

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – May 15, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

3:08 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. How is everyone today? Good. First, I'd like to start out by welcoming some guests that we have in the back of the room. We have nine journalists who are visiting from Ecuador, so I'd like to say welcome. We have a lot of journalists up here. I'm sure they'd be happy to chat with you a little bit afterwards about some of the challenges in the United States, and likewise I'm sure you have some as well that you could talk about in terms of reporting.

Good afternoon, everyone. First, I want to start out with some personnel updates that we have here to announce at the State Department. I'd like to take a moment to recognize some of the new people who have just been recently confirmed by the U.S. Senate. First, we have a new under secretary, Andrea Thompson. She is our new Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security. Under Secretary Thompson is a former military officer who recently served as special advisor in the Office of Policy Planning at the State Department. She also served as deputy assistant to the President and national security advisor to the Vice President of the White House. And I should say, because Robert Greenan is from South Dakota, she's also from South Dakota. So we're thrilled to have her on board.

In addition to that –

QUESTION: Yay South Dakota.

MS NAUERT: Exactly, yay South Dakota. In addition to that, we have a few new assistant secretaries. Yleem Poblete is one of them; she's the Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance. Also Kirsten Madison is an Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. Her first day in the building was

just yesterday, so it was great to meet her.

A few details about some of our new colleagues: The Assistant Secretary Poblete recently served as a senior advisor at the State Department. She also served for more than two decades on the staff of the Committee on Foreign Affairs at the House of Representatives, including as chief of staff and staff director – the first Hispanic female to serve in that post. Assistant Secretary Madison had been deputy director and resident fellow for foreign defense policy at American Enterprise Institute. She had a 25-year career in foreign and national security policy. She's worked on issues related to governance and counternarcotics for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the Coast Guard, the State Department, and she is now at the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement.

The Secretary has said that the department's workforce is our most valuable asset. Those officials, along with many others, are hard at work to execute our mission of diplomacy and development on behalf of the State Department and the American people.

I'm sure you've all seen by now also that the Secretary made the decision and sent out a note today announcing the end of the hiring freeze. So we're tremendously happy in the building as a result of that today.

In addition to that, I would like to recognize Peace Officers Memorial Day. As many of you are aware, flags at the Department of State are at half-staff today, by presidential proclamation, to recognize Peace Officers Memorial Day and National Police Week. We were especially humbled to honor those U.S. and partner nation law enforcement professionals who've made the ultimate sacrifice to protect American diplomacy around the world. Here at the department we remember our four Diplomatic Security special agents who have given their lives protecting diplomacy, as well as their 140 colleagues from around the globe who've died in service to Diplomatic Security. They are honored at the DSS Memorial in Arlington, Virginia.

As for the U.S. state and local police honored during National Police Week, those officers put themselves in harm's way to pursue justice across our nation, and we at the State Department are fortunate to be able to call quite a few of them and their police organizations our partners. Through 22 formal police department partnerships with the department managed by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, we leverage world-class expertise of U.S. police to build foreign nations' ability to fight crime.

Just this month, through the State Department partnerships, Miami-Dade police are now training Mexican counterparts in Miami, the Texas Department of Public Safety is conducting a field officer training in Morocco, and the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office hosted Haitian law enforcement for training there.

This Peace Officers Memorial Day we reflect upon the men and women who protect us and who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Their watch may have not ended, but our gratitude for their service will not.

And lastly, I'd like to mention that our USAID administrator, Mark Green, is visiting Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh on a USAID trip. He announced today more than 44 million in new humanitarian assistance to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and other vulnerable groups affected by the conflict in Burma. This now brings the total U.S. humanitarian assistance for displaced people in and from Burma to more than 299 million since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2017. The new funding will provide emergency food and nutrition as well as shelter, safe drinking water, life-saving medical care, and other critical aid.

Today, Administrator Green met with representatives from UNHCR, the World Food Program, and with newly arrived refugees who are now among the 700,000 Rohingya who have fled violence and conflict in Burma's Rakhine State since August, and they've crossed the border into Bangladesh.

The United States calls on the Government of Burma to allow for immediate and unhindered humanitarian access to reach people in need and create conditions that would allow for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of those refugees.

