

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – March 1, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
March 1, 2018

Index for Today's Briefing

- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [DEPARTMENT / SECRETARY TRAVEL](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [AFGHANISTAN](#)
- [RUSSIA](#)
- [SOUTH KOREA/REGION](#)
- [RUSSIA](#)
- [SYRIA / RUSSIA](#)
- [AFGHANISTAN](#)
- [ISRAEL / PALESTINIANS](#)
- [BURMA / BANGLADESH](#)
- [VENEZUELA](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)

TRANSCRIPT:

2:37 p.m. EST

MS NAUERT: Hi. Hi, everybody. How are you today?

A couple announcements to start off with today. We're going to have to keep today a little tight because we have some guests joining us here at the State Department in a short while.

I'd like to start off with telling you about something that's taking place here tomorrow, and that is – who watched the women in the hockey – in hockey in the Olympics? Weren't they fantastic? Well, they are coming here to the State Department tomorrow. So our Deputy Secretary John Sullivan and our Under Secretary Steve Goldstein look forward to welcoming the gold-medal-winning 2018 U.S. women's hockey team here at the State Department tomorrow. I'll be meeting with the team prior to a reception that we're hosting for them. They are coming here as a part of our overall sports diplomacy program, so we're really looking forward to hosting them. If anyone's interested in meeting them or talking with them, we might be able to facilitate that. So just let us know.

Secondly, I'd like to mention the Secretary's upcoming trip to Africa. It'll be his first trip as Secretary of State to the continent. Secretary Tillerson will travel to Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria from March 6th through the 13th. Secretary Tillerson will meet up with leadership in each country as well as the leadership of the African Union Commission, based in Ethiopia, to further our partnerships with the governments and the people of Africa. In particular, he plans to discuss ways that we can work with our partners to counter terrorism, advance peace and security, promote good governance, and spur mutually beneficial trade and investment. During the trip, he'll also meet with U.S. embassy personnel and participate in events related to the U.S.-Government-supported activities there.

Next, I want to highlight that today marks the day the Peace Corps was created by President Kennedy back in 1961. In the decades since, nearly 230,000 men and women from across the United States have volunteered to help combat hunger, fight disease, educate students, and create new economic opportunities in countries and communities around the world. Peace Corps volunteers represent many of our country's highest ideals, including ingenuity, hard work, and sacrifice. For many volunteers, their experiences ignite a love for their host countries and fuel a lifelong passion of government service. Hundreds of returned Peace Corps volunteers currently working here at State and USAID – our department is just one example of how volunteers continue to serve their country after they return. Many of you have met my colleague, Elie; he was a Peace Corps volunteer. I can't remember where, but somewhere he was. So thanks to all of our Peace Corps volunteers who continue to serve here at the State Department.

Lastly, the Kabul peace process conference took place in Kabul, Afghanistan yesterday. And we'd like to congratulate the Government of Afghanistan on its success. The meeting represented a historic step forward in demonstrating the resolve of the Afghan people to commit a peace process that brings an end to the war with the Taliban. President Ghani made clear in the speech that if the Taliban wants peace in Afghanistan the door to that is open. The Taliban should recognize that the Afghan Government and the Afghan people are offering confidence-building measures to show that real peace is possible. President Ghani made clear that there are no preconditions for peace. The United States and the international community strongly support the path to peace that president Ghani laid out in his speech. We echo the calls from across the Afghan Government and civil society for Afghanistan to join peace talks with the Afghan Government and to participate in the country's political system.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Matt, where would you like to start?

QUESTION: Well, actually, I just – I want to – briefly on that Afghan statement that you just read.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: When you said there were “no preconditions for peace,” does that mean that the Taliban no longer have to accept the Afghan constitution, lay down their weapons, renounce terrorism, et cetera?

MS NAUERT: I would have to refer you to President Ghani for that, because that's a statement that President Ghani made, and this just came out a short while ago, so I can try to get you some more information. I can't –

QUESTION: I get that, but this was the U.S. position as well. I mean, this had a U.S. position for a long time, that –

MS NAUERT: I would certainly think that –

QUESTION: – they would have to accept –

MS NAUERT: – our position has not changed, that we continue to call upon those to uphold the constitution of Afghanistan.

