

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – February 7, 2019

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Index for Today's Briefing

- [VENEZUELA](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [NORTH KOREA](#)
- [IRAN](#)
- [MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS](#)
- [TURKEY](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [SAUDI ARABIA](#)
- [TURKEY/GERMANY](#)
- [HUNGARY](#)

TRANSCRIPT:

2:47 p.m. EST

MR PALLADINO: It's great to see you all again.

QUESTION: The feeling is mutual.

MR PALLADINO: Excellent. Thank you, Laurie. Thank you.

QUESTION: For Laurie?

MR PALLADINO: Yes, you remember me. Thank you. You care. You care.

We have a special guest today, Special Representative for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams. Elliott, please. Thank you.

MR ABRAMS: Thanks. A few comments to start. Two weeks ago, Juan Guaido and the democratically elected National Assembly took the courageous and constitutional step of declaring Guaido interim president, and forming a transitional government while working toward free and fair elections. We, the United States, recognized Guaido as the interim president on January 23rd.

As of today, 23 European countries have recognized Guaido as the interim president of Venezuela. I believe we're up to 48 countries around the world that have recognized him. As many of you know, there are meetings, yesterday and today in Uruguay, about the crisis in Venezuela. One, an Uruguay and Mexico-led meeting; another, the International Contact Group on Venezuela.

Instead of trying to accommodate Maduro through contact groups or dialogue, we urge countries to recognize Juan Guaido as interim president and join us in responding to his call for immediate international humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of the

Venezuelan people. Maduro has proven he will manipulate any call for negotiations to his advantage, and he has often used so-called dialogues as a way to play for time. We urge all involved to deal solely with the legitimate Guaido government. The time for dialogue with Maduro has long passed. Every day that Maduro remains in power is a day where political prisoners remain in jail, detainees are abused, and Venezuelans go without food and medicine.

The contrast between Interim President Guaido and Maduro is striking. While Mr. Guaido calls for humanitarian assistance for the people of Venezuela – excuse me – while Guaido calls for humanitarian assistance for the people of Venezuela, Maduro continues to block unhindered access to international humanitarian assistance, and denies Venezuelans the basic necessities they direly need, unless they declare loyalty to him. The U.S. Government is coordinating with Guaido and his team of experts, other governments in the region, our humanitarian partners, on the logistics of deploying aid to mobilize a response efficiently and safely. We are prepositioning items – relief items, food, nutritional supplements, hygiene kits, medical kits in Colombia so that they're available to reach Venezuelans in need in their own country as soon as that is safe and logistically possible.

Yesterday, Ambassador Carlos Vecchio announced an international conference on humanitarian assistance to take place at the OAS on February 14th to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the Venezuelan people. We encourage everyone – governments, organizations, private entities – to answer his call and support the long-suffering Venezuelan people. As Secretary Pompeo said, U.S. will mobilize and transport humanitarian aid – medicine, medical supplies, surgical supplies, nutritional supplements – for the people of Venezuela.

I would like to state that we are imposing visa restrictions and revoking the visas of members of the illegitimate constituent assembly. This body has usurped many of the constitutional powers of the National Assembly, the legitimate National Assembly, and embodies Maduro's destruction of democratic institutions. While I cannot name names because visa information is protected, I can state that we will continue to take action against those destroying Venezuela's democratic institutions. Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: We have time for a few questions. Matt.

QUESTION: Thanks, Robert. Just on the contact group, you mentioned at the beginning that 23 European countries now recognize Guaido. And yet the EU was the primary organizer of the contact group. So I'm wondering, one, if you guys were invited to join and said no for the reasons that you outlined, that the time for dialogue is past. And secondly, if 23 European countries have already derecognized Maduro, how do you think that the contact group was – try to get to dialogue?

MR ABRAMS: Well, I hope they're going to follow the position of the United States, which is that the only worthwhile message to the Maduro

regime is it's time to end the dictatorship in Venezuela. The question is really what is the purpose of the contact group, and we'll find out when they issue a final statement. But our messages to the members of the contact group have been don't fall into a trap that Maduro has set many times before, where there's a phony dialogue rather than a strong message to him: it's time to go.

QUESTION: Right. But did you decline an opportunity to be part of the contact group?

MR ABRAMS: I don't believe we were ever interested in joining the contact group, because we don't think that's the way to go.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Bloomberg. Nick Wadhams.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, can you talk about what the U.S. has in mind for Nicolas Maduro himself? John Bolton tweeted that he'd be happy to see him on a beach somewhere. Would you care where he goes? Would the U.S. seek to have him face justice of some sort? Do you have anything in mind for what the endgame for him ought to be?

