

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – September 13, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

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TRANSCRIPT:

3:08 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. How you doing?

QUESTION: Good, thank you.

MS NAUERT: Good. A couple announcements to start out with today, as we take a look at all of the news that so many of the cable networks in particular are covering – covering Hurricane Florence. I'd like to draw your attention and remind folks that the State Department is tracking storms around the world. We are closely watching Super Typhoon Mangkhut, which is expected to impact parts of the Philippines, Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China later this week. The safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas is one of our highest priorities, and we strongly encourage citizens in those affected areas to follow instructions provided by local authorities and also enroll in our STEP program, the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, at step.state.gov. That way they can receive important emergency information. And also follow us on Twitter, [@travel.gov](https://twitter.com/travel.gov), and Facebook for additional updates. As the super typhoon moves across the region, we'll provide information to U.S. citizens in the area through alerts, our embassy and consulate websites, and also travel.state.gov. We urge U.S. citizens in the impacted areas who are safe to contact their loved ones directly and/or update their social media status. If you are in an emergency situation, please contact local authorities in that emergency situation.

Next, as you all know, the Secretary was just in India last week, and so this is sort of the perfect thing to bring you today. The United States, Afghanistan, and India held the second annual joint trade and investment show in Mumbai yesterday. That was in order to strengthen regional economic ties and showcase Afghanistan's products and also investment opportunities. More than 2,000 Afghan, Indian, and international businesses participating, and on the first day alone more than \$160 million in agreements were signed, many of those which will support U.S.

and Afghan jobs along the supply chain. For example, this year's show included an agreement between Afghanistan's Bayat Group and Siemens for the provision of turbines produced here in the United States that will support 60 to 70 U.S. jobs in Houston and also provide power to northern Afghanistan to support the local economy, increase stability, and promote self-sufficiency. That event is sponsored by USAID and will continue through Saturday.

Next, let's go back in history a little bit to 1945, and that's when Senator William Fulbright introduced a bill in the United States Congress that called for the use of surplus war property to fund the promotion of international goodwill through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and also science. It's the Fulbright Program, as we know it today. Today that is America's flagship academic exchange program, and we have Fulbright partnerships with more than 160 countries. That allows thousands of American and foreign students and scholars to participate in academic exchanges. 2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the United States-United Kingdom Fulbright Program. Our Assistant Secretary for Education and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce announced at the House of Commons a new Fulbright public-private partnership between the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S.-UK Fulbright Commission to exchange scholars who will focus on health issues. The UK also announced an increase in funding for the exchange from £600,000 to £1 million. So happy 70th anniversary to the United States and the United Kingdom Fulbright Program and thank you for strengthening our public diplomacy.

Last thing – and this is something we've been waiting for for a while and are really excited to bring you – and I'd like to congratulate our newest career ambassadors. They have been nominated a while ago, but just this afternoon the White House signed off on it, and we just received this news.

The Senate confirmed them today, and the President conferred the personnel rank of career ambassador to four of our colleagues: our Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale; Michele Sison, our ambassador to Haiti; Daniel Smith, our assistant secretary for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research; and Philip Goldberg, our charge in Havana.

This is the highest rank that a Foreign Service officer can attain, and we could not be happier to announce this news today. We are also pleased to announce that eight more members of our ambassadorial team were confirmed by the Senate and look forward to leading their embassies. I'll have their names and their posts in just a second.

Randy Berry is the first. He will become our next ambassador to Nepal and will succeed Alaina Teplitz, who will assume charge of our U.S. missions to Sri Lanka and also the Maldives. Donald Lu will become the next chief of mission in Kyrgyzstan. And then turning from South and Central Asia to Africa, Michael Hammer will become the next U.S. ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Stephanie Sullivan

will be our chief of mission in Ghana, Derek Hogan – we love Derek – (laughter) – a friend of ours. We traveled together; some of you may have met Derek on the plane. Derek will become our next U.S. ambassador to Moldova, Phil Kosnett will become our next U.S. ambassador to Kosovo, while Judy Reinke will become our chief of mission in Montenegro. Congratulations to all of you.

These distinguished leaders join the top ranks of our leadership team and thousands of others across the State Department, all of whom are hard at work to execute our diplomatic and national security missions across the globe on behalf of the United States.

And last thing, on a personal note: My colleague, Susan Stevenson, who was our acting assistant secretary for Public Affairs – she was also the acting R, the under secretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy for quite some time – she was just nominated today to be the ambassador of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. So congratulations to you, too, Susan, and we look forward to celebrating with you with I think some of Admiral Kirby's leftover Yuengling beer that's been hanging out for the past year and a half in the back of the fridge.

QUESTION: Ew. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: That beer's been left – that's pretty old beer. It's probably skunked by now. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: If we can get anything better for you, Susan, in short order, we certainly will. With that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: Thanks, Heather. I want to start today with something you'll probably find a little bit unusual.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: But that's with a thank you. You have – you're one of the few people in this administration at least with a public – who appears publicly to have consistently emphasized the importance of free press and democracies and talked about how important it is for journalists to be protected in what they do. And with that in mind, I'd like to know if you have anything to say about the rather surprising comments that Aung San Suu Kyi made about the two Reuters reporters in Myanmar and also her – more broadly, her comments about how – comments in defense of the Burmese military.

MS NAUERT: Right. Well, Matt, you'll recall, many of you will recall, we went to Burma with Secretary Tillerson last year. You may recall when Secretary Pompeo was at ASEAN about a month ago that this was an issue that he directly raised with his counterpart. The situation with the two Reuters reporters, we've consistently raised that issue with the Government of Burma over the past year or so since they had been – since they had been detained.