QUESTION: All right. Then what I wanted to ask is about the statements made by President Putin this morning regarding these new weapons that he said had been tested. I'm wondering what your – what the diplomatic reaction to this is from this building.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Certainly – I mean, I can tell you many of us watched that speech with great interest here from the State Department, and I would imagine across U.S. Government as well. One of the things I want to make clear – and we've talked about this type of thing before – that we're not going to react to every word or idea that world leaders express. It was certainly unfortunate to have watched the video animation that depicted a nuclear attack on the United States. I mean, that's something that we certainly did not enjoy watching. We don't regard that as the behavior of a responsible international player. So I just want to make that very clear. It's – we just don't consider it to be responsible.

QUESTION: So you are reacting to – you say you're not going to react to – but you –

MS NAUERT: To every – but –

QUESTION: But you feel compelled in this case to –

MS NAUERT: Feel compelled to say, look, we saw it and we don't think it's responsible. We don't think that kind of imagery, seeing the portrayal in a cheesy video of that kind of attack being conducted on the United States as being a responsible action.

QUESTION: Okay. Can I ask your forbearance to – there's an issue with some of our Japanese colleagues, who've got a very tight time schedule. They want to ask about North Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Certainly.

QUESTION: Can I ask you to go to them?

MS NAUERT: Sure.

QUESTION: Thanks. So apologies to everybody else.

MS NAUERT: Where are our Japanese colleagues back there on North Korea, who want –

QUESTION: Is it on? Did he leave?

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: Really, he's right there.

MS NAUERT: Is there somebody in particular?

QUESTION: Over here. Sorry.

MS NAUERT: Hi. How are you?

QUESTION: So we haven't got the readout of President Moon Jae-in's phone call, but Japanese wires are reporting the content of that. And we –

MS NAUERT: I just did, so hold on.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Let me find it, okay?

QUESTION: Great.

MS NAUERT: And I'd be happy to provide you with that.

QUESTION: And we would also be wondering State Department's –

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: We would also be wondering – want a statement from the State Department about that as well.

MS NAUERT: Certainly.

QUESTION: Great.

MS NAUERT: So let me provide a readout for you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: President Trump spoke today with President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea to congratulate him on the success of the 2018 Olympics. President Trump thanked President Moon for his hospitality to the United States presidential delegation to the opening and closing ceremonies, led by Vice President Mike Pence and advisor to the President Ivanka Trump respectively.

President Moon briefed President Trump on developments regarding North Korea and inter-Korean talks. President Trump and President Moon noted their firm position that any dialogue with North Korea must be conducted with the explicit and unwavering goal of complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. The two leaders committed to maintain close coordination. And anything beyond that, I'd be happy to try to get for you later, okay?

QUESTION: Great.

MS NAUERT: All right. Hi.

QUESTION: So is the U.S. going to be participating in the Korean decision to send a special envoy to North Korea?

MS NAUERT: I mean, I can just tell you that the United States is latched up very closely with the Republic of Korea and Japan, and so we closely coordinate a lot of our conversations and meetings with them, and I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: But will the U.S. be sending anyone in addition to the South Korean?

MS NAUERT: And we would go where?

QUESTION: To –

MS NAUERT: No, no. Okay. Let's move on.

QUESTION: Can we –

MS NAUERT: Laurie.

QUESTION: Yeah. Several questions.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. One second. What's that Arshad? Hi, Shadar.

QUESTION: Well, you – all that you commented on with regard to President Putin's statements really had to do with the animation and not with what is the fundamental issue, which is –

MS NAUERT: Hold on. I have more on that, if you'd like.

QUESTION: Oh, yeah. I do. I would.

MS NAUERT: Matt paused and deferred to our Japanese friend. So –

QUESTION: And now we're going to Kurdistan.

MS NAUERT: So if we want to go back to President –

QUESTION: I'm happy to go wherever you want.

