

# Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – August 29, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

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2:54 p.m. EDT

**MS NAUERT:** Good afternoon. You're probably wondering why we are briefing on a Wednesday. Why not? I thought some of you might enjoy an extra-long weekend; if anyone wants to feel free to take off tomorrow we'll certainly write you a slip to go.

I wanted to mention yesterday I was at the Department of Defense, and saw your digs over there, or your colleagues' digs. I saw your colleague, Jennifer Griffin, Rich, and saw some CNN folks as well. If you've not been over there – boy, that's nice. I mean, they really have a great setup over there. So your colleagues said don't tell that to our State Department colleagues.

**QUESTION:** Is it better than ours?

**MS NAUERT:** Yes, they have nice big offices.

**QUESTION:** Do they have rats? (Laughter.)

**MS NAUERT:** I did not ask about rats, but it was very, very nice, and I want to thank my colleague Dana White for having me over there.

**QUESTION:** They have WiFi, right?

**MS NAUERT:** I don't know if they have WiFi.

**QUESTION:** I think they do, yes.

**MS NAUERT:** Yes, yes. (Laughter.) But we were actually over there talking about the India 2+2 meeting that is coming up, which I wanted to make a little announcement about that today, and mention that Secretary Pompeo looks forward to traveling to New Delhi with Secretary Mattis for the inaugural India 2+2 ministerial dialogue that takes place starting on September the 6th. They'll meet with their Indian counterparts, External

Affairs Minister Swaraj and Defense Minister Sitharaman, to discuss enhancing our engagement with India on critical diplomatic and security priorities. The dialogue is an indication of the deepening strategic partnership between our two countries, and India's emergence as a net security provider in the region.

The importance of the U.S.-India strategic partnership is highlighted in the President's National Security Strategy as well as the administration's South Asia and Indo-Pacific strategies. So we look forward to that and look forward to having some of you travel along with us.

Next, I'd like to recognize a colleague of mine who is moving on to his next posting and will be preparing to head to Moldova. Some of you may know Joe Geraghty, who's worked in the European Affairs bureau, and I just wanted to recognize Joe for truly being one of the best press officers here in the building. My first day, about 16 months ago, he helped get me prepped up to start briefing all of you, and he's really been fantastic. So I just wanted to wish him and his family well as he moves on to his new post.

Last thing I'd like to highlight, and that is something we're really proud of that's taking place in Uzbekistan right now. Earlier today, our U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, Pamela Spratlen, joined the deputy justice minister of Uzbekistan to welcome the American Councils for International Education to Uzbekistan. That group is based here in Washington, D.C. The American Councils implements U.S. educational programs and exchanges worldwide. It will be the first U.S. Government – excuse me, the first U.S. NGO organization registered in Uzbekistan for more than 15 years. It demonstrates our growing strategic partnership between the United States and Uzbekistan, and the Government of Uzbekistan's commitment to meaningful reform and international engagement. The welcome news represents our two countries' strengthening of people-to-people ties as American Councils will open up many opportunities for academic and cultural exchanges between the United States and Uzbekistan.

And as you may recall, we invited that country to attend our religious freedom ministerial here at the State Department back in July in recognition of the recent steps that the Government of Uzbekistan has taken to improve religious freedom. We commend the government for its significant progress that it's made in implementing the president's reform agenda.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Go ahead, Suzanne.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I'd like to ask about something that we didn't really get a chance to talk about too much yesterday.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Yemen and the UN report that was out this week that detailed

possible war crimes there. I'd just like to get your view on this report, and the Secretary's view. And I was interested if this is something that you expect will inform U.S. policy moving forward.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. Give me one second. I've got Yemen back here, and it takes a bit to get to.

Okay. First, let me start by saying that Secretary Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General – Chairman Dunford addressed this to great extent yesterday in their press briefing, so I would just add on to their comments that they made yesterday. In terms of the UNHCR report that you ask about, we've seen that report to the Human Rights Council. The possible violations of international law as outlined in that report are very concerning to the United States Government. We believe that if such crimes have taken place, that there is simply no justification for those types of crimes. We take the report seriously. We're certainly taking a look at the report and urge all parties to the conflict to do the same.