MR ABRAMS: The endgame for him should be to leave power, and the sooner the better. Because his own situation is only going to decline the longer he clings to power and the more misery there is in Venezuela.

QUESTION: But where would you like to see him go? Should he remain in Venezuela or leave the country?

MR ABRAMS: I think it is better for the transition to democracy in Venezuela that he be outside the country. And there are a number of countries that I think would be willing to accept him.

QUESTION: Which ones?

MR ABRAMS: Well, he's got friends in places like Cuba and Russia, and there are some other countries actually that have come to us privately and said they'd be willing to take members of the current illegitimate regime if it would help the transition.

QUESTION: Can you name any?

MR ABRAMS: No.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Reuters.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, isn't it rather rich given your background –

MR PALLADINO: Excuse me, sir, no. No. Give order. No, no, no, no.

QUESTION: Do we have a free press here or not?

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams.

MR PALLADINO: Reuters. Hang on. It's Reuters.

QUESTION: Hello. How are you?

QUESTION: Freedom and democracy. That what's going on here?

QUESTION: So two questions, quickly. Is – you say time has long passed to negotiate with Maduro, but this is a different situation in which he – you have an opposition leader that has come forward and that is willing and has united the opposition, as you've claimed. Number two: How are you going to get the aid into Venezuela when Maduro still has the military behind him and he controls all of the territory?

MR ABRAMS: It is probably correct that the Venezuelan army, if mobilized, could prevent international aid from reaching Venezuela. That would be a really tragic situation. And we are hopeful that that won't happen. We saw the blocking of the bridge in Cucuta. But members of the army are Venezuelan citizens. They have parents and children and brothers and sisters who are suffering badly. So our hope is that they will be able to persuade Maduro, or they will simply disobey orders to continue the starvation of the people of Venezuela.

As to discussions with Maduro, negotiating with him on his departure is fine, if we ever get to that negotiation. Obviously, he may flee someday or he may seek to negotiate conditions. But that's not what he's done in the past. What he's done in the past is to use these negotiations to prolong his stay in power and to try to demonstrate his legitimacy. And that, we're against.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Fox, Rich Edson.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, you've been accused of –

MR PALLADINO: Excuse me, sir. Fox (inaudible).

QUESTION: How long can you say that –

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MR PALLADINO: Fox.

QUESTION: When did the –

QUESTION: (Inaudible) rich for you to be talking about political riots and starving people (inaudible) –

QUESTION: When did the administration become aware of Mr. Guaido, and how long has he been – has the administration been working with Mr. Guaido?

MR ABRAMS: I can't actually answer that question, because I've been here for too short a time. His – he was an elected member of the National Assembly in one of the major parties in the group of four

leading democratic parties. So I think it depends also who – if you ask me, for example, when did Ambassador Todd or when did now Charge Story know of him, I'm sure they've known him a long time. Obviously, he's gotten a lot more famous recently.

QUESTION: And are you confident that he's been sufficiently vetted, especially as this has gone on now for the last weeks?

MR ABRAMS: Yes, and I think – you know the pressure that he's under. You saw the incident that happened just a few days ago, where police entered his own home, his apartment where his 20-month-old daughter was. Think of the pressures that he's under. I think that the leadership that he is giving to the Venezuelan people is really quite extraordinary.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to ABC.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, just in follow-up to something that you said to Lesley, you talked about you're hopeful that the Maduro regime wouldn't block aid coming across the border.

MR ABRAMS: Yeah.

QUESTION: Does that mean that you intend, with your partner countries, perhaps with NGOs, to begin moving that aid without explicit permission to do so?

MR ABRAMS: We will be moving aid to the border of Venezuela in the hope that – and there is some aid there now – in the hope that we will be able to get it in. I don't think that we or the Colombians or the Brazilians or anyone else is planning to try to force it in. It's an extraordinary situation, if you think about it. You've seen the statistics about hunger, about closure of hospitals, about the spread of communicable diseases that had been eradicated, because now there cannot be vaccinations. There are dire needs, and I think many people, again, in the Venezuelan army feel those needs for themselves and their families. So we're hopeful that that at least initial decision on the part of Maduro can be turned around, if he sees a real demand on the part of the people of Venezuela. Let it in. That's all we're asking. Let it in.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Voice of America. Nike, please.

QUESTION: How about the sanctions (inaudible) that the U.S. special rapporteur says that sanctions (inaudible) –

QUESTION: Thank you. Sir, you just mentioned the visa restriction. And do you – is there any discussion on any sanction regarding the regimes or governments that continue to support and help Maduro regime and sabotaging the democratic transition? Separately, there is a perception in China and in other countries that U.S. is interfering in

domestic politics. What's your response to those criticism? Thank you.