Something that we don't talk a lot about, however, is the fact that our

embassy has remained very involved in monitoring the case of both of those reporters, in appearing at their court cases and so forth, and offering any support that we can certainly provide.

We are certainly aware of Aung San Suu Kyi's comments about the reporters. We are deeply disappointed by the verdict that convicted the journalists Wa Lone and also KyawSoeOo. We will continue to advocate at all levels of the U.S. Government for their immediate and their unconditional release. That verdict calls into question press freedom in Burma.

When I was there, I had the opportunity to have a roundtable discussion with a surprising number of journalists who had discussed with me the impact of government officials putting pressure on them to not report certain things and to report other things. We continue to call upon the Government of Burma to protect the freedom of expression, which is an essential pillar of democracy.

The fact that those journalists were convicted despite testimony by police that they were ordered to frame those two reporters – that, in our view, raises serious concerns about the judicial independence and the fair trial guarantees that they are supposed to have in that country. We believe it harms public confidence in the justice system and the rule of law in Burma. We continue to urge the Government of Burma to take action immediately to correct this injustice.

QUESTION: Right. And you say you're aware of Suu Kyi's comments, but you don't have anything specific to say about them or about her broader defense of the Burmese military and judicial system?

MS NAUERT: Well, Matt, I think I can continue to say the journalists should, without a doubt, be released. We will continue to raise that – their cases at the highest level of that government. We've done that consistently within this administration, including the Vice President, who has spoken out about this issue as well.

We obviously disagree with many of the comments that she made. This is an issue of importance to us. We will continue working with our partners and allies to explore options to ensure justice for the victims of what has happened in the Rakhine State. And as you all know, the United States Government has been at the forefront of providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees. More than 700,000 of them, if not 800- or more – thousand or more, have been forced to go into neighboring Bangladesh. Bangladesh has welcomed them and providing them with camps – not the ideal place for anyone to be, of course, but nevertheless Bangladesh has done that, and the United States has offered financial support and humanitarian aid to those Rohingya not only in Bangladesh but also some who are in IDP camps in Burma as well.

Okay.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Two questions –

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go ahead, Lesley.

QUESTION: – if I may follow-up – about my colleagues. The one is: Has the Secretary or any other senior official at the State Department reached out to Aung San Suu Kyi about her remarks?

MS NAUERT: About her remarks in the last 24 hours?

QUESTION: In the last 24 hours.

MS NAUERT: Not that I am aware of. I can tell you we've raised it at the highest levels in the past. I can check with our embassy to see if we have anything additional. As you well know, a lot of times it is our embassy that may be taking the lead on some of these matters. If I have anything additional for you, I'll bring it to you.

QUESTION: And then has the Secretary made – is he any closer to making some determination on what the UN called a genocidal event, I think it was?

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Please don't quote me on that one, but basically pointed to the possibility of genocide.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. And as you all know, this is one of the most important duties that a Secretary of State has in making that determination. It's a legal determination that's very complex and complicated and takes quite a bit of time to make sure you've gone through all the details and the information.

The Secretary will determine whether and to what extent he decides to publicize his final report on that. When I have that report to bring to you, I'll certainly let you know.

Okay. Said, let me come back to you in just a second. Actually, go right ahead. Yeah.

QUESTION: Thank you. I appreciate it. Today marks the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Accords in the White House, and on this occasion I wanted to ask you whether you are – it was premised on a two-state solution ultimately. Are you still committed to the two-state solution, Israel and Palestine living side-by-side?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, and we've talked about this quite a bit before, and it's certainly a priority of Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner.

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: The President has said consistently that he supports a solution that both parties can work with, recognizing that both parties

will have to compromise in order to come to some sort of an agreement. So we support whatever both sides can work – can come to an agreement on.

QUESTION: Yes, but they have negotiated for a quarter of a century on this issue, and it was premised on a two-state solution. I'm just asking you whether you are still committed to that.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Our policy has not changed. We also understand that we can't force it. Both sides will have to sit down and have direct negotiations and conversations.

QUESTION: And one other thing regarding the tweet that was, I think, made by Mr. Jason Greenblatt about we are about to roll out a peace proposal of some sort. I'm just saying that with all these measures that have been taking week after week after week in the last 12 weeks, I mean, all sticks and no carrots, so to speak, how are you trying to reach out to the hearts and minds of the Palestinian people, ordinary Palestinians who you would need to reach out to if you are going to bypass the leadership that seems to be so obstinate?

MS NAUERT: I think my answer would go back to your previous question or your assertion that this has been going on, the conflict has been going on, the disagreements have been going on for 70 years – a very, very long time. Nothing has worked despite the U.S. Government and other governments' best efforts, right? Nothing has worked thus far.

This administration has determined that it desires to take a different kind of approach in encouraging two sides to sit down and have that conversation. It's something we'll not back away from, recognizing that it's certainly not going to be easy. We've seen that. But we remain committed to that. When the peace plan is ready and when they are ready to unveil it, we'd be happy to bring that to you, yes.

QUESTION: You will be able to reach out to ordinary Palestinians, to continue to have contact with them, help them in sort of getting the proper medical care, proper schools, and so on? Will you continue to do that?

MS NAUERT: We certainly hope so, and we're having conversations with governments in the region about alternative ways that the U.S. Government could help facilitate some of those things that you mention – health care and education, medical services.

QUESTION: A follow-up?

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, how exactly is the administration encouraging the Palestinians to come back to the table?

