

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – March 5, 2019

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:55 p.m. EST

MR PALLADINO: Hi, everybody. I've got water.

A couple things to start with today. So tomorrow, Kirsten Madison – she's our assistant secretary of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs – she's going to be addressing the U.S. state attorneys general, who are meeting in Washington this week. Assistant Secretary Madison will be discussing the State Department's role in combating transnational crime, and this includes the flow of deadly illicit opioids from overseas into the United States.

Now, two of the key ways that the State Department keeps Americans safe are using diplomacy and foreign assistance to combat international crime, and that includes opioid trafficking, transnational gang activity, and corruption. So our Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs partners with the National Association of Attorneys General to train prosecutors and other foreign legal practitioners in countries that are critical to U.S. national security. Such trainings help partner nations become more effective at fighting the transnational crime that threatens their citizens as well as Americans.

Secondly, I am very pleased to announce that on Thursday at 10:00 A.M., March 7th, Secretary of State Pompeo will host the International Women of Courage Awards. The ceremony will feature special remarks by the First Lady of the United States. This year marks the 13th anniversary of the International Women of Courage Awards and it will honor 10 women from around the world who have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for human rights and gender equality, and often at great personal risk. This year our awardees are, from Bangladesh, Razia

Sultana; from Burma, Naw K'nyaw Paw; from Djibouti, Moumina Houssein Darar; from Egypt, Magda Gobran-Gorgi; from Jordan, Colonel Khalida Khalaf Hanna al-Twal; from Ireland, Sister Orla Treacy; from Montenegro, Olivera Lakic; from Peru, Flor de Maria Vega Zapata; from Sri Lanka, Marini de Livera; and from Tanzania, Anna Aloys Henga.

The awards demonstrate the United States commitment to gender equality, social inclusion, and advancing the global status of women and girls from all backgrounds across sectors as part of our foreign policy. The United States firmly believes the global prosperity, security, and stability is not achievable without the full economic, social, and political participation of women and girls.

QUESTION: That's everywhere?

MR PALLADINO: Everywhere.

QUESTION: Including certain countries in the Middle East?

MR PALLADINO: That includes the entire globe.

And we have a personnel announcement. We are delighted to welcome back Ambassador Philip Reeker to Washington later this month. On March 18th, he will become the principal deputy assistant secretary and acting assistant secretary of the Department of State's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. Now, Ambassador Reeker is a career Foreign Service officer who's currently the civilian deputy commander at the U.S. European Command in Stuttgart. He's previously served as the consul general in Milan; as the deputy assistant secretary for the Balkans, Central Europe, as well as Holocaust issues; as the United States ambassador to what is now North Macedonia; and – the only blight on his entire professional career – he was previously the department's deputy spokesperson. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: So there is hope for your career yet, Robert. Hope for your career.

MR PALLADINO: We will hope – we will put that to the side. Other than that –

QUESTION: It's not the dead end you thought it would be.

MR PALLADINO: It's – other than that, there is hope, I guess, for Palladino. I don't know. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: We have faith in you.

MR PALLADINO: Thank you.

And finally, the United States applauds the people of Venezuela for their actions to create a peaceful, democratic transition, and congratulates Interim President Juan Guaido on his successful diplomatic efforts in the region and safe return to Venezuela. However, we have

noticed in news coverage that some outlets are incorrectly referring to Juan Guaidó as the opposition leader or the self-proclaimed president. Neither is correct.

A few basic facts: The National Assembly remains the only legitimate and democratically elected institution in Venezuela. Juan Guaidó was elected president of the National Assembly on January 5th, 2019, and on January 10th, Maduro usurped the presidency.

Therefore, the president of the National Assembly and relying on Venezuela's constitution – as president of the National Assembly, and relying on Venezuela's constitution, Juan Guaidó became interim president of Venezuela on January 23rd. Millions of Americans and more than 50 countries recognize Juan Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela. He has appointed and credentialed ambassadors to international organizations and the United States and numerous other democratic nations and other democratic nations.

So to refer to Juan Guaidó as anything but interim president falls into the narrative of a dictator who has usurped the position of the presidency and led Venezuela into the humanitarian, political, and economic crisis that exists today. The international community must unite behind Interim President Juan Guaidó and the Venezuelan National Assembly and support the peaceful restoration of democracy in Venezuela.

That's it for the top.

QUESTION: Let me get this straight. You're complaining because news outlets are calling him by a title that you don't think that he should have?

