

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – December 12, 2017

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Spokesperson

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:39 p.m. EST

MS NAUERT: Good afternoon. Good to see you all. A couple announcements I have to make. And the first – you may recall the visa restrictions that were put on the country of Gambia earlier this year. We have an announcement to make on that.

On September 30, 2017, the Department of Homeland Security notified the Department of State that Gambia denied or unreasonably delayed the return of its nationals the United States ordered removed from the United States. Since then, the Government of Gambia has worked diligently toward addressing our concerns. We are pleased to announce that on December 8th, the Secretary certified that Gambia had met its international obligations concerning the repatriation of its citizens, and the United States has now ended visa restrictions and has resumed normal visa processing in all visa categories, effective December the 12th. Ensuring the countries facilitate the removal of their nationals who are subject to a final order of removal is a high priority for the Department of State and this administration, and we are pleased that The Gambia took proactive steps to address our concerns. So that's a little update for you.

Secondly, something I'd like to mention on Yemen. The United States Government announced an additional \$130 million in emergency food assistance to Yemen through USAID today. This now brings the total U.S. contribution in humanitarian aid for the people of Yemen to nearly \$768 million since Fiscal Year 2016. The funding announced today will support the United Nations World Food Program to distribute food aid to Yemen's most vulnerable populations. The United States remains gravely concerned about the worsening humanitarian situation in Yemen. We continue to call on the Saudi-led coalition to facilitate the free flow of humanitarian aid and commercial imports, especially fuel, through all Yemeni ports

and on Houthi-led militias to allow unfettered access for food and humanitarian aid to reach all areas inside Yemen. Finally, we call on all parties to protect the civilians, including humanitarian aid workers, who work at great personal risk to deliver life-saving assistance to the people of Yemen.

And finally, many of you, I think, in the past have met Ambassador John Bass, or at least have heard of him. One, I'm pleased to announce today that Ambassador Bass has now arrived in Afghanistan over the weekend. Today he presented his credentials to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani today in Kabul. Ambassador Bass is a career Foreign Service officer with close to three decades of diplomatic service at the State Department. He most recently served as our U.S. ambassador to Turkey, which may be the reason his name is familiar to many of you. He's also served as our ambassador to Georgia as well.

The U.S. mission in Afghanistan is one of our largest in the world, and I can't think of a better person to serve and be the face of the United States in Afghanistan than Ambassador Bass. His continued economic and political development – he will continue to push that, including support for the rule of law in combating all forms of corruption in that country. A main focus of his tenure will be on efforts to bring peace, security, and stability to the country and the region as part of the U.S. South Asia strategy. And so we look forward to having him serving there in Afghanistan.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Where would you like to start today?

QUESTION: I'd – just before we go to – I want to go to the town hall.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: But I have a very brief thing on The Gambia announcement.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: So does this mean that all of the deportees, that they've accepted all of them? Or just enough to get – to meet the –

MS NAUERT: I don't know if it – I don't know if they've taken every single one back. But they've taken steps in the right direction, enough so that we can remove the visa restrictions.

QUESTION: And the visa restrictions were only in place for government officials. Correct?

MS NAUERT: I believe so, yes.

QUESTION: Right. And the vast majority of Gambians who might want to come to the United States –

MS NAUERT: I believe it also included some of their family members as

well. But we can double-check that.

QUESTION: Right. But the vast majority of Gambians who might want to come to the United States probably couldn't afford to come to the United States (inaudible). So I'm just –

MS NAUERT: I don't know the answer to that, Matt.

QUESTION: – I'm wondering if you guys – you guys care –

MS NAUERT: We're always amazed by how much people want to get – not amazed, not – surprised by how much people want to get to the United States and what they're willing to do to come to our free country.

QUESTION: Did you – do you know – did you get assurances that these people will be treated humanely on their return to Gambia? Or –

MS NAUERT: I would have to – I'd have to refer you to Department of Homeland Security on that because DHS was the main government body that was negotiating with the government on this one.