MR ABRAMS: Well, there has been interference in the domestic politics of Venezuela for a long time, primarily by Cuba, which has a very large presence in Venezuela. If you look around at the now nearly 50 democracies that are supporting Interim-President Guaido and the National Assembly, it's hard really to say that all of those countries are engaged in some kind of joint effort to interfere. What we're trying to do is help Venezuelans create a system where, if you will, they can interfere in their own internal affairs, where their politics is in the hands of the Venezuelan people, where the future of their country can be determined by – in a free election by the people of Venezuela.

QUESTION: How about sanction against governments like support –

MR ABRAMS: Well, the sanctions that exist now, that have been enacted, are not secondary sanctions; they're primary sanctions. We will continue to speak to governments around the world, urging them to get on the right side of this issue, which is the side of supporting the people of Venezuela and leading toward a transition and a free election there. We will keep pushing.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) the U.S. (inaudible) interfering in any way?

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to CBS, Christina Ruffini.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mr. Abrams, I spoke with Ambassadors Story and Vecchio this morning, and I asked them about this 30-day deadline. In the constitution he was able to take power, but it says only for 30 days. And they're confident with the situation on the ground as it is that the public and the constitution gives them time to fix this. But I'm wondering if there's any kind of concern as we pass that 30-day mark and the clock starts to tick down if the Guaido government can't take control, if they start to lose momentum, that we could see this fall apart.

MR ABRAMS: Well, I don't think so. First, I don't think they're going to lose momentum; they seem to be gaining momentum, as more and more countries join this struggle to support the people of Venezuela. If it is true that at the end of 30 days it has not been possible to have – to begin a transition to a free election and an elected, democratic government, the fall will be that of the regime, so I doubt that it will have any repercussions on the National Assembly and Mr. Guaido.

QUESTION: But don't you think that if there are two presidents of Venezuela, neither of whom –

MR ABRAMS: There is only one president of Venezuela, and there is a former president of Venezuela.

MR PALLADINO: All right. Last question, Michel, please.

QUESTION: An update on the U.S. diplomats in Venezuela, their security, their protection, and the U.S. presence in general?

MR ABRAMS: As you've heard the Secretary say many times there's no greater priority for him, for the department, than the safety of our officials on the ground around the world. That remains a concern. It gets a lot of attention here. And we are – I would just say we are working on that, and I would not like to say much more about it because it's important to us.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Thank you. (Inaudible.) I appreciate it. Thanks for coming today. Here we go.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Hey, Robert?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah.

QUESTION: Before you start, can I – this was a – I wanted to – the visa restrictions that he announced on the visa – on the constituent assembly – is that new today?

MR PALLADINO: Yes.

QUESTION: It is?

MR PALLADINO: Yes.

QUESTION: And do – I know you can't give names, but roughly a number – a handful, dozens?

MR PALLADINO: We'll take it, all right? We'll take it.

QUESTION: While we're on the same subject, can we continue on that?

MR PALLADINO: No, we're going to – I've got a couple toppers and – that I'd like to start with.

And I'm pleased to announce that Lea Gabrielle will be our new special envoy and coordinator of the Global Engagement Center. Lea will provide the permanent leadership we have needed to bolster the Global Engagement Center's operations, and she will begin her duties on Monday. Lea is a former CIA-trained human intelligence operations officer, defense foreign liaison officer, United States Navy program director, Navy F/A-18C fighter pilot, and national television news correspondent and anchor at two different networks.

While serving in the United States Intelligence Community, Lea was a CIA-trained human intelligence operations officer assigned to Defense Intelligence Agency. She directed and conducted global clandestine

strategic intelligence collection operations. Lea later served as director of the United States Navy Sensitive Intelligence Program. Before that Lea was a defense foreign liaison officer for the Office of International Engagements at the Defense Intelligence Agency. She began her public service in the Navy as a fighter pilot flying combat missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Operations Enduring Freedom and Southern Watch. She was on active duty military service for 12 years.

Lea also knows the media. After serving in the Navy, she became a television news journalist at NBC News and most recently served as a correspondent and frequent anchor for the Fox News Channel and Fox Business Network. Lea is a graduate of the Naval Academy, and we're thrilled to welcome her to the department.

Pleased to announce as well that the Secretary of State will travel to Budapest, Bratislava, Warsaw, Brussels, and Reykjavik from February 11th through 15th. On February 11th, Secretary Pompeo will arrive in Budapest, Hungary, where he will meet with the prime minister, foreign minister, defense minister, and civil society leaders; discuss a range of issues in the United States-Hungary bilateral relationship, including defense cooperation, energy, regional security, support for Ukraine, and ways to counter Russian and Chinese influence and to strengthen the Western alliance.