MS NAUERT: – if we want to go back to Putin, we can do that. Okay.

QUESTION: I have just a follow-up.

MS NAUERT: Oh, goodness. Okay.

QUESTION: I mean, we're looking for a statement on North Korea – I mean, South Korea sending an envoy to North Korea, if that's all right with you. What is the State Department's –

MS NAUERT: Yes. So I think I just answered the question here from

Alicia, that is the United States is latched up very closely with South Korea. We have many conversations with our ally. Those conversations continue. We have a broad range of conversations with them. We share the principle of the denuclearization and the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and that hasn't changed. I'll just say that we are in close contact with them.

QUESTION: Thank you so much.

MS NAUERT: Okay. You're so welcome. Okay.

QUESTION: Russia?

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Back to – do you have something on North Korea?

QUESTION: No.

MS NAUERT: Okay. All right. Let me go to Arshad. We're a little disorganized today. Okay. Arshad, go ahead.

QUESTION: So you responded to the broadcast of an animation –

MS NAUERT: Correct.

QUESTION: – which is, after all, a cartoon, but not to the substance, which is Russian claims of having new weapons systems that could threaten the United States. So can you respond to that?

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: For example, is it not the case that at least one of these weapon systems has been under development or was under development many decades ago and then went away and –

MS NAUERT: Okay. Let me start with that.

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: That is certainly a concern of ours. President Putin has confirmed what the United States Government has known for a long time, that Russia has denied prior to this: that Russia has been developing destabilizing weapon systems for more than a decade, in direct violation of its treaty obligations.

President Trump understands the threats facing America and our allies in this century and is determined to protect our homeland and preserve peace through strength. U.S. defense capabilities are and will remain second to none. We have a new defense budget that's over \$700 billion. We believe that our military will be stronger than ever. The President's nuclear posture review addressed some of this. It made it clear that we're moving forward to modernize our nuclear arsenal and ensure that our capabilities remain unmatched.

QUESTION: Can you read the first sentence again, which I didn't quite understand?

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS NAUERT: Sorry. What?

QUESTION: Can you read the first sentence again, which I didn't understand?

MS NAUERT: Sure, certainly. President Putin has confirmed what the United States Government has long known but which Russia has denied previously: Russia has been developing destabilizing weapons systems for more than a decade in direct violation of its treaty obligations.

QUESTION: And which treaties is it violating?

MS NAUERT: Some of these that are not in – that they are not in compliance would be the INF treaties. That's an area of particular concern to us. Since 2014, they've not been in compliance with that. They've been developing intermediate-range ground launch cruise missiles in direct violation of the INF treaty.

QUESTION: What are you going to do about that?

MS NAUERT: That is not for me to say what the United States is going to do about that. We continue to have conversations across the various agencies and departments in the U.S. Government.

QUESTION: Is there an indication that those weapons that they showed today are actually operational?

MS NAUERT: That's not something I'm able to answer. Some of those would be intelligence matters, some of those would come out of the Department of Defense.

QUESTION: But I mean – so – but these weapons – like, you said that confirmed what we've long been known that he's developing, but do you believe that they've actually developed them or they're still in the development process?

MS NAUERT: Some of this is new information that we are seeing today. Some of this is information that we've been tracking for some time. Some of this information the United States Government will not be able to publicly provide to you, and that's part of it today.

Okay. Hi, Rich.

QUESTION: Heather, does the Secretary plan on speaking with Foreign Minister Lavrov in – specifically in regard to this morning's speech? And does this morning's speech change at all the U.S. attempts to try to

work with Russia in certain areas or change this relationship, or is this seen as sort of election year politicking on his part?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think you have to consider the audience that Putin sat before today when he made that announcement and consider the fact that it's basically his equivalent of our State of the Union address. We also would note that there is an election that's coming up. So we think he was playing to the audience, certainly.

In terms of Secretary Tillerson and whether or not he plans to speak with him about it, that I'm not sure. This is something that we have many conversations with the Russian Government, not just here in the United States between the Secretary and his counterpart, but with other officials as well.