QUESTION: All right. Well, I'd be curious to know if you guys care what happens to them when they get back because presumably they're being deported here for some kind of reason. Are they going into custody there or are they just being released? If they're being held in custody, did you guys get assurances that they'd be treated okay? Anyway, that's that.

On the Secretary's town hall –

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: – I was interested in listening to hear for updated figures, if you all have them, about retirements, resignations over the course of the past 11 months. He didn't really address that. There was one brief mention of the size of the Foreign Service being roughly the same as it was at this point last year.

MS NAUERT: I do have some numbers for you, some updated numbers for you. But I want you all to keep in mind that these numbers are constantly changing. As people make decisions about retiring, we may see some new changes – or some new numbers in the coming weeks. But I do have an update for you. But go ahead, finish – if you want to finish the question –

QUESTION: Well, that's – I just –

MS NAUERT: That's it? Okay. So –

QUESTION: I'd like one more, but that's the – but not about the numbers.

MS NAUERT: Okay. All right. I'll take the numbers first and then we'll go to your next one and get to everybody else. In terms of our career

Foreign Service officers and specialists, here are some of the preliminary accounts that we have – counts, pardon me. From February the 1st to October the 31st of 2017, 274 career Foreign Service officers and specialists have retired during that time period. That is roughly on par with the number that retired in 2016. That number was 262. So 274 this year, up till October the 31st, that same time period last year was 262.

QUESTION: What about resignations?

MS NAUERT: Uh, let's see. Retirements – I'm not sure that I have anything on actual resignations.

QUESTION: Well, you're probably aware that in recent days there's been a flurry of new reports about the – about mid- to lower-level people resigning out of frustration, anger –

MS NAUERT: I saw one news article about –

QUESTION: – disappointment.

MS NAUERT: – a woman who retired in Africa, or decided to step down.

QUESTION: Well, she didn't retire; she resigned.

MS NAUERT: She resigned; pardon me.

QUESTION: So I'm curious to know about numbers of resignations rather than retirements because if you look – if someone resigns rather than retires, and doesn't have benefits, is not vested, that's – it's a little bit different than a retirement. So I'd be curious, if it's possible, to get the numbers of resignations of –

MS NAUERT: I will – I will certainly check in with our human resources people and see what I can find for you in terms of the number of resignations that we've had.

QUESTION: Okay. And then the last one, which will be also very brief, was that the Secretary, in response to some question, I believe, made a mention of how staffing at posts, some posts in Europe – and I think he named London, Paris, and Rome – might go down as people are repositioned. I'm wondering if this is in any way analogous to what former Secretary of State Rice put in place with this – her concept of transformational diplomacy, where she also talked about shifting significant numbers of diplomats from European capitals to places of – India, Indonesia, Pakistan, rising places. And if it is analogous, how? Because it – her initiative was not combined with a goal of reducing staffing by 8 percent.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Well, first of all, I wouldn't compare what the Secretary mentioned today to what Secretary Rice had done in the past. And I say that because the Secretary now – Secretary Tillerson – has looked at some of our posts, some of our very, very well-staffed posts in places like Paris and London and elsewhere, and certainly they do

great work there. But we also have posts where perhaps more people are needed, where there are perhaps issues that are very pressing that need a lot more attention.

So I think as the Secretary looks at some of these bigger posts in very well-off countries, industrialized countries where the issues aren't as grave as in other places, he's looking to maybe see if we can reconfigure things to put more people in posts where there may be more people needed.

QUESTION: Can I follow up on that?

MS NAUERT: So that's why I wouldn't compare it to Secretary Rice's. Yeah, hi, Nick.

QUESTION: Just to follow up on that, he said that there would be no office closures. Does – is he saying now that there will be no closures of consulates in countries in Europe as part of this shift in resources?

