking the United States and thanking President Trump for his leadership on this issue. Were it not for the UN Security Council resolutions and for the maximum pressure campaign, Chairman Kim would not have gotten to this point where he is willing and open to having conversations with the United States Government.

You recall when President Moon of South Korea first came here, I think it was back in March or perhaps it was early April, and he stood just outside the door of the White House and he thanked this administration for its efforts with that economic pressure campaign.

So those are just a few ways – I can go on and on – about the repatriation of remains, I can remind folks of the three Americans that we brought home just a few months ago. Secretary Pompeo's – I think it was his tenth day on the job – I would call that tremendous progress and would take issue with anyone who would claim that we have not made progress on this front.

I've got to move on to some other issues, and I have to – I have to cut the briefing short today. Yeah.

QUESTION: South Asia?

QUESTION: President Moon is supposed to meet with Kim Jong-un next month in North Korea. Given your past comments saying that – pointing to his comments that there can be no progress on inter-Korean relations without progress on denuclearization, would you call on him to cancel that meeting?

MS NAUERT: No, I think I would just go back to what President Moon has said in the past, that those things have to take place, that has to take place. The denuclearization has to take place. He's been very clear about that. We continue to have good, frank discussions with our allies, both the Republic of Korea and Japan.

QUESTION: So he shouldn't cancel until there's been more progress?

MS NAUERT: Look, I would just go back to what he has said in the past, the importance of denuclearization.

Said, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Has there been any progress on –

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather.

QUESTION: Can you just make it clear if there's been progress on –

MS NAUERT: I've got to move on to other things. I think I just announced that, I discussed that, about denuclearization.

Said.

QUESTION: There's been progress on denuclearizing or –

MS NAUERT: We are having those conversations. The conversations have continued. As you know, we decided not to take this trip because we felt sufficient progress has not been made. But I think I've addressed your question already.

Said, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather. I wanted to ask you about the – the State Department last Friday informed Congress that – of aid cutoff to the Palestinians in the amount of \$200 million. Can you share with us why it was finally decided for this aid to be cut off, considering that this goes directly to help the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza? It doesn't go through the Authority. It goes – it is implemented by USAID and other American-affiliated NGOs and so on. And it goes to aid the youth and the women. Why was it decided to cut off the aid?

MS NAUERT: Earlier this year, and you all recall this – I know we received a lot of questions about this issue – the President directed an overall review of U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and also in Gaza to ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars were being spent in accordance with U.S. national interests and then also providing value to the U.S. taxpayer.

The decision was then made, and we sent out a statement to this effect, that that money at this time is not in the best interests of the U.S. national interest and also at this time does not provide value to the U.S. taxpayer. When we talk about the issue of Gaza, we have long said – bless you – Gaza is the primary entity – excuse me, the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinians and Hamas – the primary reason why the security situation and the situation in Gaza is so terrible, why electricity has become an issue, why clean water has become an issue, all of those things. And Hamas needs to take care of its people. It has refused to do so. Instead, it has spent money on other types of projects, and you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Two quick follow-ups. But in fact, your allies disagree with you. They think that cutting off aid will exacerbate an already volatile – volatile –

MS NAUERT: I am sure they do, and that is because the United States Government –

QUESTION: Including the Israelis, including the Israelis.

MS NAUERT: That is because the United States Government has provided far more money –

QUESTION: I understand.

MS NAUERT: – than many other countries in the region have. And I think Ambassador Haley spoke to that today –

QUESTION: I understand.

MS NAUERT: – when she talked about the importance of burden sharing. And that is we believe that the United States alone does not have to shoulder a disproportionate share of financing programs overseas. The United States is the most generous country in the world, and we continue by and large to be the most significant donor to many programs around the world. But we also feel that other countries should step up and take responsibility, and that's a key point of what the President has discussed.

QUESTION: Okay, I understand. But what is the logic, when you say that it was not in the interest of the national security of the United States of America while, in fact, the Israelis, including Israeli generals and intelligence and so on, the British, the French, everybody says it is actually – it can exacerbate this horrible situation? So why is that not in the interest of the national security of the United States?

MS NAUERT: I think we believe at this time that it is not providing value to the U.S. taxpayer. If I have anything more for you on that, I will let you know.

QUESTION: Right. One last issue on the – there's been a great deal of talk about that this administration is going to be pushing – sometime soon, maybe next week, maybe the following week – to cut off all aid to UNRWA and in fact, dismantle UNRWA and to have whatever programs UNRWA is doing now to have it conducted under UNHCR. Could you share with us or could you enlighten us on this effort, if there is such an effort, if that is the thinking of this building? Because this building historically has been supportive of UNRWA.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I can just tell you we have no decisions to announce today. No decisions have been made.

Hi, Laurie.

QUESTION: Hi.

MS NAUERT: I saw you at the Pentagon today.

QUESTION: So I'm following up with an issue that came – was raised at the Pentagon.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: It has to do with Syria's use of chemical weapons in Idlib, possible use. And specifically, Secretary Mattis said this morning that you were in regular contact with Russia on this issue. Can you explain both your concerns and what the situation is, particularly with the Russians?

MS NAUERT: Mm-hmm. And I think DOD did a terrific job of laying out a lot of the issues there, so I would largely echo what the Department of Defense said and encourage anyone who's not taken a look at that transcript to please take a look at that.