Okay, Laurie, let's move on. Okay.

QUESTION: Russia – yeah, on another aspect of Russia which Kurdistan is interested in, General Votel said Tuesday that Russia plays both fireman and arsonist in Syria. Is that a position you would agree with?

MS NAUERT: Yes. I mean, I think I've been pretty clear, as has the Secretary, about Russia's responsibility in Syria. Russia has a responsibility to stop Syria and to stop aiding Syria in attacking its own people. We look at the situation in Eastern Ghouta today, since there was the UN ceasefire that was voted upon unanimously on Saturday – excuse me – yes, on Saturday – and the fighting continues. They are continuing to kill innocent civilians. We have seen more than 100 people die since Saturday alone. This ceasefire is clearly not working. Russia has called for these joke-like humanitarian corridors. Russia needs to just do what the United Nations had agreed to and voted on, and that is a countrywide ceasefire. This is not working. Russia's responsible for this in part because they continue to train and equip and work with the Syrian Government. We've been watching that very carefully. It's a tremendous concern of the U.S. Government.

QUESTION: And he said that there needs to be more pressure on Russia to do the right thing in Syria. Are you thinking of anything now that would constitute pressure on Syria that General Votel said was necessary?

MS NAUERT: In terms of pressuring Syria or in terms of pressuring Russia?

QUESTION: I'm sorry, pressuring Russia.

MS NAUERT: In – we are having conversations with the Russian Government, I can tell you that. The United Nations is having a series of meetings where they're talking with other countries, like-minded countries, on exactly what is going on in Syria right now. You recall the Secretary signed on to the chemical weapons program that Paris – that France put together about a month ago or so. They are expected to hold their next round of conversations sometime in March, sometime later this month.

So there are a lot of different ways that we are keeping a close eye on this. What we do – I've said this before out of this building – is diplomacy. We will continue to reach out to many like-minded countries. Let me remind you of the 15 countries that signed on to the ceasefire resolution over the weekend. We're having lots of conversations with those countries that share our concerns.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: Thank you, and if I could just ask you about Iraq. The parliament passed a resolution –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Let's – let's – hold on, let's stick with anything related to –

QUESTION: You mentioned something about a –

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Let – excuse me –

QUESTION: – joke-like humanitarian corridor. Is that –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Okay, let's talk about that.

QUESTION: Yeah, okay.

MS NAUERT: Let's stick on Syria for right now.

QUESTION: So – and you're saying that the ceasefire is not holding?

MS NAUERT: I think just said the ceasefire is clearly not working.

QUESTION: So what – I understand. So what are you proposing doing?

MS NAUERT: And here's the thing: This idea of a so-called humanitarian corridor, which is a narrow little banner, that if you look at the video that you see on TV, people aren't using that. Why are people not using that? Well, it didn't work in Aleppo very well, did it? People are afraid to use it. They are afraid if they try to leave Eastern Ghouta, that they could be conscripted into working with Bashar al-Assad, that they someday may not be able to go home, or they could be killed. People are fearful of that.

That does not go far enough. The idea that Russia is calling for a so-called humanitarian corridor, I want to be clear, is a joke. What needs to happen instead is a nationwide ceasefire that was voted upon unanimously at the United Nations last Saturday. Fifteen countries supported it. Let me remind you, so did Russia. So did Russia.

I want to be clear also that there are a few exemptions to that ceasefire so no one tries to parse my words. Al-Nusrah, al-Qaida, and ISIS – those are the exemptions. Anything else on Syria?

QUESTION: How about –

QUESTION: But I think –

QUESTION: Russia?

QUESTION: – Said's question here is: What is the United States going to do about it, because so far, as you've said, the ceasefire hasn't held –

MS NAUERT: Right.

QUESTION: – has never even been implemented. Beyond just talking to people about it, is the United States going to take action?