MS NAUERT: Well, Matt, recognizing –

QUESTION: By shuttering their office here, by cutting off aid to UNRWA, by cutting off aid to the hospital networks, by cutting the aid to the West Bank and Gaza –

MS NAUERT: Determining that there needs to be a different –

QUESTION: – by recognizing Jerusalem as –

MS NAUERT: Matt, there needs to be a different kind of approach. Nothing has worked. For far longer than you and I have been alive, right, nothing has worked thus far. So we're trying a different approach, seeing if this is going to work. We are committed to it. We have people on the ground who are working to this effort each and every day and we remain optimistic and committed to working on this.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay, hold on. Hi.

QUESTION: Because we're hearing different point of view. Is the peace plan not ready or is it ready but you're not ready to unveil it?

MS NAUERT: Not ready to unveil it just yet. Anything more specific I'll have to get an update for you from the offices handling this issue most – more closely.

Hey, Barbara.

QUESTION: Just very quickly, there's an Israeli newspaper reporting that Mr. Trump has offered to give the Palestinians \$5 billion in aid if they come back to the peace talks. Have you heard anything about that?

MS NAUERT: Inaccurate. Inaccurate.

QUESTION: It's a – it's false?

MS NAUERT: It's not a correct story, yeah.

QUESTION: So are they going to get anything?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of any amount of money that is being offered to return to the peace table.

QUESTION: So there's no – so there's no at least financial incentive for them to come back thus –

MS NAUERT: That is my understanding, not only that that report is –

QUESTION: Is – that's part of the encouraging plan, right?

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: That's part of the encouragement?

MS NAUERT: I can just tell you that that report is inaccurate.

QUESTION: They get nothing.

MS NAUERT: That report is inaccurate.

QUESTION: Are you saying the peace deal is ready, it's – you're just waiting to present it at a – at a time –

MS NAUERT: We will unveil it when we are ready to unveil it, and I'll just leave it at that for right now.

QUESTION: Afghanistan.

MS NAUERT: Hey, Laurie.

QUESTION: Hi. In Iraq, both Ayatollah Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr have come out in opposition to a second term for Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi. Do you think it would be – it might be a good idea if he stepped aside?

MS NAUERT: Laurie, that's something that we wouldn't get involved with in calling for that at this time. That would be an internal Iraqi matter that the Iraqis would have to figure out.

QUESTION: Well how about this question, then: Neither of the two blocs – one is kind of neutral or pro-American, the other is pro-Iranian – has the seats to form the next government, and the Kurds control a bloc of seats that is likely to be decisive. Do you think making concessions to the Kurds in order to encourage them to support your side would be a good idea? Because the other side will make those concessions and then you'll lose Iraq.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, Laurie, again, we support Iraq's democratic progress that they have made and their democratic process, recognizing that it is a sovereign government. We support Iraq's efforts to form a moderate, sovereign Iraqi government pursuant to the constitutional timeline that's responsive to the aspirations of the Iraqi people.

QUESTION: But you don't contest my view of the importance of the Kurdish bloc?

MS NAUERT: Of course that is important. All Iraqis are important, and that's why we talk about a sovereign Iraq and we think that Iraqis will be able to figure this out very well on their own.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Afghanistan.

QUESTION: India.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Okay. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Quick question on China. So President Trump has recently

signed the John McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2019 in which – so it's law now – in which there are language to restrict U.S. Government's procurement of Chinese telecommunication service and equipment. My question for you is how does that impact State Department's guidelines to embassies and consulates in their procurement process?

MS NAUERT: Oh, goodness. You're asking me about the procurement process. I think you have to be a lawyer in order to handle that one. I'll have to look into that and get you an answer from our folks who are working on that issue.

QUESTION: Yemen. Yemen.

QUESTION: Does the U.S. have a opinion on – does the United States has a opinion on U.S. allies' reliance on Chinese telecommunication equipment and service?

MS NAUERT: I would just hesitate to answer that. I'd like to get some more information from our experts who work on those technical issues and get you an answer on that later.

QUESTION: Yemen. Yemen.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go right ahead.

QUESTION: India.

MS NAUERT: And then we'll come back to you. Hi.

QUESTION: Just in terms of the certification yesterday on Yemen, the report mentioned a number of things it said that the coalition was doing, but they were sort of like technical things like getting training and drawing up no-strike lists and acknowledged that there were still way too many casualties – civilians being killed. And I know that there is concern after the UN report that the Americans maybe could be implicated in war crimes if some of these strikes are found to be war crimes. Was the feeling here with that certification that you're covering your bases in terms of any culpability for civilian casualties?

MS NAUERT: Well, first, let me start out with this – with mentioning this: The NDAA required the Secretary to make a determination on the actions of the Saudi-led coalition operating in and around Yemen. The Secretary, in line with 1290 – section 1290 of the NDAA – certified that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are supporting diplomatic efforts to end the civil war there. There are three things that the NDAA required. It did not require perfection on the part of the coalition's actions. It stipulated making concerted efforts in three key areas: diplomatic efforts to end the civil war – we see that going forward – and strong efforts on the part of the Saudis and the Emiratis to push forward with a diplomatic solution; also taking measures to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

The governments have contributed significant amounts of money to that end and I can detail a few of those, but also refer you back to their governments for more information on that. Next, agreeing to undertake actions to reduce the risk of harm to civilians and also civilian infrastructure. We see those governments and the coalition taking steps and listening to the concerns of the U.S. Government. Those concerns have been expressed on the part of Secretary Pompeo, Secretary Mattis, and I would imagine others in high positions within the U.S. Government.

