

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – December 13, 2017

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Index for Today's Briefing

- [UKRAINE/RUSSIA](#)
- [ISRAEL/PALESTINIANS](#)
- [NORTH KOREA](#)
- [CHINA/NORTH KOREA](#)
- [BURMA](#)
- [IRAN](#)
- [CUBA](#)
- [HONDURAS](#)
- [TURKEY](#)
- [DEPARTMENT/MEXICO](#)
- [IRAQ](#)
- [YEMEN](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [VENEZUELA](#)

TRANSCRIPT:

3:04 p.m. EST

MS NAUERT: So it's great to see you on this Wednesday. I've got a little bit of time to go over some stuff. As you know, the Secretary is hosting his Mexican counterparts tomorrow, so he will be speaking with them, doing an event. I think it's about 10:30 or so in the morning. So we will not be briefing tomorrow, but just wanted to let you know about that.

I want to start out with just mentioning something. Tina had touched on Ukraine, and I'd like to mention this. It's something that we've addressed before and, unfortunately, we have to address it one more time. There are continued attacks against civilian infrastructure projects in Donetsk. It's sad that we have to address this once again. The situation in Ukraine, unfortunately, is not getting any better and so we're talking about it once again.

The United States continues to be deeply concerned by the escalating violence and the worsening humanitarian situation in eastern Ukraine. Back in November, we expressed concern about shelling near a vital water filtration plant in Donetsk. The plant remains under threat, and now a nearby coke factory has also taken fire by Russian-led forces. Coke factories assist in fuel production, energy production, as I understand it. We talked about that back in November.

Together, the filtration plant and this coke factory help provide drinking water, electricity, and central heating to approximately 345,000 people. Threatening water supplies and also home heating in the dead of winter is simply unconscionable. Russian-led forces should immediately withdraw from their new positions surrounding the water treatment plant. We again call on Russia to stop artillery and rocket attacks against Ukrainian civilian areas and to honor the ceasefire called for in the Minsk agreements.

The humanitarian situation in eastern Ukraine is one of the – is the worst it has been now in three years and it is deteriorating. More than 1 million people in the Donbas region are food insecure, civilian casualties are up significantly over last year. We call on Russia to take immediate steps to resolve the humanitarian crisis by withdrawing its forces and agreeing to a robust UN peacekeeping mission. We also call on the Ukrainians to do more to alleviate the suffering and protect civilian populations and critical infrastructure.

The United States remains committed to securing a lasting peace in eastern Ukraine through the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. However, as the Secretary said in Vienna last week, quote, “We should be clear about the source of this violence. Russia is arming, training, leading, and fighting alongside anti-government forces.” The decision to end the violence in eastern Ukraine and secure better relations with the United States and the international community lies squarely with Russia.

And with that, I’d be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Can I –

MS NAUERT: We usually go to – I know you’re new here. We usually go to Matt first –

QUESTION: I’m sure –

MS NAUERT: – since he’s with the AP. Matt, go right ahead.

QUESTION: I’m sure – thank you. I’m sure –

MS NAUERT: Just kind of a tradition.

QUESTION: I’m sure that you will – others have – will have questions about North Korea, so I’ll let others ask them. I wanted to start with the Middle East.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: You have seen Palestinian President Abbas’s comments, I’m sure. I know the White House has already responded, but only on background. I’m wondering what you make, if anything, of his comments that the United States has abdicated its role as mediator, or no longer fit to be the mediator and that the UN should take over.

MS NAUERT: That’s it? That’s the question?

QUESTION: I’m wondering if you have –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Okay.

QUESTION: – a response to that.

MS NAUERT: I think, as you all well know, the President is committed to this peace process, as committed as he has ever been, and that has not changed. That type of rhetoric that we heard has prevented peace in the past, and it's not necessarily surprising to us that those types of things would be said. We remain hard at work in putting together our plan. We believe that that will benefit both the Israeli and the Palestinian people.

It is also important, I want to point out, to ignore some of the distortions and instead focus on what the President actually said last week. The specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties. The United States continues to take no position on any final status issues, and the United States would support a two-state solution – we've long talked about this – if both sides can agree on this.

QUESTION: Okay. The – you talk about this type of rhetoric has never been helpful for peace. Does that mean that the U.S. does not believe that it's possible for the – to – it's possible to engage with the Palestinians under their current leadership?

MS NAUERT: No. I think we hope to continue to try to work with both the Israelis and the Palestinians to try to force some sort of meaningful peace agreement so that they could sit down and have talks about this. We will continue to back that. We will continue to try to support both sides of it.

QUESTION: Right. But I'm curious because President Abbas hasn't made comments like that – hadn't made comments like that for 10 months until this decision was announced. So are you – when you say that this type of rhetoric in the past has not helped, you're talking about under previous administrations?