MR PALLADINO: Not a complaint. Pointing out. Just trying to correct.

QUESTION: Well, it sounds like a complaint to me, and that seems pretty weak-sauce. I don't understand what your problem is. I mean –

MR PALLADINO: He's the interim president, and we don't want to –

QUESTION: Well, you consider him to be the interim president, and as you say, 50 other countries outside of – recognize him as the interim president. But there are more than 190 members of the United Nations. So your 50 countries is not even close to half of that. Is that correct?

MR PALLADINO: We are supporting the constitution of Venezuela and the people of Venezuela. With the – we're supporting the Venezuelan people here. And so the United States – it's time to act in support of democracy and –

QUESTION: And you think that news coverage calling him the legitimate leader, the president, is going to encourage more countries to recognize him?

MR PALLADINO: We don't feed into rhetoric of the current dictator.

QUESTION: Okay. Listen, I have one very brief thing, but then I want to get into a policy question, and that is: Have you – you're aware, obviously, of the helicopter crash in Kenya and the deaths of the four Americans there. Can you give us a very – well, whatever you can, detail in terms of the State Department's involvement with the families? And then I have a really brief kind of policy question.

MR PALLADINO: Sure.

QUESTION: It's unrelated to that.

MR PALLADINO: Sorry. Let me – I've got to flip for a second here.

QUESTION: I can do the policy one first, if you want.

MR PALLADINO: Well, just give me one second. Let me – here it is. Thanks.

Okay. So you're referring to the helicopter crash in Kenya. And we are – in this regard, we are in communication with the Kenyan authorities on the matter, and we can confirm that four United States citizens were killed in the crash. We can confirm the names of the four deceased, if that is information that is helpful. Is that something that you need, Matt, or –

QUESTION: Sure. Well, I mean, I think we already have it.

MR PALLADINO: You have that? Okay.

QUESTION: I'm more interested in knowing what exactly you guys, the embassy is doing for the families and what kind of contact there is.

MR PALLADINO: We would say – we're in sincerest – we'd offer our sincerest condolences to the family at the top, and all the friends of those who were killed in this crash. We are providing all appropriate consular assistance to the families of these U.S. citizens, and I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Well, in that case, does it mean helping recover the bodies and getting them back to the United States?

MR PALLADINO: That is – as a general matter, that is something that consular officials do anytime that an American citizen passes away overseas. It's –

QUESTION: And you don't have any reason to believe this is anything other than an accident, do you?

MR PALLADINO: We don't have any information to that effect, no.

QUESTION: Okay. Very briefly, a policy question. Yesterday you guys got a letter from three House committees, once again bringing up this – the request for to either speak with the interpreter who was present during

President Trump's meeting with President Putin in Finland, or – and/or notes and communications regarding that. I saw the answer that you – that's – that the Department provided yesterday, which is basically we got the letter, but we're not going to talk about our cooperation with a different agency. I would like to know, because when Heather was up here, when this first came up last year immediately after the summit, she didn't really give a full answer. And so I want to know: Is it the department's practice, policy, to make available to relevant congressional committees its staff – interpreters, or the interpreters' notes, whatever – to – is it standard practice? Or is this something that has been denied in the past? Or has it never come up?

MR PALLADINO: Matt, it's a fair question, but I got – I just don't know the answer to that today. I don't have that answer for you. But I will get you an answer on that.

QUESTION: Can someone check to find out?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah.

QUESTION: I'd just like to know if it's ever – if you're – if the building, in its vast history –

MR PALLADINO: Yeah.

QUESTION: – has – if there's precedence for agreeing to a request like this.

MR PALLADINO: I mean – right.

QUESTION: Or if there's precedence for denying –

MR PALLADINO: I believe the answer to no, but I want to look into it, okay, before I give you –

QUESTION: No, as in it's never been asked for?

MR PALLADINO: As in it's not been brought previously.

QUESTION: So this is uncharted territory –

MR PALLADINO: That is – that – I want to look into it and get you a proper answer, okay.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. Please.

QUESTION: Robert.

MR PALLADINO: Go right ahead, Lesley.

QUESTION: I wanted to raise something yesterday that the Secretary said in his address to students, in which he spoke about the Taliban as

terrorists in Afghanistan, at a time when a team from the U.S. is in negotiations with these – with the Taliban. I've looked on the terrorist list; I don't see them as a terrorist, listed as a terrorist organization. So has something changed here in which the Secretary believes that they are terrorists? And then what does it say about the U.S. negotiating with terrorists, something that it's said before that it would never do?