MS NAUERT: Well, again, what we do in this building, we do diplomacy. Okay? We have conversations with countries all around the world, and that's exactly what we're engaged in. Ambassador Haley at the United Nations is doing her part at the United Nations, we're doing our part here out of the State Department. We're engaging in talks with the Russians in Geneva, the State Department is. We are investigating various mechanisms that would hold Russia and the Syrian regime accountable –

QUESTION: What kind of mechanisms?

MS NAUERT: For using chemical weapons on its own people. We have talked about the OPCW and their role in identifying substances that were used.

QUESTION: What about sanctions on –

MS NAUERT: Hold on.

QUESTION: I mean, just – what about sanctions –

MS NAUERT: Elise – Elise, let me finish, because you're asking me a question about some of the things that are being done. There are other mechanisms in place. Paris I mentioned. The accord, the agreement that Secretary Tillerson and 25 or 26 other countries signed onto. We have a new member just as of yesterday. I'm trying to remember if it was Norway or the Netherlands. Let me get back to you on that. There is that.

A lot of these meetings are happening. We will hold Russia accountable and hold Russia responsible. And let me again urge you – I know a lot of you are so obsessed with Russia and what Russia did in the United States in the 2016 elections. I would urge you to –

QUESTION: I –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: – to show your outrage –

QUESTION: I'm sorry, I really –

QUESTION: Actually, I don't think that's true in this room.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Hold on. I would assure you –

QUESTION: Maybe in some other briefing rooms around town.

MS NAUERT: Okay, maybe in other briefing rooms –

QUESTION: Not this one.

MS NAUERT: – but let me ask reporters to turn that around. Fine to ask about Russia's role in influencing or trying to influence the 2016 elections, but look at Russia and what it's doing in killing people in Syria. I would urge you to do that.

QUESTION: I think – I mean, I'm sorry, I think that everybody in this room is asking about that and talking about that. And I don't – I reject your assertion that everybody in this room is obsessed with the –

MS NAUERT: I don't – I don't think I said everybody in this room is obsessed, but in general – in general.

QUESTION: But the point is –

QUESTION: Okay, well, it's just not – it's just germane to the questions –

QUESTION: But the point is you haven't gotten a single question about that topic. You haven't gotten one question about –

QUESTION: It's not germane to the question at hand, and the question at hand is: What is the U.S. going to do to hold Russia accountable when in the past the U.S. has imposed sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine? Are there sanctions not just for chemical weapons, but are there sanctions being considered for supporting the Syrian regime for its barrel bombing of civilians in Eastern Ghouta and elsewhere?

MS NAUERT: You know we never forecast sanctions, but I can tell you there are a lot of options that are now being considered.

QUESTION: You're talking about countrywide ceasefire. Would that – should that include Turkey in the North?

MS NAUERT: We have talked about this in the past. We talked about this on Tuesday.

QUESTION: Today. I mean, today you are calling for a countrywide ceasefire.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Should this include Turkey?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. That –

QUESTION: Should Turkey cease all military operations?

MS NAUERT: We look at the entire part of the country, and that's what was called for – a ceasefire throughout the country.

QUESTION: Sorry, you went – you spoke about that at length on Tuesday, right?

MS NAUERT: Correct.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS NAUERT: Yes, I did.

QUESTION: And the Turks have for two days running said that you should read the resolution, and they rejected your interpretation.

MS NAUERT: Well, okay, let me –

QUESTION: You have a comment on that?

MS NAUERT: Let me go back and read the resolution one more time. I think I was pretty clear, and I think you all understood it as well, that the resolution calls for – and this is the UN resolution – it affirms that the cessation of hostilities shall not apply to military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, also known as Daesh; al-Qaida; and al-Nusrah Front, and that other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with al-Qaida, ISIL, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council.

So I think that the United Nations and the resolution is pretty clear and that it speaks for itself.

QUESTION: A question on Iraq.

QUESTION: Are you still considering –

MS NAUERT: Okay, let's move on. Okay, go ahead.

QUESTION: All right. So just to go back to the Russian missiles for a minute, as you say, Putin seems to have confirmed that he's developing these weapons that would breach the various treaties, including the INF treaties. The United States is also modernizing its nuclear arsenal. Do you still consider yourselves bound by these treaties that Russia, apparently, has already broken?