On February 12th he will arrive in Bratislava, Slovakia, where he will meet with the president, prime minister, and foreign minister; discuss United States-Slovak – the United States-Slovak security relationship, Slovakia's role as the chair-in-office of the OSCE, and regional and global issues. He will visit the Gate of Freedom Memorial, where more than 400 people died trying to escape from communist Czechoslovakia to freedom in Austria between 1948 and 1989. He'll also speak with students about the legacy of Western democratic freedom and its triumph over communism 30 years ago.

Later on February 12th, Secretary Pompeo will travel to Warsaw, Poland, where he will meet with the foreign minister to discuss security and energy issues, building on the strong relations between the United States and Poland. There the Secretary will participate in the Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East, jointly hosted by the United States and Poland, from February 13 through 14 in Warsaw. Countries from across the globe have been invited to participate, and more than 40 will, in fact, be there.

The ministerial will be a forum for countries concerned about instability in the region to share their assessments and other ideas on a better way forward. Countries will also address a range of critical issues including terrorism and extremism, countering illicit finance, missile development and proliferation, regional crises and their effects on civilians, cyber security, energy threats to the energy sector, maritime trade and security, and threats posed by proxy groups across the region.

On February 15, Secretary Pompeo will travel to Brussels, Belgium, where he'll meet with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Mogherini. The Secretary and high representative will discuss our shared efforts to restore democracy to Venezuela and support Venezuelan Interim President Guaido and the National Assembly, as well as the importance of strengthening European security and addressing the threats posed by Iran and Russia.

Finally, the Secretary will travel to Reykjavik, Iceland, on February 15th. In Reykjavik he will meet with the prime minister and foreign minister and discuss security issues in the North Atlantic, Iceland's upcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council, and growing economic relations.

One other trip announcement: Secretary Pompeo will deliver the March 18th keynote address for the State Department's Road to the Global Entrepreneurship Summit Heartland Event in Overland Park, Kansas, which will take place on March 18th and 19th. The Road to GES Heartland Event will bring together hundreds of entrepreneurs, investors, and public and private sector leaders who are building innovated solutions to agriculture, health, and connectivity. Will also preview the Secretary's participation in the Global Entrepreneurship Summit in The Hague, the Netherlands, which will take place on June 4th and 5th, and both events promote growth and prosperity in the United States and the world, and the Heartland Event will show how American economic strength can shape world affairs to our nation's benefit. Road to GES Heartland will also include a delegation of entrepreneurs from the Netherlands, a strong and longstanding partner of the United States.

Finally, I want to start off with a brief update on our efforts towards the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea and the second summit between President Trump and Chairman Kim. As the President said during the State of the Union Address, the second summit will occur on February 27th and 28th in Vietnam. Vietnam is a close friend and partner of the United States, and we thank the Government of Vietnam for its generosity in hosting the second summit. The history of our two nations reflects the possibilities for peace and prosperity. We move past conflict and division towards the thriving partnership that we enjoy today.

As you know, negotiations are ongoing. Currently we have a team on the ground led by the United States Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun, who is in Pyongyang for – with meetings with his counterpart, Kim Hyok-chol. These meetings are to prepare for the President's second summit with Chairman Kim and to make further progress on the commitments that the President and Chairman Kim made at their first summit in Singapore, including complete denuclearization, transformation of the United States-North Korea relations, and building a lasting peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula.

With that, I'd be happy to take a couple questions.

QUESTION: So Kansas in March, eh? Any particular reason you decided to announce this more than a month ahead of when it's actually happening?

MR PALLADINO: Because it's time to start sending invitations, actually, and this has been in the works for about –

QUESTION: Okay. No other reason for the Secretary to make another trip to Kansas –

MR PALLADINO: Hey, hey, the Secretary likes Kansas, you may have noticed as well. Yeah, absolutely. Always a good reason to visit Kansas.

QUESTION: On North Korea, has anyone heard from Special Representative Biegun? When's he coming back from Pyongyang? He's been there for, what, two days now, or –

MR PALLADINO: I have – we have nothing further to announce on his schedule at this point. When we have some updates on that, we'll – we will provide them.

Anything further on that? North Korea?

QUESTION: Locations in Vietnam – why not announce where this is going to be and more details on it?

MR PALLADINO: That will come when it's ready for announcement, but I have nothing at this time.

QUESTION: But we're only days away from this summit, so why are those details not nailed down just yet?

