

# Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – December 19, 2017

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TRANSCRIPT:

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3:25 p.m. EST

**MS NAUERT:** Hi, everybody.

**QUESTION:** Hello.

**MS NAUERT:** How are you?

**QUESTION:** Good.

**MS NAUERT:** Hi. How have you been?

**QUESTION:** I've been good.

**MS NAUERT:** It's been a while. Nice to have you back. Okay. I'd like to start with mentioning the Secretary's trip to Ottawa, Canada today. As you know, Secretary Tillerson is in Ottawa making his first trip to Canada as the Secretary of State. Secretary Tillerson is joined on this first trip by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Paco Palmieri. Many of you know him. And they were welcomed by Ambassador Kelly Craft.

While in Ottawa, the Secretary is meeting with Foreign Minister Freeland and several other senior Canadian officials as part of our ongoing and close relationship between our two countries. During the meetings, they discussed a range of issues, including mutual prosperity, defense and security, and our shared concerns on global issues, including North Korea and the ongoing situation in Ukraine.

On North Korea, the Secretary and foreign minister talked through upcoming plans to convene the United Nations Commanding Sending States<sup>[1]</sup> meeting in January. We still don't have the specifics nailed down, so I won't have anything additional for you on that. But as soon as I do, I will certainly bring it to you. That group will include South Korea, Japan, and other key affected countries to discuss how the global community can address North Korea's threat to international peace.

Lastly, they spoke about the importance of border security and our mutual economic relationship.

In addition to that, I want to draw your attention to something that we addressed last week, but unfortunately, the situation has not improved in Ukraine. I want to draw your attention to the dire humanitarian situation and the spiraling violence in eastern Ukraine. Last night, Russian-led forces shelled the town of Novoluhanske with Grad rockets, wounding eight civilians and damaging dozens of homes, a school, and also a playground. Fighting also resumed today around the Donetsk filtration station and its system of pipes carrying poisonous chlorine gas. This is considered extremely dangerous. If those were to go off in this area, which is close to where people live, it could be potentially devastating.

Employees of the filtration station are trapped in the station's bomb shelter at this time, we are told. Previously, a Russian-Ukrainian military body has organized ceasefires to allow civilians in similar situations safe passage. However, the Russian Government has unilaterally withdrawn from this deconfliction mechanism. This happened yesterday. So those trapped in the filtration station will remain stranded, under fire, until Russian-led forces stop the attack.

Russia and its proxies are the source of violence in eastern Ukraine, and the Russian Government continues to perpetuate an active conflict and humanitarian crisis through its leadership and supply of military forces on the ground, as well as its direct control over proxy authorities. The conflict in eastern Ukraine is not an organic civil war. The so-called "republics" that Russia created are not legitimate entities.

The United States calls on Russia to put an end to the attacks in eastern Ukraine, withdraw its forces and heavy weapons from the sovereign territory of Ukraine, and agree to a robust UN peacekeeping mission. And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

Oh, one more thing. I'd like to – many of you joined us yesterday for our public affairs holiday party, and I just wanted to thank you so much for coming up and spending time with our front office and the front office of many of our bureaus here at the State Department. We love having you. And I think it's just another example of how we can certainly disagree over some things, but we can hang out and have a good couple of drinks together. So thanks for showing up.

**QUESTION:** Will there be one for the New Year or –

**MS NAUERT:** Well, that's a good idea. (Laughter.) That's a good idea. And we've got a little surprise for you coming up in Robert's office in the new year. So – especially on a tough day.

But, Josh, go ahead. Good to see you.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Heather. You too.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Why don't we just start right on there. Is the – do you have any update for us on the status of trying to work out a UN peacekeeping deal for Ukraine? How's that going?

**MS NAUERT:** That's something that's still under discussion. One of the things that we consider to be important about that is having it be a not only a real UN peacekeeping mission, but the line of conflict is something that would have to be agreed upon. We have some concerns about how that would work out. Russians are pushing for one side of things, and we're pushing for another side of things. But it's still something that we are looking at seriously.