I can tell you that the Secretary spoke with Foreign Minister Lavrov last week. We made it very clear, the Secretary made it clear, that any Russian regime offensive on Idlib and an escalation –

QUESTION: You mean a Syrian regime offensive?

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry. Yes, thank you. Any Russian and/or Syrian regime offense – offensive on Idlib and any kind of escalation in that area, we would hold them responsible and we would hold them accountable for that, especially – most especially, for the use of chemical weapons. The United States has taken a very strong stance in the past when chemical weapons have been used. You all know that very well.

We have engaged the Russian Government and also the military at the most senior level. Ambassador Bolton has spoken to his Russian counterparts. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman Dunford, has as well spoken with his Russian counterparts to make it very clear that the United States Government and its partners would respond to any verified chemical weapons use in Idlib, or elsewhere in Syria for that matter, in a swift and appropriate manner.

So we would encourage Russia to make this point very clear to Damascus that that will not be tolerated.

QUESTION: Thank you. And a follow-up: The Syrian and Iranian defense ministers just signed a new defense cooperation agreement. How do you view that?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, we saw that, certainly. Iran has continued its destabilizing activities around the globe, and I think would be a primary example of that.

Okay? Okay.

QUESTION: On Idlib very quickly –

QUESTION: South Asia?

QUESTION: Just to follow-up on Idlib, because all reports say that it is – it has a concentration of al-Nusra forces, the bad guys that you have listed as terrorists and so on. They are concentrated there. Their allies, who are from the same political and kind of militant orientation, are also there. You certainly don't want to provide another safe haven in Idlib, do you?

MS NAUERT: Said, I don't have anything additional for you on that, but I think Department of Defense addressed that today earlier. I can tell you something in addition on the Geneva talks. That is something that has been a real priority of ours and a priority of our Special Representative Jim Jeffrey as well, to reinvigorate the Geneva process.

I can tell you that we have accepted an invitation by Staffan de Mistura. He is the UN special envoy handling Syria. We will be participating in talks in Geneva on September 14th. It's a bit of a ways off, certainly, but I can tell you that Ambassador Jeffrey will be there and looks forward to representing the United States along with our Deputy Assistant Secretary Joel Rayburn.

I want to make it clear that we fully support the Geneva process. We fully support the efforts on the part of Staffan de Mistura to broker a political settlement. We recognize that a military solution is not going to resolve the problem long term in Syria that it has to be a political solution, so I expect that we'll have more announcements and details for you on the days and weeks to come. But we think we're at a good spot right now in getting back to the Geneva process.

And I can take one more question.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Yeah. Heather.

MS NAUERT: I can take more one question and then I have to go. Hi.

QUESTION: Thank you so much.

MS NAUERT: Where you been?

QUESTION: (Laughter.) I've been enjoying the summer.

MS NAUERT: Oh, good for you. Glad to hear it.

QUESTION: Thank you. Good to be back. Do you have any update on the Rohingya report? When should we expect the State Department to release such a report? And I have one follow-up.

MS NAUERT: Sure. So let me first start with the UN fact-finding mission,

and UN just released its report within the last day or so. And I just want to make clear that that is something that – we are reviewing that report's recommendations. So there is that piece of things. The findings in that report, if you've not reviewed it just yet, overall add to a growing body of information indicating widespread human rights abuses by the Burmese military and other security forces in Burma. The United States Government has held individuals – high-level military individuals responsible. We have through different rounds of sanctions in the past and I will certainly let you know if we have any additional announcements on that.

There's a second piece of information and that is the State Department's own documentation project that – it started – actually, let me back up for one second and mention something about the UN fact-finding mission. We were very troubled by the fact that those participating in the UN fact-finding mission were not granted access to the Rakhine State, and that's the key area where this crisis has taken place and so many people were run out of their homes and killed, and you know the rest of that. They have not been able to gather adequate information and that has long been a concern of ours. Humanitarian workers have not been able to get in and provide the important and necessary aid and support that they need to. Media, that has been an issue as well. So I just wanted to highlight that disappointment that we have had that various groups have not been able to get in.

With regard to our documentation project, the State Department undertook one in which refugees located at Cox's Bazar, which is in Bangladesh – many of them were interviewed for their experiences. That has been pulled together into a report which the Secretary will review and has taken a look at it from my understanding, and we will decide whether and to what extent to publicize that final report.

As you well know, we considered this, we designated this as ethnic cleansing last year. It's a very complicated and complex process that involves a whole lot of lawyers, and when we have something ready to announce, we'll certainly let you know. Okay?

QUESTION: Do you share the –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I've got to do last question. I've got to go.

QUESTION: Can I just follow up on that one (inaudible)?

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: So the – so do you agree or – that – with the UN report that there was genocidal intent in those attacks against the Rohingya?

MS NAUERT: We have not made a determination on that, and I'll go back to what I just said, and that is it is a very specific legal designation. It's not one that is easily made. To the average person, of course these

things are incredibly horrific and it seems like we should just slap a label on something. Well, there are complex legal designations that have legal meaning and weight in courts around the world. So that is why the Secretary reviews this very carefully and makes the best determination possible.

QUESTION: But does the UN policy affect at all what the U.S. does going forward? Does the UN report in any way change –

MS NAUERT: Does the UN fact-finding mission change –

QUESTION: – anything to do with how the U.S. policy is?

MS NAUERT: We support that process and we are taking a look at the recommendations. And I've got to go unfortunately, but thanks, everybody. We'll see you real soon.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:18 p.m.)

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