MS NAUERT: I don't think so. I think – and we've spoken about this in the past. I think he's just looking at it, saying, hey, look. Look at Paris. Look at London, where – I don't know what the numbers are, and you know we don't announce those numbers anyway. But they're – it's a huge staff in some of these places. And if you look at that and compare it to – and this is just me saying this – if you compare it to a place like Pakistan, they might need more people in Pakistan. They might need more people in Venezuela. They might need more people elsewhere than they have in these beautiful postings like Paris.

QUESTION: Sure.

MS NAUERT: And so I think it's just taking a look at the numbers and reconfiguring that.

QUESTION: But is he – was he making a commitment they're not to close any consulates?

MS NAUERT: I know that – I know that that is a question that you all have asked before. I'm not aware of any consulates that we are looking at closing. Okay?

QUESTION: One of the embassies mentioned – oh, I'm sorry.

QUESTION: Okay, but he's not – he's not saying – because he said there will be no office closures. So –

MS NAUERT: If he says there will be no office closures, then I would take him at his word. Yeah? Hi.

QUESTION: One of the embassies he mentioned is maybe shrinking is Paris, and Paris is a tri-mission. They – there, for example, the administration set an intent to pull out of UNESCO. You haven't nominated the UNESCO ambassador. I assume you won't bother since in just

over a year's time you'll be out of UNESCO. When he says you're not going to close any offices, is he meaning at least entire missions might go?

MS NAUERT: I – to – back to Nick's question, I thought your question was the same as Nick's.

QUESTION: It's similar. But it's not a physical office; it's a concept, I suppose.

MS NAUERT: Oh, I –

QUESTION: Will you have a mission to UNESCO?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of that. I'm not aware of anything that we've announced that we're closing at this point. I think what the Secretary was referring to are actual posts or consulates, and I'm not aware of anything that's – that we are looking at closing. Okay?

QUESTION: Can we move to China?

QUESTION: Can we move on?

MS NAUERT: Sure. Hi, Said. How are you?

QUESTION: Hi, Heather. On Jerusalem, I wanted to ask you first if you have any update as far as any possibly urgent measures or unusual measures that you are taking in your embassies worldwide, because there's been many demonstrations since we spoke the last time? Is there any update that you can give us?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I don't have any updates for you. Our embassies are always keeping an eye on the situation, the reality on the ground. We are in constant contact with our embassies as well to keep an eye on security situations, and we put out that information as we get new information or as it warrants.

QUESTION: Are you surprised by the size of these demonstrations, and in fact, the scope of these demonstrations, that they cover a huge geography all around the world?

MS NAUERT: Said, I think, one of the things as Americans we are accustomed to countries and people around the world either protesting or making their viewpoints well known. I don't think any of this really comes as a surprise to us.

QUESTION: Yeah. I understand, but did you figure or did you factor in that there will be such a reaction? Or are you – you expected this?

MS NAUERT: I – Said, we have talked about this. We plan for all eventualities or virtually every eventuality and various conditions on the ground. I don't think anything would come as any big surprise to the United States if people like or, perhaps, don't like a policy decision

that we've made.

QUESTION: I have a couple more. Isn't there any –

MS NAUERT: Okay, but we're going to have to move on –

QUESTION: A couple more.

MS NAUERT: – because we don't have a ton of time today. I have to get over to the Atlantic Council.

QUESTION: Absolutely, yeah.

MS NAUERT: So this let's make this one the last one.

QUESTION: A couple more. Has there been any contact between the State Department and its personnel, such as the consulate general in Jerusalem with the Palestinians and Israelis?

MS NAUERT: As of a couple days ago, I know that we had had contact with the Palestinian Government. I know that we've been in conversations, but I don't have any updates for you on that. Okay?

QUESTION: Just a follow-up on Jerusalem, Heather?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Hi.