**QUESTION:** And then I wanted to follow up on the National Security Strategy that the administration released yesterday. One piece of that brought up the issue of STEM visas that are issues in the context of intellectual property and the allegation that other countries are sending students here who then steal trade secrets basically and bring them back to their foreign governments. And it says that the U.S. will consider restricting those STEM visas from designated countries. What are those designated countries?

**MS NAUERT:** So the National Security Strategy which the President rolled out yesterday is a broad-based document that looks at and highlights our national security priorities. It's not meant to be a piece of legislation; it's not intended to provide extremely specific guidance to various government agencies, entities, and departments. So some of this we will take back from the National Security Strategy, take a look at the State Department in conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security. We have the ability to take a look at these things and decide what needs to be done from there.

So we don't have anything specific for that yet. I can tell you, however, that our U.S. embassies and consulates are continuing to process visa applications as we normally would. So there has been no change at any point yet. No changes have been made. Security screening and vetting is something that you all know well that is constantly reevaluated; it's constantly evolving and changing within various environments.

So if I have anything new for you on that, I'll certainly bring that to you.

**QUESTION:** Sure. New visa steps aside then, can you tell us which countries are considered at a larger risk for that kind of problem?

**MS NAUERT:** To my knowledge, that has not been determined in any kind of way. Perhaps I missed something. But in that document, I don't recall having seen any specific countries mentioned. So I think some of that

will just – the U.S. Government will take a look at that.

**QUESTION:** And then on that issue – and one of the countries that comes to mind for a lot of people because of its focus in the NSS was China – China’s Government reacting pretty angrily to that strategy today, saying it’s part of a new Cold War kind of phenomenon. Do you have any response to the Chinese reaction?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. I think what we would say is no, it’s not that. It’s not what they called it out to be. We have a broad relationship with China, as we do with many nations around the world, where we have areas where we have mutual cooperation and get along great. As you know, the President has a very warm relationship with President Xi. But we also have areas of disagreement, and some of the areas of disagreement include human rights, some trade issues, and all that. So we can have that kind of broad-based relationship like yesterday. We all hung out and we had a good time together and celebrated the holidays, but sometimes we duke it out here as well.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Heather.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

Hi, Said.

**QUESTION:** Can I move on?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Does – first of all, does anyone else want to cover DPRK or China?

**QUESTION:** China.

**MS NAUERT:** Oh, a lot of you do. Okay.

**QUESTION:** I’d like to ask about DPRK.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, go right ahead. Hi, Carol.

**QUESTION:** McMaster today gave an interview in which he said now is not the time for talking, and he seemed to suggest that the United States may have to forcibly denuclearize the Korean Peninsula if North Korea does not denuclearize itself. It seemed to be an implicit rejection of the diplomacy that the Secretary has been doing.

**MS NAUERT:** I heard –

**QUESTION:** I was wondering what the State Department –

**MS NAUERT:** I heard General McMaster – I heard General McMaster’s interview this morning. I don’t recall him saying how you just characterized it. I know our official administration policy, our

administration policy, is we would certainly like to sit down, be in the place where we can have talks with North Korea, but we are nowhere near that point yet. Our administration policy has not changed. We continue to push for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. There are many, many other nations around the world that agree with us on that front. We would like to have the opportunity to talk with North Korea when the time is right, and I want to be clear about that; the time is not right, right now.

**QUESTION:** Just on China.

**MS NAUERT:** Hi. How are you?

**QUESTION:** Good. South Korean President Moon said –

**MS NAUERT:** Can we come back to South Korea, stick with North Korea?

**QUESTION:** This is also North Korea.

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

**QUESTION:** Sorry. They said that the U.S. and ROK are considering postponing military exercises until after the Winter Olympics. So – and obviously, part of this reason would be North Korea. So my question is: How seriously is the U.S. considering this proposal?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, I think that would be a DOD issue, but I can tell you that we have joint exercises that are legal. We do them around the world. We do them with many other countries. And those are to maintain our readiness and to be able to make sure that we are ready in the event of a worst-case scenario. But that's something that would just be handled by DOD.

Okay. Anything else on ROK?

