

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – March 12, 2019

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:42 p.m. EDT

MR PALLADINO: Good afternoon, everybody.

QUESTION: Good afternoon.

MR PALLADINO: Afternoon. At the top today, we are privileged to have with us our Special Representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams. He'll be – make a few remarks and be willing to take some questions. At the conclusion of the briefing, we also have some subject matter experts from our Bureau of Consular Affairs. If there are additional questions on matters pertaining to American citizens that you'd like to dive into a little bit, we'll make them available as well.

QUESTION: American citizens anywhere or in Venezuela?

MR PALLADINO: We're talking – that's for Venezuela we're talking about today. Okay? Great. Mr. Abrams, thanks.

QUESTION: Then you're going to –

MR PALLADINO: We have a normal briefing as well.

MR ABRAMS: Thank you. Happy to be here for my daily briefing.
(Laughter.)

QUESTION: You are becoming quite a fixture up there.

QUESTION: You're setting a good example.

MR ABRAMS: Oh.

QUESTION: There may be an opening for a spokesman. (Laughter.)

MR ABRAMS: I wouldn't touch that with a 20-foot pole. (Laughter.)

On January 23rd and January 24th, we announced and began a process of bringing back to the United States the great majority of Americans who work at the U.S. embassy in Caracas. The decision announced yesterday is, in a sense, a follow-on to that initial decision and is the product of the same considerations for the conditions in Caracas, which make it so difficult to continue keeping the embassy staffed there, and for the general situation in Caracas.

If you think back, it's only six weeks ago, but the situation in Caracas has deteriorated very considerably in that period and especially in the last few days since the blackouts began on Friday. So the Secretary made that decision.

You may have seen the interviews he did this morning. I'll just read one paragraph: "We made the decision yesterday that it just was prudent to get these folks back. The situation there is deteriorating. The Maduro regime's horrific leadership over the last year[s] has just made life there so difficult, it began to make it more difficult for the United States to take the actions that it needed to do to support the Venezuelan people. So we concluded this was simply the right step to take," and it "was the right time to take it."

I should say that this does not represent any change in U.S. policy toward Venezuela nor does it represent any reduction in the commitment we have to the people of Venezuela and to their struggle for democracy. You will see very soon a significant number of additional visa revocations. You will see in the coming days some very significant additional sanctions and the international group, of which we are a part – that includes most EU countries, the Lima Group, Canada, the U.S. – continues to do its work.

Why don't I stop there and we'll take some questions.

MR PALLADINO: We'll start with Associated Press.

QUESTION: Thanks. I'm curious to know what the Secretary meant by saying that the presence of – continued presence of any American diplomats in Caracas was a constraint on policy. He didn't quite explain. What exactly did their presence constrain, number one?

Number two, you talked about the blackouts and all this kind of thing, but presumably there are no family members there. It was very, very – only a handful of staffers still at the embassy. Presumably, they have generators, right?

MR ABRAMS: Generators require fuel, the embassy requires water.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR ABRAMS: The embassy's own situation also had a – let's say a finite number of days.

QUESTION: Okay. All right. So can you explain what exactly the

constraint was on – what kinds of policies were being constrained by the presence –

MR ABRAMS: Well, I don't –

QUESTION: Especially because yesterday, the Secretary said that – when he was asked about support for – U.S. support for Juan Guaido, said that as long as our team is on the ground in Caracas, you'd continue to provide the same kinds of support that you do. Well, now that's gone or very soon will be gone, so I don't understand how these – those mesh.

MR ABRAMS: Well, we will – we will – obviously it makes it more difficult to meet with all Venezuelans when the – we – when the team is not on the ground. I'm kind of reluctant to sort of try to parse the Secretary's words, but let me just say that in every decision we made – every decision, decisions on diplomatic activities, on visas, on sanctions – the safety of that staff was a key consideration. And that was something that weighed very heavily on our mind every day, literally every day. So I think that's – I think that was what the Secretary was referring to, and I'll just leave it at that.

QUESTION: Okay, but when you said it doesn't reflect a change in policy –

MR ABRAMS: No.

QUESTION: – it means that it was not intended to be some kind of hint or harbinger of military intervention or some kind of use of force?

MR ABRAMS: Nothing has changed. We continue to say, because it is true, all options are on the table.

QUESTION: But?

MR ABRAMS: But they did not change yesterday.

MR PALLADINO: There we go. Let's go Michelle, CNN.

QUESTION: So just hours before this statement came out from the Secretary we heard from the Secretary on Venezuela and he made no mention of the need to get people out. In fact, he really didn't talk about U.S. people at the embassy there. So what changed between the time we spoke to him and close to midnight when he put this out?