MR PALLADINO: We're working on details as we speak, and we're looking forward to a very good summit.

Please.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) second summit. Will the issue of the declaration of the end of the war coming up at this summit?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not going to get ahead of the summit and the agenda for the summit, but we're very much focused on setting it up, yeah.

QUESTION: Okay. What is the United States preparing to – for the concession to North Korea? You have any concession to North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: We are focused on the commitments – achieving – first of all, achieving final, fully verified denuclearization as committed to by Chairman Kim in Singapore. And at that first summit, President Trump and Chairman Kim made that very first leader-to-leader, leader-level United States-North Korea commitment, and that's the first time that that's happened, and we are following up on those commitments that have been made and we remain confident.

QUESTION: It is reported that United States willing to provide incentive, an economic package to North Korea. Can you confirm this? Any reason why you –

MR PALLADINO: We've always been clear that one of our goals here is a brighter future for the North Korean people. Part of that, of course, though – we remain united in enforcing and in implementing the United Nations sanctions until we achieve that final, fully verified denuclearization. We've been very clear that sanctions relief will follow denuclearization. I have nothing – don't have too much more on the summit, but one more – go right here.

QUESTION: No, no, on summit, I have a quick follow-up. So before the first summit, the U.S. rhetoric was the goal is to reach a final, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. So has your goal changed? Because you are not using the same words as before.

MR PALLADINO: Stephen Biegun, our special representative, gave very full remarks only a week ago at Stanford. I refer you to those. I really have nothing further to add beyond the special representative's –

QUESTION: Can I – just a quick follow-up?

MR PALLADINO: Sure, Lesley. Please.

QUESTION: I'm going to give it to my colleague who covers the UN for Reuters.

QUESTION: Hi, Michelle Nichols from Reuters at the UN. The UN sanctions monitors reported to the Security Council on Friday that North Korea continues to defy UN sanctions, and in particular they found evidence of a consistent trend that the DPRK is dispersing its assembly, storage, and testing locations of missiles to avoid any decapitation strikes. Does the United States have a response to this?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, our goal hasn't changed. Our goal is the same, as announced at the first Singapore summit, and that is the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea, and we are very much focused on that. We've seen a lot of positives that have occurred since that first summit, but we've been – we've been candid along the way as well, and that much, much work remains.

QUESTION: But did North Korea have to demonstrate anything in particular before you agreed to this next summit? Did they have to demonstrate any particular ask by the U.S.?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, I'm not going to go into private diplomatic conversations, but we have had a lot of engagement with North Korea during the interim. That's all I have today on North Korea. Let's go, Rich, right here, please.

QUESTION: Quickly on Iran, or – do you have anything on these satellite images and reporting that shows Iran has attempted to launch another

satellite into space, and what the U.S.'s comment on that would be?

MR PALLADINO: I've seen the reports, and – failed, correct? We're aware of those reports of that launch. We continue to call upon the Iranian regime to cease immediately all activities that are inconsistent with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, including space vehicle launches.

QUESTION: Is there anything that the United States is coordinating with European allies who have been open to further sanctions on Iran and further penalties for Iran on its ballistic missile program?

MR PALLADINO: Nothing to announce today, but we continue to take the actions that we believe are necessary to impose sufficient pressure on the Iranian regime so that it ceases pursuing these capabilities that could further destabilize the region.

QUESTION: On the peace and security conference next –

MR PALLADINO: Please.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you, Robert. Good to see you at the podium.

MR PALLADINO: Said, hello.

QUESTION: Next week, it is said that Mr. Kushner is going to brief the leaders that are attending, or the countries that are attending, on where they are – where you are with the peace plan. Could you share with us what is he going to say to – is he going to sort of reveal the peace plan, the so-called deal of the century? Is it going to be oral? Is he going to submit something in writing? That's one.

And second, the Israeli prime minister will be attending. Why have you not sent an invitation to the Palestinian authorities since you're going to be talking about peace and security? Or maybe you have, I don't know. But could you shed light on these two issues?

MR PALLADINO: Mr. Kushner will be in attendance, and he will be discussing Middle East peace as part of this overall conference. And anything further than that, I would – I have to refer you to the White House. I don't want to get ahead of what they plan to do.

QUESTION: But this conference is organized by the State Department and Secretary Pompeo, so the invitations, I assume, went out from this building, correct? I mean, you invited –

MR PALLADINO: That's correct.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: We sent the invitations.

QUESTION: So have you sent out an invitation to the Palestinian Authority or any Palestinians to attend?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything on that specifically today.