**QUESTION:** Heather?

**MS NAUERT:** Korea?

**QUESTION:** Korea-China.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, hold on. Hi, Conor.

**QUESTION:** Just something that a White House official said. Tom Bossert, the Homeland Security Advisor, said that "President Trump has used just about every lever you could use, short of starving the people of North Korea to death, to change their behavior. So we don't have a lot of room left to apply pressure to change their behavior." If that is the case, how much more room do you have then, and how can you achieve results with this peaceful pressure campaign, especially again, as you say, now is not the right time to meet, but H.R. McMaster also said recently that we're running out of time.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. So look, diplomacy is what we do in this building and that's not going to change. We will continue to push ahead with the peaceful pressure campaign, the maximum pressure campaign. Every day we're speaking with other countries about having those countries do more to try to stem the tide of money going into North Korea. So that hasn't changed. We're pushing ahead. We had some good news come out of Thailand. They're doing less in conjunction with North Korea than they had in the past. I'd have to look at the specific details.

But my point is there are a lot of countries doing a lot to contribute to this. Last week at the United Nations, Secretary Tillerson called on countries to go beyond the scope of the UN Security Council resolutions and agreements to do their part to choke off that money supply to North Korea. So regardless of what others in the U.S. Government say, we're pushing ahead with peaceful diplomacy, maximum pressure.

**QUESTION:** So you think there is more – you would disagree? You think there is more room?

**MS NAUERT:** I think there is more that we can do, yeah. And that's just like we call on Russia and China every single day to do more, to do more to put pressure on North Korea.

Anything else on North Korea?

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

**MS NAUERT:** Hi. Yeah, sure.

**QUESTION:** So Bossert was talking specifically about the cyber attack.

**MS NAUERT:** Oh, he was. Okay.

**QUESTION:** And so –

**MS NAUERT:** I did not see his comments. I read a couple of them.

**QUESTION:** No, that's fine. I just – I'm just trying to – so the pressure campaign, is that just targeting North Korea for its nuclear program and its missile activity, or is it also trying to tamp down on them for what they're doing in the cyber sphere as well?

**MS NAUERT:** If it is with regard to cyber, I'm not familiar with that. One of the things we focus on here in that building – and cyber, I think, would be handled out of DHS or Department of Justice, perhaps even DOD – but we focus here on the money that goes into North Korea that North Korea then ends up using to fund its illegal nuclear and ballistic missile programs, so that's what we stay focused on.

**QUESTION:** So the State Department won't be involved in any unilateral consequence –

**MS NAUERT:** What I said is I'm just not familiar with that part of it.

I'd just have to refer you to DHS at this point. If we have anything more, an angle that the State Department is specifically involved with, I'll certainly let you know. Okay?

**QUESTION:** Heather?

**MS NAUERT:** DPRK.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. And on that –

**QUESTION:** China.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Janne, hi.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Heather. As you already know that five Chinese combat airplanes flew over in the South Korea's Air Defense Identification Zones. How do you comment on this?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry. Tell me –

**QUESTION:** Five Chinese combat airplanes flew over in South Korean Air Defense Identification Zone, so how do you comment on this?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry, I just don't have anything for you on that. I'd refer you back to South Korea or to the Government of China.

**QUESTION:** Do you think this action is, like, threatening South Korea and China?

**MS NAUERT:** I just – I don't have any specifics on that for you, so I don't want to comment on that, because I just don't have any specifics for you, okay?

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Hey, how are you? Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Can we stay on DPRK, please, for just a second longer.

**MS NAUERT:** Wait, Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** North Korea. North Korea.

**MS NAUERT:** Oh, North Korea. Okay. Sure.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Secretary Tillerson pretty much signaled a willingness to have talks with North Korea recently, saying as much as, hey, you want to talk about weather, let's talk about weather. I wanted to ask if you reached out to the North Koreans directly via diplomatic channels either in New York or someplace else to suggest having talks, other than making those public announcements.

**MS NAUERT:** First, let me tell you our U.S. Government policy has not changed. We are not going to be sitting down for talks with North Korea



at this time. They are showing no interest, they're showing no willingness to sit down and have conversations with the U.S. Government.