MS NAUERT: We are in compliance with the treaties. We put up –

QUESTION: You're in compliance currently, but do you –

MS NAUERT: We put –

QUESTION: Would you – you intend to remain within the compliance?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware that we – we certainly would intend to remain in that. I'm not the arms control and verification expert, so if you

want a deeper dive on that, I can certainly put –

QUESTION: It's a matter of policy whether you –

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: It's a matter of policy, diplomatic policy, whether you remain in a treaty or not.

MS NAUERT: We believe that we remain in the treaty. Okay?

QUESTION: Thanks.

QUESTION: Are you still considering (inaudible) negotiate with Russia in the bigger sphere?

QUESTION: Who is the arms control expert?

MS NAUERT: Our – we have our AVC Bureau. They're our experts there.

QUESTION: Right. Who is the under secretary?

MS NAUERT: The – cute, Matt. (Laughter.) Okay, let's move on.

QUESTION: Are you still considering –

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry. Who are – your name is?

QUESTION: Alexander Khristenko, Russian TV. Are you still considering negotiations with Russia on global security issues and nuclear arms issues after today's announcement?

MS NAUERT: Would – are – so your question is would we cut off conversations and negotiations?

QUESTION: I mean do you change something in your attitude toward this?

MS NAUERT: Well, look, it's certainly concerning to see your government, to see your country, put together that kind of video that shows the Russian Government attacking the United States. That's certainly a concern of ours. I don't think that that's very constructive, nor is it responsible. I'll leave it at that. Okay?

QUESTION: It was not attacking the United States. It was not attacking the United States. It was two missiles sent to different directions. So why do you say that they are –

MS NAUERT: Are you – oh, you're –

QUESTION: Sorry. I'm from Russia. Channel One in Russia.

MS NAUERT: You're from Russian TV, too.

QUESTION: Yes, yes.

MS NAUERT: Okay. So hey, enough said then. I'll move on.

QUESTION: Wait, I'm sorry. What does that mean?

MS NAUERT: What does what mean?

QUESTION: I mean, it's – they're not – they're not officials of the Russian Government. They're just asking a question about Russia.

MS NAUERT: Oh. Oh, really? Okay. Well, we know that RT and other Russian news – so-called news organizations –

QUESTION: They're a –

MS NAUERT: – are funded and directed by the Russian Government. So if I don't have a whole lot of tolerance –

QUESTION: As are other media in this room, Heather.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Heather, can I just ask you one thing about the video?

MS NAUERT: Oh, my gosh. Yes.

QUESTION: This video that you're talking about, the cartoon.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Excuse me. The – as I understand it, and I could be wrong, the video that was played doesn't actually show the missiles hitting anything. Are you – but I'm just asking. Is it the assessment of the U.S. Government that had the missiles in the video ended up at their presumed target, that presumed – that that target was the United States?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I think it's certainly looks like that. I'd ask you to go back and take a look at that.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: It's pretty clear what their target is, okay?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: So this is – let's move on from this.

Nazira, you have a question about Afghanistan?

QUESTION: Yes, Heather. Thank you very much. As you mentioned, Kabul Process conference. What was the U.S. expectation from that conference?

Still United States will satisfied or something else? The conclusion. What was the conclusion from it?

MS NAUERT: Well, look, I can tell you that we were certainly a part of it, that the United States was pleased to have representation at the Kabul Process conference, and we congratulate the Government of Afghanistan for holding that conference. I mean, I think that that is a – certainly a good step forward in doing so.

We continue to have conversations with the Government of Afghanistan and continue to engage them on a daily basis through our ambassador there or through our acting assistant secretary here. We support the cause of peace in Afghanistan, recognizing that peace talks have to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Okay, all right. Said.

QUESTION: Very quickly.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: There was a news item yesterday, both in the Saudi press and in the Israeli press, that there is some sort of a peace proposal that will be coming out shortly. It was – so I wonder if you have anything on that, if you could share anything on that with us.