QUESTION: Very, very quickly, today the United States blocked a statement at the United Nations Security Council that wanted to express regret for Israel throwing out international observers from the city of Hebron and calling that – for all people to sort of tone down and so on. Why would you block such a statement? I mean, the observer mission – you were instrumental in creating that international observer mission in Hebron back in the '90s when it was so volatile.

MR PALLADINO: The 1997 agreement on the temporary international presence in the city of Hebron clearly states that the consent of both the Israelis and the Palestinians is required in order to extend the mandate and presence of the TIPH. Furthermore, Oslo II and Hebron Protocol of 1997 also stated that the agreement from both sides was necessary for that to continue.

QUESTION: Yeah, but don't you like to see some international presence in Hebron because it is a point of conflict and flash point?

MR PALLADINO: Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with the Israeli decision not to renew, it would be inaccurate to accuse Israel of not having the right to make this decision under the 1997 agreement. This is a sovereign decision and it's the right of either party to make that agreement.

Please.

QUESTION: Robert, but are you disappointed, though? I mean, it's their right to do it, but you guys take stance – positions and stances on sovereign decisions by foreign governments every day, kind of like the way you did yesterday with Germany and its extradition. So do you – it seems as though your blocking of the statement at the Security Council would suggest that you're not disappointed and that, in fact, you're in favor of it. You said whether you agree or disagree with the Israelis' decision. Well, do you agree or do you disagree with it?

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing further on that other than to say it is – this is in accordance with the agreement itself. This was something that is the right of either party to do, and that was a sovereign decision that was made. Nothing further on that subject.

Any – please, Michel, go ahead.

QUESTION: I have two questions. One on the Turkish – the Turkish foreign minister has said today that the U.S. and Turkey have agreed on forming a joint task force to coordinate the withdrawal from Syria. Can you confirm that?

MR PALLADINO: I haven't seen that report, Michel. I'm sorry. I

haven't – I haven't – I don't have anything on that.

QUESTION: And on the security zone in Turkey, news reports – or in Syria. News reports said that the administration asked France, Britain, and Australia to form a force to create this – this force for – to employ their forces in northeastern Syria. Is it accurate?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything on that. Talks are ongoing on many different levels right now, as you know, but I don't have anything specific to add to that.

QUESTION: Last one. Secretary Pompeo has met today with the Kuwaiti prime – deputy prime minister. Any readout?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have a readout on that for you yet, no, but hope to. We'll put something out, hopefully soon.

Yes, Laurie, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah. Could you respond in general terms to President – Turkish President Erdogan's complaint that the U.S. has been too slow on the security zone and his threats to implement the security zone unilaterally by force by Turkey? What's your response to that?

MR PALLADINO: The United States takes Turkey's security concerns seriously, and we are actively engaging with Turkey on this matter. And as President Trump just said, we're working through the course of various discussions, including senior-level meetings that took place here at the State Department on Tuesday, as recently as that, and we're trying to promote a stable and secure security relationship for northeast Syria as soon as possible.

QUESTION: And you remain committed to ensuring the security of the people that live in northeast Syria?

MR PALLADINO: We have been clear on that. From the President on down, we have spoken at length to counterparts at various levels on how to proceed with the safe withdrawal of our troops from northeast Syria while stabilizing liberated areas, and we're fully engaged on this, and we've been clear that the Syrian Democratic Forces should not be engaged militarily, and that would include the Kurdish component of the SDF. And we also want to make sure that – and I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: All right. All right.

QUESTION: Saudi –

QUESTION: On a different topic, Robert?

MR PALLADINO: Sure. Let's go to Michelle.

QUESTION: Thanks. This is –

QUESTION: There's three Michelles in here.

QUESTION: I know.

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: It's very confusing.

QUESTION: This Michelle, and –

MR PALLADINO: And we got – how many Roberts do we have? That's my next question. (Laughter.) All right.

QUESTION: We're wasting precious seconds here. So we haven't seen you in a while, Robert. This is the first briefing this year.

MR PALLADINO: Thank you for noticing.

QUESTION: Last year there were 61 briefings. By comparison, 2016, there were 219 briefings for the year. Why are there so few briefings, and is this ever going to be a daily briefing again?

MR PALLADINO: This is the department press briefing, I would say first. And since Secretary Pompeo assumed leadership last April, he really has taken a lot of steps to increase media engagement here at the State Department – across the United States, frankly, and around the world. There's been an expansion. We remain committed to doing all that we can to provide transparency for the American people and to explain our foreign policy around the world.

Now, the Secretary has been in this press briefing room now nine times for nine televised briefings. We hope to continue.

QUESTION: But what's the problem with having a daily briefing though, when past administrations had them virtually every day?