Later this week, Administrator Green will be here – will be in Burma on behalf of Secretary Pompeo. He will meet with the governor of Burma – Burmese officials to discuss urgent steps needed to end the crisis in the Rakhine State and address violence in other parts of the country. And I know the Secretary looks forward to speaking with him when he gets back to get a full report.

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

QUESTION: Thanks, Heather. Before you get a barrage of questions about this latest – these reports coming out of North Korea, I want to start – to which I don't think you're going to have an answer, other than we've seen the report and –

MS NAUERT: Well, that's your preface always. Yes, okay.

QUESTION: Well, I just suspect that it's going to be – the answer is not going to be very solid. Anyway.

MS NAUERT: You could've saved that for the end then, Matt, if it's going to that boring of a leadup.

QUESTION: Sorry. I want to start with the Mideast.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: You're obviously aware of what happened yesterday and what's been happening over the course of the last month along the Gaza border.

Today your – Ambassador Haley at the UN said that the Israeli Government had acted with restraint in dealing with the protests along the border. And I'm just wondering, is that really – is that the position of the government, that the Israeli – that Israel has acted with restraint in dealing with these protests?

MS NAUERT: I don't have her comments right in front of me to be able to put those into the proper context. I think what the ambassador was referring to is compared to how other countries in other situations handle certain things. But I'm not going to parse her comments. I'd have to refer you up to the USUN for additional information on that.

QUESTION: There was a – the United States Government was notable for being one of the few, if not the only, who did not at least call on the Government of Israel to take restraint. Other governments went much further. They condemned the – their actions and the deaths of almost 60 people just yesterday. Are you in a position to be able to say that – to criticize or to otherwise say that Israel might not be acting in a proportionate way?

MS NAUERT: Well, first let me say we regret the loss of life. We regret the loss of all life. Ambassador Haley said that as well. White House officials have addressed that in addition to that. But let's go back to something that we have covered extensively here, and let's go back to the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza. We have had many Gazans who have suffered at the – from the loss of medical care, not being able to have access to enough medical care, not having access to consistent electricity, food, jobs, and many other things as well. The misery that is faced by people in Gaza is because of a result of Hamas. That is something that we come back to. People want to blame Israel for all of this that is going on over the past few weeks. Let's take a look at the dire situation that people in Gaza are facing, and that is a result of Hamas's governing. Let's not forget that. People like to lose sight of that.

QUESTION: I don't think –

QUESTION: Is that what the –

MS NAUERT: Michelle, go ahead.

QUESTION: I don't think anyone's necessarily not blaming Hamas for part of this. But the point is so many U.S. allies are also just at the very least saying the words Israel should use some restraint. Why does the U.S. seem to not want to just even make that simple statement?

MS NAUERT: Michelle, I said we regret the loss of life. That is very clear. The administration has said that consistently. We've said that –

QUESTION: But that's not (inaudible) restraint.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. We've said that on numerous occasions. We have seen how Hamas continues to incite violence. The actions, the activities that

are taking place there that you're all referring to, would certainly stop if violent protests were to stop and if Hamas were to stop inciting violence, encouraging people to go up to the border fence, encouraging people to cut through the border fence, encouraging people to run down that border fence and into Israel, sending these kites over the fences – all of those activities. They're encouraging people to do those activities, and might I remind people that is not a safe place to go. It is not a safe place for people to bring their children. If that were to stop, then certainly the violence would stop.

QUESTION: So when the UK calls for an independent investigation of the killings that have happened there, would the U.S. support that?

MS NAUERT: That's a hypothetical. I'm just not going to get into it. Okay?

QUESTION: Yesterday –

MS NAUERT: Said, go right ahead. Hi, Said.

QUESTION: Thank you. Hi. Yesterday the White House said that all the blame rests with Hamas, no blame on Israel whatsoever. So do you agree with that statement that Israeli soldiers that shot these people, killed 60 people, six of them are children, are not responsible whatsoever by any degree?

MS NAUERT: Israel has a right to defend itself. When people are being sent to the border, they are bringing weapons, they are threatening to cross through the fence, they are throwing Molotov cocktails – Israel has a right to defend itself. But I want to be clear about this also that we do regret the loss of life. Ambassador Haley addressed that today. She called the loss of life deplorable. And let's once again get back to why the situation is so miserable. The United States would like to see peace. That is a priority for this administration. We would like to see – we would like to see both sides be able to come back, sit at the table, and have conversations about a good and peaceful solution. Unfortunately, we're not there at this point, but we hope that we will be soon.