MS NAUERT: The report that we saw – I think it is an unfortunate report because it prejudices people against a plan on the part of the United States that is not yet complete. We have not released our plan. When it is ready to be released, the White House will go ahead and put that out. And some, I think, are trying to not only prejudice it but to try to draw conclusions about what is in that plan.

QUESTION: Is the Secretary of State involved in this process?

MS NAUERT: Yes, the Secretary of State has been involved in meetings and conversations about this entire process.

QUESTION: And lastly, there's going to be a big conference in town this weekend. It's the AIPAC conference. Is anyone from the United – from the State Department attending or speaking at that meeting?

MS NAUERT: I would imagine so, but I just don't have any confirmation to read out to you for that. Okay. All right.

QUESTION: Religious –

MS NAUERT: We're going to – we're going to have to wrap it up, but –

QUESTION: One on religious freedom.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Hi.

QUESTION: Yes. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback told VOA in an interview that what happened in Rohingya is a religious cleansing against Muslim. (Inaudible) is already released on our website. My question for you is: Is it the United States position that Rohingya crisis is religious cleansing against Muslim; and secondly, is religious cleansing now a new category that the U.S. would imposing sanctions. Thank you.

MS NAUERT: So part of your question – is that a new category? No, there is not a new category that would include that. The Secretary had defined this after taking a very close look at this as ethnic cleansing. It is a long road to making those sorts of determinations, getting a lot of information and evidence that we have to compile. The Secretary made that determination back in the fall. Okay.

QUESTION: I have a question on Iraq.

QUESTION: A follow up on –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Hi, Lalit.

QUESTION: The Burma – Burma has increased its troop presence in the border with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is opposing it. Do you have anything on that?

MS NAUERT: Bangladesh is?

QUESTION: Has opposed the presence of additional troops for the Burmese on the border.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I can just tell you that we're watching that carefully. I can certainly understand that that would be a concern of the Government of Bangladesh, but we're watching that one closely. And that's all I have for you, okay?

QUESTION: A question on Iraq?

MS NAUERT: We're – we have to wrap it up.

QUESTION: A question on Iraq.

MS NAUERT: Let me get – I've gotten to you already. Let me get to somebody else.

Miss, hi.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm Cristina Garcia with the Spanish newswire EFE.

MS NAUERT: Yes, hi.

QUESTION: I have a question on Venezuela. So today Venezuela has decided to postpone the election to May, and also there is now an opposition candidate running. I want to know does it affect the sanctions that the

United States is considering and if you have some update on those sanctions. When will they come – before the election, after the election? I know you don't forecast sanctions, but that's (inaudible).

MS NAUERT: Yeah, so I'm not going to have anything for you on the sanctions. I can just tell you that we're considering a lot of different economic and diplomatic options in dealing with Venezuela and, hopefully, its return to its constitution as we have watched the situation deteriorate in Venezuela over the past year or so. We have said we are considering all options to restore democracy to Venezuela, including individual and potentially financial sanctions.

QUESTION: And what about the election that has been postponed? Does the United States like this step a little?

MS NAUERT: Last I had known, the election was set for April the 22nd, I believe. So it – you're saying it's been pushed from there?

QUESTION: Yes, for May. Take place in May.

MS NAUERT: Okay, all right. I had not heard that, so my apologies. I'll see if I can get anything more for you on that. Okay?

QUESTION: Thanks.

QUESTION: Heather, can we –

MS NAUERT: All right.

QUESTION: Can we stay in WHA for a second, just to – I just want to ask you. This is a bureau that over the course of the last couple weeks has – seems to be – have – well, doesn't seem to – is losing a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge and experience, the latest being Roberta Jacobson announcing her resignation today, effective in a month or so. But this is after your ambassador in Panama and Tom Shannon also announced their plans to resign. I'm wondering if there's concern in this – in the building about WHA and the loss of knowledge and experience there.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, so you're referring to our ambassador, Roberta Jacobson, who serves in Mexico. She's been with the State Department for – I believe it was 31 years. And if you look at the amount of time that many of these individuals have invested in their careers at the State Department – her, 31 years; Ambassador Joe Yun was – I believe it was 30-some years; Under Secretary Tom Shannon was – I think it was 35 years – that's a tremendous amount of time to be working in any one industry, building, service, government agency, or department. People choosing to retire for personal reasons – and that's perfectly fine with us.