MR PALLADINO: We – right now, as you point out, we are in the process – meeting with the empowered Taliban negotiation led by Mullah Baradar, and that's taking place in Doha, and that's being led by Special Representative Khalilzad. And that's going on right now, and he – we have several agencies that are part of that from the United States Government. These discussions are ongoing, and what they're focusing on are the four interconnected issues that are going to compose any future agreement, and those four are counterterrorism, troop withdrawal, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a ceasefire.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: So – no, well, I'm – I mean, are they terrorists? Or did he misspeak?

MR PALLADINO: I – the Secretary's words speak for themselves, and I'm not going to go beyond that. I would say we are very focused on bringing better results to what's going on in that part of the world, and that's where our focus currently is. And we'll stay focused on that.

QUESTION: So I assume then that he's – that, well, he didn't misspeak, because you're not saying that he misspoke. And also he says in the transcript that he can travel there in a couple of weeks and help move it along a little bit. Is he planning on meeting with the Taliban?

MR PALLADINO: I have no travel to announce today. Talks are ongoing. More work needs to be done. We're focused on this. We have private diplomatic conversations that are occurring, and we want to give all the parties time to work out these issues. And so, we'll see, and if we have anything more to announce I'll be sure to let you know.

QUESTION: More on those interviews?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: More on interviews?

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR PALLADINO: Please. Go ahead, Michelle.

QUESTION: Quick question on his interview. In one of his interviews, he just said that Hoda Muthana would present an enormous risk to the United States if she returned and if those like her return. What kind of risk would she present if she were to be brought back and prosecuted for her

crimes?

MR PALLADINO: Yesterday, there was a legal decision – let me –

QUESTION: Yeah, they just decided not to fast track it.

MR PALLADINO: Correct. It was –

QUESTION: But what kind of – but if people like her – I mean, ISIS brides or ISIS fighters, some of whom are U.S. citizens – if they're brought back – as he said, others like her would present an enormous risk. What would that risk be, if people like her are brought back and prosecuted here?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. Avowed terrorists returning to the United States would – could present issues. So that's why Secretary Pompeo has been quite clear in this regard and that we're going to continue to take all lawful measures to ensure that she does not enter the United States. That said, there is a legal case ongoing right now, and that's a separate issue. And we're pleased with the district court's decision yesterday, and we're going to continue to vigorously defend this case.

QUESTION: And the stance that the government has taken on this particular case, could that encourage other countries to disavow ISIS fighters or others who came from those countries if there are similar issues or questions? I mean, the U.S. is essentially rendering this woman stateless. She was born here; she grew up here. You could argue that she belongs to the U.S. or she came – she came from the U.S. So isn't – if the – if your stance has been to encourage other countries to take back their people from ISIS territory, isn't this encouraging them to do the opposite?

MR PALLADINO: That remains our policy. This particular case is something completely different, and we don't bear a responsibility here. We have been clear that this is not a United States citizen, nor is it anyone entitled to U.S. citizenship. Beyond that, I don't want to talk any further about this case because legal proceedings are ongoing.

QUESTION: Can I just ask –

QUESTION: On Afghanistan –

QUESTION: – if an avowed terrorist with undisputed American citizenship comes back to the U.S. from Syria or wherever, and is in custody and is prosecuted, how – what is the – what's the threat?

MR PALLADINO: I don't want to go into hypothetical situations. If and whether –

QUESTION: Hold on a second. The hypothetical was raised by the Secretary, as was pointed out by Michelle.

MR PALLADINO: Now, what is the hypothetical here?

QUESTION: Well, that she and others like her would pose a risk by coming back to the United States. So what is the risk if someone is coming back to the U.S. and is being prosecuted here and likely to spend a lengthy, lengthy amount of time in prison?

MR PALLADINO: For an American citizen, we have a legal system to deal with these issues. And so –

QUESTION: Well, I know, but what is the risk?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not saying that there is a risk. For someone –

QUESTION: All right, okay. Never mind then.

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Sure. Please.

QUESTION: But I mean, on that, we've been listening to you guys for the last couple months, and I asked you this question when you were here last time, and you said, "Our policy in this regard would be to repatriate them." This is Americans or potential American citizens. "It's what we call on other countries to do with foreign fighters" – people – "in Syria too."