QUESTION: I fully understand what you're saying. Now, according to all reports, there has been no firing from the Gaza side by anyone so far since the – since the 30th of March. But I just want to ask you once again: There is absolutely no blame whatsoever that should fall squarely on Israel?

MS NAUERT: Said, I'm not –

QUESTION: Or Israeli snipers?

MS NAUERT: – going to parse every single event that happens. But let's remember why the situation has become so troubling. Let's remember how Hamas continues to incite violence. If they really wanted peace – if they really wanted peace, they would call for peace, and we don't see

them doing that.

Lesley, you had a question.

QUESTION: I want to ask –

QUESTION: Do you really believe that the opening of the embassy in Jerusalem had nothing to do with inciting some of this violence?

MS NAUERT: Look, we have seen the demonstrations, and we have watched the demonstrations over the past six weeks. These demonstrations are nothing new. Our embassy was set to open for quite some time when the President announced it late last year. There have been other countries as well that have announced that they're opening their embassies as well. If Hamas wants to use that as an excuse to rile people up and to encourage violence, that is their choice. It's an irresponsible choice.

QUESTION: And then the Palestinian representative was withdrawn today from Washington. Was there any kind of protest letter or communication with the State Department regarding this?

MS NAUERT: I'm just – I'm not aware of that, myself, if there was. The PLO office though remains open in Washington. You'd have – I'd have to refer you to the Palestinians for more information on that.

QUESTION: So Heather –

QUESTION: Heather –

MS NAUERT: Okay. Hi, Barbara.

QUESTION: Yeah. Just to say – you said that the misery in Gaza was because of Hamas. And of course, Hamas has not done a very good job of governing. But are you seriously saying the blockade of Gaza has not contributed to the misery? I mean, that seems to be self-evident.

MS NAUERT: Look, we have a – not we, but there are a group of people – there is a group of people in Gaza that don't have access to all of the things that most of us do each and every day. We have pretty much unfettered access to healthcare, to clean water, to electricity – all of those things – and that has been a problem there. And when you fail to provide people with the basics that they need, they can turn – they can become frustrated and they can certainly turn to violence, and Hamas is certainly encouraging them to do that.

QUESTION: And when you block the borders in Israel and in Egypt and people can't get in and out, and foods and goods can't get in and out, the same thing happens.

MS NAUERT: Look, I would just say that Israel has certainly concerns and they're right to have concerns. I saw it myself – a terror tunnel that was going from Gaza into Israel, for example. They have legitimate concerns about their security and people trying to send weapons and

other things through the various checkpoints. So that's a concern of theirs.

QUESTION: So all of the situation in Gaza is completely the fault of Hamas?

MS NAUERT: It's the primary responsibility – it's primarily the responsibility of Hamas. This is the first time we've said this. We've been very clear about this all along, okay.

QUESTION: And in terms of an independent investigation, I don't think it's a hypothetical because it has been called for.

QUESTION: It's being called for right now.

QUESTION: So what – is there any chance the Americans –

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything for you on that, okay?

QUESTION: Heather, I'd like to ask you –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Hi.

QUESTION: Heather, could I ask you –

MS NAUERT: Go – hold on. I've already –

QUESTION: – a question about Ambassador Friedman?

MS NAUERT: Hold on. I've already talked to you. Hold on. Michel.

QUESTION: Can we switch to Iraq?

MS NAUERT: Certainly.

QUESTION: Can we –

MS NAUERT: Okay. I'll come right back to you. Okay. One –

QUESTION: Very quickly, one question.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Hold on. One more for Said, and then I'll go over to you, Michel.

QUESTION: Thank you. I appreciate it. I asked Ambassador Friedman on a teleconference the other day whether he considered East Jerusalem to be occupied territory or whether he considered the West Bank to be occupied territory. And he said: Well, look I am – I have my own personal views. As the ambassador of Israel, I am not the ultimate policy maker, so I'm going to defer to others. I think the situation in West Bank is unique, unprecedented, and so on. What is your position on the West Bank and East Jerusalem? Is it occupied or is it not –

MS NAUERT: Our position on that has not changed. You and I have gone

around and around about this many times before. I can just tell you our position on that hasn't changed.

QUESTION: What is it?