MS NAUERT: Well, just talking about the general body of it. There has been inflammatory rhetoric, as we have seen, that has come from the region. We want to sit down and we want to be able to help bring both sides of the table together.

QUESTION: But you're not ruling out being able to work with him and his –

MS NAUERT: No, I don't think so. I don't think so at all. I have not seen that come out of the U.S. Government.

QUESTION: All right. Okay.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: And then the last one on this is: As you know, some of the criticism of the administration's move on this has been that it does, in fact, prejudge at least part of one final status issue. You will have seen that in addition to President Abbas's comment today, the OIC meeting that he was at recognized East Jerusalem as the capital of the

Palestinian state. Can you explain to me what the administration's thinking is about that? Is it willing to do that? And if not, why not?

MS NAUERT: The administration is committed to final status negotiations, and in those final status negotiations, that's when we believe the best – those parties, the Israelis and the Palestinians, are best suited to be able to establish their own boundaries, their own borders, and issues of sovereignty. That's not something that we are taking a position on as this administration. Simply, the administration determined that Jerusalem, based on where buildings are, based on where the government is, that Jerusalem is the capital.

QUESTION: Well, I don't understand why –

MS NAUERT: (Clears throat.) Excuse me.

QUESTION: What's the difference between recognizing – you guys are recognizing Jerusalem, an undefined Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. How is it any different that the OIC is recognizing East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine?

MS NAUERT: I think this would be the difference – and I've not spoken to OIC about this – but we are not making any calls on borders, we're not taking – making any calls on sovereignty, we're not making any calls on boundaries. That is up for both parties to decide in final status negotiations.

QUESTION: Well, then but – so why – then what's –

MS NAUERT: We're not drawing any geographic boundaries and we don't think that that is our position to do that.

QUESTION: Well, then why – so why can't you say – then why can't you say that you would regard East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state?

MS NAUERT: I think that that will all be up to final status negotiations –

QUESTION: Well, then why –

MS NAUERT: – and I'm not – I'm certainly not going to get ahead of any of those negotiations.

QUESTION: Well, then why wouldn't calling – why wouldn't Jerusalem being the capital of Israel –

MS NAUERT: Matt, I'm not going to have anything more for you on this. That would be subject to final status negotiations –

QUESTION: Well – I get it. I just don't – I guess –

MS NAUERT: – and our policy is not going to change on that.

QUESTION: I don't understand how it's consistent logically if – one, if recognizing East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestine is prejudging something that should be done in final status negotiations, why isn't also Jerusalem –

MS NAUERT: I think we're taking a position on –

QUESTION: What's the administration's logic on that?

MS NAUERT: – how we view – on how we view Jerusalem. I think it's up to the Israelis and the Palestinians to decide how they want to view the borders. Again, final status negotiations.

QUESTION: Well –

MS NAUERT: Elise, do you have something on this?

QUESTION: I just want –

QUESTION: I just – I don't get –

MS NAUERT: Matt, I'm not going to have anything more for you on this.

QUESTION: Well, I understand, but can you find out –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – what the – and get back to us on what the reasoning is, what the difference is here? I have a good idea of what you might say, but –

MS NAUERT: I will certainly see what I can do.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Just one quick one on this –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – and then I have one on North Korea. All of this stuff from the OIC and the Palestinians, are you just seeing this as kind of an emotional response to the President's decision? And do you think that cooler heads will prevail and they'll come back to the idea that there should be peace talks? Or do you think that this is kind of an irreparable chasm?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to assume why they came to this determination, why they came to that judgment. But again, our – I think our position is clear: final status negotiations.

QUESTION: Well, I understand, but do you think that this is kind of a temporary anger that will dissipate or are you just hoping –

MS NAUERT: I don't know. All I can say is that with Mr. Kushner, Mr. Greenblatt, our ambassador, we look forward to continuing

communications, to try to pick up communications, and try to have conversations about a peace process. That's something that's important to the President and that hasn't changed.

QUESTION: Has anyone in the Palestinian – in the CG's office or anyone here talked to the Palestinians?

MS NAUERT: Not to my awareness.

QUESTION: Okay. Just –

MS NAUERT: I know as of last week, there were conversations. I'm just not sure about this week.

QUESTION: I just – on North Korea, I think there's a lot of discussion about whether Secretary Tillerson's comments yesterday, saying that there were no preconditions for talks, are in opposition to the White House policy. You saw that a White House official, I guess, is saying that now is not the time for talks. Could you clear up whether the Secretary was making some kind of new policy or if he was just sticking to something that he's said before?