MR PALLADINO: We have had a government shutdown that has slowed us down, regrettably.

QUESTION: No, no, no, aside from the shutdown.

MR PALLADINO: No, a shutdown is a major consideration.

QUESTION: There was no shutdown –

MR PALLADINO: Absolutely.

QUESTION: – for most of last year. The shutdown has a few weeks.

MR PALLADINO: And we have – we've had significant travel as well. And we have more travel upcoming, and if you looked at the last bit of travel, there was a lot of media engagement on that travel, both from

joint press conferences and media interviews. And a little while ago I announced additional travel next week, and we're actively at work to ensure fulsome press engagement on the next trip as well.

So I reject the premise. The Secretary has conducted 72 press engagements since he's arrived. That includes remarks, press availabilities, interviews. And we always want more. I understand that. More to come, and let's look forward.

QUESTION: Wait, wait.

QUESTION: Hang on a second.

MR PALLADINO: Please.

QUESTION: You can't reject the premise. You can't reject the premise. The premise is factual. You can just count up the number of briefing – not the Secretary – I'm talking about this daily briefing, where you are expected or should be able to cover the world and tell us what U.S. policy towards Cameroon or whatever.

MR PALLADINO: We've got a lot of different ways to communicate, and we are – we're going to be providing more information in many different ways. When we're here in Washington, you have my commitment that I intend to brief as often as we are able to brief.

QUESTION: Well, there was a time when there was both a deputy spokesman and a spokesperson.

MR PALLADINO: Yes.

QUESTION: Right? And when the spokesperson was away on travel with the Secretary, the deputy spokesperson would brief. Remember those times?

MR PALLADINO: You may have noticed that the President has made an announcement in December and that the spokesperson is very much focused –

QUESTION: So you –

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: So she goes and does that, but in the meantime there's just one of you. And as wonderful as you are, Robert –

MR PALLADINO: Thank you, Matt. Thank you.

QUESTION: – you can't be in two places at the same time.

MR PALLADINO: This is correct.

QUESTION: So why don't we get someone who can either be a deputy deputy, who can brief while you're on the road with the Secretary, or get another spokesman, get a new spokesperson.

MR PALLADINO: We will hire you for personnel soon, Matt, okay. These are good suggestions.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Let's move on. Lesley, please, move on.

QUESTION: As head of the Correspondents Association –

MR PALLADINO: Yes.

QUESTION: – given that we are now discussing this openly, it is true exactly what my colleagues are saying, that there have not been daily briefings. And it is true that you are the lone person on this, and maybe you should look for somebody else to brief when you're not around, number one.

MR PALLADINO: I think that was what Matt just said, Lesley. Okay.

QUESTION: I know. But number two is also: There is value in these briefings not just for us, but everybody on the outside. And then number three is: Can I please put in a request for a Reuters interview, given that we've never ever had an interview? But it seems that there are other outlets that continually have interviews almost daily.

MR PALLADINO: Oh, Lesley, we agree that there is value in this briefing not only for those that are in this room but for audiences around the world. That's why it's important to do a press briefing.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: And we'll continue. Please. Michele Kelemen, NPR. Please.

QUESTION: Thank you. Does this administration intend to meet the deadline tomorrow to Congress to say whether Mohammed bin Salman had anything to do with the Khashoggi murder and whether there will be any sanctions.

MR PALLADINO: The Department of State shares the deep concern and outrage over the killings of Jamal Khashoggi expressed by members of Congress and we have consulted and corresponded with the Congress regularly since Jamal Khashoggi's October 2nd killing, including briefings by the Secretary of State.

On November 15th, the Department of Treasury, in consultation with the Department of State and the Department of Justice, imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on 17 individuals under Executive Order 13818, which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to target perpetrators of serious human rights abuse and corruption. These sanctions blocked and designated individuals' assets in the United States jurisdiction and generally prohibited all transactions by U.S. persons with them.

We will continue to consult with the Congress and work to hold accountable those that are responsible for Jamal Khashoggi's killing.

Please.

QUESTION: What was that? Are you going to meet the deadline, tomorrow's deadline, to –

MR PALLADINO: I would say we continuously engage with members of Congress to provide them with information as appropriate and to hear their concerns and to have dialogue. I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Right. But isn't it appropriate to follow the – to comply with the law?

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing further to announce today.

QUESTION: Well, wait, wait.

MR PALLADINO: And of course we will comply with the law.

QUESTION: Okay. All right.

QUESTION: I have a question on Iran.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Let's go to Iran.