MS NAUERT: Our position on that –

QUESTION: Is your position occupied or not occupied?

MS NAUERT: I'm going to leave it at this. Our position on that has not changed. We've discussed this before. I'll sound like a broken record. Okay, let's –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Let's move on. Michel, go right ahead.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: (Inaudible) recognize the –

QUESTION: Yeah. Heather, do you have any comment on the –

QUESTION: Wait, before we go to Iraq – among the questions that have been asked about the whole Gaza situation for a while now is the situation – the death of the Palestinian photographer, news photographer, and then the death later of – from injuries of another Palestinian journalist. The first one to die had been a recipient of USAID funding. You guys said you were going to look into that.

MS NAUERT: That money was never transferred over to that individual. Last I checked, that is still being investigated. I don't have anything additional for you. But when I do, I'd be happy to bring it to you.

QUESTION: Okay, but should –

QUESTION: Can I –

QUESTION: When you say that you regret the loss of life just now –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – I mean that would include a working journalist as well, right? This –

MS NAUERT: Matt, we've –

QUESTION: Because –

MS NAUERT: I think I can blankly say that the United States Government regrets the loss of life. Okay? Okay.

QUESTION: But in so many flashpoints that are sensitive around the world, regularly the U.S. Government calls for restraint on all sides.

It's such a common, simple thing to say. Why in this case is it so difficult? What would be wrong with calling for restraint on the part of Israel?

MS NAUERT: I think this is a complex region. We're looking at exactly why protests are taking place, why Hamas is encouraging people to go out and protest, why Hamas is encouraging people to go out right up to the border fence, why they're encouraging people to try to knock down that fence and go into Israel, why they're sending kites with Molotov cocktails to try to burn down the fields. Michelle, this is not as innocent as it may seem to many people. Hamas is trying to encourage people to do that, and by doing that, they are putting Palestinian lives at risk. Many people are expecting or are wanting people to be sympathetic to Hamas. We are not going to be sympathetic to Hamas. Hamas does not take care of its own people and it's inciting violence, and we've seen a death occur as a result, okay?

QUESTION: Then why did the Secretary of State –

MS NAUERT: I don't have –

QUESTION: – have nothing to say on this issue?

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything more for you on that, okay. I wasn't there at the time.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Let's move on. I don't have anything more for you on this, okay?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Look, guys, you'll want to go on all day. We've got a big world to cover, other things going on. Nick, I'll come back to you on something else. Michel, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah. On Iraq and the Iraqi – and the parliamentary elections. Do you have any comment?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I think it's certainly notable, first of all, that Iraq held elections that were largely free of violence. Imagine, think about not long ago, ISIS had controlled large swaths of that country. And the fact that they were able to pull off elections that were relatively free of violence is certainly a pretty amazing feat and a testament to the Iraqi people. We congratulate Iraq and the Iraqi people for participating in the democratic process yet once again. Iraqis are certainly eager to build a safe and prosperous future for themselves in the context of a government that's sovereign and stable. So we'd like to congratulate them for doing that.

QUESTION: I have two more on this, Heather. Do you have any comment on Moqtada al-Sadr, who emerged as the big winner in these elections?

MS NAUERT: Yes. Let me just remind folks that he wasn't an actual candidate on any of the ballots, but yet his slate of people were candidates. Iraq is still finalizing its election results right now. They're likely to have to form some sort of coalition government, so I don't want to get ahead of the process and presume how things are going to look in the end. But I think the overarching theme right now is congratulations to Iraq for holding democratic and free elections.

QUESTION: And on the formation of the new government, Iranian Revolutionary Guard's commander Qasem Soleimani is in Baghdad to discuss the formation of the new government. How do you view this Iranian role in the formation of the government?

MS NAUERT: We have a good relationship – bless you – with the Government of Iraq, and we believe that we will continue to do that. There have been many – in Iraq and in other countries as well – that have been concerned about Iran's reach into many other countries. That is certainly always a concern of ours, but we have a great deal of trust and faith in the Iraqi people and whoever ends up governing, whatever the structure is, the governing of that country going forward.

QUESTION: Is Brett McGurk – is he still –

QUESTION: Are you concerned –

MS NAUERT: Sorry.

QUESTION: Is Brett McGurk there for the talks along relations to the elections?

