

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – November 29, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:54 p.m. EST

MR PALLADINO: All right, nothing for the top. Let's – happy to take a question.

QUESTION: That must mean that there's nothing going on in –

MR PALLADINO: Oh, there's a lot going on, Matt. There's a couple things going on.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, actually in keeping with the theme of that, though, I have a kind of a smaller question, but I need to get it out of the way first. And that is the Cubans are complaining that you guys are not – you're limiting the number of visas that you're giving to their people while they have been more than accommodating with your requests. And I got an answer to the one question which had to do with the two embassies, but apparently the Cuban complaint is broader than that. And I just discovered this in the last 15 minutes, so I apologize for that. And that is that they're also complaining that you guys are denying visas for Cuban officials to come to go to New York or to participate in UN events. Do you have any response to that?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything specific, but what I can say is we are – the Cuban Government is already aware of our concerns about visas, specifically about staffing at our embassy in Havana. Under reduced staffing levels at the United States embassy in Havana following the health attacks, every position is vital to our operations, and both of our governments are – maintain our sovereign right to issue or deny visas to specific individuals. And I would leave it at that.

QUESTION: Well, so you don't have any response to the related but separate –

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything related – anything specific on specific visa cases. I don't.

QUESTION: No, no, no, but I'm talking about your obligations under the UN host country agreement and granting – or their complaint that you're using your authority to deny visas in violation of that.

MR PALLADINO: Matt, I'll have to look into it. I don't have anything on that.

QUESTION: All right, thanks.

MR PALLADINO: Sure.

QUESTION: Move on.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Francesco.

QUESTION: One last quick question on Cuba.

MR PALLADINO: All right, Cuba.

QUESTION: Just– Canada announced it last night that a 13th Canadian diplomat has now experienced the same health symptoms that U.S. diplomats have. Are you aware, I guess, of any additional U.S. cases? And are you doing anything to help the Canadians to try to figure out what's going on?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not aware of any new cases. We did – we do note that Canadian case, and we are in close coordination on a pretty regular basis with the Canadian Government on these issues.

Francesco, I said – please.

QUESTION: Yes. On Russia, the President said he won't be meeting with President Putin at the G20. Does the Secretary have any plan to meet with Lavrov at the G20 or in the next days, or – and did he talk with Lavrov about what's going on in – with Ukraine?

MR PALLADINO: The Secretary's schedule at the Group of 20 Summit in Buenos Aires will follow that of the President's, and I have no new – nothing new to announce for the Secretary.

QUESTION: No conversation with the Russians?

MR PALLADINO: Not a word. I have nothing – I am not aware of any of that, no.

Let's go to – sure, Barbara.

QUESTION: So Mr. Pompeo spoke to the Senate yesterday and made a very pointed case to continue military assistance to Yemen, after which the senators voted on the first procedural step to withdraw military assistance. Does the Secretary of State have a reaction to that since it

seems quite a failure of his attempt?

MR PALLADINO: I think the Secretary spoke quite a bit yesterday and made the case that the timing is not right for that, and he made the case quite forcefully that what we're trying to accomplish vis-a-vis Yemen we are on the cusp, and hopefully in December we're going to be supporting Special Representative Griffiths as we push towards that.

QUESTION: But does he have a reaction to the vote that followed shortly after his –

MR PALLADINO: I haven't spoken to the Secretary. And as you know, he's on his way to Buenos Aires. Please, anything further?

QUESTION: Why is the time not right? He said that the time is not right to end the war in Yemen. Is there –

MR PALLADINO: Absolutely not. The Secretary spoke on this yesterday, and he was clear the time is right for us to end this violence. And so we don't want to give Iran any further cause to continue to fund and supply arms, so we are pushing in support of Special Representative Griffiths.

Please.

QUESTION: Well, if you could draw that out a little bit further, Robert, when would the time be right for Congress to act on ending support for the Saudi campaign?

MR PALLADINO: We are –

QUESTION: Ever? Is there – would there ever be a good time in this administration's view for Congress to weigh in on this matter, or is this something that you think the Congress should have no business in?

MR PALLADINO: Absolutely not. We welcome the views of the Congress in this matter.

QUESTION: So you welcomed the vote, the procedural vote yesterday?

MR PALLADINO: We welcome the views of the Congress. The Secretary has made quite clear that for the Iran-backed Houthi rebels to be able to establish something akin to what Lebanon's Hizballah has done in Lebanon in the Arabian Peninsula would be destabilizing, damaging to American interests and to our allies and partners in the region.

QUESTION: I get that. But you say you welcome the views of Congress, and yet you're – you made – the administration has made clear that the President will veto this –

MR PALLADINO: We appreciate the views of Congress, of course, and we work closely.