QUESTION: So in the town hall, the Secretary was asked about whether – what the challenges were for moving the embassy, and he responded in purely operational terms about the building site and security and all that. I know what the explanation is for the decision – it's practical and so on, that's what they're saying – but does he have any – does he believe there will be any challenges politically given the political controversy in terms of the credibility of the U.S. role in continuing this mediation effort or –

MS NAUERT: I'm not sure I'm really following your question.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: How would a political challenge affect our ability to move our embassy, because some of the things that would have to be done in order to do that include talking to Congress –

QUESTION: No, you're right. I was thinking about the role – the – in the peace process, whether there – one of the challenges of moving the embassy would have a political consequence of making it impossible for the U.S. to mediate in a peace process. Does he feel that that is a possible challenge?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think the Secretary addressed this previously last week on his European trip, and the President addressed it as well. And they've both said similar things in that when we look at the peace

process over the past many decades, we have not really – despite the efforts and despite all the good work of many administrations, Republican and Democrat, have failed to make changes to the situation over there. And so the President looks at this as a new way of potentially being able to move the ball, to advance the ball to try to get the Palestinians and Israelis to come together.

So we're hard at work at that. We have not given up. We are still optimistic. We certainly know that some things can become complicating factors, but we look forward to sitting down and trying to advance the peace process.

QUESTION: Just a follow-up on this –

MS NAUERT: Okay. Yeah.

QUESTION: – the embassy. Last week when we were in Europe, Secretary Tillerson said that the physical move of the embassy wouldn't be this year and probably not next year. This morning he said three years. I don't know whether something has changed over the weekend to prolong the process or whether they're just vague estimates. Do you – does Secretary intend that the physical move of the embassy should take place during President Trump's first term?

MS NAUERT: Well, look, I think the move – the moving of the embassy will be done when it is all – when it's ready. And some of the things that have to be done include talking to Congress about the money, taking a look at the most appropriate site for it. As you all know, security is extremely important. We have to take a look at all the security things that have to be factored into that site. Is this a – is this the right space for it. So a lot of that stuff is just, frankly, going to take time, and that's why the Secretary said it could take several years.

QUESTION: Aren't those things the administration could have considered before making a decision to move the embassy?

MS NAUERT: Well look, I suppose so. But here's where we are now, the President made his decision, and now we're taking the position that we need to look at what next – what the next steps are.

QUESTION: Syria?

QUESTION: So the three-year estimate this morning is where we are, though, in terms of approximately?

MS NAUERT: That is a number that I have heard discussed. So –

QUESTION: Syria?

MS NAUERT: – I think that would – I think it would be fair, Dave, just to state that that is a number that we are looking at. It could take longer; it could take less time. Okay?

QUESTION: Syria? Syria?

MS NAUERT: Hey, Arshad.

QUESTION: A couple of – just some very tight, quick ones.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Is today Secretary Tillerson's Senior Communications Adviser R.C. Hammond's last day?

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: In a December the 1st *New York Times* article, three administration officials are cited as saying that he'll be leaving soon, I think it said in the next couple of weeks. And he said that that was wrong, that he was not leaving soon. What changed?

MS NAUERT: He being?

QUESTION: He, Mr. Hammond, on the record said that.

MS NAUERT: I see.

QUESTION: What changed? And in the intervening eight or nine days, because I think the pool report said on Friday that he was leaving on the 12th, and you've just confirmed it. So what changed in that period between December 1 and today that he wasn't leaving, and he said he wasn't, and now he is leaving?

MS NAUERT: I would just have to refer you back to him. I'm sorry. You certainly know how to reach him. I'm not going to speak about somebody's personal career plan. So I'd have to refer you to –

QUESTION: Was he fired in the intervening time?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to comment on his career. He served this administration for about a year now, and I'd just have to refer you to him on that.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Syria? Syria?

QUESTION: Heather –

MS NAUERT: Okay. Okay, let's go to Syria.

QUESTION: According to Robin Wright in *The New Yorker*, you've reconciled yourself to Bashar al-Assad's remaining in office until the next Syrian elections in 2021 because there aren't many other options now. And in fairness to you, this was really set by the previous administration and it's evidenced by Matt Lee's repeated interrogations of John Kirby. So, I mean, is what she wrote basically correct? Can you confirm it?