MS NAUERT: I can confirm he is in Iraq right now; I don't have the details of his entire itinerary and why he's there. I can see if I can get more for you on that. Okay. Hey, Laurie.

QUESTION: And also some are – one more here.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: And also, some of the political parties are charging that the election was rigged by groups in – that were probably backed by Iran. Do you have any comment on that?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I can just say the Independent High Electoral Commission – that's basically the Iraqi equivalent of the Federal Election Commission – they are investigating; they are taking a close look at allegations of fraud and intimidation. There were civil society observers who were participants or who – involved in watching the process. And there were also international observers who were on the ground as well, and they have reported to us that they found the elections to be credible. Okay.

QUESTION: What –

MS NAUERT: Hi, Laurie.

QUESTION: What do you see as next steps in this political process? And are you concerned that if it takes too long that there may be a resurgence of Islamic State or other insecurity?

MS NAUERT: I'll just say we're not going to get ahead of that process right now. We have faith in the Iraqi Government, and so we're just going to wait and see how this all plays out. They're still finalizing the election results, so I don't want to get ahead of that.

QUESTION: And you're comfortable that the leading two party lists include people who were opposed to the United States presence in Iraq up to 2011?

MS NAUERT: We are very well aware of Moqtada al-Sadr and his background and his positions now, yes.

QUESTION: And as well as the Conquest list, which includes figures like Qais al-Khazali?

MS NAUERT: I don't have any information on the so-called list that you mentioned.

QUESTION: They were number two.

MS NAUERT: Okay. I don't have any information on that, Laurie. I'll see if I have anything more.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay. Let's switch on. So North Korea? Okay.

QUESTION: Okay. I guess you saw just before the briefing the reports that North Korea threatens to cancel its participation in the summit in Singapore because of the joint exercises, military exercises with South Korea. We were told by South Korea that they were okay with these exercises. What has changed? Did –

MS NAUERT: Well –

QUESTION: – Secretary Pompeo spoke about that –

MS NAUERT: So I just saw that report as I was coming out here.

QUESTION: – when he was there?

MS NAUERT: So we haven't had a whole lot of time to dig into that. I will say that Kim Jong-un had said previously that he understands the need and the utility of the United States and the Republic of Korea continuing in its joint exercises. They're exercises that are legal; they're planned well, well in advance. We have not heard anything from that government or the Government of South Korea to indicate that we

would not continue conducting these exercises or that we would not continue planning for our meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un next month.

QUESTION: So they didn't tell you anything about –

MS NAUERT: We have no information on that whatsoever. What we have to go on is what Kim Jong-un had said before, that he understands and appreciates the importance to the United States of having these joint exercises. The Republic of Korea has as well. We've received no formal or even informal notification of anything.

QUESTION: So you continue to plan the summit as –

MS NAUERT: Absolutely. We will continue to go ahead and plan the meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un.

QUESTION: Isn't a report on the official North Korean news agency at least an informal notice or –

MS NAUERT: Did it actually go out on there? Because I got this just as I was walking out here, so I haven't had a chance to fully sit down and investigate. But this is – that would be news to me.

QUESTION: It did.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Great.

QUESTION: They're calling the exercises provocative and they're calling them –

MS NAUERT: Well, they're certainly not provocative. These are things that we do all around the world with many of our partners and allies. These are things that have occurred for decades and decades. Again, I'll say this for a third time, Kim Jong-un had said that he understands the importance to the United States that we conduct these joint exercises, these joint exercises continue to go on, so okay.

Hi.

QUESTION: Hi. In addition to saying that they might cancel the U.S.-North Korea summit, they've also canceled high-level talks with South Korea over the military drills. Do you have any comment on that?

MS NAUERT: I can't confirm that. I would just have to refer you to those respective governments.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: But would you see that as an unwelcome sign?

MS NAUERT: I – guys, I would not get ahead of ourselves here. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. This news just came out. We need to verify it,

get additional information on that, but we're going forward and planning our meetings next month, okay?

Hi, yes.

QUESTION: Still on North Korea but not on that.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: So Secretary Pompeo said on Sunday that the U.S. would have to provide security assurances to the Kim regime. Is that what he told Chairman Kim when he was in Pyongyang meeting with him, and if so, what was the response?