We see them taking steps. Is it perfect? No, absolutely not. Do we see them doing what they can to mitigate civilian casualties? Absolutely, we do. That's something that the U.S. Government takes very seriously, as you hear the Pentagon speak about that with regard to its own actions that it takes around the world, doing everything that it can to mitigate civilian casualties. So the Secretary made his determination and sent that information up to Capitol Hill.

QUESTION: Senator Shaheen said that the legislation had established firm benchmarks on avoiding civilian casualties before a certification could be made, and the coalition clearly hadn't met these benchmarks. So she's saying that even though they weren't expecting perfection, the Secretary chose different benchmarks basically. Do you have a response to that?

MS NAUERT: I would disagree with that. Some of the information would be classified, so it'd be limited in terms of the scope of what I can say. But I can tell you that they have been working to reduce civilian casualties. The U.S. Government has found them, meaning the coalition, to be receptive to our concerns. They have taken our advice, they've admitted to making errors. The coalition announced that it is reviewing its rules of engagement. We think that that is something that is important. They will hold – the coalition has pledged to hold those at fault accountable for their actions in terms of those civilian casualties. They've also pledged to compensate the victims of those strikes that tragically did kill civilians. So we're seeing them make some good-faith efforts and we're continuing to have conversations with the government about that.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Heather –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – the reaction to this certification from the Hill and from human rights groups, from aid agencies – I mean, they're pretty damning. I mean, charade, charade, farce – I think senator – Oxfam or someone said that he was lying to Congress. Other members of Congress said that this made a mockery of their requirements that were in the NDAA. So how do you square that reaction with the certification? What's your response to that kind of a – that response, which is pretty harsh?

MS NAUERT: Well, first I would say they're taking steps in the view of

the U.S. Government and this administration in the right direction. I understand certainly the concerns of aid groups. Our Deputy Secretary Sullivan has been meeting consistently with some of the aid groups who are operating in the region and providing assistance to those in Yemen. In fact, he had a meeting with them just today, and I can provide you a bit of a readout on that meeting he had with some of those humanitarian groups. Our Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan and USAID Administrator Mark Green met – it was actually yesterday, not today – with international and NGO groups to discuss the humanitarian situation in Yemen and to brief the group on the Secretary's certification to Congress under section 1290 of the John McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019. They discussed recent efforts by the United Nations Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths to bring the Republic of Yemen Government and Houthi representatives to Geneva for consultations.

The deputy secretary reiterated the administration's full support of the UN-led political process and stressed that there is no military solution to this conflict. The deputy secretary and the administrator discussed the importance of all parties continuing to support the UN special envoy; avoiding further escalation of the conflict, including Hodeidah; coordinating efforts to address Yemen's economic and humanitarian situation; and committing to a process to reach a comprehensive political agreement that will bring peace, prosperity, and security to Yemen. Participants expressed their concern about escalating violence in Hodeidah and also noted the continuing dynamic of desperation in Yemen.

It necessitates measures that would yield tangible results and a sense of improvement. The deputy secretary thanked the NGOs for their continuing cooperation and the frank dialogue that they had. He reaffirmed the United States' concern about the risk of harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure, particularly of a humanitarian nature. He said the United States will continue to call on all parties to respect the law of armed conflict, take feasible precautions to avoid harm to civilians, and conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into alleged violations. I would be happy to send that out to you after the briefing.

QUESTION: Yeah, could you? And could you also – could you – did they accept the certification? Did these – would you say that these aid groups welcomed the Secretary's determination that the coalition is doing everything – or doing enough?

MS NAUERT: I would say that we would have access to different kinds of information than some of the NGOs on the ground. They do some incredible work, these NGOs, and I can tell you we were pleased to have them in to the State Department. It was a frank discussion, of course, as you can imagine it would, but here is the readout that I was just able to provide for you.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Unfortunately, I wasn't in the room. I wish I had been in that meeting.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) Thank you.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay. Next – next question. Cindy, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Just to follow up, can you provide any more information about what exactly the Saudi-led coalition – what steps they're taking?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, and I think this is something that Secretary Mattis had addressed not that long ago, and so, in fact, the Department of Defense is better positioned to be able to discuss some of the activities of the coalition and some of the direct things that they are doing. So let me just read a portion of this for you. Pardon me, I have to grab my glasses. Secretary Mattis said about a week and a half ago, "For the last several years we've been working with the Saudis and Emiratis doing what we can to reduce any chance of innocent people being injured or killed. We recognize that we are watching a war in which the Houthi-led effort involves launching weapons out of residential areas into Saudi Arabia.

We recognize the complexity of this. At no time have we felt rebuffed or ignored when we bring concerns to them," meaning the coalition. "The training that we have given them we know has paid off." He goes on to say, "We recognize every mistake like this is tragic in every way, but we have not seen any callous disregard by the people we are working with. We continue to work with them and to reduce this kind of tragedy."

This is something that the United States Government takes seriously. I understand that some NGOs, some folks on the Hill are perhaps angry and frustrated with the decision, but I can tell you we took a very careful and close look at the information, some of which is classified, and the Secretary made his determination. Okay?

QUESTION: Syria.

MS NAUERT: Okay, go right ahead.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Syria.

MS NAUERT: Hi.

QUESTION: Thank you, madam. Two questions, please. One, before heading to India for 2+2, Secretary was in Pakistan meeting and greeting civilian government and the military officials, including Prime Minister Imran Khan. What I'm asking you is that was Secretary carrying any messages for the Pakistani or Indian prime minister from the President?

MS NAUERT: Did he have any particular messages?

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: For both of them from President Trump? That's your question?

QUESTION: Right. Yes, ma'am.