MS NAUERT: I would say her reporting's off the mark.

QUESTION: Off the mark.

MS NAUERT: Off the mark. We remain committed to the Geneva process. We believe that the future of Syria will not include Bashar al-Assad, but that is ultimately up to the Syrian people and the Syrian voters to decide. It could take a period of time before the Syrian people are able to get to the process by which they can actually turn out to vote. We've talked about this a little bit before, trying to include the diaspora in that voting. We remain committed to the Geneva process. Russia has said that it would help bring the regime to the Geneva process. They did part of that for a time. They chose to leave while the opposition stayed. We were – we noticed that and thought that was a very good thing that the opposition stayed during some of the Geneva talks that just took place over the past few days. We expect that Russia will continue to try to bring the regime to the table. But the Geneva process is something we stand firmly behind.

QUESTION: Do you have a timeframe in mind for this?

MS NAUERT: Look, I think we are still at the place where U.S.-backed organizations and coalition-backed organizations are removing the rubble. We're still involved in the demining process. So I'm afraid we're just not there to the electoral process just yet, but we're having a lot of conversations with the UN and other like-minded countries about the importance of the Geneva process.

QUESTION: So what was off the mark in the story?

QUESTION: Can you comment on the withdrawal of Russian forces?

MS NAUERT: In her story, she said that the U.S. had accepted that Assad will be in power until 2021. We've not accepted anything of the sort. It could take some time, but we've not just accepted that. And by the way, it's not up for the United States to ultimately decide, that is up to the Syrian people.

QUESTION: I wanted to ask if you have any –

QUESTION: So there's no 2021 goal or idea?

QUESTION: Heather?

MS NAUERT: Not that I have seen. In talking with all of our experts on ISIS and in Near Eastern Affairs, no one here has seen that number in paper or spoken about.

Okay.

QUESTION: Heather? Heather?

QUESTION: On the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria yesterday,

as was announced by President Putin. First, do you have a comment? And second, is this in any way – did you know in advance that the Russians were moving their troops out of Syria?

MS NAUERT: No, I can't –

QUESTION: Or a number of their troops.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I can't speak to any alleged Russian troop movements. So I'd have to refer you back to the Government of Russia on that one. But it's interesting, Russia may consider its job in Syria to be done. Our job in Syria is not done. And when I say "our," I don't just mean the United States, I mean the entire coalition. There are still pockets of ISIS. The country still needs to be stabilized. We were just talking about rubble removal and we were talking about demining. If Russia chooses to pull out, certainly, that is its choice to do so, but we continue to work through all our partners to try to stabilize the country.

QUESTION: So if the job is not done as you – you don't consider it done. The –

MS NAUERT: The job is not – the job is not done.

QUESTION: Not done. I understand.

MS NAUERT: It's not – done in Iraq, even though Iraq has declared victory over ISIS. It's not – it's still not done there because there are still individuals there who belong to ISIS, who will take part, undoubtedly, in terrorist activities. Syria, the job is far from done there, unfortunately.

QUESTION: So is it the expectation that the United States will continue to have a presence there in military terms? I mean, it has like 2,000 personnel. Is it likely to increase (inaudible) its position?

MS NAUERT: Look, I can't comment on the number of U.S. personnel there. That would be under the Department of Defense. But the job is not done yet. There are – there's a lot of work left to be done in Syria. We wish that weren't the case, but it is the case, and we've made a lot of progress on this. And again, when I say "we," I don't mean the United States, I mean the entire coalition has made a lot of progress. But it's not finished yet.

QUESTION: Heather?

MS NAUERT: Hey, John.