MS NAUERT: So some of those would certainly fall under private diplomatic conversation. I was not there in the room when the Secretary spoke with Chairman Kim at the time. I – what I would go on is what the Secretary said in interviews in which he had talked about security assurances. Obviously, governments like that are concerned about their principals' security, and I'll just leave it at that, okay?

Okay. Hi. Yeah.

QUESTION: So Secretary Pompeo has said that having a ambassador to South Korea is one of the high priority. Now that the – with the freeze of hiring, should we – what does the timetable look like? Should we expect a U.S. ambassador to South Korea before June 12th?

MS NAUERT: Well, I would refer you to the Senate, first of all. Let's see what they have to do, let's see what they can do to help speed this up. We look forward to having an ambassador in South Korea just as soon as we can get one. I don't know what the timeline is on that or the timeframe is on that, but we look forward to having him in place.

QUESTION: Heather.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Can you confirm that Harry Harris –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Yes.

QUESTION: Heather, no Secretary –

MS NAUERT: Hold on a sec. Janne, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. In order to – me go?

MS NAUERT: Yes. Please, go right ahead.

QUESTION: In – on North Korea. In order to – (coughs) – excuse me. In order to dismantle of North Korean's Punggye-ri, North Korean nuclear

test site, on I think May 22nd – between the 22nd and 25 – only the reporters were invited to ceremony, but not – expert were not invited. Will the U.S. need verification or not? Do you have any comment on this?

MS NAUERT: First I would say the United States and our allies look forward to getting some more information about that event that North Korea has said they would destroy that facility. I don't know if any of you are planning to go or hope to go over, but I'm sure our Consular Affairs people would be okay with taking your calls, certainly. We look forward to learning more about that and seeing exactly what they have planned.

QUESTION: You should have verification, that site, because they five times in a nuclear test. So why – you had to verify –

MS NAUERT: I can just say our people will be all over this type of thing, whether it's now or in the future when our people can go in and start to verify. Hopefully we'll be in the position to be able to do that, but again, I don't want to get ahead of that process.

Hi, Nick.

QUESTION: Heather, do you have – you mentioned the Senate would have a role to play in that. Has the administration formally nominated anyone for –

MS NAUERT: I'd have to double check on that. I'm not sure if they've actually formally nominated Admiral Harris to be the ambassador of South Korea, but I'll just double – take a look at it.

QUESTION: But he is the nominee?

MS NAUERT: I – I'll double check on that.

Kylie.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: So wait a second. Just to make sure I got this right, you're inviting all reporters to call Consular Affairs to ask them about traveling to North Korea?

MS NAUERT: I'll get in trouble with Consular Affairs. I'm being lighthearted in that. I understand that the Government of North Korea has invited reporters. I've not heard from any of you about that just yet.

Kylie, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Will Secretary Pompeo be reaching out to North Korea to encourage them to carry through with this meeting with South Korea?

MS NAUERT: I don't think he's picking up the phone and begging anybody

to do anything at this point. We are operating under the idea and the notion that the President's meeting is going forward with Chairman Kim next month.

QUESTION: And if this meeting doesn't happen, will you still go forward?

MS NAUERT: That's a hypothetical. That's a hypothetical. Look, this news just came out. I can't verify it just yet. It's very early on in the process, but we're planning ahead for our meetings. Okay.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: How does that affect your confidence on North Korea?

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: North Korea making such announcements through state media ahead of the summit, how does that affect U.S. confidence on North Korea in pushing ahead with this summit – planned summit?

MS NAUERT: Well, I would say that we've seen some pretty good indications from them so far. It was just one week ago that we had three Americans who were being held prisoner in North Korea for far too long. The Secretary was able to bring home those Americans, and now they're home and reunited with their families.

So they have taken some steps in the right direction in having us and inviting this United States delegation to go to North Korea and saying that they're willing to meet with us, and they have said that we will commit to denuclearization. I think those are all good signs. I don't want to get ahead of this announcement that everybody's all worked up about until we have some time to take a look at things, okay? Okay.

Michel, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Heather, on the Gulf dispute, Secretary Pompeo has emphasized yesterday to UAE foreign minister the President's desire to see the Gulf dispute eased and eventually resolved.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: And his hope that parties will engage constructively ahead of the U.S.-GCC summit. Was he trying to put a deadline for the GCC to resolve their dispute?

MS NAUERT: Initially, the GCC summit was supposed to be sometime this spring. I'd have to double-check this –

QUESTION: September?