In terms of your question about whether or not any U.S. Government official or representative sat down and had a talk with North Korea while at the United Nations, the answer is absolutely no. The Secretary did address publicly the North Korean permanent representative, and he said to him, among other things, any notion that the source of tensions on the peninsula are the fault of one party – because some have blamed the United States for the deplorable conditions in North Korea – there is one party that has carried out illegal detonation of nuclear devices; there is only one party that continues to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, overflying other sovereign nations – Japan – threatening civil aviation security because these launches are undertaken with no notification.

So the Secretary addressed him publicly, but the U.S. Government has had no other conversations.

Okay. Shall we move on to another issue?

**QUESTION:** One more about China, please.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. All right.

**QUESTION:** So just calling China and Russia the rival powers in the –

**MS NAUERT:** Start your question again, I'm sorry.

**QUESTION:** I mean, my question is that just calling China and Russia the rival powers in the national strategy reports. So does it signal any policy change from the U.S. Government towards the countries?

**MS NAUERT:** About the national security strategy?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MS NAUERT:** I think I would just go back to the President and his team and our folks at the National Security Council outlined four pillars, four pillars of our national security strategy. And among those are just what we've talked about already – taking a look at other nations and determining other nations and where we have areas of agreement, and where we have areas of disagreement, and how we will – it may seem messy to some people, but we'll work together with some countries in areas where we have agreement, and we will continue to call out countries and – in areas where we have disagreement. So I think I've stated that already, and the President's comments were clear.

Okay? Let's move on. Hi, Said.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Thank you. I want to ask you about the American-Palestinian relations. First of all, at the vote yesterday at the Security Council, 1421, and Ambassador Haley said that this is to help

the process of peace. Could you explain to us, what is – how could that possibly – your vote, your no-vote, your veto, could help the cause of peace?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I don't want to speak on behalf of Ambassador Haley. She has a very capable team up there who handle that for her. But I can say this: We exercised our veto power because we view that that resolution would do more harm than good. The United States wants to not add to any additional strife. We feel that that resolution vote causes additional strife in the area. The President has long called for the two sides to sit down and have peace talks. They're not there yet; we continue to work on those peace talks, however.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but this is a position that the United States has long held. I mean, we can go back all the way to the late '40s, but most recently – more recently in the '80s, Resolution 478; last year, 2334, which basically was saying that Jerusalem is occupied territory, and we consider whatever Israel has done is null and void. Why would this suddenly be contrary to the American position?

**MS NAUERT:** I think what we would say is that the President took great care in his decision that he made about recognizing Jerusalem as the capital. We are not making any decisions about boundaries or borders; we see that as being up to final status negotiations, and they're not there yet.

**QUESTION:** And I have one more about today, because today in the General Assembly, there was a vote on the right to self-determination. And 176 countries voted for the right of Palestinians for self-determination. You and Israel and the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau voted against. I mean, the right to self-determination is basically an American concept. It is an American principle. It was – it has been put forth by – pioneered and put forth by the United States. Why would you oppose the right to self-determination of the Palestinians?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, I think we would support – in terms of that, the United States is supporting something that both sides have to be able to live with and be able to agree with, the Israelis and the Palestinians. So when we get to the final status negotiations – when I say “we” I just mean the Israelis and the Palestinians, and we're happy to help support and facilitate those talks, and we have people hard at work at that, but they have to decide; they have to come up with something that's going to work for both sides.

**QUESTION:** And I promise, my final question – sorry, Michele – my final question.

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

**MS NAUERT:** She shares.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** You can ask all my questions. (Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask you if there is any ongoing talks or contacts with the Palestinian leadership at the present time.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. I could just tell you that we look forward to having additional talks with the Palestinians. We were at a hopeful point with Mr. Abbas at the United Nations earlier this year. We had positive conversations about the peace process. Relationships between the United States and other nations have their peaks and their valleys. Some days are better than others, but we look forward to continuing those talks and we're confident that we'll be able to do that.

Okay. Laurie, you want to talk Iraq?

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry, Michele, did you have a question about this?