MS NAUERT: The Secretary was not creating any new policy. Our policy remains exactly the same as it was, the very same policy that we've talked about in this room for months and months now. First and foremost, diplomacy is our top priority. We have worked very hard on our maximum pressure or peaceful pressure campaign. We continue to work on that every single day. The second thing is the policy has not changed. I just want to be very clear on that. We remain open to dialogue, and we've long said this. We remain open to dialogue when North Korea is willing to conduct a credible dialogue on the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

We are not seeing any evidence that they are ready to sit down and have those kinds of conversations right now. Some of you may say, well, that sounds like it it's without preconditions. No. We would say that's actually in accordance to international norms. When somebody is shooting off ballistic missiles, when someone is conducting advanced nuclear tests, they're not showing any kind of interest or seriousness about wanting to sit down to talk. At some point we would like to do that, but our policy has not changed.

QUESTION: So that is – I mean, I know he said that there are no preconditions on what would be discussed at the talks, but I think he used the word "caveat," which is the same, I think, as a precondition, isn't it? The precondition is they have to stop testing for some while to demonstrate their willingness to come to the table. Is that correct?

MS NAUERT: Look, North Korea has been choosing to –

QUESTION: Well, I understand. Just –

MS NAUERT: – regrettably to show that they are serious about talking.

Our policy has not changed. We have long said that at some point we would be willing, when the time is right – and clearly the time is not right right now – when the time is right to sit down and have conversations with them. But we are not seeing that they are interested in doing that, and so our policy hasn't changed. We are on the same page at the White House and at the State Department on this.

QUESTION: But I just want to, like, make clear – like, in effect, that is a precondition. The precondition is that they stop testing. Is that right?

MS NAUERT: Look –

QUESTION: As a show of good faith.

MS NAUERT: I think as a show of good faith, to not test would certainly be a smart idea and I think everyone in this administration would agree with that.

QUESTION: No, but you – he said that there are no – and I just want to, like, get at this. Everyone is saying that he, like, said he's ready to talk with no preconditions. Doesn't he have a precondition? The precondition is no testing.

MS NAUERT: Look, all of what the Secretary has said and the administration has said in the past is that we are willing to sit down and have conversations with them, but now is not the right time. Our policy has not changed. Our policy has not changed. I can't be any more clear than that.

QUESTION: Can I follow up on –

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go ahead, Nick.

QUESTION: I mean, you just mentioned – you said that what you want is a credible dialogue on the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and that's the policy. That's not what he said yesterday, though. He said that he – he's happy to get in the room for that first conversation to talk about the size of the table. So –

QUESTION: Or the weather.

QUESTION: Or the weather. So that seems to be a discrepancy.

MS NAUERT: Look, he – the Secretary then went on to say, "I think they clearly understand that if we're going to talk" – I'm quoting here – "we have to have a period of quiet. We've got to have a period of quiet or it's going to be very difficult" to have any kind of discussions. We would need a period of quiet, and we certainly haven't seen anything of that sort.

QUESTION: Just a quick – I just have two quick follow-ups on that. I mean, that's separate from the issue of talking about denuclearization.

So what you said now is that he is willing to have a credible discussion about denuclearization, but what he said yesterday is the administration is willing to talk about other things.

MS NAUERT: Look, I can tell you our policy has not changed. If you mention talking about other things, we do happen to have some Americans who are still being held in North Korea. That would be an area – that would be a fertile ground to have conversations about. I'm not aware of any conversations taking place, but that would be an example of some kind of conversation that could take place right now.

QUESTION: So is he willing to get in the room and talk about the size of the table, as he said yesterday?

MS NAUERT: Look, I think our position is clear that – that he is not – by "he" I mean Kim Jong-un – is not showing any level of seriousness about sitting down and having conversations right now.

QUESTION: Okay, and just one more follow-up. Joe Yun is going to – he's in Asia now. He will be in Thailand. Is he meeting with North Korean officials in Chiang Mai?

MS NAUERT: He is not. So a little bit about Ambassador Yun, and I know there's always a lot of interest in Ambassador Yun. He will be in Bangkok December 14th and 15th. Our special representative on North Korea policy – that is his official title – he'll meet with a variety of Thai Government officials. The Thai Government – and I know you ask about this a lot, Alicia – has been one of those governments that has pledged to be helpful on our maximum pressure campaign. That will be the topic of discussion between Ambassador Yun and Thai officials. They will continue to talk about the international threat posed by the DPRK. Ambassador Yun will not be meeting with the DPRK on that trip. Okay?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Anything else related to North Korea? Hi.

QUESTION: On North Korea?

QUESTION: (Inaudible) India?