MR ABRAMS: He made his final decision. We have been talking about this literally – literally – every day. I've only been here six weeks, but that was right after the decision to move most of the people from the embassy back to the United States. We have had daily phone calls, daily meetings about this question, been before the Secretary, and he made his decision.

QUESTION: And then that line that Matt mentioned, "constraint on U.S. policy" – that reads like a threat. I mean, it's obviously curious. So

should Maduro see that line as a threat?

MR ABRAMS: I can only repeat what the President has said: All options are always on the table.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to AFP.

QUESTION: Yes. Just to – thank you. Just to follow on on this constraint thing, is there a link between the decision of withdrawing all the diplomats and some actions you might want to take to make sure the aid, which is at the border, come inside Venezuela?

MR ABRAMS: No.

MR PALLADINO: Reuters.

QUESTION: Hello, Mr. Abrams. Two questions. One is: Who do you leave the embassy to? Do you appoint a protective power? What happens to the embassy, how do you ensure, number one.

MR ABRAMS: Right.

QUESTION: Number two: We understand that the decision was made because the talks with the Venezuelans collapsed late yesterday and that that – this is according to the Venezuelans – that's what led to this. Did you – did the U.S. get any kind of direct threat from Maduro's government that something was going to happen?

MR ABRAMS: On the first part, normally we would get a protecting power, and that is, I think, what we'll do here, and we are in discussions now about that. What will happen to the embassy grounds, the embassy physically, let's say, is something that we then discuss with the protecting power, with potential protecting powers. So we don't have a final answer on that, and when we do we'll announce it.

On the regime, you know on –

QUESTION: Are you in discussions with other countries to – as to who will be the protecting power?

MR ABRAMS: Yes. We are in discussions.

QUESTION: But it hasn't been decided who?

MR ABRAMS: Right. About – we are trying to decide on a protecting power. January 23rd, the Secretary said the United States does not recognize the Maduro regime as the government of Venezuela. Accordingly, the United States does not consider former President Nicolas Maduro to have the legal authority to break diplomatic relations with the United States or to declare our diplomats *persona non grata*. So from our point of view, the regime cannot make a decision about whether we stay or go. And as a matter of fact, the National Assembly yesterday said we have the legal authority to stay, and they are the legitimate government of

Venezuela. But the regime also cannot, in our view, provide security for the embassy, and the situation in Caracas is deteriorating. So our decision was made really fundamentally without regard to what the regime wants or thinks.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go with *Los Angeles Times*.

QUESTION: Thank you. Just to follow on Lesley, so there were talks going on between the Venezuelans and you guys about creating an interest section or something like that and then the Venezuelans gave you 72 hours to leave. Is that not true?

MR ABRAMS: No, we have had – as you know, we've talked about this before. I have – I had a couple of meetings with the de facto regime Foreign Minister Arreaza. And those meetings were essentially about exactly this. So this subject has been out there for a long time. But we made a decision at one point, and you talked about it here – I've certainly talked about it in public – that an interest section was really not appropriate. You do an interest section where there is no government that you consider legitimate. There is a legitimate government in Venezuela, from our point of view. Maybe that would have satisfied some demands of the regime, but it was not something that the United States was going to do. So that really was off the table.

QUESTION: And 72 hours? The deadline?

MR ABRAMS: Well, as I said, we do not believe the regime, on the one hand, has the ability to tell us when to leave, on the other hand, doesn't have the ability to protect us if we stay.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, the Maduro government's attorney general announced that Juan Guaido is going to be investigated for – on suspicion of sabotage in the blackout. Does the departure of the U.S. diplomats put him in a weaker position at all, at a time when he would seem to be under greater threat?

MR ABRAMS: First, we've seen that as well, and it's a threat against Interim President Guaido. They have made such threats before. They've talked about going after him on one basis or another, and we also know that the supreme court, the TSJ, has essentially been packed by the regime. So that's a – that report is of real concern. I don't think the regime is going to base its decision on that, on our presence or absence, any more than it made the decision on whether to arrest him upon his return on the basis of whether we were there or not there. I think it's largely a matter of how they think the public, the Venezuelan public, will react.

QUESTION: You have any warnings to the government or any message to them?

MR ABRAMS: We have –

QUESTION: Should they be contemplating arresting him on this?

MR ABRAMS: I think – I hope they're aware of the fact that there are 54 countries, some important countries, that consider Juan Guaido to be the legitimate interim president of Venezuela. And I think not only we but the other 53 will react immediately. There are a number of diplomatic and financial and economic steps that governments can take. We've taken many of them; other countries haven't. I would think that the arrest, incarceration of Juan Guaido would lead a lot of countries to react very quickly.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to EFE.