QUESTION: I find that highly – no, you don't. I mean, the op-ed that the

Secretary wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that was published yesterday was extremely harsh, went after the members of the Washington salons and whatever the experts of the foreign policy community – foreign policy experts, or not experts, but the community at large. So it's pretty clear that you don't – I mean, he called it "caterwauling." It's pretty clear that you don't welcome a different opinion or opposing views to what you have, so I'm just curious as to how you can get – say with a straight face that you welcome this.

MR PALLADINO: We – the Secretary has made clear our position on the violence and the humanitarian disaster that has taken place in Yemen, and we've just announced additional measures to help alleviate some of that situation.

QUESTION: Right.

MR PALLADINO: And it's actually quite significant. It's worth mentioning. A hundred and thirty-one million in emergency food assistance to the people of Yemen, and we – and this –

QUESTION: I agree it's significant.

MR PALLADINO: And that is why we support the special representative and we think the timing is right and we are on the cusp, and so –

QUESTION: Let me just – I'll point out that yes, it is significant. I'm sure that it is appreciated. But that does not answer the question of how you can say you welcome Congress' views on this and then just ignore it and then essentially insult –

MR PALLADINO: We consult with the Congress. Please. Janne, please.

QUESTION: A question about North Korea. Do you know why is there no high-level talks between United States and North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: We are looking forward to having high-level talks. We have – we continue to – our policy hasn't changed on North Korea. Progress has been made, and we are hopeful that more will be made on North Korea as well.

QUESTION: But if North Korea continues to refuse to talk, then will the United States, your strategic patience is over – I mean end over? Or how you – your diplomatic engagement with –

MR PALLADINO: The Secretary and the President have been clear we're not going to be forced into artificial time constraints here. We've made great progress at the summit in Singapore for the final, fully verified denuclearization. We are going to continue to push forward on that. And of course, future dialogue will take place and it'll definitely be something that Special Representative Biegun will be leading. And we're – that's okay.

QUESTION: And do you know that Special Representative Biegun said that

the last week he mentioned about maybe they're going to close up windows because it's not listening in anything from North Korea? So what does it mean?

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry, Janne. I didn't understand that. They were going to close the –

QUESTION: Close. I mean close door or windows, no longer open the windows. I don't know what the meaning is diplomatically.

MR PALLADINO: I'm not familiar with that statement, and I don't want to –

QUESTION: That's why I said –

MR PALLADINO: – try to parse those words. Sorry. Yeah.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: Laurie, please.

QUESTION: Hi. The head of the Iraqi militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which is backed by Iran, recently said that the Hashd al-Shaabi should have a role in security along Iraq's border with Syria. What's your comment on that?

MR PALLADINO: The security of Iraq and its borders is the responsibility of the Government of Iraq, and I would defer to the Iraqi Government for comment.

QUESTION: Iraqi Government. Okay. And Secretary Pompeo condemned statements that Iranian President Rouhani made in an Islamic Conference in Tehran recently when he called for Israel's destruction. Iraqi Vice President Nouri Al-Maliki was at the same conference, and he spoke and said that Hizballah, the Houthis, and the Hashd al-Shaabi, which is Iraqi militias, will liberate Palestine soon. What's your comment on Maliki's statement?

MR PALLADINO: As you point out, it was – the Secretary was speaking to President Rouhani's comments, and we have no further comment beside that.

QUESTION: Even if the vice president of an allied state of yours –

MR PALLADINO: Laurie, we're not going to react to all world leaders' comments here. Please.

QUESTION: Rob, could I stay on that region? Very quickly, I have a very quick question there for you. Thank you. Yesterday, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations circulated a draft resolution to condemn Hamas because of the rocket firing, but of course it begins by saying violence against all civilians is rejected and so on, but does not mention Israeli or Israel in any way, shape, or form. I want to ask you first

what is the status of this draft resolution. What's going on? Did you gather enough support? Because I think you need something like 90 member-states to support it for it to be voted on.

MR PALLADINO: Said, we don't comment on draft resolutions.

QUESTION: But it was circulated. I mean, I have a copy.

MR PALLADINO: We don't comment on drafts, yeah.

QUESTION: Can you tell us what is going on in terms of talks among –

MR PALLADINO: I can't. What I would say is the root of destabilization and violence in Gaza is Hamas. And beyond that, the world is growing tired of Hamas's violence and the violence of other bad actors in Gaza that prevents any real help for the people of Gaza.

QUESTION: Today being the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, do you think the world has grown tired of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, 51 years on?

MR PALLADINO: I would say that Hamas's activities continue –

QUESTION: That – I'm not talking about Hamas.

MR PALLADINO: – to prove that they don't really care about the Palestinians of Gaza.

QUESTION: Right. Right, okay. What –

MR PALLADINO: And I'll leave it at that, okay.