This serves as a good reminder that all parties to the conflict need to comply with their obligations under the Law of Armed Conflict to thoroughly investigate alleged violations of the Law of Armed Conflict and take necessary measures to prevent such violations. And that report I think gets us back to something that we have long supported, and that is a political solution to take place in Yemen. Martin Griffiths, who represents the United Nations as its special envoy, has a meeting coming up – I believe it's within the next week or so. So we're hoping to have some additional information and possibly some progress coming out of those meetings. And I'd be happy to bring you more when we do have it on that.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but do you expect that this could maybe cause the U.S. to reevaluate support for the Saudi-led coalition?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I'm not going to get ahead of that. I think that Secretary Mattis addressed that yesterday. And so I would just urge you to go back and read his comments. Saudi Arabia is obviously a strong strategic partner of the United States and we work with Saudi Arabia on a host of issues because we have a very broad relationship with that government. As we have discussed for the past several weeks, they are conducting an investigation; that's something that the U.S. Government has encouraged them to do so, and they have accepted that and they have given us assurances that they will conduct that investigation fully.

Okay. Hey, Lesley.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I do have a follow-up on that one. Does that mean – you said you were reviewing the report. Does that mean that aid or any kind of assistance could be implicated depending on whatever your finding is? Or, I mean, I'm trying to find out what the – what the endpoint could be on that.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I'm not going to get ahead of any of the decisions that may or may not be made in the future with regard to that, but just want to say that we take those findings seriously and we're urging parties to the conflict to do the same thing.

**QUESTION:** And then how long will your review take? Or you don't have a deadline for that?

**MS NAUERT:** I don't. I don't know if there is a deadline on that or how long that that will necessarily take, but I think we will spend the time necessary to review it as appropriate.

Okay. Okay. Hey.

**QUESTION:** Just a quick follow-up on that?

**QUESTION:** I have a question on Palestinian aid.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can you confirm reports that a decision was made to cut the whole U.S. funding to the UN Agency for Palestinian Refugees?

**MS NAUERT:** No, and we have covered this extensively here in this briefing room. That issue is – the funding is still under review and we have no announcements to make at this time.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on the aid?

**MS NAUERT:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** The question that I asked about yesterday. There was a report yesterday afternoon that Congress actually rejected the aid cuts, the international aid cuts, as it was submitted. Does that include the Palestinian aid package? Are you aware of that?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry, I don't have any information on that. I'm just not aware of Congress's position on that.

**QUESTION:** Well, congressional staffers said that. Some – there was some – some of this information was attributed to high officials in the administration. So you cannot confirm?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry, I just don't have anything for you on that.

**QUESTION:** If I could stay with the Palestinian issue for a –

**MS NAUERT:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** – minute. Also, the – an Israeli court ruled yesterday that settlements that are deemed illegal by the United States on private Palestinian land, which you have complained about in the past and in

fact protested with the Israelis, that now they are legal depending on good faith. I don't know what that means, if the land was taken from Palestinians in good faith then they can build settlements. Do you have any reaction to that? Do you plan on protesting, as you have done in the past, on these particular settlements?

**MS NAUERT:** The only thing I can tell you is that the President has made his position on settlements very clear, and I'll state that position once again, and that is that the Israeli Government has made it clear to the U.S. Government that its – intends to adopt a policy regarding settlement activity that is in line with the President's overall concerns, and that the Israelis will take that into consideration, and that's something that we certainly welcome. What we want to get to is a comprehensive peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and we'll keep pushing ahead for that.

**QUESTION:** But on the issue of this privately owned Palestinian – you have taken a very strong stance in the past every time it happened that you object to this. What – do you plan on doing the same for this particular –

**MS NAUERT:** Well, we have said in the past –

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** – about unrestrained settlement activity, and we have made our position very clear with the Israeli Government. We've spoken about that. They have made it clear that they intend to adopt a policy concerning settlement activity that is in line with the President's concerns and that they will take that into consideration. Okay.

**QUESTION:** And lastly – I promise lastly on this issue – the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas told Israeli academics yesterday that the Palestinians want an unarmed or disarmed Palestinian state. Is that a good step? Is that something that you would encourage? What is –

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not – I'm sorry, Said, I'm just not familiar with his comment so I wouldn't want to comment on anything that I have not seen myself, but thank you.

Hi, Elise.

**QUESTION:** Hi. On Syria.

**MS NAUERT:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** There's a report out there that a U.S. delegation met with members of the Assad regime in Damascus recently. I was told you might have something.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. So we have seen that report. When I say "yeah," that's a figure of speech. That is not a yes. We've seen that report. It doesn't reflect any reality that we are certainly aware of, so that is

all I have on that. We've seen that report; it doesn't reflect anything that the U.S. Government is tracking at this point.

**QUESTION:** Well, are you saying that you don't know of a meeting between U.S. Government officials and Assad regime officials?

**MS NAUERT:** I am not aware of any meeting to that effect.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** If we – if we have anything more on that for you, I'll let you know. Okay.