QUESTION: Hey. I wanted to follow up on the Trump administration's rejection of a Russian proposal on noninterference in each other's internal affairs. Are there any things that Russia can do so that the United States might reconsider a noninterference agreement, given concerns about potential meddling in light of the 2018 midterms being on

the horizon?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. It's funny that some are indicating that we rejected a deal with Russia and that that's a bad thing that we rejected the deal. Let me – let me remind you that Russia is not an honest broker when it comes to deals. I can point you to a few things, from INF treaties which they are not in compliance with but yet they are supposed to be. Okay, that's one example of an area that they can't – they're not holding up their end of the bargain. Minsk, that's another area. Anti-doping, that is another area. So Russia has a history of this. So I think it's – I would be very skeptical when Russia comes to you, when Russia comes to the United States saying, "Okay, here's our agreement." I'm not certain it's worth the paper that it's actually printed on.

So I'd be very suspicious of any kind of deal, any kind of story that says, "Oh, Russia, they wanted you to agree to this but bad America, bad America wouldn't agree to it." They have a record of the noncompliance with the INF; I just mentioned on arms control, other key agreements, a failure to honor commitments on Minsk, denials of its ongoing support of violence in eastern Ukraine. We haven't talked about this in an awful long time: the cover-up of the shoot-down of MH17, which happened over eastern Ukraine back in, what was that, 2015 or so? The denials of interference in our election. So I find their claims to just be laughable. Okay?

QUESTION: Yeah, and I take your point on those. It sounds like, given that rundown, that there is quite a low level of trust, and we probably shouldn't expect an array of new sort of agreements between the U.S. and Russia. Is that right?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to forecast any potential agreements. But I'm just saying on that one matter that you asked me about, I think we'd be pretty suspicious about signing anything. Okay?

QUESTION: Let me congratulate you early on the – your "bad America" soundbite, which will be probably very popular in certain parts of the world.

MS NAUERT: It might be. It might be. (Laughter.)

We've got to get moving on pretty quickly. Hi, Marcin. How are you?

QUESTION: Thanks so much.

MS NAUERT: Wait, hold on. Let me go to our friend Marcin back in there, from Poland. Hi.

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather. There have been quite a lot of changes in Poland recently, including the last changes over judiciary that are taking place tonight. Could you comment on all of the recent developments in Poland?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. As you know, Poland is a close ally of ours, a NATO

member, also a fellow democratic country. We have a good relationship with that country. But we've been watching very carefully some of the developments that have been taking place in Poland over the last 11 months, over the last year or so. In terms of some of the recent judicial reform legislation that's been moving through Polish parliament, we are following that very closely. We are aware of the president's new judicial reform proposals and recent amendments that have been introduced in the lower house of parliament. We continue to follow that closely, the upper house of parliament's deliberations on that legislation. We are relying on our allies to maintain strong democratic institutions, economies, and defense capabilities. The United States has stressed that judicial reform should be in line with Poland's constitution and the highest standards of international law, and respect judicial independence and separation of powers.

Another thing that we are following very, very closely is what is happening to some news organizations in Poland. And as a democratic country, you tend to have a free and fair press. We're tremendously concerned about the direction that the country seems to be going in. We're concerned about Poland's national radio and television broadcasting council's December the 11th, yesterday's, decision to fine the private TV broadcaster TVN for so-called biased reporting of demonstrations that occurred between December 16th and 18th. A lot of you have – probably saw those demonstrations here on the news. A free and independent media is a fundamental pillar of democracies. Poland would certainly be one of those. The decision appears to undermine and interfere with media freedom in Poland. They're a close ally and a federal – and a fellow democracy. So we're watching that one carefully.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Yeah, hi. What is your name?

QUESTION: Sameera Khan.

MS NAUERT: And you're from?

QUESTION: RT.

MS NAUERT: Uh-huh.

QUESTION: Yes. So when RT was forced to register as a foreign agent, you said that it wouldn't inhibit our ability to report. However, just a couple weeks ago, our press credentials were revoked. So doesn't this contradict your earlier statements?