QUESTION: Thank you. I want to ask you a question about the possible scenario of the Maduro government collapses. The Spain's foreign minister today said that the U.S. asked Spain to receive Venezuelan ministers loyal to Maduro in case the Venezuelan Government collapses. So I wanted to ask you if the U.S. has actually made this petition to Spain, and what were the terms in which these petitions were made?

MR ABRAMS: This is an old discussion. When I was assistant secretary of state for Latin America, and there were a lot of military regimes, the question of what to do with dictators arose, and it was actually Felipe Gonzalez, who was prime minister at the time, who said maybe Spain can help by taking some of these people. We've had some conversations with Spain. I wouldn't say we made a request, they made an answer. We have certainly had conversations. We've had them with a couple of other places too, because this question may arise, and we have talked about off-ramps and we have talked about wanting some of the regime officials to leave the country as part of a transition.

So the question therefore obviously arises: well, where would they go? And they may prefer to go to Cuba or Russia, but there are other places, and so that is a conversation we'll continue to have. Unfortunately, none of the people at the top of the regime have yet made that decision, the decision that they should make. And as we've said before, we are willing to help them out in those circumstances.

QUESTION: Can I ask a follow-up of – on that? You mentioned that they're – the U.S. Government with Spain and a couple other places. Which ones are these other –

MR ABRAMS: I'm not going to say, because it has not been as public as it has in the case of Spain.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to *Washington Times*.

QUESTION: Thanks for coming out to talk with us. Big picture question regarding all the – all of the options on the table. Can you discuss the military option for a minute? And specifically, has the administration asked the Pentagon to draw up such an option? And assuming that it has,

are you satisfied with the option that the Pentagon has, which is headed by an interim defense secretary, provided at this point?

QUESTION: He's a legitimate interim defense secretary. (Laughter.)

MR ABRAMS: The President has said all options are on the table. They are. Further than that it would be foolish for me to go, and I'm not going to do it.

MR PALLADINO: Bloomberg.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, can you talk a little bit more about the finite resources that the embassy is facing? I mean, it seems to be a suggestion that they're running out of fuel and water. What were the constraints on the embassy?

MR ABRAMS: It's a difficult situation for the embassy. It's a difficult situation for Venezuelans, of course, far more. I don't believe the embassy is at this point connected to any water system. So there's a question of how would you get fresh water. Obviously, there are continuing blackouts on and off. So the question then is: How are your generators working, and do you have enough fuel? There's also a question of communications. If there's no electricity, there are no communications, which obviously speaks immediately to the safety of our people.

So the deterioration of the general situation in Caracas doesn't affect the embassy exactly as it affects Venezuelans, but it does affect the embassy.

QUESTION: But were you – was there any concern that there was some new or imminent security threat that the embassy might be overrun, that the Maduro regime was unable or unwilling to provide or to guarantee security?

MR ABRAMS: We do not think that the regime is really able to provide security, and I would note that in his most recent public statement, former President Maduro spoke about calling upon the *colectivos* to come forward. Now, that – that's calling for armed gangs to take over the streets, and it is obviously going to be a great worry to Venezuelans, but we noted it.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, was that part of the – was that the deciding factor?

MR ABRAMS: That – actually, that statement by Maduro came today. So it was not part of the decision. But the background was – and as you know, they've been using *colectivos* more in Caracas, along the borders. Perhaps it is a sign of Maduro's lack of confidence in his own security forces. But it is by definition a breakdown of law and order.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go *Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Thank you. You said that the decision to remove embassy personnel doesn't represent a policy change by the United States, but you have acknowledged that it would make it more difficult to meet with Venezuelans, both the Maduro regime and the Guaido government. So functionally, how is the U.S. going to proceed without an embassy staff on the ground? Are you just – are you going to remove them to nearby countries? Are they coming back to the States? What is the plan?

MR ABRAMS: Who to nearby countries? The Americans?

QUESTION: Yes.

MR ABRAMS: The Americans will come back here to Washington, which is what the much larger group of Americans from the embassy in January did. I am very – I am one of the beneficiaries of this, because my team is made up in great part of people from Embassy Caracas, and the WHA team on Venezuela was also greatly enriched by their presence. Now, obviously people in the summer will go on to whatever forward assignments they had.

We will – as I said, it'll be harder, because we're not going to be able to do the face-to-face meetings we were doing. Admittedly, we were not able to do a lot of face-to-face meetings because the embassy staff had become quite small. But it wasn't – so it will be something that we're going to have to try to accomplish outside of Venezuela or by telephone or by emails and other forms of communication.

QUESTION: And are you able to give us even just rough estimates of the number of people we're talking about?