**QUESTION:** Heather?

**QUESTION:** A follow-up on Syria, if you don't mind.

**MS NAUERT:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yesterday you mentioned – you warned against any possible chemical weapons attack in – by the Russians or the Syrian Government, and in – afterwards I had in my mind – I was like, where did this come from? And do you – is it that the U.S. believes that there is an offensive about to happen in Idlib or –

**MS NAUERT:** I think what we are concerned about is not just a potential chemical weapons attack, but we're concerned about the threat, any kind of escalation of violence in Idlib. That would put civilians and civilian infrastructure in Idlib at risk. We have shared the concerns that we have about any potential offensive taking place. We've shared those concerns with the Russian Government at many levels, from Secretary Pompeo to his counterpart, to Chairman Dunford, also to Secretary Mattis, National Security Advisor Bolton and others. So we've made our position on that very clear. In addition to that, our new Syrian envoy, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, has discussed that as well with some of his counterparts.

**QUESTION:** But you – it's not that you have evidence of chemical weapons or of them assembling chemical weapons, just a warning?

**MS NAUERT:** Nothing that I can – nothing I can share with you at this point, so I wouldn't want you to jump too far ahead and jump to any kind of conclusions on that. That of course is a concern of ours. We know those types of things have been used in Syria in the past.

**QUESTION:** Heather, conversely –

**QUESTION:** Two things on – wait –

**MS NAUERT:** Hold on. Hold on.

**QUESTION:** Two things on that. First of all, when you say that Ambassador Jeffrey has been discussing it with his counterparts, do you mean his

Russian counterparts or is he in – is he empowered with kind of sending message directly to the Syrian regime?

**MS NAUERT:** I – no, I’m talking about Russia here.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** Ambassador Jeffrey and Ambassador David Satterfield met earlier this week with the Russian ambassador to the United States, in part to raise concerns about what could happen in Idlib.

**QUESTION:** Okay, just – and on that, I mean, obviously if they’re kind of – mention these warnings about what can happen, are you looking at the situation on the ground and you’re – and you see some indications that there’s going to be an offensive underway?

**MS NAUERT:** We’re concerned about it. I mean, you’ve seen the – you’ve read the Russian reports, you’ve heard their rhetoric, and so we’re concerned about what could potentially happen.

**QUESTION:** Well, it’s not just rhetoric. I mean, aren’t there indications that the Syrians are moving some equipment around?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I can’t comment on that in particular. That would be more of an intelligence matter or a Department of Defense matter, but we’ve seen the reports about that and of course we’re concerned, concerned about the potential impact on civilians and also infrastructure as well, in a country that has been through so much.

**QUESTION:** When you say that Ambassador Jeffrey talked to his – and Ambassador Satterfield talked to their Russian counterparts, was this about – in general about an escalation in Idlib or specifically about the use of chemical weapons?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, it talked about the situation in Syria. They covered that, with a particular focus on U.S. indications of an impending Syrian regime offensive. So that’s obviously supported by Russian forces and Iranian forces, and that is something that is of concern to them and to us.

**QUESTION:** So you do say that there are indications of an offensive. Does that mean including the use of chemical weapons?

**MS NAUERT:** Elise, I don’t have anything more for you on that. If I do, I will certainly let you know, but that is a concern of ours. We have all seen what the Syrian regime, backed by the Russian Government, has done in the past. That should not be a surprise to anyone that that would be a concern of ours once again.

**QUESTION:** Heather.

**QUESTION:** Heather, on –



**MS NAUERT:** Hi, Janne.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. On North Korea (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** On the – on this chemical weapons issue, the Russian – just a quick follow-up.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Just a quick follow-up on Elise's –

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, just briefly, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Really very briefly. The Russians are claiming that al-Nusra and other groups are stockpiling chemical weapons and planning an attack. So you dismiss that out of hand?

**MS NAUERT:** I think that's more false flag type reporting.

**QUESTION:** They've been talking about this for a while.

**MS NAUERT:** We've seen that before –

**QUESTION:** So you dismiss it?

**MS NAUERT:** – where they try to put the blame, they try to put the onus on other groups, and we don't buy into that. Go ahead, Janne.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Heather. On North Korea, U.S. Ambassador to United Nations Nikki Haley mentioned that North Korea is threatening to nullify the denuclearization talks. What is your comment that –

**MS NAUERT:** That they're threatening to what?

**QUESTION:** Nullify the denuclearization –

**MS NAUERT:** I have not read that quote from Ambassador Haley. I've read most of her quotes. I don't recall having seen that one. I can just say diplomacy is something that we will be pushing ahead with, and that has not changed.