QUESTION: I – not to belabor the point, but the Secretary said yesterday, "It's not realistic to say we're only going to talk if you come to the table ready to give up your program. They have too much invested in it. And the President is very realistic about that as well." So how is that not a change in policy when previously it was denuclearization of the peninsula?

MS NAUERT: Well, that still remains our policy goal: denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. That has not changed either. But the point is that we could only sit down and have talks when they're showing a seriousness about being ready to sit down and have talks. And when you're firing off ballistic missiles and you're doing advanced nuclear testing, no one is

showing that they're serious about talking. But the overall policy on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is something we continue to support.

QUESTION: But after –

MS NAUERT: Hi.

QUESTION: – a period of calm, you can sit down without asking that the goal of this first meeting is denuclearization – I mean –

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry, say that again?

QUESTION: You said – in August the Secretary said a condition of those talk is there is no future where North Korea holds nuclear weapons. Yesterday he said we can have a first meeting without speaking about denuclearization.

MS NAUERT: I think the Secretary is on the same page as the White House, so – okay. Yeah.

QUESTION: But isn't that a change – I mean, that's – regardless of the period of quiet, whether or not they're willing to denuclearize, would you be willing to meet with them if they're not?

MS NAUERT: If they're not willing to denuclearize? No. That remains our goal. Our overall goal is denuclearization. It's not something that –

QUESTION: But regardless of the overall goal. But for the first meeting.

MS NAUERT: – is just the United States that agrees with that; it's China, it's Russia, it's many other countries, it's the Korean Peninsula –

QUESTION: For the first meeting –

MS NAUERT: – that wants the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

QUESTION: – do they have to agree to denuclearization before you will hold that discussion?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to get ahead of the Secretary on any additional comments that he might make, but I just want to say that our policy, we are on the same page as the White House.

QUESTION: Do you see the – do you see the problem –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: So he'll turn down –

QUESTION: People – people intensely parse every – this is like –

MS NAUERT: I know, I know. And –

QUESTION: – one of those things, like Taiwan-China; like – and so when you have two things – you’re talking about two different things here. One is a precondition to actually sit down at the table, and then the second thing is a precondition for the – that talks that eventually happen. Okay? So what you’re saying is that there has to be a period of calm before you even sit down at the table, which is a – which is a precondition.

MS NAUERT: There would – there would – if you want to call it that, go right ahead –

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: – but I’m not going to call it that. That’s –

QUESTION: But then when –

MS NAUERT: I don’t think that that’s the case.

QUESTION: Okay. But then –

QUESTION: A caveat is a precondition, isn’t it?

QUESTION: But then – but then – but then –

MS NAUERT: Guys, I’m not going to – I’m not going to –

QUESTION: But then there is –

MS NAUERT: I’m not going to do the verbal gymnastics kind of thing.

QUESTION: But then there’s also –

MS NAUERT: You all asked to hear –

QUESTION: This whole briefing is about verbal gymnastics, Heather.

MS NAUERT: You’re not – you all asked to hear more and more from Secretary Tillerson. We gave a lot of him to the public yesterday.

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: You certainly heard from him at the town hall meeting. I know many of our – my colleagues were really happy to have heard from him at that. He was gracious enough to have spoken and accepted the invitation to the Atlantic Council where he spoke to that, and now you all are complaining about a couple of words.

QUESTION: Why did the Secretary –

MS NAUERT: Come on, guys.

QUESTION: We’re not complaining about it.

QUESTION: Why did the White House feel compelled, then, to come out like two hours later and issue a statement that appeared to contradict the Secretary?

MS NAUERT: I don't think that it did; I think it was just clarifying what our policy positions were. I know we were getting a lot of questions from –

QUESTION: Heather, on North –

MS NAUERT: I know we were getting a lot of questions from all of you, so we just wanted to make sure that everybody knew our position on that. Okay?

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Heather –

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to have a lot more for you on this.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: One more.

MS NAUERT: If you want to spend all our time on this, we can certainly spend all our time on this –

QUESTION: Heather, on North –

MS NAUERT: – but there are other things going on in the world. Yeah. Hi.

QUESTION: Heather, one more.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) period of calm –

MS NAUERT: Yeah?

QUESTION: – how long is a –

MS NAUERT: And that's something we will never say. We will never put a period of time on that, whether it's weeks, months, I don't – I just don't know. We just won't put a timeframe on that. Okay?

QUESTION: Heather, on North Korean Government –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – respond on the Secretary Tillerson's yesterday comment about North Korea without any preconditions, but they – North Korea has a condition – preconditions for dialogue with the United States that – will the United States recognize North Korea as a nuclear state?

MS NAUERT: No. No.

QUESTION: No?

MS NAUERT: We will not recognize North Korea as a nuclear state.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: Yes.