QUESTION: Okay. What about – what about – I mean, what about –

MR PALLADINO: And that's – and move on. I'm going to move on. I'm going to move on. Please. Sure.

QUESTION: Except that they actually are Palestinians in Gaza.

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, please.

QUESTION: Thank you. Two different questions on two different region. Let me start with Georgia. Do you have anything on the second round of Georgians' presidential election? What is the U.S. expectation, and what is the implication of this election to U.S.-Georgia relations? Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Thanks, Nike. I would say the United States looks forward to working with President-elect Salome Zurbishvili and continuing our close partnership with Georgia on a range of important bilateral and regional issues, including our robust security cooperation and Georgia's contributions to NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Can I move on to ask a question on DRC, Congo?

MR PALLADINO: The Congo. Okay.

QUESTION: Yeah. Do you have anything on the closure of the embassy and why it's closed so long? And do you have any update on the terror threats against the U.S. –

MR PALLADINO: As you point out, the embassy is still closed. It has not adversely impacted the United States support to our ongoing efforts there regarding containing that Ebola outbreak. And as far as when we're going to resume operations, I would say we just got to step back and understand that the highest priority in these situations, of course, is the safety and security of American citizens, including our diplomatic and our military and government officials that are serving abroad. So we are closely following the threats against our facilities there, and I can't comment any further or in more detail on the actual threat reporting there.

QUESTION: Robert, thank you. But in your estimation, do you think the closure of the embassy and the terrorist threats is something to do with the press release by the U.S. regarding the election over there?

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry. With the election?

QUESTION: Yeah.

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything correlating to that, no.

QUESTION: Do you think it's targeted at –

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing for you on that.

QUESTION: It's targeted at the U.S. announcement on the position on DRC going to have an election in December?

MR PALLADINO: I just don't have any information on that. Sorry, Nike.

QUESTION: Robert –

QUESTION: China?

QUESTION: – on Syria?

MR PALLADINO: On Syria. Okay.

QUESTION: You were hoping that the constitutional committee would be held by the end of December. Today Astana group has failed to agree on a list of members, and you are blaming Russia and Iran for continuing to use the process to mask the Assad regime, as you said in your statement. What's the alternative now?

MR PALLADINO: Well, Michel, as you point out, the meeting did not yield to an agreed list of members for the Syrian Constitutional Committee and it again ended in stalemate, so it failed to produce progress towards

advancing the political process, which is, of course, one of our goals.

We believe that establishing and convening a constitutional committee in Geneva is vital to a lasting de-escalation and a political solution to the conflict, and that has broad international support. We are going to continue to work to achieve the goals laid out in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, and that includes de-escalation and a reinvigorated political process, but we believe success is not going to be possible without the international community holding Damascus fully accountable for the lack of progress in resolving the conflict.

QUESTION: How can you hold Damascus –

MR PALLADINO: We're going to support the work of the United Nations Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to convene the committee by the end of the year and his efforts in Geneva as well to broker a political process. And we're going to remain engaged.

QUESTION: Isn't he leaving?

MR PALLADINO: We're – he – there's a successor. We'll work with both, correct. We'll remain engaged with the United Nations on this and other parties. That's the way forward, including Russia.

Please. Right here.

QUESTION: Do you still hope that Russia will push the regime to nominate the members? And since you are blaming Russia and Iran for not coordinating and masking the Assad regime, what hope do you expect from Russia?

MR PALLADINO: We're going to remain engaged. We're going to support the UN process, and we're going to keep engaged.

Yeah, Ben, please. Sure.

QUESTION: Yeah. Thank you, Robert. The President's going to have a meeting with President Xi at the G20. Are you expecting any kind of agreements to come out of this meeting that might sort of defuse the current tension between the two countries?

MR PALLADINO: Ben, I'm going to not get ahead of the President and his meeting, okay, so – yeah.

Okay, go to Conor.

QUESTION: The other meeting that he was supposed to have was with Vladimir Putin. The White House announcing that that was canceled and that Secretary Pompeo was involved in that decision. What advice did the Secretary have for the President? Why not have that meeting and send a strong message face to face with Vladimir Putin about Ukraine?

MR PALLADINO: I mean, I would point out that happened a couple hours

ago, Conor, and it was aboard Air Force One, I believe, that that took place and the Secretary was with the President at the time. So I don't have any further details to provide you. But what's clear is the President's tweets on the subject were quite clear at what we looked for, and that is the return of the Ukrainian sailors as – and the vessels. The aggression that we've witnessed this week is unacceptable and a strong message has been sent.

Please.

QUESTION: The – how has a strong message been sent? Just through (inaudible)?

MR PALLADINO: Isolation. Isolation, okay?