**QUESTION:** One more: The North Korea travel ban is lifted or is it extended?

**MS NAUERT:** As far as I know, that is – our policy has not changed on that. If and when we have some change to let you know about, I'll let you know.

**QUESTION:** But expires at the end of this month.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, well then that's the end of this month. I will take a look at it and see if we –

**QUESTION:** Two days left.

**MS NAUERT:** I'll see if we have any updates for you on that.

**QUESTION:** All right, thank you.

**MS NAUERT:** Hey, Ben.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thanks, Heather. Two questions on North Korea. First, yesterday you took a question whether Secretary Pompeo had spoken with his North Korean counterpart after the cancellation of the trip. Have you gotten an answer yet?

**MS NAUERT:** I did not ask for an answer on that. My apologies, it just slipped my mind.

**QUESTION:** Okay. If you can ask that, and then maybe not the Secretary but –

**MS NAUERT:** I'll see what I can find out for you. You know we often don't talk about our private diplomatic conversations. If there is something I can share with you, I will. I may not be able to, however.

**QUESTION:** Okay, and the second question is: You said diplomatic efforts are ongoing as far as denuclearization, but it seems the cancellation of this trip is sort of a setback. And then in the statement you read, you said that America stands ready to engage when it's clear Chairman Kim stands ready to deliver on his commitments he made. Does that mean the U.S. is waiting to see what North Korea does, or are you guys going to do anything to try and maybe add any more pressure to get North Korea to sort of deliver on their promises?

**MS NAUERT:** I think I would say we always stand ready to engage. Those – some of these things are diplomatic conversations that we're not going to read out. I know it's frustrating to a lot of reporters because we're not giving you the tick-tock on everything. The President decided to postpone this trip because he felt like it was not the time to go on this trip, and when we have something more for you on that, we'll let you know, okay?

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on that?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, hold on. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Just – is Steve Biegun – are there plans that he goes on his own to North Korea without Secretary Pompeo or –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have any travel on Steve Biegun to read out at this point or to announce at this point, but I know he will be traveling in the region sometime probably within the next several weeks or so to meet some of his counterparts in other countries. Whether – whether or not he ends up going to North Korea at some point, I'm not going to forecast that. We have no travel to announce, but at some point he will be going to the region to meet some of his counterparts.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Hey. Hold on.

**QUESTION:** I have two questions, one regarding when President Trump announced to cancel Secretary Pompeo's trip. One of his tweets, he also – he blamed China not putting enough pressure on North Korea. I'm wondering if Secretary Pompeo has talked to his Chinese counterparts and is the United States considering any more sanctions on Chinese companies.

**MS NAUERT:** Well, you know we never forecast sanctions, so that's just something I will not address. But I can tell you that – and we say this about many other countries around the world – that certain countries – all countries can do more to adhere to sanctions. We would expect China, just like other countries, to adhere to the UN Security Council resolutions that it too voted for. So we'd just remind folks of that, but certainly we would expect other countries to continue to live up to its expectations with regard to imposing sanctions and seeing those sanctions through.

**QUESTION:** And I'm sure you have seen the report about a secret meeting between Japan and North Korea in Vietnam in July, and it was reported that United States was irritated by this meeting. I'm wondering if you have any comment on this report.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I can't confirm any kind of meeting of that sort. I can tell you, though, that the U.S. and Japan, just like the U.S. and South Korea, are very closely coordinated. They talk, we talk, I would say virtually every single day. I've sat in on some of those meetings with the South Koreans and the Japanese, and we are all in coordination, singing out of the same hymn book, as some of us here in the United States would certainly say, and that is something that has not changed. We still remain in close coordination on many things.

**QUESTION:** Heather, on that note, there's, I don't know, a big report out from South Korea that Secretary Pompeo sent a letter to his South Korean counterpart kind of explaining why he didn't travel to North Korea, that the time wasn't right –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I saw that report earlier. I'm not sure why that – I can't confirm that. He spoke with his South Korean counterpart. That I can confirm. We put out a readout of that call, but any supposed letter, I'm not familiar with that in any way, shape, or form.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thanks.