QUESTION: So in Japan, Special Representative Brian Hook said that the oil waivers on those eight countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, will not be extended. Can you confirm that or is such a decision still being under consideration?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything on that today. Sorry.

Let's go to Shaun. Please.

QUESTION: Can I ask you – the case of – getting back to Turkey – of Adem Yilmaz that was raised apparently with the German foreign minister yesterday? Could you say a little bit about what the United States wants in terms of prosecution of him and whether concerns were raised with the Germans?

MR PALLADINO: We did make – Deputy Secretary Sullivan made very clear yesterday our concerns with Germany's refusal to extradite Yilmaz. Yilmaz is a convicted terrorist; he's charged with serious crimes by the United States. Two American service members were killed and 11 wounded as a result of a suicide bomb attack in Afghanistan in 2008. And this bombing was facilitated by actions that Yilmaz took in support of terrorism. So the United States will never relent in its efforts to bring Yilmaz to justice.

QUESTION: Does it intend to also take that up with Turkey, if and when he is taken there?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. We have been in touch with the Turkish authorities to coordinate further on Yilmaz's case. I can confirm that. Yeah.

QUESTION: Just briefly following up, you mentioned disappointment with Germany. They argue that it's a judicial process domestically for them. Do you believe that the Germans have done all that they could to take him to the United States, to extradite him?

MR PALLADINO: Can you redo the question one more time? I lost the train there. Go for it.

QUESTION: Sure. Sure.

MR PALLADINO: Yeah.

QUESTION: Just the Germans argue, in response to this, that it's a domestic judicial process, rather than a process – a political decision for the German Government to make. Does the United States buy that? Does the United States think that Berlin could have done more to extradite him to the United States?

MR PALLADINO: We're disappointed by Germany's decision not to deport – decision to deport him to Turkey rather than to extradite him to the United States. He's been indicted by the Southern District of New York on terrorism charges, and the refusal to extradite him is inconsistent with Germany's obligations under the Bilateral Extradition Treaty between the United States and Germany.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Can I do Hungary briefly?

MR PALLADINO: Do – any more on Germany here? Yeah, fine. But let me just add though, at the same time, because I think it's important to add, that Germany remains one of our closest allies and trading partners with whom we cooperate on a huge range of issues. And I would even include extradition in that category as evidenced by our successful collaboration on the Jakiw Palij case. But friends must be frank with one another at times when they have concerns, and to be clear, in this case, the United States has some concerns.

QUESTION: So this one case is not going to trash the entire U.S-German relationship? Is that what you're trying to say?

MR PALLADINO: The premise of the question –

QUESTION: At the very end?

MR PALLADINO: This is our ally, Germany.

QUESTION: Gotcha.

MR PALLADINO: Please, Nick.

QUESTION: Let me – can I just ask about one where you mentioned that the Secretary will meet with civil society groups when he's in Hungary? Does that include critics of the Orban government and people who – concerned about his undermining the judicial system in Hungary and his increased demonstration of authoritarian impulses?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have full details on each leg of the trip, but we will be putting out a media note this evening just as a heads-up, and there will be a curtain-raiser background briefing announced soon, during which we'll provide a lot of detail on each leg of the trip. That will be tomorrow at 10 o'clock.

QUESTION: Does the Secretary –

MR PALLADINO: So that's coming. Yeah.

QUESTION: Does the Secretary have any concerns that his visit in – legitimizes Victor Orban's actions?

MR PALLADINO: These are NATO allies. We have longstanding historical, cultural, and economic ties to Central Europe, and we very much look forward to honoring our shared history with central Europe and to building on a shared future as we go forward. This year marks 30 years since Central Europeans tore down the Iron Curtain in 1989 and reclaimed their sovereignty and freedom, choosing for themselves a Western path joining NATO, joining the European Union, moving towards democracy and freedom that had been denied for them for so long. So we are committed to NATO, we're committed to the Western Alliance, and we're going to work with our European partners and allies, and we certainly can't expect American views on a variety of subjects to be heard by our allies if we refuse to engage with them. And so –

QUESTION: So will you – will he raise those concerns with the government directly?

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing to announce at this time on future discussions. There'll be much more detail provided tomorrow. I would encourage you to please tune in. We will have senior State Department officials to speak on these matters at length, and in conclusion, it is great to see you all again. Thank you very much.

QUESTION: So Robert, does that mean that it's like with the case of Germany, where you're friends but you need to be frank when you have concerns with them? If you have concerns with Hungary and its policies, you'll raise them? Is that a fair –

MR PALLADINO: Matt, we talk to our friends frankly all across the globe. That is what the State Department does.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: And you can – thank you, guys.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:38 p.m.)

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