MR ABRAMS: No, we – I'm told we just – by the Diplomatic Security people we just don't do that.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Fox.

QUESTION: At the top you said that significant sanctions would be coming in the coming days. Can you elaborate a little bit on that? Are they targeting financial institutions or country-specific? The Secretary said yesterday a handful of nations are providing aid and comfort to the Maduro regime.

MR ABRAMS: Well, we did, you know, Friday sanction a Russian-Venezuelan bank, one that was basically 50/50 owned by Russian and Venezuelan state institutions. There will be more sanctions of financial institutions – I think I would leave it at that – and more visa revocations coming very soon.

QUESTION: Like today?

MR ABRAMS: Possible. Possible.

QUESTION: How about Turkey?

MR PALLADINO: No, no Turkey. Voice of America, please.

QUESTION: Well, Turkey and Venezuela is actually a thing.

QUESTION: Yes.

MR PALLADINO: Turkey and Venezuela. Okay.

QUESTION: Yes, that's what I – that's what I mean.

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead, Laurie. Okay, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. To follow up on this question, Turkey's support for – is prominent among those countries supporting the Maduro regime, including through the gold trade. What – do you have a comment on that and are you considering the possibility of secondary sanctions?

MR ABRAMS: Well, those are two different questions. We – Turkey's support for the Maduro regime obviously is completely contrary to U.S. policy and very unhelpful, and we will continue to take a look at the ways in which that support takes place, and in the context of sanctions by Treasury. Maybe I should leave it at that.

MR PALLADINO: Okay, fair enough. Voice of America.

QUESTION: Thank you. So a follow-up on Nick's question. Is yesterday's sanction against the bank based in Russia a secondary sanction? And is it the beginning of more sanctions against foreign financial institutions? That's number one, and number two: Can you please give us a sense if there is any diplomatic effort to bring China on board? Thank you.

MR ABRAMS: The bank – the sanctions of Friday on the Russian-Venezuelan bank were not secondary sanctions. We have not done any secondary sanctions. The – we will continue to make efforts to bring China aboard. We have told – in various places have told the Chinese that we think if their concern is in essence getting their money back, they'll never get it back from the bankrupt Maduro regime and from a basically destroyed Venezuelan economy. As the Secretary explained yesterday, the only way they'll get it back is when Venezuela returns to prosperity, which it won't do under Nicolas Maduro. Obviously they haven't changed their policy yet, but we will continue to talk about that.

QUESTION: Will they be subject to potential sanction?

MR ABRAMS: Well, we have not done secondary sanctions. That's always one of the options on the table.

MR PALLADINO: Last one. Let's – someone new. (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Really?

QUESTION: NTN24, Emiliana Molina, Mr. Abrams. So removing U.S. diplomats

and bringing them back to D.C., is this perhaps a show of lack of confidence from the U.S. in Juan Guaido's government to restore democracy, and what does this mean for his government? Some experts are saying that this looks bad for Guaido.

MR ABRAMS: It certainly is not a display of any lack of confidence in him. The fact is that today the regime has the guns. The National Assembly and Interim President Guaido are trying, through exclusively peaceful means, to bring democracy back to Venezuela, and that is obviously something we and dozens of other countries support. It is a reflection of the deterioration that we see on the ground in Venezuela, and it is in essence a follow-up to the major part of the decision, which was made on January 24th, to take most of the embassy staff. It's – we left a few people there, not many, but it's really the same logic. Our support for Interim President Guaido is absolutely undiminished, and I think, more importantly, the support of the Venezuelan people for him is undiminished.

MR PALLADINO: Perfect. All right.

MR ABRAMS: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Mr. Abrams, thank you very much.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR ABRAMS: Thank you. Should I say see you tomorrow?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Or later this afternoon. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Robert, are some of these experts (inaudible)?

MR PALLADINO: Some of our subject matter experts remain in the room, and so let's get through some of our other issues today and then I'd be happy to make them available if you've got some specific questions that you'd like to ask on the subject of consular services in Venezuela, okay?

QUESTION: You're going to make them sit through the whole press briefing?

MR PALLADINO: I'm going to apologize in advance. You are going to have to listen to some other things, it's true, so all right. Thank you. All right.

Let's start with this: We are outraged to hear reports that the Iranian regime sentenced Iranian human rights defender and women's rights activist Nasrin Sotoudeh to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes. This sentence is beyond barbaric. Her alleged crime was advocating for Iranian women's rights and for defending other Iranian women who were arrested by the regime for peacefully protesting the mandatory hijab

law. Nasrin was sentenced in absentia without a fair trial by the notorious revolutionary court, which is led by Judge Moghiseh, an accused human rights violator.