QUESTION: Heather, just one on under secretary – sorry, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Feltman, has he been in contact with the Secretary since his return from North Korea?

MS NAUERT: The – and that – he's from the UN?

QUESTION: The UN.

MS NAUERT: Not to my awareness. I just don't have anything for you on that.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: And are they planning to meet?

MS NAUERT: And I don't know what his travel schedule or even when he would be back. I'd just –

QUESTION: So –

MS NAUERT: I'd have to refer you to the UN on that.

QUESTION: North Korea and the United States –

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: So 60 days has passed since President –

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry, say that again?

QUESTION: Sixty days has passed since President Trump just decertified the Iran's compliance to the JCPOA –

QUESTION: Oh, wait, wait.

MS NAUERT: Oh, wait. Okay. Okay.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Yeah.

QUESTION: I just had one more on Secretary's –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: What did the Secretary mean specifically when he said that the Chinese were looking at or preparing to secure – or either accept an inflow of refugees or secure North Korean nuclear – secure North Korean nukes in the event that something happened?

MS NAUERT: I think one of the things that the Secretary was referring to is taking steps to prepare – that China would be, and I'd have to refer you to the Chinese Government for more on this –

QUESTION: That is a real –

MS NAUERT: I know, I know. But I can't speak on behalf of the –

QUESTION: That's a really helpful referral.

S NAUERT: I can't speak on behalf of the Chinese Government, so that is why I say that, Matt. But I think the Secretary's point was that they are taking some steps to prepare for various eventualities. He went on to say he thinks it's something they can manage when he was talking about potential refugees if refugees were crossing the border. He said, "I don't think the threat is as significant perhaps as others view it. I don't want to be dismissive of it, but it's not an unmanageable situation. And they're already taking preparatory actions for such an event."

As you all well know, various governments prepare for many eventualities, things that may sound very extreme, things that may never come to fruition, but it's a government's responsibility to try to plan for those types of things.

QUESTION: Okay. And then the other thing he alluded to was that if the United States was to go in to North Korea for any reason, it would – he had assured the Chinese that they would – whatever forces would – that went in would return south of the 38th parallel, south of the DMZ.

MS NAUERT: Right.

QUESTION: Under what circumstances is he talking about –

MS NAUERT: Well, I think part of that is a hypothetical situation, but he did address it so I'm happy to entertain this with you. One of the things that the Secretary has identified are his four nos, four nos with North Korea: We are not seeking the collapse of the North Korean regime; we are not seeking regime change; we are not seeking the accelerated reunification of the Korean Peninsula; and we are not seeking an excuse to send our military north of the 38th parallel.

In the Secretary's comments – so those are the four nos. In the Secretary's comments yesterday he spoke about conversations that he has had with the Chinese. He said, quote, "We have had conversations that, if something happened and we had to go across that line" – meaning the 38th parallel – "we have given the Chinese assurances that we would go back and retreat back to south of the 38th parallel when whatever the

conditions that caused that to happen. That is our commitment we made to them.”

I think he’s just talking about reality. Yesterday he used the word – pardon me – “if something happened and we had to, we would go back and retreat back.” So I think he is just planning for various potential situations.

QUESTION: Okay. And forgive me – forgive me, the four nos, is this a formulation that you’ve just come up with now? The term for it, it’s very, very Chinese in –

MS NAUERT: Is that – no. In fact, this is something the Secretary has talked about quite a lot.

QUESTION: He – yeah, and phrased it like that, the four nos?

MS NAUERT: The four nos. The four nos. Yeah.

QUESTION: Because that’s the first I’ve heard of it. Have you heard of it?

MS NAUERT: That’s the first you’ve heard of it?

QUESTION: Oh, he has. Sorry, never mind.

MS NAUERT: You’ve heard it before though, Nick.

QUESTION: Never mind then. Sorry.

MS NAUERT: Okay, Matt, get on the airplane and come along.

QUESTION: Sorry, sorry. My fault.

MS NAUERT: Okay, shall we move on? Okay, okay.

QUESTION: Just one more on –

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: The Secretary is a very deliberate person who chooses his words very carefully. Was he intending to send a signal yesterday, or was it just an off-the-cuff remark?

MS NAUERT: I think the Secretary was talking for a long time, sharing information, entertaining hypotheticals, and talking about different situations. But our policy overall has not changed and the Secretary remains firm on that. Okay? Let’s move on.

QUESTION: Can I ask you one more question about his comments specifically?

MS NAUERT: Okay, last one, and then we’ll move on.

QUESTION: Okay. He was referencing if North Korea did build up a nuclear arsenal that they were able to use, he – his understanding is it wouldn't just be used for deterrence, that it would also be used for commercial purposes.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: And that there have been elements that they've seen of that. Was he referencing elements that North Korea is already trying to sell what they have, or something else?