QUESTION: And – but since the message was sent on Monday by Secretary Pompeo calling for these sailors' release, they've actually been moved from Crimea to a jail in Moscow, according to one of their lawyers. Is it time, then, to increase your pressure other than isolating Vladimir Putin?

MR PALLADINO: We are – our European partners from NATO, OSCE, European Union have all issued strong statements. There have been emergency sessions that have taken place. There are – there is a coalescing of opposition and strong condemnation for the aggression that we have witnessed. And for the United States, our position has been very clear, from the President to Ambassador Haley to Secretary Pompeo. We – they must return to Ukraine its vessels and detained crewmembers.

QUESTION: But have those statements failed if they've now moved these sailors into a different facility as opposed to releasing them?

MR PALLADINO: We are going to continue to drive forward on this and to be firm in our position.

All right. Let's – sure.

QUESTION: Yeah. I have one clarification, logistical; one update request; and then one question.

MR PALLADINO: That's a lot.

QUESTION: No.

MR PALLADINO: That sounds difficult, too. What are you – what?

QUESTION: Logistical is that President Trump will be having a trilateral with Prime Minister Modi and the Japanese leader. What about any bilaterals with officials for the Secretary?

MR PALLADINO: I don't want to speak from the State Department on the President's schedule. That's something –

QUESTION: No, about the Secretary.

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing to announce. The Secretary will be participating in the President's meetings and supporting the President on this trip, and I just don't – have nothing else to announce on that.

QUESTION: And with the U.S. ambassador now in Colombo, do we have any update on the U.S. position on Sri Lanka?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything new today to read out. Okay.

QUESTION: Okay. Now the question is about the India-Pakistan. They have opened a new – at the Kartarpur border and things are moving, but the Mumbai attack for which we made the statement the U.S. has given more reward. What is exactly happening behind the scenes? Like, is – are we serious six U.S. citizens died and nothing? Those people are out there roaming around freely. And with the new prime minister, what is the U.S. – is he coming here? Is there going to be a meeting? Is there – what is – can you give us –

MR PALLADINO: No new meetings to announce at this time. I did – I'm aware of the reports of this Kartarpur corridor, as you referenced there. I understand that it's kind of a visa-free way for Indians to visit this important Sikh site. And of course, the United States – we would welcome efforts to increase people-to-people ties between India and Pakistan. I'd leave it at that and –

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: Okay. Sure, let's go right behind Nina, please. Yes, Pakistan.

QUESTION: Jahanzaib Ali from ARY News TV, Pakistan. So I have one question about Afghanistan. A couple of weeks ago, President Trump on Twitter accused Pakistan of harboring terrorists, some kind of very harsh tweet, and Prime Minister Imran Khan also tweeted. There was kind of exchange of harsh tweets on the Twitter, sir, but right now, United States looking towards Pakistan to bring Taliban to the table for the peace negotiations. So do you think it's the right time for such kind of statement from U.S.?

MR PALLADINO: The Secretary has emphasized the need for Pakistan to deliver outcome and build confidence and trust between our two countries, and our policy towards Pakistan is clear.

Last question. Dan De Luce, please.

QUESTION: Thanks. Just – so we had this briefing this morning on Iran's missile program and so on. Given this discussion about Yemen, could you just take a step back? Because the administration, from the first day it came into office, said it would roll back Iran's influence across the region. This was a top priority. We've had an array of sanctions imposed, sanctions reimposed, we had this briefing about the missiles.

Has the administration succeeded in rolling back Iran and Yemen and Syria and Lebanon, or is it time to review the approach?

MR PALLADINO: We're going to continue to push. Our approach to Iran's malign influence has many, many, many factors, and this administration is committed to stopping what Iran is attempting to do both across the region and globally.

QUESTION: Is there an example of a successful case where you've managed to do that?

MR PALLADINO: We have gotten out of the failed JCPOA, something that is going to allow us to finally confront the totality of Iran's malign influence and to preserve American interests and peace both in the region and globally, and that's it. I'm going to end it there. Thanks, guys.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) to the failed JCPOA? I mean, the administration's position is that even if it was succeeding, it wasn't good enough, and that's why you had to withdraw. But the IAEA continues to say that Iran is complying with the JCPOA, so I don't think that –

MR PALLADINO: While they continue to proliferate –

QUESTION: So “failed JCPOA” – but wait a second.

MR PALLADINO: – as your colleague points out today from –

QUESTION: Look, I understand that – your reasons for withdrawing from it, but you didn't withdraw from it because it had failed. You withdrew from it because you said it didn't go far enough and because –

MR PALLADINO: We –

QUESTION: – even if it was succeeding, it wouldn't work, right?

MR PALLADINO: We withdrew because it failed to counter the totality of what Iran is up to. Thanks, guys. I've got to go. All right.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:20 p.m.)

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