In addition, just this week, the regime cynically announced that as they enter the fifth decade of the Iranian Revolution, they would appoint Ebrahim Raisi, a man involved in mass summary executions of prisoners of conscience, as the head of the regime's judiciary. The Iranian regime makes a mockery of the entire legal system in Iran, placing innocent people at the mercy of accused human rights violators. We condemn Nasrin's sentence in the strongest possible terms and call on all of our partners and allies to speak out and demand the release of this courageous human rights defender and all those arbitrarily detained immediately. The Iranian people deserve a government that respects their legitimate demands and the human rights of all in Iran, not one that subjects them to prosecution in a justice system led by accused human rights violators.

And we are pleased to have a group of teachers and students from Oakton, Virginia with us today. They're in the back row. Welcome. They're visiting the State Department as part of their history course and they are here to learn about American foreign policy. So welcome, we're happy that you could join us, and – yeah, don't ask questions. Perfect, all right. (Laughter.)

Great. Questions?

QUESTION: Yeah. Robert, I mean, this is going to be for the end. I would just like to know from the consular – roughly how many Americans or people, dual American citizens they estimate – I know that there's no exact figure. You can never be exact, but like, is it tens of thousands, hundreds of – I mean, what's the population? And how much of a difference is this going to be mean with – it was only a handful of people at the embassy in Caracas anyway, so there couldn't – must have been very limited what they could do for people who needed assistance. So I mean, is – what's the actual impact on that?

And then more broadly on Venezuela, not for the CA people, although maybe: What is the – what's the current standing of this debate over TPS or some other kind of – if that's determined not to be applicable in this Venezuela situation, some other mechanism that would allow Venezuelans to stay in the U.S. beyond what Special Representative Abrams has spoken about, the 74,000 who are already in this asylum pipeline?

MR PALLADINO: Regarding American citizens, I will defer on some of the more specifics on what we're able to do to some of the folks that we have with us today, but we – I can say at the top that we will hold the Maduro regime directly responsible for the safety and welfare of United States citizens that are in Venezuela, and like our travel advisory says, we – U.S. citizens – U.S. citizens residing in or traveling in Venezuela should strongly consider departing Venezuela. That's something

we've said previously and something that we reiterate. We're pursuing all possible possibilities to secure travel options for U.S. citizens, and we will be announcing additional information for foreign government partners in the days that follow. We continue to advise American citizens to avoid demonstrations and large gatherings and to monitor local media for updates.

To repeat, the travel advisory in Venezuela remains the same, and that is Level Four, do not travel. And I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: TPS or some other –

MR PALLADINO: I don't have any updates on that issue today. I don't want to get ahead. It's something that's being looked at, I know, but I don't have any information to –

QUESTION: But what exactly is being looked at? Some alternate mechanism? Has it been – has it actually been decided at some – by – has it actually – has the administration actually decided that TPS in the case of Venezuela is not the right – is not the applicable vehicle or mechanism for –

MR PALLADINO: I don't have any policy announcements to make on that. It's just something – I don't have any policy announcements to make.

QUESTION: I have a follow-up just – I don't know if I didn't hear properly. Are you saying you're pursuing all options as to get U.S. citizens out of Venezuela?

MR PALLADINO: No, no. That's something we do to help facilitate, not –

QUESTION: To facilitate.

MR PALLADINO: Yes, there's no – yes.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Correct.

Michelle.

QUESTION: So with the situation deteriorating enough to now pull everybody out of the embassy, do you feel it necessary to put out additional information to all American citizens there, or do you feel like the "do not travel" sort of stands for itself?

MR PALLADINO: Well, we routinely look at our travel information, and given that circumstances are changing, I would not think it – I would think – I would expect that additional information would be updated and provided in short order. I don't think it's going to change from Travel Four, that said, okay – from Level Four.

QUESTION: Yeah, the advice that you – the advice that you last gave to –

that you strongly, whatever that exact wording is, urge them to –

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, “do not travel” was our – that’s our advice, okay?

QUESTION: That’s – okay, that’s – but for those who are already there, I mean, the current language you said is, like, strongly suggest that they leave or something to that effect. Is that language from the alert going to be updated to, like, get out now?

MR PALLADINO: That’s – I don’t want to preview what’s being done. It’s being looked at and reviewed, and in short order – safety of American citizens is one of the highest priorities of the State Department. It’s something that we are constantly reviewing, and as situations on the ground change, we review these things regularly and update them.

Carol.

QUESTION: Robert, after the American diplomats leave, will the local staff remain or will they – will they still be going into work and maybe protecting the property? And if not, will you be giving things like any remaining food and water that you have to them to take home, or can you tell me what –

MR PALLADINO: I don’t have any additional information on that topic.