**QUESTION:** It's okay. Yeah, quickly.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Sorry.

**QUESTION:** So we heard –

**MS NAUERT:** She's been so patient.

**QUESTION:** It's okay, I don't care. We heard Ambassador Haley say that this resolution was an insult that won't be forgotten. How does the State Department view that statement? Do you agree with that? And it kind of sounds like a threat of some kind.

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have Ambassador Haley's comments directly in front of me, so I don't want to – I don't want to speak on her behalf. I know that one of the things we've been extremely focused on today is the Secretary's travels up to Canada to handle issues related to North Korea. We have a whole world in front of us. That's just not something I have anything for you on.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And so when you say that the resolution itself does more harm than good and causes more strife, well, those parties feel like the U.S. declaration does the same thing. So if the U.S. is going to make a statement like that that many feel, including the U.S.'s closest allies, causes more harm than good at this time, why would the U.S. have such a problem with a resolution –

**MS NAUERT:** Well –

**QUESTION:** – a resolution that simply expresses the opposite opinion?

**MS NAUERT:** They're certainly – other nations are certainly welcome to support resolutions, just as they did, and that's sort of – they have the right – the right to their free speech; they have the right to make

the votes and choose the votes that they decide to put forward and vote for; and we have the right to vote the way that we choose, and we made that decision.

**QUESTION:** But calling it an – for the U.S. side to call it an insult that won't be forgotten, it kind of seems like the U.S. has something in mind or some kind of retaliation for that.

**MS NAUERT:** That – I don't have anything for you on that.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** I would just have to refer you to USUN.

**QUESTION:** Okay, thanks.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay? Laurie, go right ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. The Dutch prime minister recently called on Baghdad to end its ban on flights to and from Kurdish airports, saying that it was getting in the way of Dutch military operations. Do you agree with that position? Do you think the ban should end, whether for military or humanitarian reasons?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. I was looking into this and talking to some of our experts who cover Iraq about this very issue earlier today, and I think this goes back to something that, for a couple months now, we've been calling for Iraq and Erbil to sit down and have talks. And I feel like we say this about a lot of nations, but it's really a perfect example in Iraq. That is a situation where they need to work it out themselves. I understand under the Iraqi constitution that the central Government of Iraq has sort of management over the airports throughout the country. That's my understanding of the Iraqi constitution – not only the airports but also the borders. But for that very reason, it's even more important for Erbil and Baghdad to sit down and have talks about the status of its airports.

**QUESTION:** And you've been saying that for so long and that – I've got a different understanding of the airports, but anyhow.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** I've been – I think it's joint operations, but whatever. You've been saying that for so long. The Iraqis do nothing. In fact, they increase the punitive measures on Kurdistan and show no regard whatever – whatsoever for your calls for dialogue. Don't you think it's time to publicly pressure Iraq? For example, the German foreign minister, when the prime minister of the Kurdistan region just visited there, said, "We're going to make our aid to both of you, Baghdad and Erbil, contingent on a dialogue." Are you inclined to up your pressure because, so far, nothing has happened?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, we have spoken about this a lot here. I think you've

asked me about it at every briefing.

**QUESTION:** And I get the same answer and nothing happens.

**MS NAUERT:** At every briefing since this happened. We continue to talk with the countries – I mean with Erbil and Baghdad. We continue to talk with them and urge them to sit down and have conversations. In terms of punitive measures such as withholding money or anything, we never forecast that. I'm not saying we would do it at all, but we just continue to ask the countries to sit down and have a conversation. It's ultimately hurting themselves by not sitting down. We hope that countries would see the wisdom in that.

Okay.

**QUESTION:** If in a month from now we have this same conversation, is there anything you're prepared to do to put more pressure on Baghdad?

**MS NAUERT:** Laurie, I think that's a hypothetical. We'll just follow it and see what happens then.

**QUESTION:** A month from now? Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** A new topic?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Hi.

**QUESTION:** Honduras. The opposition leader is here in town urging you not to recognize Hernandez's reelection. Does the U.S. believe that these – this vote should be – that there should be a revote?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. So there are a couple entities which have looked at that election and they've come up with a little bit of different information about how they regard the election. We're continuing to look at both of their responses, the OAS and the European election commission, I believe it's called, to determine our position on this.