MS NAUERT: We certainly had lots of messages that we brought. India is a very close friend of the United States. We have among the strongest people-to-people ties. I think there are more than three million Indian Americans living here in the United States, so that was certainly part of the meetings and the conversations. COMCASA was something that was signed between the Department of Defense and also the ministry of defense in India, and that was something important that had been a long – a long time in the making. So we were pleased to have signed that with the Indian Government because that not only supports jobs but also supports better military-to-military cooperation. They also agreed to doing more work on the military-to-military front. So that was part of the conversation but also to go over there and thank the new government for our strong friendship that we have.

In terms of Pakistan, the Secretary had some meaningful and important meetings with the new government, looking forward to forging a relationship with that new government, recognizing that there are, of course, some tensions and some areas where we – or the government can work harder. And so those were the types of meetings that we had and we were pleased to have gone.

Short trip, but nevertheless an important trip.

QUESTION: And second –

MS NAUERT: Let me just move on because I want to –

QUESTION: Second question, please.

MS NAUERT: I want to be able to hit everybody in the room, so Rich, go right – go right ahead.

QUESTION: Heather, really quick. Yesterday secretary – former Secretary Kerry acknowledged that he's spoken with Foreign Minister Zarif after he's left office. Does the current Secretary, Secretary Pompeo, does he have thoughts on that and does he believe that that is potentially countering this administration's policy?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, so let me – let me start with this. I've seen former Secretary Kerry do rounds on the talk shows and talking with the press in terms of print and also radio. I've seen him brag about the meetings that he has had with the Iranian Government and Iranian Government officials. And I've also seen reports that he is apparently providing, according to reports, advice to the Iranian Government. I think probably the best advice that he should be giving the Iranian Government is stop supporting terror groups around the world, stop supporting Hizballah.

We were just talking about the Saudi-led coalition and activities that it is undertaking in Yemen, and we see the Iranian Government offering help, expertise, money, material to the Houthi rebels in Yemen that is causing so much misery in that country. We see them – meaning Shia militias – trying to kill U.S. service members in places like Iraq. We see them launching attacks on some of our partners. If anything, we should – he should be calling on the Iranian Government to stop spending money on all this adventurism and terrorism around the world and start spending their money on their own people, as we have seen so many Iranian people express their serious concerns about this kind of military adventurism.

QUESTION: Heather, just on that.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: One of your colleagues, Assistant Secretary Singh, was on the Hill earlier today and was asked a very similar question about this by Representative Zeldin. And she said in response to his question, which – and his question suggested that former Secretary Kerry was going to do backdoor diplomacy here to thwart the will of this new administration. She said – Assistant Secretary Singh said, “It’s unfortunate if people from a past administration would try to compromise the progress [that] we are trying to make in this administration.” And then she said she didn’t have personal knowledge of the meetings that Secretary Kerry is talking – former Secretary Kerry is talking about, but if that is happening again, she said, quote, “I would find it very inappropriate.”

Are those her personal feelings about this, or is that the position of this Secretary and the State Department that –

MS NAUERT: I have not spoken to Assistant Secretary Singh. She may still, in fact, be on the Hill at this hour, so I have not yet consulted with her on some of those remarks. But I think I just laid out concerns that we would have in offering advice to the Iranian Government. If someone is going to have conversations with the Iranian Government, let’s make them productive conversations. Let’s make them about how the President sees the activities of the Iranian Government.

This administration no longer looks at the Iranian Government just through the narrow scope of the JCPOA, the nuclear deal. We look at the totality of Iran’s bad actions around the world in fomenting terror and causing so much misery around the globe, including misery in their own country.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, I think the former administration would disagree that it only focused on the JCPOA.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: But regardless, I’m just trying to find out whether or not Secretary Pompeo, who is the current Secretary of State, has any

problems or plans to raise any concerns about this with his predecessor, former Secretary Kerry.

MS NAUERT: I have not asked him that question –

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: – but I will be sure to do so, certainly.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Afghanistan?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay, okay. Hey, Nazira. How are you?

QUESTION: Good, thank you very much. Heather, as you mentioned, a lot of achievement from Indians regarding Afghanistan, it's good things. But unfortunately, the security is bad in Afghanistan. We have the day before yesterday, almost 200 people have been killed and injured. Based on this situation, still United States generally you are optimistic about the peace process with the Taliban? What do you think?

MS NAUERT: Well, it's a long road, right? We have a new military commander in Scott Miller, who's over there. We have a lot of respect and hope for the work that he will be engaging in. Ultimately, this is going to become a conversation or will be a conversation between the Afghan Government and also the Taliban. The United States Government stands ready to assist, to facilitate, but this has to be an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.

Things have been very, very difficult in Afghanistan lately. As you well know, Nazira, since you're from Afghanistan, you know the terror acts that have taken place there recently. We continue to stand by the people of Afghanistan, who have been so brave and have lived through so much over many decades where they've had to live through terrorism. But this ultimately has to become – be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned.

Okay? And we're going to have to wrap it up pretty shortly. Hey, Michelle.

QUESTION: Heather, just two quick questions.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: This week, some Democrats in Congress sent a letter to the State Department criticizing State and a particular deputy assistant secretary for not calling out racism and xenophobia in international fora, and they demanded that he be made available to answer questions to their staffs. Does the State Department plan on doing that?

MS NAUERT: Michelle, I don't have any information for you on that. I can

tell you that allegations of racism, political retribution, anything of that sort, is not something that the Secretary tolerates. It's not an accepted practice here at the State Department. Anyone who has any issues or concerns, I would encourage them to contact our Office of Civil Rights, raise those concerns. We have internal mechanisms here at the State Department to handle those types of issues and concerns. In fact, the State Department has more offices, more avenues in which people can express their concerns about those allegations than other federal departments do in the United States Government.