(Inaudible.) Please, go ahead, Christina.

QUESTION: Thanks. Can you give us – can you give us some guidance on when we might see the evacuation start? I’m hearing the end of the week. Does that sound about right? Is there an evacuation plan in the works? Can you give us, like, an update on where that is? Commercial? Are we going to send transports down?

MR PALLADINO: We’re not going to get – the Secretary last night in his statement and tweet indicated this week, and we’re not going to get into details on when exactly or how exactly that will be transpiring.

QUESTION: And just a follow-up, my colleagues asked a couple times but it wasn’t quite answered – Mr. Abrams didn’t quite answer the question when he was asked whether there had been some sort of new specific threat from the Maduro regime. He kept saying we don’t trust them to protect our diplomats, but can you say definitively, yes or no, if there had been some sort of new threat in the last couple hours that prompted this decision by the Secretary?

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing beyond what Mr. Abrams said. I don’t.

Please.

QUESTION: Did you accept the premise of her first question, which was that this is an evacuation, or did you just not –

MR PALLADINO: This is – no. This is – I did not. This is – we’re

withdrawing U.S. personnel.

QUESTION: Right, but do you consider it to be an evacuation?

MR PALLADINO: No.

QUESTION: Are you going in – is this Saigon '75?

MR PALLADINO: We're withdrawing our personnel in an orderly fashion. The security of our people is paramount.

Please. Said, please.

QUESTION: Robert, thank you. Change topics. Okay.

QUESTION: Could I just have one real quick question? Will the embassy be closed? Will that be the way to describe it? How would you describe –

MR PALLADINO: I would not say it's closed, no.

QUESTION: How – when –

MR PALLADINO: I would say – the legal status of the embassy – I would say we're withdrawing from the embassy, but I believe closure is a matter of legality, and that's not something that we have decided. So this is interim, I would say.

QUESTION: One more on Venezuela?

MR PALLADINO: Said, please go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. Changing topics, very quickly, Israel is set to deport the Human Rights Watch director for the West Bank because of a tweet, I guess. He's a U.S. citizen. Are you aware of that? And what will you do to help him stay and conduct his job?

MR PALLADINO: We are aware of those reports, and yes, the answer is –

QUESTION: And what are you offering him? Aid? Help? Has he come – has he gone to the – not the consulate but the embassy?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not aware of anything like that, Said.

QUESTION: Okay. All right. Let me move on to another –

QUESTION: Well, wait a second. Let's stay.

MR PALLADINO: Sure.

QUESTION: Just are you talking to the Israelis about this? Would you – or is it – is it that you come to the defense of American citizens any – in all countries except Israel?

MR PALLADINO: That is not true. The United States has no greater –

QUESTION: Okay. Well –

MR PALLADINO: Let me finish – has no greater responsibility, priority than the safety of American citizens, the welfare of our citizens overseas. In this particular case, I'm not going to talk about specifics. But I can say, as a matter of general principle, we value freedom of expression, even in cases where we do not agree with the political views espoused, and I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: But did he –

QUESTION: Okay, let me just follow-up –

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead.

QUESTION: – on another issue on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. The government signed agreement, the Israeli Government, to build 23,000 housing units in occupied East Jerusalem. And also, there's been such an uptick in settlements and so on. I know that you stick to your policy, but has there been – I mean, past administrations would issue concern from time to time, say, "We're concerned about the acceleration of settlement building," and so on. What is your position on this latest thing, since we haven't heard anything from this administration on settlements?

MR PALLADINO: The President has made his position on settlements clear. This is something we've talked about before. The Israeli Government has also made clear that its intent is to adopt a policy regarding settlement activity that takes into account the President's concerns, that takes those into consideration. And that's something that we welcome.

QUESTION: And do you think that they have – I mean since this President's been in office for the past two years, that they took his concern into consideration?

MR PALLADINO: We welcome the Israeli Government's decision to take the President's views into consideration, and I would just reiterate what the President has said repeatedly, that the administration is committed to pursuing a comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

QUESTION: Robert?

MR PALLADINO: Laurie.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: The Western press yesterday ran headlines like, "Iran's Rouhani in Iraq for His Third Visit to Offset U.S. Sanctions." Is it still your position that Iraq has to abide by the Iran sanctions?

MR PALLADINO: As far as sanctions go, as you know, a waiver was granted to Iraq to allow it to continue to pay for its electricity imports from Iran. And that has helped Iraq limit electricity shortages in the south since the re-imposition of sanctions that took place in November. And we're going to continue to discuss Iran-related sanctions with our partners in Iraq to ensure continued compliance. And finally, any decisions related to those sanctions waivers, they're at the discretion of the Secretary of State, and I would leave it there.