I can tell you Honduras' supreme electoral council, it declared the incumbent presidential candidate, Juan Hernandez, as the winner. The process overall is underway. There's that five-day period in which – that's established under Honduran law, and that's when people can present challenges that they might have to the election result. One of the things that we're doing is having conversations with both sides, the opposition and the incumbent, to ask them to refrain from any provocative talk. We're calling on both sides to not commit any kind of violent acts. I can confirm for you that our deputy assistant – excuse me – our deputy assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere, John Creamer, met with the opposition alliance's Salvador Nasralla yesterday. Yesterday was December 18th, right? But I want to point out and be clear about this that we regularly meet with many individuals from the government in Honduras. Since the election we've met with candidates on

both sides regularly.

**QUESTION:** I have one –

**QUESTION:** Do you support a call to have the election counted once more?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, there are two different electoral bodies, if you will, that have looked at this. My understanding is that they've come up with different results at this point. We're just taking a look at all that. We're not ready to make a call right now. They're in that five-day period and so we're going to wait and see what happens then, okay?

**QUESTION:** I have one other question –

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Yeah, go right ahead.

**QUESTION:** – on another topic – on Egypt, because there was a woman here who came to the State Department a couple weeks ago. Her parents are both green card holders and jailed in Egypt. There are about 20 other Americans who are jailed in Egypt, and many were hoping that Pence would raise that on his trip, though he's postponed it for now. What's the State Department doing on that front, on the American citizens?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not familiar with that case. I can just look into it and get back with you. I don't recall that individual you mentioned having been at the State Department, but let me see what I can find for you about that, okay?

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

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

**QUESTION:** Yeah, Senator Tim Kaine sent a letter to Secretary Tillerson and Mattis expressing his concern that U.S. forces and coalition forces in Syria are switching from an anti-ISIS mission to an anti-Iran and proxies mission. What would be your answer to that?

**MS NAUERT:** You said that Senator Kaine sent a letter to Secretary Tillerson about this?

**QUESTION:** And Mattis.

**MS NAUERT:** I have not seen this letter supposedly going to Secretary Tillerson. I'm just not familiar with it. Okay? Hi.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, hi. Switching to Burma, Myanmar.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Wanted to talk about the – ask you about the two Reuters journalists who have been detained there. In the past, the State Department has suggested that the civilian government is not fully in control of events and it has focused its criticism on the military. Is

it therefore a concern to the United States that the civilian president, Htin Kyaw, should have given approval for the case against them to proceed?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not familiar with him giving approval for their case to proceed. I don't have the details on that. What I can tell you is that we've been covering – following the cases of the two reporters, the Reuters reporters, very closely. We are deeply concerned about their detention. We do not know their whereabouts. That is of concern also. They've now been detained for, what, a week – about a week now, right? And today I want to make it clear that we're calling for their immediate release. We call for the release of these two reporters.

As you all know, I was recently in Burma and had a chance to meet with a lot of reporters, and despite the status of the government – some very difficult things happening in that country – they have reporters who are working hard to tell the story and to try to accurately tell the story about what is happening in the northern Rakhine State. I met reporters who represent a free and fair press over there. Not all of them do; some of them have a state component to them or are heavily influenced by the state. But I met a few reporters who have the courage to report openly and freely, and we applaud those efforts. And so it is tremendously concerning to us when we hear that reporters have not only been detained but they've been detained and we don't know their whereabouts. I can just tell you we're covering this – following this very closely.

**QUESTION:** On this –

**MS NAUERT:** Anything else on Burma?

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Go right ahead, sir. Hi.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Heather. My name is Mushfiqul. I'm representing Justnewsbd. Right groups –

**MS NAUERT:** You know what, let me pause you for one second. I just want to add one more thing to that. It is our understanding that the families do not know about their loved ones' whereabouts. I mean, imagine that. You're a family member. Your child, your husband, your brother is reporting, and you're just trying to tell the story. You're reporting, you're detained, and you don't know where that loved one was. I cannot imagine, as a mom and a former reporter, what that would feel like. And so I hope that the Government of Burma will let us know how they're doing and let the families know how they're doing.