MS NAUERT: I think press credentials may have been revoked by Congress, and not necessarily the members of Congress, but rather the association of reporters that handles who gets to come in and cover Congress. The – FARA, the act that you're speaking of, only requires that organizations register with the federal government. That is it. The United States does not tell any Russian news organization what to report or how to report

it. We don't tell Turkish ones, we don't tell Polish ones. In fact, the fact that you're here as a representative of the Russian Government is a perfect example of how we do not restrict any type of freedom of the press. You come in, Sputnik comes in, all the Russians come in here and you are more than welcome, and the reason why you're more than welcome –

QUESTION: (Inaudible) House of Representatives –

MS NAUERT: Hold on. The reason that you are more than welcome is because we have freedom of the press here in the United States. We support the First Amendment. We wish that the Russian Government would give us the same opportunities to report freely in Russia as we provide you all here.

Any of you listen to bluegrass? All right. Laurie, you listen to bluegrass. My understanding is that one of the bluegrass stations, I think it's 105.5 here in Washington – is that right? You're nodding. You're nodding too.

QUESTION: The only one.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Well, it used to be bluegrass and now it's Russian radio. Right?

QUESTION: It's Sputnik.

MS NAUERT: Now it's Sputnik Radio. So that is a perfect example, on the free airwaves here, where people don't have to pay for it. But they can get Russian news, if you will.

QUESTION: Right, but –

MS NAUERT: And by the way, may I just mention that Russian Government itself has talked about how it will influence RT and Sputnik, how it will influence how it reports and what it reports on.

QUESTION: Yes, but back to the original question: We can't go to the House of Representatives or the Senate to report, so that restricts our ability to report on that.

MS NAUERT: I would encourage you, then, to talk to the congressional correspondents association. You are more than welcome here at the State Department anytime you like, but that would be up for the State Department's Correspondents' Association to handle.

QUESTION: Heather?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Yeah, hi.

QUESTION: Heather, how do I –

QUESTION: A couple –

QUESTION: On this issue –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – Heather, how – that was a very nice, full-throated support of freedom of the press you just gave, but how comfortable are you doing that and how comfortable are you that you can speak for the entire administration given the fact that you just went off on the – you heavily criticized Poland for this – going after a TV station for biased reporting, but we’re hearing the same thing coming out of the White House every day. Criticism, yes, not legal action, at least not yet. Are you comfortable –

MS NAUERT: Well –

QUESTION: – that you speak for the entire administration –

MS NAUERT: – I think –

QUESTION: – in your support for –

MS NAUERT: I think that – I think these instances are night and day. The administration is rightfully concerned about some erroneous reporting that’s come out. I have said to some of you here before – although I think you are all terrific reporters here at the State Department. We are very lucky to have a professional group of reporters who take the issues as seriously as you do. There have been in the past mistakes that have been made. Whether or not they have been intentional or not on the part of reporters, I cannot speak to because I’m not involved in that. But there have been times in the past where reporters have just frankly gotten it wrong, and I understand that members of the administration would be concerned about reporters getting things wrong.

But I am not going to back away from my defense of a free and fair press that reports responsibly and accurately. That is something that we stand for here in the United States. We like to set an example for other countries and talk about how we can have uncomfortable conversations here in this room. You’re asking me that very question. That is what we stand for. You from the Russian Government, you were asking me those questions too. You are welcome here anytime. That is what we stand for here in the United States –

QUESTION: So what’s the definition of “free and fair press?”

MS NAUERT: – free and fair debate.

QUESTION: Any network that’s funded by a state government? Or what’s your definition?

MS NAUERT: We have many news organizations that are funded by state governments who are welcome to come here. That is an example, no better example.

QUESTION: So it's just the Russian Government – any network funded by the Russian Government, those are the only ones that can be targeted?

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry, targeted?

QUESTION: Are targeted, cracked down on, restricted in reporting.

MS NAUERT: The FARA Act –

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: – will ask entities to have to sign up for the FARA Act. That's it. I'm pretty sure that there are other ones on there as well. We're going to have to move on. You're welcome back anytime.