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: And there are two issues in specific. One has to do with banking and reports that Iraq and Iran will establish a joint bank, which will allow Iran to circumvent sanctions. And the second has to do with a railroad from Iran to Basra, which would allow Iran to send military supplies to its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Is that compatible with your understanding of sanctions?

MR PALLADINO: Laurie, I don't have any information on these proposals that you're identifying today, so I'm going to refrain from talking on them.

QUESTION: Robert –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Yep. Let's go –

QUESTION: Could you give us your reaction, the U.S. reaction, on President Bouteflika of Algeria not to seek a fifth term but to stay – to postpone the election and to stay in power, at least until the end of the year and probably after that?

MR PALLADINO: We support efforts in Algeria to chart a new path forward based on dialogue that reflects the will of all Algerians and their aspirations for a peaceful and prosperous future.

QUESTION: That's all?

MR PALLADINO: Well, we respect the rights of the Algerians to assemble and peacefully express their views, and we're closely monitoring reports that Algeria's elections have been postponed. We support the right of the Algerian people to vote in a free and fair election, as we do around the world.

QUESTION: You think it's a good thing that he's not seeking a fifth term?

MR PALLADINO: We support efforts in Algeria to chart a new path forward, and I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: Robert?

MR PALLADINO: Please. Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Ambassador Khalilzad tweeted a short while ago that they're – the – the two parties agreed in – in draft to some sort of proposal on the U.S. withdrawal as well as the Taliban providing safe haven in Afghanistan to terror groups. Can you share any more details on what that draft looks like, whether it's – there's a timetable now on U.S. withdrawal?

MR PALLADINO: I did see those tweets. Special Representative Khalilzad and a team representing agencies across the United States Government concluded today talks with the Taliban delegation in Doha, and that's what he was tweeting about. These have been the most substantive talks with the Taliban to date. We've received reports back from Special Representative Khalilzad that they've had meaningful progress. The Taliban have agreed that peace will require both sides to fully address four core issues, and they are: counterterrorism assurances, troop withdrawal, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire.

In this round of talks, we were able to move to agreement in draft on the first two principles – counterterrorism assurances and troop withdrawal. And when that agreement, in draft, is finalized, the Taliban and an inclusive Afghan negotiating team that includes the Afghan Government and other Afghans will begin intra-Afghan negotiations of a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire.

And I'd also add that Special Representative Khalilzad will be returning to Washington. He'll be consulting with Secretary Pompeo as well as the interagency and also partner countries in this process. Much work remains to be done. As Special Representative Khalilzad has said before, "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed."

QUESTION: So you can't share any details then of what was agreed to in that draft?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not going to be able to go into details on the results of the just concluded and ongoing talks.

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: Second part of this though, as you said and as the ambassador tweeted, once this agreement in draft is finalized, then those intra-Afghan party talks will begin. Is that a commitment from the Taliban that they will engage, once this agreement is finalized, with the Afghan Government?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not going to be able to go into more details on the agreement itself, because they're private conversations, and we want to give the parties time to work things out and to work out these issues in

private. But intra-Afghan dialogue that includes the Afghan Government as well as the Taliban and other Afghans encourages – is something that we're very much focused on and remains part of what we're pursuing.

QUESTION: Can I ask you, on a separate topic, your statement at the beginning on Iran and the sentencing of a women's rights activist: Why didn't you issue a similar statement when Saudi Arabia arrested women rights activists there, including a State Department International Women of Courage Award winner, Samar Badawi?

MR PALLADINO: We've – I mean, this particular case really was barbaric. Many others have spoken out on this as well. Thirty-eight – this is a – basically, a lawyer representing women clients that's been sentenced to 38 years and 148 lashes. That kind of barbarism is something that must be called out.

In regards to other countries, Secretary Pompeo – we've spoken about – we speak about human rights, frankly, when we engage – when we travel the world engaging partners, allies. We do this regularly. It's something that we stand for. It's something that we'll continue to do.

QUESTION: But why not do it from the podium in a similar fashion?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not sure what specific case you're referring to. We choose different ways to communicate our – to promote the value – human rights values. It's something we're going to continue to be outspoken about and we raise this regularly with all partners.

Sure, Janne. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Robert. On South Korea, not North Korea this time.

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: Okay. The – reported by the South Korean Channel A News, the former unification minister of South Korea, Jeong Se-hyun, said that the United States National Security Advisor John Bolton is a very unlucky person. I think the insulting language about John Bolton is a (inaudible) about – against the American people. How do U.S. react diplomatically?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, I haven't seen that report and I'm – I have no reaction. Okay.