Sir, go right ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Heather. Human Rights Watch was – has claimed satellite images shows that dozens of Rohingya villages were burned the week Myanmar signed an agreement with the Bangladesh to repatriate hundreds of thousands of refugees. The evidence that villages were still

being damaged as late as 2nd December contradicted assurance by the Burmese Government that violence had ceased and that the Rohingya could safely return to Myanmar, the watchdog said. Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement on 23rd November to begin the proceed of repatriating some of the estimated 6,500 – 6,500 – thousand refugees who fled Myanmar in the past four months.

Do you think, with this reality, it will really work for repatriating the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to their homeland?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, that's one of the things that we hope for eventually. We hope that the refugees will eventually be able to go home, to go home to Burma. More than 600,000 of them have been forced across the border since August alone and now it's December. Bangladesh has been so generous in accepting hundreds of thousands of refugees. The U.S. Government has provided significant financial assistance to help with that. I want to be clear that that financial assistance goes directly to aid groups. That financial assistance does not go to the individuals. I want to be clear about that.

In terms of the repatriation plan, we'd like to see the plan. We've heard about it in concept. But one of the things that would be important to be in that plan is the voluntary, safe, and dignified return. So it has to be voluntary. People have to feel like it's safe to go home. If they don't feel like it's safe to go home, it's probably not going to be safe to go home. They have to have a dignified return. That means treating the people well as they decide to return home. It also needs to be voluntary. They can't be forced to leave one country to go to another country. They have to feel safe and ready to go home. We don't think that that situation calls for it just yet.

Unfortunately, I think it's probably not safe for them to go home at this point, but we're continuing to assess the situation and continuing to have our conversations not only with the Bangladesh Government, but also with the Burmese Government. Okay.

Anything else on Burma and Bangladesh? Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask on Yemen?

**QUESTION:** On Mexico?

**MS NAUERT:** Oh, yeah. Hi.

**QUESTION:** There was just a bus crash involving cruise ships in Mexico. Are you guys hearing anything about that and the possibility that there could be American casualties?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. I have some notes on that because I heard about that not long before I went out – before I came out here to talk with all of you. There was a bus crash. And it was an accident, I would say, involving a bus that was contracted by Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines. It was in Quintana Roo, Mexico, which, as I understand, is close to –



**QUESTION:** Cancun.

**MS NAUERT:** – Cancun, thank you. We've heard certainly about that. We're following it very closely. We would want to express our condolences to all of those who have been affected by that. It's certainly a tragedy. We know that lots of families and individuals are traveling this time of year when people go to have fun and they get a few days off, certainly, for vacation at the holiday time. We're continuing to monitor that situation. We're working with local authorities. Some of our officials from our U.S. embassy, or our – perhaps it's our mission – are on their way there to better assess the situation and to speak with government officials to see how we can help and try to determine if there are any U.S. citizens who were involved. That we just don't know yet.

**QUESTION:** Okay. You don't know that Americans are involved at this point?

**MS NAUERT:** I do not at this point.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thanks.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. Okay.

**QUESTION:** Could I ask a question on Yemen?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Yesterday, both the –

**MS NAUERT:** We're all over the map today, aren't we? Yes.

**QUESTION:** I know, sometimes. It's the end of the – midweek. Yesterday, both the Government of the United States and United Kingdom called on the Saudi coalition to let up and allow humanitarian supplies and aid to go through to Sana'a and other places. Could you explain to us what you are doing in terms of talking to the Saudis to convince them or to allow this aid to go through?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, and I'm glad you asked about it. It's an area that we care a lot about. We have had many conversations with the Saudi Government. We've put out numerous statements from the State Department. The President has as well. The President put one out about a week ago on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. Just last Friday, our Deputy Secretary John Sullivan, along with USAID Administrator Mark Green, held a meeting with humanitarian aid groups to try to get more information about what's happening. When we talk about where we get our information, part of that is from our people on the ground in any given country, but part of that is also talking with aid groups. And we hear from aid groups about the situation on the ground.