QUESTION: Okay. And yesterday, the author of a preliminary GAO report on the State Department's response to the attacks in Cuba took issue with State's explanation for what went wrong in communication. He called it unsatisfactory, saying that there was genuine confusion, a lack of clarity in the department's policy; some but not all State employees that were involved even knew of the existence of this office that they were supposed to report it to.

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry, in which office?

QUESTION: In the office that was supposed to call for the creation of an Accountability Review Board. So they didn't – there were people who didn't even know that that office existed and that there were communications issues across the board at the State Department. So he disputed the – State's explanation.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. We conducted – let me just pause you there. We pulled together an ARB, an Accountability Review Board. The Accountability Review Board released its report to Capitol Hill about two weeks ago or so –

QUESTION: Right, right.

MS NAUERT: – acknowledging that there were some things that certainly could have been done better. I think any time you have a tragedy, anytime you have a crisis, anytime you have a medical situation – and let me remind folks that with regard to our Cuba situation, we still don't know the cause, we still don't know what or who is responsible for health attacks that took place that affected our personnel in Cuba. We still don't know what is responsible despite the interagency efforts and investigations that are still underway today.

So we are working to try to provide the best of care that we can to our personnel. We have not only the Accountability Review Board, but we also have a task force that meets regularly, that meets – I think Robert goes to those meetings just about every day. We remain very busy, very engaged in this and take this situation extremely seriously.

QUESTION: But on –

QUESTION: But the question was –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – this all – the explanation for the problems that the State Department gives to this day, the author of this report takes issue with and calls that explanation unsatisfactory. So, I mean, from the podium, do you feel like these issues and how these things are handled –

MS NAUERT: I think you're raising a lot of issues that I can't get into in totality, issues in a very detailed and complex report. So I'm not going to comment broadly on something that I don't have all the specific details on in front of me.

QUESTION: Can you just talk about the meeting today with the Cubans?

MS NAUERT: Yes, yes. So as some of you may be aware, some officials from the Cuban Government are here at the State Department today. I believe at this hour it's still ongoing; there's a briefing taking place between some of our colleagues from our various bureaus that are involved in this very issue that Michelle and I were just talking about. They're having meetings with the Cuban Government to discuss some of the medical issues that our people have experienced.

I will not have a readout for you coming out of that meeting. That is something that involves the private medical information that is coming forth from some of our people, but I can confirm there is a meeting taking place here at the State Department.

QUESTION: Does that mean that the Cubans, who have complained in the past that you refused to give them that – some of that private medical information, does that mean that you've now agreed to give them what –

MS NAUERT: I'm not exactly certain what information will be provided to them, but I won't be able to provide that to you publicly. There may be some information –

QUESTION: No, no, no – okay.

MS NAUERT: – that we are sharing with the Government of Cuba about what our people have been experiencing.

QUESTION: More than what they had – what had been shared in the past?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of the specifics of that. I can just tell you that our medical professionals and some of our experts on this area are meeting with Cuban officials at this hour.

QUESTION: Can I get you on one last thing?

MS NAUERT: Sure.

QUESTION: And that is something we talked about a little bit yesterday.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Then we have to wrap.

QUESTION: That was – yeah. So I did finally get an answer to the

question, my question about where the administration thinks it might get the authority to issue – to impose sanctions on ICC employees, and that was the IEEPA. But even former Republican legal counselors in this building – one of whom worked with Ambassador Bolton himself – are very dubious that that could – that IEEPA, which means that there has to be a national emergency declared with respect to security issues, could be used for that sanctions. But assuming that this administration thinks it can make the argument for that, I still – I don't have an answer to the question of where Ambassador Bolton and the administration thinks that it would get authority to prosecute ICC employees in U.S. courts. The – it seems to me that that would smack of the same kind of universal jurisdiction that Ambassador Bolton is so un-fond of.

MS NAUERT: I would say some of this is hypothetical. So Ambassador Bolton's speech spoke of options that we could take if the ICC were to choose to prosecute or investigate some U.S. service members. So it was simply an option that Ambassador Bolton highlighted.

QUESTION: So it's not definitive. It's not – so –

MS NAUERT: I would hesitate to –

QUESTION: – you're walking back what the ambassador said?

MS NAUERT: No. I would hesitate to speak for Ambassador Bolton on this very issue, but I can just tell you that it is an option that the U.S. Government could explore if the ICC were to go down that road and attempt to prosecute or investigate our U.S. service members.

QUESTION: Okay. Does that go for both sanctions and/or prosecution in U.S. courts? Is it –

MS NAUERT: You know we typically don't comment on possible specific sanctions or prosecutions.

QUESTION: Okay. So it's not a definite; it's just a possibility?

MS NAUERT: That's what it seems to me.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: But I would also ask you to speak with Ambassador Bolton's office –

QUESTION: Will do.

MS NAUERT: – for any more clarity on that.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Okay. We've got to –

QUESTION: The new charge d'affaires to Cuba, will they be taking up

their post, or just waiting here until things are –

MS NAUERT: I don't know the exact timing of it. We just got this information out today, so I'll let you know. Okay.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:48p.m.)

3:08 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. How you doing?

QUESTION: Good, thank you.