QUESTION: Because he blaming about Hanoi talks, so John Bolton made the decisions break down this U.S.-North Korea summit. Can you find that out?

MR PALLADINO: I would just say that the lead negotiator for the United States of America is the President of the United States, and that's the President's decision.

QUESTION: Robert –

QUESTION: That's President's decision. Okay. Thank you.

QUESTION: Can I ask about the Ethiopian Airlines crash? It's my understanding that Ethiopia has a lot of control over the investigation, at least at this point. Is the State Department working with Ethiopian authorities to make sure U.S. investigators have access to black boxes?

MR PALLADINO: In response to the Government of Ethiopia's request, we have sent a team from the United States National Transportation Safety Board. That includes the Federal Aviation Administration personnel as well. And they're assisting in the investigation to determine the cause of death. Officials from the United States are also coordinating with INTERPOL and Ethiopian authorities in support of efforts to identify the remains of victims. These are some of the steps that the United States Government is taking to assist, and we – again, we extend our deepest condolences to all those families and the friends of those that lost their lives on that tragic accident.

QUESTION: On Syria, Robert –

MR PALLADINO: Please, right there.

QUESTION: Thank you. If we can move to North Korea. Given the UN panel of experts' findings on North Korea and sanctions, is the administration concerned that North – that the sanctions regime is not being enforced?

MR PALLADINO: We made progress in Hanoi at the summit, and although we did not reach an agreement with North Korea, we were able to exchange detailed positions and to narrow the gap on a number of issues. Also made clear the United States expects complete denuclearization before sanctions relief. So I'd say that in response to your question, the United States and the international community have a shared understanding of what final, fully verified denuclearization entails, as well as meaningful progress, what that will constitute, what that goal looks like. And we remain ready to move forward. And I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: Can I just follow quickly? Does the administration believe that there should be more economic pressure applied on North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: We remain ready to engage North Korea. We are looking – I'm sorry, what was your question again? Increased? So we – our policy's been explained many times; the President explained that these sanctions are the world's sanctions and that they will be maintained until denuclearization is achieved. And I'll leave it at that for now.

Let's go – last question. Michel, please.

QUESTION: Yeah. You tweeted on Syria and building a statue of Hafez Assad in Daraa. Can you make the statement on camera, please?

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry, can you say it one more time, Michel?

QUESTION: On Syria. You tweeted on building a statue of Hafez Assad in Daraa. Do you remember?

MR PALLADINO: When was this?

QUESTION: Before noon today.

MR PALLADINO: Before noon. Of course. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: If you can make the statement on camera, please.

MR PALLADINO: (Laughter.) And what is your question? Help me establish –

QUESTION: If you can make the statement on camera, please.

MR PALLADINO: I need the tweet in front of me. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Okay. I will retweet it. You can –

MR PALLADINO: All right, I'll do it afterwards. If you want me to read the tweet, I'd be happy to do that. All right. All right.

QUESTION: Quick question on Israel?

MR PALLADINO: Shri, go ahead. Oh, I'm sorry, not Shri. Shri, go ahead. There's your hand there.

QUESTION: I wanted to know if you have an update on the exemption from Iran sanctions for India on oil purchases. It's been six months since they were granted, and I think the foreign secretary is – Gokhale is scheduled to discuss them with his U.S. counterparts.

And a second question: Is the U.S. concerned that China might block the UNSC 1267 listing request for Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar? Because Beijing made some comments yesterday that would suggest that China was potentially going to put a hold on it or block it.

MR PALLADINO: As you point out, Foreign Secretary Gokhale is in town for high-level meetings this week at the State Department. He met with Secretary Pompeo yesterday. He's got meetings at the White House, Department of Defense, as well as on Capitol Hill on a range of diplomatic and security issues.

Regarding Masood Azhar, the United States and India work closely together on counterterrorism efforts, and that includes at the United Nations. And our views on Jaish-e-Mohammed and its founder are well known. JEM is a United Nations-designated terrorist group. Azhar is the founder and the leader of JEM, and he meets the criteria for designation by the United Nations. JEM has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks and is a threat to regional stability and peace.

Now, the United Nations sanctions committee, their deliberations are

confidential, and as such we don't comment on specific matters, but we'll continue to work with the sanctions committee to ensure that the designation list is updated and accurate.

Regarding your specific question on China, I would say that the United States and China share a mutual interest in achieving regional stability and peace, and that a failure to designate Azhar would run counter to this goal.

And with that, we'll end.

QUESTION: The National Security Advisor John Bolton welcomed the foreign – Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi. Do you have any readout of that?

MR PALLADINO: The national security advisor works at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and I'd have to refer you to the White House for a readout on his call, but thanks. I don't have a readout for you.

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

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