The situation is certainly dire there, and that's why we've been very clear and we've increasingly called on the Saudi Government to open up humanitarian aid. We have not seen enough aid getting through the ports,

we have not seen the fuel supplies coming in that are necessary to get that aid in. And you've all seen the pictures on television; you've seen the pictures in the newspaper that people are in crisis. You see the women, you see the children there, they need help. I certainly hope the Saudi Government will listen to us and that they will try to open up that aid as we have called for.

**QUESTION:** But the –

**QUESTION:** So the – go ahead.

**QUESTION:** The Saudis say that the reason that they are not able to allow more aid in is because they're – they have these concerns about those ports being used to smuggle in missiles and other weapons that are being shot at them.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** The U.S. has been giving –

**MS NAUERT:** And we've just seen that report about a – what they believe is a ballistic missile, which I can't confirm that, but being fired into Saudi Arabia. So they do have every right to be concerned about their sovereignty and about their security. We are sympathetic to that. We've been attacked here in the United States too, so every country has a right to be concerned about that. But you also see the humanitarian situation and you see the horrific situation that people have put – been put in for several years now. And so we are asking the Saudis to open up the ports and allow humanitarian aid to come in.

**QUESTION:** So how – I mean, is there some advice that you're providing to the Saudis about how they can let in just the humanitarian aid but better keep out the weapons? Because it seems like they're working at cross purposes.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I would assume we are. Some of those conversations might be between DOD and the Saudi Government. We have a good relationship with the Saudi Government; you all know that. I would imagine some of the conversations would include tips to figure that out.

Okay, we've got to wrap it up, but –

**QUESTION:** Well, just on that.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Given the Saudis' restrictions, is it the U.S.'s view that Saudi Arabia is in part responsible for the famine and for the deaths of these civilians?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not going to go as far as saying that, but what they can do is that they can open up humanitarian aid and they can allow it to get through to the people who need it most. Okay?

**QUESTION:** Heather.

**MS NAUERT:** Lalit, then we've got to wrap it up.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. About a month ago, U.S. issued a statement asking Pakistan to re-arrest Hafiz Saeed, the Lashkar-e Tayyiba leader. He's still freely roaming around the country. What do you have to say on that? Has U.S. – has Pakistan listened to U.S. asks?

**MS NAUERT:** I don't – for those of you who – I'm not sure if we've talked about this here in this room before. I think we may have on one other occasion. And who Lalit is referring to is the mastermind behind the Mumbai attacks – remember those – where the guys drove up on the boat, they went into the hotel, they shot up hundreds of people, killed I believe it was hundreds, including some Americans. That happened a few years back. He's asking about the mastermind of those attacks, a man who is affiliated with LeT, Lashkar-e Tayyiba, one of the terror groups. It's a group that the United States Government considers to be a terror organization.

We have many conversations with the Government of Pakistan. One of the things that happened recently is that this guy was held on house arrest. Pakistan released him from house arrest, and now there is word that he may be running for some sort of office. I want to remind folks we have a \$10 million Reward for Justice program that would reward for information that would bring him to justice. So I want to make that clear so that everybody knows, \$10 million out for this guy, and we would certainly have concerns about him running for office. So I'm glad you highlighted that.

**QUESTION:** But Pakistanis are saying they don't have enough evidence against him. Has the U.S. provided evidence as well?

**MS NAUERT:** I can tell you that his organization – his organization that was responsible for those attacks – is considered a foreign terror organization. It's considered a foreign terror organization by the U.S. Government for a reason and for a good reason. I would imagine that if we had any intelligence – and that's not an area that I can discuss, anyway – but we would certainly share it with the Pakistanis on that front. I hope they'll do the right thing.

Okay.

**QUESTION:** But what implications Pakistan has if he's – continues to move freely?

**MS NAUERT:** I can't –

**QUESTION:** That was a pretty strong statement U.S. issued.

**MS NAUERT:** I can't comment on that. I would just have to refer you back to the Government of Pakistan and hope that they will do the right thing and remind folks across Pakistan we have a \$10 million reward for this

guy. Okay?

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thank you.

**MS NAUERT:** Thanks, everybody. We'll see you soon.

(The briefing was concluded at 4:02 p.m.)

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