So as you are going around trying to get other countries to follow this policy, doesn't it appear to be kind of a "Do what we say, not what we do?" Doesn't that undermine this policy you're trying to sell as you try to convince European allies especially to take back these foreign fighters coming out of Syria?

MR PALLADINO: Not in a case where the person in question is not an American citizen, so this is different.

QUESTION: Robert?

MR PALLADINO: Please, right here. Francesco.

QUESTION: On Afghanistan again. As you said, these new talks have been going on for a week now. How would you characterize them? Are there important progress being made? And how long do you think you can continue doing these talks without the Afghan Government being included? Did you set a deadline when you think the intra-Afghan dialogue should start?

MR PALLADINO: No deadlines to announce now. And these are – and I don't really want to go into much more detail. These talks are ongoing. Special Representative Khalilzad is engaging on this on a daily basis right now, and progress is being made. So I'll leave it at that. More

work to be done, obviously, but we'll stay focused on that.

QUESTION: When his trip was announced, it said that we was going to be out there through the end of February. It's now – we're now in March. So is it – it's open-ended – his trip?

MR PALLADINO: You're – I don't have the media note in front of me, but it sounds like his trip's been extended. I don't want to read into that, but some – listen, when we travel, we have a notion quite often of what's going to take place when we travel. Many of you have been on trips. You know that what we think we're going to do sometimes changes and sometimes changes right at the last minute. And so I wouldn't go so far as to say open-ended, but this is the nature of diplomacy. Opportunities present themselves; we change course, we correct, et cetera.

Rich, you had a question?

QUESTION: Venezuela okay?

QUESTION: Robert?

MR PALLADINO: Venezuela? Okay, sure.

QUESTION: The measure announced yesterday in regards to property in Cuba, how much does the Cuban Government support of the Venezuelan Government – or one of them – how much does that play into the Secretary's decision?

MR PALLADINO: I'd say quite a bit. I mean, Cuba's support for the Maduro regime has been significant, and therefore part of our overarching policy is to squeeze Cuba as appropriate, and we would like to see democracy return to Venezuela.

QUESTION: Robert, on –

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, please.

QUESTION: And Robert, just one quick follow-up?

MR PALLADINO: Sure.

QUESTION: You have sanctioned – or the United States has sanctioned – the state oil company. Is there a concern that you are sort of running out of options to press the Maduro regime, and there's not as much to hold over the Maduro regime's head as far as potential future sanctions or measures the United States or world community would take to usher him out? And is there a concern that it's reaching a static point or there's a loss of momentum for the opposition or the Guaido presidency?

MR PALLADINO: We're optimistic. I think we're up to – I think I've got the latest numbers – up to 54 countries have now recognized Juan Guaido as interim president. The humanitarian response global has been

overwhelming. That's something we're going to continue to push. And we call – now is the time to act in support of democracy. We think momentum is good. We're going to continue to look at ways that we can support Venezuela's humanitarian needs on one side, and we're going to continue to ask other nations to do the same.

There has been positive news recently of some Venezuelan military and security service personnel standing on the right side of history and recognizing Juan Guaido as interim president. So we're going to continue pushing. We're going to continue pushing. And I'll leave it there.

QUESTION: Since you just mentioned the number again, Robert, 54, that's only about a quarter of countries in the world, is that right?

MR PALLADINO: You know the number of countries. But we've gotten major support in the Western hemisphere, and I would just point that out, as well as Europe. And if we look at the democracies, we're doing pretty well as well. Okay? All right.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: North Korea?

QUESTION: India?

QUESTION: North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: Michel, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, I have two questions. Secretary Pompeo has announced yesterday that he will be traveling to the Middle East next week to Kuwait, Lebanon, and Israel. What's the purpose of this visit?

MR PALLADINO: We haven't – I don't have the details today to announce, Michel, but I know for Kuwait, if you remember, on our most recent Middle East trip we had to curtail that trip by a day, so this is very much a continuation of that previous trip. There is a strategic dialogue that we'll be pursuing, but I don't want to get much ahead on the rest of the itinerary. That's something that we'll be announcing soon. Okay?

QUESTION: My second question on Algeria. Do you have any comment on the demonstrations there?

MR PALLADINO: I think I do, but you're going to have to give me a second.

QUESTION: Well, it should be in the front, right? A, Algeria? Right after Afghanistan, no?

QUESTION: I think they have binders, right?

MR PALLADINO: I've got –

QUESTION: Albania, Algeria.