MS NAUERT: Good. A couple announcements to start out with today, as we take a look at all of the news that so many of the cable networks in particular are covering – covering Hurricane Florence. I'd like to draw your attention and remind folks that the State Department is tracking storms around the world. We are closely watching Super Typhoon Mangkhut, which is expected to impact parts of the Philippines, Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China later this week. The safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas is one of our highest priorities, and we strongly encourage citizens in those affected areas to follow instructions provided by local authorities and also enroll in our STEP program, the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, at step.state.gov. That way they can receive important emergency information. And also follow us on Twitter, [@travel.gov](https://twitter.com/travel.gov), and Facebook for additional updates. As the super typhoon moves across the region, we'll provide information to U.S. citizens in the area through alerts, our embassy and consulate websites, and also travel.state.gov. We urge U.S. citizens in the impacted areas who are safe to contact their loved ones directly and/or update their social media status. If you are in an emergency situation, please contact local authorities in that emergency situation.

Next, as you all know, the Secretary was just in India last week, and so this is sort of the perfect thing to bring you today. The United States, Afghanistan, and India held the second annual joint trade and investment show in Mumbai yesterday. That was in order to strengthen regional economic ties and showcase Afghanistan's products and also investment opportunities. More than 2,000 Afghan, Indian, and international businesses participating, and on the first day alone more than \$160 million in agreements were signed, many of those which will support U.S. and Afghan jobs along the supply chain. For example, this year's show included an agreement between Afghanistan's Bayat Group and Siemens for the provision of turbines produced here in the United States that will support 60 to 70 U.S. jobs in Houston and also provide power to northern Afghanistan to support the local economy, increase stability, and promote self-sufficiency. That event is sponsored by USAID and will continue through Saturday.

Next, let's go back in history a little bit to 1945, and that's when

Senator William Fulbright introduced a bill in the United States Congress that called for the use of surplus war property to fund the promotion of international goodwill through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and also science. It's the Fulbright Program, as we know it today. Today that is America's flagship academic exchange program, and we have Fulbright partnerships with more than 160 countries. That allows thousands of American and foreign students and scholars to participate in academic exchanges. 2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the United States-United Kingdom Fulbright Program. Our Assistant Secretary for Education and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce announced at the House of Commons a new Fulbright public-private partnership between the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S.-UK Fulbright Commission to exchange scholars who will focus on health issues. The UK also announced an increase in funding for the exchange from £600,000 to £1 million. So happy 70th anniversary to the United States and the United Kingdom Fulbright Program and thank you for strengthening our public diplomacy.

Last thing – and this is something we've been waiting for for a while and are really excited to bring you – and I'd like to congratulate our newest career ambassadors. They have been nominated a while ago, but just this afternoon the White House signed off on it, and we just received this news.

The Senate confirmed them today, and the President conferred the personnel rank of career ambassador to four of our colleagues: our Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale; Michele Sison, our ambassador to Haiti; Daniel Smith, our assistant secretary for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research; and Philip Goldberg, our charge in Havana.

This is the highest rank that a Foreign Service officer can attain, and we could not be happier to announce this news today. We are also pleased to announce that eight more members of our ambassadorial team were confirmed by the Senate and look forward to leading their embassies. I'll have their names and their posts in just a second.

Randy Berry is the first. He will become our next ambassador to Nepal and will succeed Alaina Teplitz, who will assume charge of our U.S. missions to Sri Lanka and also the Maldives. Donald Lu will become the next chief of mission in Kyrgyzstan. And then turning from South and Central Asia to Africa, Michael Hammer will become the next U.S. ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Stephanie Sullivan will be our chief of mission in Ghana, Derek Hogan – we love Derek – (laughter) – a friend of ours. We traveled together; some of you may have met Derek on the plane. Derek will become our next U.S. ambassador to Moldova, Phil Kosnett will become our next U.S. ambassador to Kosovo, while Judy Reinke will become our chief of mission in Montenegro. Congratulations to all of you.

These distinguished leaders join the top ranks of our leadership team and thousands of others across the State Department, all of whom are

hard at work to execute our diplomatic and national security missions across the globe on behalf of the United States.

And last thing, on a personal note: My colleague, Susan Stevenson, who was our acting assistant secretary for Public Affairs – she was also the acting R, the under secretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy for quite some time – she was just nominated today to be the ambassador of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. So congratulations to you, too, Susan, and we look forward to celebrating with you with I think some of Admiral Kirby's leftover Yuengling beer that's been hanging out for the past year and a half in the back of the fridge.

QUESTION: Ew. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: That beer's been left – that's pretty old beer. It's probably skunked by now. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: If we can get anything better for you, Susan, in short order, we certainly will. With that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: Thanks, Heather. I want to start today with something you'll probably find a little bit unusual.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: But that's with a thank you. You have – you're one of the few people in this administration at least with a public – who appears publicly to have consistently emphasized the importance of free press and democracies and talked about how important it is for journalists to be protected in what they do. And with that in mind, I'd like to know if you have anything to say about the rather surprising comments that Aung San Suu Kyi made about the two Reuters reporters in Myanmar and also her – more broadly, her comments about how – comments in defense of the Burmese military.

MS NAUERT: Right. Well, Matt, you'll recall, many of you will recall, we went to Burma with Secretary Tillerson last year. You may recall when Secretary Pompeo was at ASEAN about a month ago that this was an issue that he directly raised with his counterpart. The situation with the two Reuters reporters, we've consistently raised that issue with the Government of Burma over the past year or so since they had been – since they had been detained.

Something that we don't talk a lot about, however, is the fact that our embassy has remained very involved in monitoring the case of both of those reporters, in appearing at their court cases and so forth, and offering any support that we can certainly provide.

We are certainly aware of Aung San Suu Kyi's comments about the reporters. We are deeply disappointed by the verdict that convicted the journalists Wa Lone and also KyawSoeOo. We will continue to advocate at all levels of the U.S. Government for their immediate and their unconditional release. That verdict calls into question press freedom in

Burma.