**QUESTION:** I just have a quick follow-up on South Korea. While Pompeo canceled his trip, South Korea has announced that they're going to continue with talks with North Korea, and I'm just wondering is there concern that that could undercut U.S.-North Korea talks or that South Korea and the U.S. are out of sync on this issue –

**MS NAUERT:** And I've started to see some reporting about that, claiming that there is a rift between South Korea and the United States, and I can just say that that notion is simply overblown. There is no reality to that. I was just talking about how we closely coordinate with Japan. We closely coordinate with South Korea. We couldn't have gotten to this point where we have been having conversations with North Korea without the assistance of South Korea and without the assistance of Japan, and without a lot of other countries for that matter, but those two key allies helped get us to that position. So while we may have minor disagreements here and there on different kinds of policy issues, all of this narrative is simply overblown. We closely coordinate and have an excellent relationship with these countries and share information all the time.

Okay. Hey, Conor.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask one last question on this?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** President Trump talked about a couple of different verbal agreements between him and Kim Jong-un during their meeting in Singapore. Can you say whether or not a declaration, a joint declaration to end the war, was one of those agreements?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not familiar with that being a part of the overall agreement, but I can tell you that we believe that denuclearization has to take place before we get to other parts, and that's been a part of our policy.

**QUESTION:** Including a joint declaration?

**MS NAUERT:** Pardon me?

**QUESTION:** Including a joint declaration?

**MS NAUERT:** Yes. Yeah.

Okay, I've got to wrap it up, then.

**QUESTION:** On next week's 2+2.

**MS NAUERT:** Hey. Yeah.

**QUESTION:** So on next week's 2+2, earlier this summer, over 4 million individuals in Assam were left off the citizenship rolls. There was some controversy, there were fears about deportations. Will Secretary –

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry, they were left off of what?

**QUESTION:** Citizenship rolls. They were left off lists of citizens.

**MS NAUERT:** In India?

**QUESTION:** Mm-hmm.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** And I was wondering if Secretary Pompeo planned to raise that issue or minority rights more generally in his meetings next week.

**MS NAUERT:** Well, we talk about a whole host of things with other governments. That particular issue I'm not aware of. Doesn't mean that he's not aware of it, I'm just simply not aware of that. We are going there, of course, with our Department of Defense counterparts. We'll be having some breakaway meetings of our own as will our DOD counterparts be having their own meetings. When we have an agenda and a particular list of topics that I can share with you I certainly will, but I'm just not aware of that one in particular.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** On North Korea.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, last question. Let me just call on somebody who –

**QUESTION:** Also on North Korea.

**MS NAUERT:** Hey, there. How are you doing?

**QUESTION:** Hi. Good, how are you? Just a quick clarification question on North Korea. You had said yesterday from the President's tweet about there wasn't quite enough progress on denuclearization. I wondered what you consider to be enough progress for a trip to be justified in the future.

**MS NAUERT:** If – the last part of the question was what again?

**QUESTION:** What would be considered enough progress on denuclearization for a trip for Secretary Pompeo and Steve Biegun to be justified to North Korea?

**MS NAUERT:** So the President said we were not making sufficient progress with respect to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

**QUESTION:** So what –

**MS NAUERT:** That was the President's position, that's the Secretary's position, and that's the position of the President's national security team. And so they made the decision to postpone that trip. I think it's one of those things that we'll know it when we see it. We stand ready. We're watching closely. We stand ready to have meetings, and we will wait and see what happens. But I'll let you know when we have something more for that, okay?

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you one more question on China?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, and then I got to go.

**QUESTION:** There was a letter today from a bipartisan group of lawmakers urging the administration to use Global Magnitsky Act to sanction China over the crackdown in western China and Xinjiang province. Do you guys have any response to that? Is that something that you're considering?

**MS NAUERT:** I've not seen that letter. Sometimes when a letter comes to the State Department, reporters tend to hear about it from members of Congress faster than we do. So I just can't confirm receipt of that letter just yet, but I'll take a look and see if we have anything for you on that.

**QUESTION:** I just want to –

**QUESTION:** If I could just broadly on – is that something that you would consider, sanctioning China?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm just not going to comment on that in general terms without having seen the letter, who it's from, what it includes. It's certainly something that we would – we would take a look at and consider, however.

**QUESTION:** I just want to ask (inaudible) letter –

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Lesley, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** – because it happened last week, but I don't think we've had a chance to raise it, is that's the letter from Menendez and Shaheen requesting the notes of the interpreter from the Helsinki summit between Trump and –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have any updates for you on that. I know that those interpreters take an oath of privacy, and that's something that they hold very dear. It's one of the ethics that they adhere to and agree to when they take on those positions. If I have anything more for you, I'll let you know.

Okay. Thanks, everybody. And have a good Memorial weekend.

**QUESTION:** Labor Day.

**QUESTION:** Labor Day.

**MS NAUERT:** Labor Day weekend, yes. Thank you.

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

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