MR PALLADINO: I go by regions, Matt, and then I've got a separate folder just for you is what I call – all right, (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Which also probably begins with an A. (Laughter.)

MR PALLADINO: So we're monitoring these protests that are happening in Algeria. We're going to continue to do that. And I would say that the United States supports the Algerian people and their right to peacefully assemble.

Michel, all right?

QUESTION: Following on the Secretary's visit, is it – I mean, considering that the Israeli election is next month, a month from today, is it likely that he would go there before the election? Does that send some sort of a message?

MR PALLADINO: No message. Israel is an ally. We're not going to get involved in the domestic politics of another country.

Please, Lalit.

QUESTION: So – no, no, no, let me just follow up on the embassy, please?

MR PALLADINO: We'll go to Lalit. I'm going to jump.

QUESTION: No, I have – and the consulate.

QUESTION: Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second. You're not going to get involved in the domestic politics of another country when that country is Israel. What about Venezuela, huh? Any –

MR PALLADINO: We're supporting the Venezuelan people and their constitutional –

QUESTION: Any involvement there?

MR PALLADINO: Lalit, let's go.

QUESTION: Excuse me. I asked about the consulate. The consulate?

MR PALLADINO: I'll come back to you. Okay, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead. Let's – sorry. I mean, you're next, Lalit, all right?

QUESTION: Obviously –

MR PALLADINO: One, two.

QUESTION: I appreciate it, Lalit.

MR PALLADINO: There we go. All right. Go ahead, Said.

QUESTION: You closed the consulate in Jerusalem yesterday.

MR PALLADINO: Right.

QUESTION: After 175 years of operation. But you're saying the decision was driven by our global efforts to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our diplomatic engagements and operations. Could you really explain what that means? What does that mean?

MR PALLADINO: It means exactly what it says. We've got – this is an internal administrative decision about how we staff and organize our representation overseas, and that's exactly what it is. The –

QUESTION: Have you done this anywhere in the world? I mean, have you – can you cite an example where you have actually closed down a consulate, let's say, in St. Petersburg and say – if you have one – and then make it part of the embassy? I mean –

MR PALLADINO: I mean, we're talking here about multiple missions within the same city, so there – efficiencies are definitely to be had. But I mean, we do have other examples where administrative functions are shared within – I mean, you could look at Rome, for example, where we have multiple missions – to the Holy See, to the Republic of Italy, to the FAO – where efficiencies are gained by colocation. And that is something that we do –

QUESTION: But they're not part of the same embassy, are they? Your mission in the Rome, I mean – to the Holy See and so on.

MR PALLADINO: But we have one – correct. This is –

QUESTION: Okay. Let me ask you a technical question. I mean, Palestinians have gone to the consulate to get visas, get grants, get all kinds of things – go to school, whatever. How are they supposed to do this now? Because the Israelis restrict the movements of Palestinians to Jerusalem. It will not – they will not allow them to go as they please to Jerusalem. How – what should they do?

MR PALLADINO: All services that were previously provided continue to be provided. There's been no change in the underlying functions. There's continuity in both the diplomatic activity, what is provided by consular services, and that hasn't changed.

QUESTION: Robert, you can say that this is an internal administrative decision, but frankly, it's not. I won't try and argue the point with you here. I have a technical question about this. What happens to the building?

MR PALLADINO: The building we continue to house and use.

QUESTION: As what?

MR PALLADINO: We have – the Palestinian Affairs unit is now stood up

within that building, and –

QUESTION: So – and it will stay there? It's not –

MR PALLADINO: Correct. Correct.

QUESTION: So, in other words, this building will be – it's just – it's going to be used for the same purpose as it was on – last week, it's just going to have a different name? And it won't be run by a consul general who reports directly back to us.

MR PALLADINO: Correct. That's correct.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Chain of command now reports to the United States ambassador.

QUESTION: Is it going to become – is it going to become a residence for the American ambassador in Israel?

MR PALLADINO: I don't know. I don't have any information on that, Said.

QUESTION: Because there are reports that this is –

MR PALLADINO: Don't have – I promised Lalit.

QUESTION: Turkey?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. Yes, go ahead.

QUESTION: Sorry, thank you. I have two questions on South Asia, India and Pakistan. What is U.S. assessment of the situation between the two countries now? And also, can you give us a sense or describe in detail what efforts the Secretary himself made in calming the situation? He spoke to the two leaders in the India, Pakistan earlier this week, and he spoke about it yesterday too in Iowa.