MS NAUERT: – but it's now been moved to September.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS NAUERT: I can't remember the date exactly, but it's been moved. This is something that's important, though, for the President, and the President has talked to many of those countries. When Secretary Pompeo was recently in Saudi Arabia, he had conversations with the government there, also spoke with the Jordanians about this as well since they are our strategic partners in the region, about the importance of solving this dispute. The dispute's been going on now for, oh, 10 months or so. It's gone on far too long. So the President has said enough is enough, let's put an end to this and move forward.

QUESTION: Is September a deadline?

MS NAUERT: I don't know if it's a deadline, but last I had heard that that is when we have a meeting scheduled on GCC. Okay.

QUESTION: Can I ask about the hiring freeze?

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) Do you have a number for – the number of positions that were left unfilled because of the freeze and then how quickly you expect there to be movement on those jobs?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I don't have any numbers for you just yet. We are all very happy, as you all have worked here long enough to have known how frustrating it was for many people who wanted to get jobs at the State Department who were told no, I'm sorry, we're not hiring as a result of the hiring freeze. This is something that the Secretary looked at very early on when he came on board. In fact, before he came on board, he had been briefed on this when he was briefed about the various issues that had to be resolved or various difficult issues at the State Department, and that was one of the things very early on that he wanted to take a very close look at, a careful look at, and has made this decision to lift that hiring freeze.

I don't have any numbers for you just yet. This is all pretty fresh and pretty new, but if I can get some numbers, I'll let you know.

QUESTION: So can you, as you're checking that, also find out if this is going to affect the intake of new – of A-100 classes?

MS NAUERT: I believe that it does help facilitate, because we've been getting some phone calls from young people asking if they can now get in, so I believe this helps sort of pave the road for some of those younger people to get in.

QUESTION: Okay. But could you find out a hundred percent –

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: – for sure if it was –

MS NAUERT: I will find out 100 percent.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: On Turkey?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay. Hold on. Hey, Abbie.

QUESTION: Can I go back to the Middle East for a moment?

MS NAUERT: We're done with the Middle East. I got nothing left for you. Yeah.

QUESTION: This is a separate question not related directly to the Gaza, but –

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: And then we'll move on.

QUESTION: Do you have any further explanation for why it was that Pastor Jeffress was chosen to participate in the ceremony given his past controversial comments?

MS NAUERT: I can just tell you that Ambassador Friedman, I know, was looking at a variety of people to be a part of the service or the ceremony, and that's who was invited. I don't have anything more for you on that.

QUESTION: Was the State Department aware of some of his past comments regarding specifically Mormonism, Islam, Muslim, and –

MS NAUERT: We certainly would not agree with –

QUESTION: – Jewish –

MS NAUERT: – his assertions. We would certainly not agree with the pastor's remarks, some of his controversial remarks that he has made about various religious groups, but he was chosen by Ambassador Friedman, who was certainly welcome to do so, and made that decision.

QUESTION: Well, wait, so that means that if not – even though you don't agree with those comments, you might say that they're wrong or what – I don't know what term you would use –

MS NAUERT: I think I was just pretty clear. I said we do not agree with his opinion.

QUESTION: But – so that's not disqualifying to be – I mean, does this – is this the embassy of the United States of America or is it basically

Ambassador Friedman's embassy?

MS NAUERT: As we have seen before – I seem to recall not too long ago that there was another embassy that made some decisions – embassies certainly have their free will sometimes to make decisions about who they want to bring in as guest lecturers or people to lead a ceremony or some sort of a celebration. To my knowledge, we did not have any role in making that decision, but –

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Not that we asked to. I just – I'm not aware if we had any decision-making –

QUESTION: Okay. So I just want to make sure I understand. So this is the equivalent – you're saying it's kind of like the equivalent of the Berlin situation?

MS NAUERT: I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that embassies and people around the world bring in lots and lots of people who have various opinions. Okay?

QUESTION: And speaking of going – going back to that, when the U.S.'s allies and eight European countries call for restraint on the part of Israel –

MS NAUERT: Michelle, I think we've already –

QUESTION: – and they –

MS NAUERT: I think we've already covered this.

QUESTION: And they asked for – but my question is different.

MS NAUERT: I think we've covered this already.

QUESTION: Are they wrong in asking for that?