MS NAUERT: I think one of the things that he has made clear with our colleagues here in the past is that we believe that if North Korea has this technology that they would only be so happy to share it with other rogue regimes and they would make money off of that. We see that as a very dangerous thing.

In terms of what has or maybe hasn't been sold, I just can't comment on that, I'm afraid. I know the Secretary alluded to it, but I'm not in the position to be able to dig down deeper into that. Okay?

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Let's move on from North Korea. What do we want to talk about next?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay, go ahead.

QUESTION: One more North Korea.

QUESTION: I just wanted to follow up on –

MS NAUERT: We already covered Jerusalem.

QUESTION: I know, but I – but you moved on to North Korea too quickly.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Nope, we're – I've got nothing more. I've got nothing more on Israel. I have nothing more on North Korea. So let's move in. We've got a big world out there. Does anyone want to ask me about the reporters who were arrested in Burma? Anybody from Reuters here?

QUESTION: I have left over one more.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay, let's ask about that.

QUESTION: Do you have any response to the arrests?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I mean, a couple things. One – and this is important –

QUESTION: Nicely planting your own questions.

MS NAUERT: No, it's not.

QUESTION: (Laughter.) I'm just –

MS NAUERT: But you know what? I know in a room full of reporters, that you all care about the detention of reporters.

QUESTION: Indeed. It is true.

MS NAUERT: I don't see any of our – your colleagues here from Reuters today, so –

QUESTION: He's right there.

MS NAUERT: You're – why are you not asking me about your colleagues?

QUESTION: He probably would have.

QUESTION: I know that you issued a statement from the embassy. Do you have anything more to say?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I can tell you it's a situation we're watching very carefully. Any time reporters who are trying to do their jobs to try to bring information to the people are detained is an area of concern for us. I can tell you our ambassador, Ambassador Marciel, had a conversation with the Government of Myanmar yesterday. He asked them about this. He spoke with two government officials about this. He said that they seemed genuinely unaware of the situation. We are following this closely. I want you and your colleagues to know that not only is the safety and the security of Americans, although I don't believe your colleagues were Americans, but we care about the safety and security of international reporters who are simply just trying to do their jobs.

So we're going to continue to try to stay on that. If I have anything more from our post overseas – it's in the middle of the night over there – I'll certainly get back with you on that.

Okay. Yeah, thanks. Let's talk about something else. What –

QUESTION: Yes. On Iran.

MS NAUERT: You wanted to talk about Iran. Okay.

QUESTION: So 60 days has passed since President Trump just decertified Iran's compliance with the JCPOA. And yesterday the White House just said that there was actually no deadline to act by the Congress by this week. So my question is that: Is there any kind of deadline for the Congress to act or for the Trump – for the administration to do something about it? Or we'll just wait until the mid-January for President Trump to decide that – on whether he will waiver or not the sanctions?

MS NAUERT: I believe the next deadline comes up in January, so I don't

think that we would do anything prior to the deadline.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Hi.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. This week was the migration talks between the United States and Cuba.

MS NAUERT: It's the what?

QUESTION: The migration talks took place here in the department between the United States and Cuba. The Cuban Government is now saying that because Washington requires a third country where people should go to to get the visas, it's – this is disrupting family connections and family unity. Your comments, please?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. We've talked about this before. While I'm sympathetic to family reunification and the fact that people want to visit their family members, I'm also sympathetic to the fact that our diplomats were targeted in Cuba and that people have faced some serious health consequences. Some are still receiving medical treatment. That situation has – is still unresolved. We have an investigation that is still underway. We were forced to have to draw down the size of our embassy, the size of our embassy personnel. The mere fact that we had to reduce the size of our embassy personnel means sorry, not every Cuban is going to be able to get their visa handled in Cuba; you're not going to have all the conveniences that perhaps you did in the past when we're forced to draw down the size of the embassy.

That's just a reality. There are other posts where people can go out of country to try to get the documentation that they need, and they're just going to have to do that for now. Okay? All right.

QUESTION: Same region?

MS NAUERT: Okay, hi.

QUESTION: Honduras, please.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Thank you. You guys haven't really said much since the certification, and 14 people have been killed, and the violence continues, the elections results still not calculated. But your charge has been appearing in public with the government's side and seems to have, in the eyes of many, taken the government's side. Do you have anything to say about that? And you're willing to criticize Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela, but not Juan Orlando Hernandez, who's been a good ally of the White House.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I –

QUESTION: There's a lot of question about why you've not been more vocal about what's going on in Honduras.

MS NAUERT: I can tell you – well, first let me say I'm not aware of our charge's schedule. So I don't know and I can't confirm if he had the –

QUESTION: She.