MR PALLADINO: Right, right. Our position – the position of the United States is we continue to urge both sides to continue to take steps to de-escalate the situation, and that includes through direct communication. And we believe strongly that further military activity will exacerbate the situation. So we reiterate our call for Pakistan to abide by its United Nations Security Council commitments to deny terrorists sanctuary and to block their access to funds.

Regarding your second question – this happened in Hanoi last week, actually – Secretary Pompeo led diplomatic engagement directly, and that played an essential role in de-escalating the tensions between the two sides. He spoke with leaders in both countries, and that included the Indian Minister of External Affairs Swaraj, National Security Advisor Doval, and Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi.

Since – I'll stop there.

QUESTION: Can I follow up?

MR PALLADINO: Is there any follow-up?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Is there a follow-up on that?

QUESTION: Robert, follow – follow please?

QUESTION: Right here.

QUESTION: Follow-up.

MR PALLADINO: Oh, I'm sorry. Please, go ahead, Lalit.

QUESTION: So has he made any further calls since coming here after that?

MR PALLADINO: He hasn't. But what I can say is we've been in continuous – high-level contact has continued. That's with both governments via our embassies in New Delhi and Islamabad, as well as with the Indian and Pakistani embassies here in Washington. That has been sustained, that's been ongoing, and – sometimes we do public diplomacy and sometimes there's a time for private diplomacy, and there's a lot of private diplomacy that's going on right now.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: One quick thing. India has found use of F-16 by Pakistan. State Department and the U.S. embassy in Islamabad said it is looking for more information on that. Is there potential misuse of F-16 by Pakistan, and what information you are seeking from?

MR PALLADINO: So we've seen those reports and we're following that issue very closely. I can't confirm anything, but as a matter of policy, we don't publicly comment on the contents of bilateral agreements that we have in this regard involving U.S. defense technologies nor the communications that we have with other countries about that. So we're taking a look and we're going to continue to take a look, and I'm going to leave it at that.

QUESTION: Just one –

MR PALLADINO: Let's move on.

QUESTION: This is on State Department business.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. I'm going to go to Michelle and – I already called on you. Let's go to Laurie. Let me go to Laurie. Let me go to Laurie. We'll try to get back.

QUESTION: I have a question on Turkey's plans to purchase the S-400. How

does that stand now, and what will you do if they go ahead with that?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. We've spoken about that before here, Laurie, and the position hasn't changed. We've long made it clear we would like to work collaboratively on air and missile defense with Turkey, and we have offered opportunities for Turkey to consider Patriot among other systems over the years. We've also made it clear to Turkey that we have very serious concerns with its stated plans to proceed with the acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system.

We've clearly warned Turkey that its potential acquisition of the S-400 will result in a reassessment of Turkey's participation in the F-35 program and risk other potential future arm transfers to Turkey, as well as lead to potential sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, CAATSA, upon any government entities, private industry, or individuals that are involved in such a transaction.

QUESTION: Again, if I could ask you about the latest on Syria, you're leaving – we understand there'll be 400 U.S. troops that will remain in Syria after the departure with additional forces from coalition members; is that correct?

MR PALLADINO: The White House has indicated those numbers, and I'll defer to the White House and Department of Defense on specifics. But what I will say is that a residual force of the United States military is going to remain in northeast Syria as part of a multinational force in order to prevent ISIS resurgence and to support stability and security in northeast Syria.

QUESTION: That means that there will be more troops from the international coalition that will join the U.S. forces?

MR PALLADINO: We are – the drawdown is going to continue. As previously announced, it's going to be done in a deliberate and coordinated manner. And as we transition – transition, we're going to continue to be working with our allies and partners to clear liberated areas, conduct targeted counterterrorism operations, and support stabilization efforts.

As far as – our priorities remain the same and the – and talks are ongoing with our allies about the future.

QUESTION: Robert?

QUESTION: Did you say multinational force?

QUESTION: Yeah, multinational force?

MR PALLADINO: Francesco, a follow-up on that? Yeah.

QUESTION: Yeah. When you say multinational force, what are the other nations? What pledges do you have for this force?

MR PALLADINO: We're not going into details. Talks continue. We have

nothing to announce today.

QUESTION: You don't have any pledge to announce?

MR PALLADINO: We'll go – please, thank you.

QUESTION: Thanks so much.

MR PALLADINO: Absolutely.