MS NAUERT: Michelle, listen, we've covered this already. I don't have anything more for you.

QUESTION: But there's still questions. I mean, the questions don't end just because you say that they do.

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything more for you on this. I think we've covered it extensively. Okay. Go right ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. A little bit closer to home.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: I wanted to find out the status of the visas for Cubans and also the preparations in Georgetown, Guyana for those Cubans who may wish to come to live in the United States and obtain their visas. Do you

have any update on this?

MS NAUERT: I will take a look. I'll get in touch with our people in Western Hemisphere and see if I can get you some specific details on that. Okay? Okay, thank you.

QUESTION: On Russia?

MS NAUERT: Okay. Yeah, go right ahead.

QUESTION: You may have already seen the video that Russia President Putin drove the truck himself –

MS NAUERT: Oh, I did.

QUESTION: – across a new bridge connecting the mainland Russia to the Moscow-annexed Crimea today, and which we note Ukraine has condemned such annexation. Would you have – would you like to comment, or did you have a reaction on that?

MS NAUERT: Yes, we certainly do. We saw as Vladimir Putin hopped in that truck and drove that truck from Russia into Crimea. We saw the construction and the partial opening of that bridge. It's over a strait. One of the things I want to mention about it is that the construction of that bridge certainly limits the ability to bring in goods via ship, so it's affected people – it's affected Crimea, it's affected Ukraine – in that way. The bridge represents not just an attempt for Russia to solidify its unlawful seizure and occupation of Crimea, but it also impedes that navigation that I just mentioned. So that's something we're watching carefully and is a concern of ours. Okay.

QUESTION: Do you have anything on the raid today by Ukrainian authorities on these two Russian news outlets and the arrest of a reporter?

MS NAUERT: I do. Yeah, that's another situation that we've watched. And you all have heard me talk here about the importance of free speech. The arrests of journalists or searches taken of media outlets, if that is done, it has to be done in accordance with the law. It is something that includes international human rights law. We take those actions seriously. We hope that the government takes those actions very seriously. We understand that Ukraine, like a lot of other countries, has been concerned about intense propaganda. Goodness, when we talk with a lot of our allies and partners overseas, they certainly have fallen victim and understand the influence and the reach of Russian propaganda. So we do understand Ukraine's concerns about that. But overall, these are very serious actions that have to be taken in accordance with the law.

QUESTION: On Turkey?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go ahead.

QUESTION: The pulling of the ambassador from the U.S. and Israel – do you have any sense of how long this is going to be, and how would you say that it affects the relationship between Turkey and the U.S.?

MS NAUERT: I don't know how long it's going to be. I'd have to ask you to speak with the Turkish Government of that. We're certainly aware of Turkey's decision, and I think it's their decision and they're the best ones in the best position to be asked that.

QUESTION: You don't have a reaction to it?

MS NAUERT: Look, Turkey made that decision. That is their decision to make. Okay.

QUESTION: And is Secretary Pompeo still planning to receive his Turkish counterpart here in D.C. in the next days or –

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of any meetings that we have fully solidified with really many governments at this point. When I – if I have those meetings, I'll be sure to bring them to you when I can.

Okay, and we're going to have to wrap.

QUESTION: How is it not justification for killing – for Israel killing when you say Israel has the right to defend itself?

MS NAUERT: Okay, we're done with this.

QUESTION: Israel has a right to defend itself –

MS NAUERT: We've already been there.

QUESTION: – and there are no Israeli casualties –

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: – and there are literally tens of – there's over ten thousand –

MS NAUERT: I think we've covered this extensively already.

QUESTION: – Palestinian casualties in the – and a hundred dead.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Go on, one last question?

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: Do you have something else?

QUESTION: Yes. On the Lebanese.

QUESTION: Excuse me. Excuse me. No, no, no. That requires a response. And furthermore, I mean, the U.S. isn't mowing down people along the U.S.-Mexican border.

MS NAUERT: We –

QUESTION: Isn't that accurate?

MS NAUERT: We are done with this issue. We've covered it extensively already. I've taken many questions on this, and we've –

QUESTION: So Israel is off the hook again. Israel is off the hook again.

MS NAUERT: Sir, thank you for your question. I think we've covered this already, okay? I'm sorry; I'll get back to you another time, okay?

QUESTION: That's okay.

MS NAUERT: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:45 p.m.)

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