MS NAUERT: – she, pardon me; thank you – if she had the meetings or showed up at certain places that you mention. It's obviously a post-election situation there. We know that monitors have covered it. The election observers are still evaluating that situation. So I think until we know more about the results of all that, we're just going to refrain from commenting on it.

QUESTION: Not about the violence or anything?

MS NAUERT: Well, any time that there is violence from any side, we would always encourage people to not act violently. We would call for peaceful demonstrations, if people were to demonstrate; that is an area that is a huge concern of ours. But in terms of commenting on the elections and the results, we're just going to hold off until we can get that better figured out. Okay?

Hi, sir.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Voice of America, Turkish service.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: During Zarrab's trial in New York, this Iranian-Turkish gold trader case that's still going on, a former Turkish police officer who was sitting in the witness chairs, he said that FBI gave him \$50,000 and also FBI is still paying his apartment lease in U.S., and he is – he got his working permit in return of his cooperation with the FBI. And after that news, the Turkish media reports that the FBI officer in Istanbul was invited to Turkish police headquarters to answering the questions about these allegations. So do you have any comment on this?

MS NAUERT: On the case and the details that you out – that you laid out, I would just have to refer you to the Department of Justice on that. We are not involved in the case. The Department of Justice is handling that.

In terms of one of our colleagues, it's actually in – pardon me. Give me a second here. (Coughs.) By the way, I learned something new about all you the other day.

QUESTION: What, we're (inaudible)?

MS NAUERT: Bluegrass music. (Laughter.) Pardon me. We have an FBI attache to our embassy there who was brought into the Turkish ministry. I don't have any additional information for you on that, but I can

confirm that that in fact did take place.

Okay. Okay. Anything else? Hey, Abbie.

QUESTION: Hey. Do you have any information or comment on a report out that the OIG has opened an inquiry into the State Department's handling of some cases in Mexico regarding tainted alcohol and other incidents associated with the tainted alcohol in Mexico?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of that. I know that the tainted alcohol issue, especially from our Western Hemisphere Bureau, is something that we followed closely. Over the summer, maybe it was spring break time, we put out a travel warning, a travel alert, a travel notice – which was it? I'm trying to remember. But it was an area-specific piece of information that we provided to alert Americans the fact that this was happening. I know at the time that we were not able to definitively say that it was from alcohol, from tainted alcohol, but I know that that was something that the Mexican Government was looking into. It certainly seemed that those were very credible reports. That concerned us and so just out of an abundance of caution and awareness that many Americans travel to Mexico, in particular that region, we put out that warning. But I don't have anything on the – on a potential OIG report. If I do, I will certainly let you know.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Hi, sir.

QUESTION: Iraq. Yesterday, Secretary Tillerson, he said that they stand with the Kurds and they support the full implementation of the Iraqi constitution, which he said hasn't been fully implemented yet. Can you talk about some of the ways that you are willing to take in order to support both Baghdad and Erbil and make sure the Iraqi constitution is fully implemented?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think that's ultimately up to the Iraqi people. What we can do here from our perch, if you will, is try to encourage that. The Iraqis passed that constitution. It's the constitution of the country. We would certainly expect and would hope that when a country formulates a new constitution, that they adhere to it.

In terms of dialogue, we have a lot of conversations with the Iraqi Government, also with the Kurds as well, good relationships with both. One of the top Iraqi officials was just here at the State Department meeting with our deputy secretary just last week. And so those conversations continue. We continue to encourage Erbil and Baghdad to sit down and have a better dialogue. They've had military-to-military talks, but in terms of government-to-government, face-to-face talks, we hope that that'll happen soon.

Okay, sir.

QUESTION: Okay. Do you have anything on the incident in Yemen where 30

people were killed in a Saudi-led strike? And I wanted to, if I may, go back to what the Secretary said in Paris last week.

MS NAUERT: Let me take your first question first –

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: – because everybody here knows if we –

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: – stick too many together, I get lost. In terms of the airstrikes that you had mentioned, we've certainly seen those reports. We're – it's something that we're following closely about Saudi – alleged Saudi airstrike on a Houthi police base. We continue to take all credible accounts of civilian casualties very seriously. We call upon the parties to take appropriate measures to diminish the risk of civilian casualties. That's something that's important to us. We talk about it a lot here. We urge the parties to investigate reported violations.

Let me go back to say that an enduring solution to the crisis in Yemen is not one, in the end, that is military-based; it's one that's politically based. We continue to support the work of the U.S. – UN special envoy to Yemen. Certainly a tough job, especially given the very grave humanitarian situation that is taking place there.