QUESTION: A question on Saudi Arabia. Given the case that was publicized this week of an American woman who, due to circumstances surrounding a divorce, is unable to leave Saudi Arabia, I wondered if the State Department has any concerns about the guardianship laws generally in Saudi Arabia and the effect it has on women there.

MR PALLADINO: Just speaking generally about any time an American travels overseas, they're, of course, subject to the laws of the country in which they travel, and we routinely encourage American citizens to make sure – to read what we publish and to understand the laws of the countries to which they're visiting.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, as you point out, married women, including non-Saudis, require their husbands' permission to depart the country, while unmarried women and children require the permission of their father or male guardian. So that's something that we work through.

QUESTION: And can I ask one follow-up on that on another American –

QUESTION: How does this fit in with the International Women of Courage Award?

MR PALLADINO: We continue to engage all countries on the issue of women and girls' rights, and that's something we speak forthrightly about globally when we travel.

QUESTION: Well, why can't you say in this case about Saudi Arabia, unless it's not a concern with Saudi Arabia?

MR PALLADINO: We –

QUESTION: I mean, if you're only – if all you're doing is warning American women who are married to Saudis that if they go there they might not ever be able to leave, that doesn't sound like you're trying to change their – the policy.

MR PALLADINO: We engage with the Saudi Government and all nations on these issues. It's something that we do routinely in our diplomacy. It's something that we continue to stand up for and something that is part of what we as the diplomatic corps do globally. I'll stop there.

QUESTION: On North Korea?

QUESTION: One follow-up question on that?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Robert –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Let's do one North Korea. How about one on North Korea?

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: All right. Over to Janne. She's got a North Korea. Let's see how it goes. All right.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. On United States and North Korea, Hanoi talks broke down in the last week. What are the next step in the United States – is there any plan to have the next meeting with North Korea? United States have any planned next meeting with North Korea? What do you have scheduled?

MR PALLADINO: Not yet. Not yet.

QUESTION: Not yet. But the Pompeo said – Secretary Pompeo said there will be sent a special envoy to North Korea. Do you have any plan?

MR PALLADINO: We have no travel to announce for Special Representative Biegun yet. We're – we've just returned from that trip, and we're going to regroup and we're going to drive forward.

QUESTION: So are you saying –

QUESTION: But the special –

MR PALLADINO: Keep going. One more time, Janne.

QUESTION: Yes. Special Representative Biegun were meeting with the South Korean Representative Lee Do-hoon. Do you have anything on this? Because he's arriving –

MR PALLADINO: Can you say – I'm sorry, Janne. One more time. Can you say that again?

QUESTION: South Korean Representative Lee Do-hoon will meeting with Special Representative Biegun today or tomorrow.

MR PALLADINO: Tomorrow. That will happen tomorrow.

QUESTION: Yes.

MR PALLADINO: I can confirm that that meeting will take place.

QUESTION: So they will be talking about this issue with extending –

MR PALLADINO: Of course. This is his counterpart. And so there's very close coordination with the Republic of Korea on this – in this regard.

QUESTION: So currently no plans, right?

QUESTION: Robert, when you say – sorry.

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry?

QUESTION: You don't have any plan to special envoy to –

MR PALLADINO: At this point, I've got nothing to announce.

QUESTION: All right. Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: No, absolutely not.

QUESTION: When you say that –

QUESTION: So when he was in Iowa, he said in the next couple weeks – he said hoped to have someone – I hope to have a team in Pyongyang headed over there in the next couple weeks.

MR PALLADINO: He says "hope." He says "hope," and we do hope. We want to move this forward, absolutely. But I've got nothing to announce today. And the Secretary is expressing where we want to go. We think we've made progress in Hanoi and we're going to operate from that. We're going to push forward.

QUESTION: So are you saying that there hasn't been State Department contact with any North Koreans since the summit?

MR PALLADINO: I didn't say actually, no.

QUESTION: Well, what is the answer then? Has the U.S. been talking to the North Koreans since the summit?

MR PALLADINO: We – I'm not going to go into private diplomatic channels, but we remain – I would say as a general principle, we remain in regular contact with the North Koreans. And progress was made at the Hanoi summit. Yes, we did not reach an agreement. But at the same time, we were able to exchange very detailed positions, and that has narrowed the gap on a number of issues. And we've also made clear where the United States and the world stand regarding denuclearization.

QUESTION: But you can't say whether there's been conversation by the State Department since the summit?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not going to go into specifics on private discussions. I would say –

QUESTION: But that wouldn't be private. A yes or no, that you've talked

would not be giving away anything.