We thank her for her service. She has certainly done a tremendous job in representing U.S. interests with the Government of Mexico. We thank her for that. But when people choose to retire – and we've noticed that they've all served for about the same period of time – it is not

uncommon that people will eventually choose to move on.

QUESTION: Well, yeah. That's not my – that is not my question.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: But I mean, the three people and the careers that you've just mentioned, that's 95 years cumulative experience. And my question to you was not – ambassador – people move on, yes. But I'm wondering if there is any concern at all on the seventh floor that this particular – this region in particular, WHA, is losing such a huge wealth of talent and –

MS NAUERT: Well, we have a –

QUESTION: – experience.

MS NAUERT: We have –

QUESTION: You don't have an assistant secretary even nominated; you have an acting one, which is okay. The President gets to choose ambassadors; that's his prerogative, and that's fine. But I'm just wondering more broadly, regardless of the reason for their departures, if there is some concern that WHA – which the United States is actually in this region, right; so these are –

MS NAUERT: We certainly are, yes.

QUESTION: – our closest neighbors – if there's a concern that this is – that you're losing this amount of experience.

MS NAUERT: No.

QUESTION: No?

MS NAUERT: I mean, we are thankful for their service. They have served our country and this department with dignity and with distinction, and we are grateful to them for that. We have a tremendous number of qualified, good people who are here in this building who work for us every day.

QUESTION: Right, but you don't have –

MS NAUERT: All around the world.

QUESTION: But you don't –

MS NAUERT: And it doesn't mean that just because there are a few people sitting in the bureau, or a few people out at post doing those jobs, that there aren't other experts. You all may not know their names; it doesn't mean that they don't exist and they aren't excellent at their jobs. There's also the fundamental belief that people should be promoted in their careers, and we look to the future generations of people who are younger in this department to be able to bring them up through the

ranks and take over these positions.

QUESTION: I'm all in favor –

MS NAUERT: Do you want somebody –

QUESTION: I'm all in favor of youth.

MS NAUERT: – around forever? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'm all in favor of youth; that's wonderful. Remind me again who the nominees are for Mr. Feeley – Ambassador Feeley in Panama. Who's going to – who's been nominated to replace him? Who's been nominated to replace Ambassador Jacobson? Who's been nominated to replace Under Secretary Shannon, and who has been –

MS NAUERT: Matt, I would refer you then to the White House for those nominations. You know very well –

QUESTION: And who – has anybody?

MS NAUERT: You know very well where nominations come from.

QUESTION: That nobody has. So if you're interested in promoting the youth and the experience, or midlevel people who should go into the – then one would think that you would have replacements in line.

MS NAUERT: And Matt, you well know –

QUESTION: And there – the point is –

MS NAUERT: – that some of these are political positions –

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: – and some of these are career positions, and we work every day to find the people who are the best fit for those positions.

QUESTION: But the point is is that people are not – I think there would be less concern – well, according to you there is no concern at all that these people are leaving – but there would be less concern for people on the outside who are – who do think that this is an issue, if there were people in line to replace the people who are leaving. And the fact of the matter is is they're not.

MS NAUERT: Just because you're not aware of it does not mean that that does not exist. Okay?

QUESTION: They haven't been nominated.

MS NAUERT: Okay. There are people in mind and in line for those types of positions; perhaps you've just not heard about it yet, okay?

We've got to go.

QUESTION: I have a question on Iraq, Heather, please.

MS NAUERT: I will talk to you after the briefing, then.

QUESTION: No. The Iraqi parliament voted Wednesday to call for a timetable for the Iraqi – for foreign –

(The briefing was concluded at 3:12 p.m.)

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.