Hi, yeah.

QUESTION: Quickly, thank you. A couple weeks ago from here you called on the Venezuelan Government to release Josh Holt, an American held in Venezuela for more than a year now, on humanitarian grounds. Since then – I believe yesterday – audio purportedly of him has been released indicating he is not well. Have you heard that audio tape and are there any developments on securing his release?

MS NAUERT: Here's what I can say: Josh Holt, an American citizen, has now been detained in Venezuela for nearly 18 months. He has never formally been charged with a crime. We have consistently called on the Government of Venezuela to release Josh Holt on humanitarian grounds due to his ongoing health concerns. I am certainly aware of that tape. I know that some of my colleagues have listened to a tape. We can't independently verify that that is his voice. However, we have no reason to believe that it was not his voice. For those who have heard the audio recording, it certainly describes his dire medical condition. We believe that he is in extremely poor health, which is why we continue to call on the government to release him.

He had preliminary hearings in Venezuela, and as many of you know, some of those hearings had been delayed. Some hearings have not been held at all. He had hearings on October the 10th and October the 24th. He has a hearing that is set to take place sometime today in Venezuela. We've had a representative at the previous two hearings – excuse me, is there something you need right now?

STAFF: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay. We're leaving at 3:30, so I'm good, right? We're leaving at 3:30.

STAFF: 3:15.

MS NAUERT: Oh, 3:15. Okay, so I'm going to have to wrap it up. He's in extremely poor health. We want him to be brought home. I don't have an update for you on how his hearing today went. We expect that somebody from our embassy was able to join him for that. If I get anything more for you on – I'll share that, okay?

Okay, and as you can see, my colleagues are standing in the back, telling me I have to go. I do want to clear up one thing, clarify something on the hiring freeze which was announced earlier today, and there's been some misreporting on that. Some have reported that the State Department hiring freeze altogether has been lifted. I want to be clear: The hiring freeze as a whole has not been lifted. The hiring freeze as it applies to eligible family members is being lifted.

Now, that is not insignificant, because the few times that I've been at our embassies overseas and have talked to my colleagues there, we've asked what are the top issues, what are the top concerns for you here at the – as you work for the State Department overseas, and that is one of the things that they mentioned, eligible family members. Let's just say a Foreign Service officer goes over and is serving at a post in Bangladesh, where I just was, and they have a spouse. They will often – Bangladesh is a bad example, but let's say Burma – bring a spouse over there to live with him or her. Often those people are professional people who can contribute a lot to our embassies while they are serving overseas. During the hiring freeze, they were not able to work for the State Department, although there had been some exemptions that the Secretary had made. Now we are happy to announce that we are lifting that hiring freeze so those spouses, eligible family members, can rejoin work and can work at the State Department. So we're happy that, but I just want to clarify that it only applies to the eligible family members and EPAPs, which stands for –

MR GREENAN: Employee [\[i\]](#) Professional Associate Program.

MS NAUERT: – Employee [\[ii\]](#) Professional Associate Program. That falls under EFM.

QUESTION: When are you going to lift the wider total hiring freeze?

MS NAUERT: That – the wider hiring freeze will be a decision that the Secretary will make. I'm just not sure. I know he wants to get through the redesign.

QUESTION: Can I give you a – give you a question –

MS NAUERT: I'm going to have to run or I'm going to miss my bus.

QUESTION: – a question to take on Honduras?

MS NAUERT: Yes. Yes.

QUESTION: The election –

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: – and whether you guys accept the results, as your senior diplomat down there seemed to say a couple days ago?

MS NAUERT: Can I have my colleague here –

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: – Robert take that one?

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: Sorry we have to cut it short here, guys. I have to –

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: – go get the bus.

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thanks.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:14 p.m.)

[\[i\]](#) Expanded Professional Associates Program

[\[ii\]](#) Expanded Professional Associates Program

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