MR PALLADINO: – we are in regular – we remain in regular contact with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

QUESTION: Robert.

QUESTION: Well that’s helpful.

MR PALLADINO: Please.

QUESTION: Can I follow-up?

MR PALLADINO: Yes.

QUESTION: Regarding Special Representative Biegun, will there also be a trilateral with Japan this week included?

MR PALLADINO: I can confirm that he’s meeting with his Japanese counterpart tomorrow as well.

QUESTION: This week? Tomorrow as well? Okay. Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Yes, tomorrow.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Please.

QUESTION: While we’re on the subject of women’s rights, does the U.S. also have concern about the future of women in Afghanistan with these ongoing talks with the Taliban, and if the Taliban returns to government in Afghanistan?

MR PALLADINO: Special Representative Khalilzad and his team are working to promote intra-Afghan talks through a national, unified, and inclusive Afghan negotiating team that includes opposition parties and representatives from civil society, particularly women and youth. And so our position is we’re going to continue to support a peace process that aims to address the legitimate concerns of the Afghan people and sustains the social and economic gains of the last 17 years, and that means ensures a better future for all Afghans, particularly women and youth.

All right.

QUESTION: One question about Saudi back here?

MR PALLADINO: A Saudi question.

QUESTION: A Saudi women question?

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: Two Virginia lawmakers have written to Secretary Pompeo asking him to raise the case of Aziza Al-Youssef, who's been in jail for almost a year. Says she was tortured, she's a woman activist there. I wondered if the Secretary has raised that case and also the case of the American man who says he was tortured in Saudi custody, a U.S. citizen.

MR PALLADINO: And who was the Saudi man that you're referring to?

QUESTION: It's a Saudi American man who – that – who was in the Ritz-Carlton. *The New York Times* profiled him this weekend.

MR PALLADINO: Okay, right. So it's – Walid Fitaihi is his – is the gentleman's name, right?

QUESTION: Yeah, yeah.

MR PALLADINO: Confirm that he's detained in Saudi Arabia, confirm that we're providing him consular services, and that we have raised his case with the Government of Saudi Arabia. We visited him today, we visited him on the 20th, and we have had consular access previously. We've raised and we continue to raise his case on a consistent basis with the Saudi Government.

QUESTION: And anything you can tell us about his condition that – since you saw him today?

MR PALLADINO: I have no updates on that regard, no.

QUESTION: And anything –

QUESTION: A follow-up question? Saudi?

QUESTION: And about the woman who's the –

MR PALLADINO: I don't have that in front of me today. I'm sorry. I just don't want to misspeak on that issue. But I would say we – I don't have the facts of that case. I don't want to misspeak, Michele. All right. Please.

QUESTION: Congress is considering sanctions on Saudi Arabia, Robert. Do you have anything on this?

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry, Michel?

QUESTION: Congress is considering sanctions on Saudi Arabia.

MR PALLADINO: We don't preview sanctions and I've got nothing to announce in that regard.

QUESTION: Robert – Robert –

MR PALLADINO: All right. This is the last question. We're going to wrap it up and I'm going to try you. Please.

QUESTION: Okay. Senators had a closed-door briefing yesterday with a senior State Department official and Lindsey Graham said it was a waste of time, Mitt Romney said he learned nothing new. If senators learned nothing new, what was the point of the briefing? And the other question really quickly on Israel: Israel's prime minister is facing indictments. I know you said you don't get involved in domestic issues, but how does that – and does it affect the administration's peace plan?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not going to comment on the second question. Israel is an ally. We deal with the Government of Israel and that's the way – we pursue our own interests as the United States of America. We take countries as we find them.

Regarding your first question, that was a closed-door session and I'm not going to attempt to read out what was briefed, and I'm certainly not going to react to members, our elected representatives. Not going to do that from the State Department. We continue to regularly engage the United States Congress on these issues and to provide information. Our position has not changed. We continue to gather facts. We'll follow them where they lead and to hold those responsible responsible.

QUESTION: Including the crown prince?

MR PALLADINO: We have repeatedly said that we will follow the facts where they lead and hold those who are responsible responsible, and with that, I'm going to stop. Guys, thank you very much.

QUESTION: You don't have anything to say about this whole controversy around Representative Omar, do you, and her comments?

MR PALLADINO: Not from the State Department. Thank you, Matt.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:43 p.m.)

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