Ambassador Mark Green, our USAID administrator, spoke a little bit about that humanitarian situation. Yesterday we were happy to announce on behalf of USAID a new pool of money going into the humanitarian situation in Yemen. We announced \$130 million in emergency food assistance to Yemen through USAID, and that brings the amount in fiscal year 20 – since 2016 to 768 million.

And now to your point about – your question about the Secretary.

QUESTION: Yeah. I mean, how much of a sore point has Yemen become in relations with – between Washington and Riyadh?

MS NAUERT: Look, I know it's a topic of conversation. The Secretary addressed this last week in Paris, saying that he hoped that the government could moderate some of its moves. I don't have the exact comments right in front of me. But I think that that's certainly something that we would call for. We want to get the humanitarian aid in, and we've seen that that's been difficult to get the humanitarian aid in. You saw a statement on the part of the White House. It's something we're just tracking carefully. Okay.

QUESTION: And as you know, the – what the Secretary said in Paris regarding the Saudi positions on Yemen, the blockade of Qatar, and Lebanon, they're being interpreted by a lot of people in the Middle East as basically reflective of much more profound differences between Washington and Riyadh. What's your reading of that?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think we have a close relationship with the Government of Saudi Arabia, but there are also instances, whether – many countries around the world, where we may have disagreements, where we may have areas where we encourage them to do more or less on any given issue. And I think this would just be another example of that.

Okay, we've got to wrap it up. Robbie, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Just one last question on the Vacancies Act. There's this Vacancies Act that has a 300-day statutory threshold for acting officials, and after that threshold ends it opens the administration to lawsuits, I think saying that acting officials don't have authority to carry out and make new policy. So I'm wondering if this is on the State Department's radar given how many acting officials are in place now and if there's any reaction to it.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I can confirm that the Vacancies Act has affected some of our colleagues here. I believe – and I'd have to double-check this for you, but I believe their duties can largely remain the same and that it is simply a title shift for now. But let me try to get some more information for you on that and we'll get back to you.

Okay, we've got to go, guys. Sorry.

QUESTION: Hold on.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: You're going to have to take one of these, I think. But do you have anything on the Secretary's meetings on the Hill earlier today?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So I know the Secretary went before the House Foreign Affairs, Ed Royce's – Congressman Ed Royce's committee. He was up there briefing the committee for about two hours on the redesign. That was the topic. I don't know what time it started, but it went for about two hours.

QUESTION: And then there was a second one too?

MS NAUERT: I'm not – I'm only aware of one that took place –

QUESTION: With appropriations.

QUESTION: With appropriators.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: Any – the same thing? Budget? Reorg?

MS NAUERT: I believe so. I believe it's all about the redesign. Yeah.

QUESTION: All right. And then – okay. So on that, yesterday you – the Secretary and then you clarified that the EFM – the hiring freeze on EFM's

has been lifted.

MS NAUERT: Correct.

QUESTION: My question is: Is there any change to the kind of jobs that the EF – that EFMs can get? In other words, can they – are they now being allowed to take positions that there were Foreign Service officers already in line to get?

MS NAUERT: I have not heard that. Is that something that you've heard?

QUESTION: It's something that is a concern of some people.

MS NAUERT: That's a concern. Okay, I've not heard that taking place. I can certainly try to look into it and see if that is the case.

QUESTION: Okay, thanks.

QUESTION: Any update on Josh Holt?

QUESTION: Because there used to be just specific –

MS NAUERT: Hold on, hold on, hold on.

QUESTION: There used to be just specific categories of jobs that these people were directed to, like in terms of visas and in some consulates and stuff like that. I mean, not only, but yeah, if you can check if their job criteria has expanded.

MS NAUERT: Okay, I will certainly.

QUESTION: Any update on Josh Holt –

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: – who was ordered to stand trial yesterday in Venezuela? That was before I had asked you if any American had access to him during those proceedings or what the updated position is.

MS NAUERT: Pardon me. Yeah. So Josh Holt, an American citizen from Utah originally, has been in – held, has been detained in Venezuela for about 18 months now. He was not – we want him to be released on humanitarian grounds. Yesterday he was charged with weapons charges. That is the first time in his 18 months of detention that he has been charged with anything.

We are disappointed that Josh Holt has not been released on humanitarian grounds, as we have asked the Venezuelan Government. After his hearing that was held yesterday, we continue to have grave concerns about his health situation and lack of access to what we see as sufficient medical care. He's been detained in Venezuela for nearly 18 months without a trial. Only now has he been charged.

We are following the case very closely. Our consular officers from our

U.S. Embassy in Caracas were last able to visit Mr. Holt on November the 7th. I expect that there will be more conversations and more details coming out about this. Thanks.

Thanks, everybody.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:45 p.m.)

DPB # 71

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