When I was there, I had the opportunity to have a roundtable discussion with a surprising number of journalists who had discussed with me the impact of government officials putting pressure on them to not report certain things and to report other things. We continue to call upon the Government of Burma to protect the freedom of expression, which is an essential pillar of democracy.

The fact that those journalists were convicted despite testimony by police that they were ordered to frame those two reporters – that, in our view, raises serious concerns about the judicial independence and the fair trial guarantees that they are supposed to have in that country. We believe it harms public confidence in the justice system and the rule of law in Burma. We continue to urge the Government of Burma to take action immediately to correct this injustice.

QUESTION: Right. And you say you're aware of Suu Kyi's comments, but you don't have anything specific to say about them or about her broader defense of the Burmese military and judicial system?

MS NAUERT: Well, Matt, I think I can continue to say the journalists should, without a doubt, be released. We will continue to raise that – their cases at the highest level of that government. We've done that consistently within this administration, including the Vice President, who has spoken out about this issue as well.

We obviously disagree with many of the comments that she made. This is an issue of importance to us. We will continue working with our partners and allies to explore options to ensure justice for the victims of what has happened in the Rakhine State. And as you all know, the United States Government has been at the forefront of providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees. More than 700,000 of them, if not 800- or more – thousand or more, have been forced to go into neighboring Bangladesh. Bangladesh has welcomed them and providing them with camps – not the ideal place for anyone to be, of course, but nevertheless Bangladesh has done that, and the United States has offered financial support and humanitarian aid to those Rohingya not only in Bangladesh but also some who are in IDP camps in Burma as well.

Okay.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Two questions –

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go ahead, Lesley.

QUESTION: – if I may follow-up – about my colleagues. The one is: Has the Secretary or any other senior official at the State Department reached out to Aung San Suu Kyi about her remarks?

MS NAUERT: About her remarks in the last 24 hours?

QUESTION: In the last 24 hours.

MS NAUERT: Not that I am aware of. I can tell you we've raised it at the highest levels in the past. I can check with our embassy to see if we have anything additional. As you well know, a lot of times it is our embassy that may be taking the lead on some of these matters. If I have anything additional for you, I'll bring it to you.

QUESTION: And then has the Secretary made – is he any closer to making some determination on what the UN called a genocidal event, I think it was?

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Please don't quote me on that one, but basically pointed to the possibility of genocide.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. And as you all know, this is one of the most important duties that a Secretary of State has in making that determination. It's a legal determination that's very complex and complicated and takes quite a bit of time to make sure you've gone through all the details and the information.

The Secretary will determine whether and to what extent he decides to publicize his final report on that. When I have that report to bring to you, I'll certainly let you know.

Okay. Said, let me come back to you in just a second. Actually, go right ahead. Yeah.

QUESTION: Thank you. I appreciate it. Today marks the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Accords in the White House, and on this occasion I wanted to ask you whether you are – it was premised on a two-state solution ultimately. Are you still committed to the two-state solution, Israel and Palestine living side-by-side?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, and we've talked about this quite a bit before, and it's certainly a priority of Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner.

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: The President has said consistently that he supports a solution that both parties can work with, recognizing that both parties will have to compromise in order to come to some sort of an agreement. So we support whatever both sides can work – can come to an agreement on.

QUESTION: Yes, but they have negotiated for a quarter of a century on this issue, and it was premised on a two-state solution. I'm just asking you whether you are still committed to that.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Our policy has not changed. We also understand that we can't force it. Both sides will have to sit down and have direct

negotiations and conversations.

QUESTION: And one other thing regarding the tweet that was, I think, made by Mr. Jason Greenblatt about we are about to roll out a peace proposal of some sort. I'm just saying that with all these measures that have been taking week after week after week in the last 12 weeks, I mean, all sticks and no carrots, so to speak, how are you trying to reach out to the hearts and minds of the Palestinian people, ordinary Palestinians who you would need to reach out to if you are going to bypass the leadership that seems to be so obstinate?

MS NAUERT: I think my answer would go back to your previous question or your assertion that this has been going on, the conflict has been going on, the disagreements have been going on for 70 years – a very, very long time. Nothing has worked despite the U.S. Government and other governments' best efforts, right? Nothing has worked thus far.

This administration has determined that it desires to take a different kind of approach in encouraging two sides to sit down and have that conversation. It's something we'll not back away from, recognizing that it's certainly not going to be easy. We've seen that. But we remain committed to that. When the peace plan is ready and when they are ready to unveil it, we'd be happy to bring that to you, yes.

QUESTION: You will be able to reach out to ordinary Palestinians, to continue to have contact with them, help them in sort of getting the proper medical care, proper schools, and so on? Will you continue to do that?

MS NAUERT: We certainly hope so, and we're having conversations with governments in the region about alternative ways that the U.S. Government could help facilitate some of those things that you mention – health care and education, medical services.

QUESTION: A follow-up?

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, how exactly is the administration encouraging the Palestinians to come back to the table?

MS NAUERT: Well, Matt, recognizing –

QUESTION: By shuttering their office here, by cutting off aid to UNRWA, by cutting off aid to the hospital networks, by cutting the aid to the West Bank and Gaza –

MS NAUERT: Determining that there needs to be a different –

QUESTION: – by recognizing Jerusalem as –

MS NAUERT: Matt, there needs to be a different kind of approach. Nothing has worked. For far longer than you and I have been alive, right,

nothing has worked thus far. So we're trying a different approach, seeing if this is going to work. We are committed to it. We have people on the ground who are working to this effort each and every day and we remain optimistic and committed to working on this.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay, hold on. Hi.

QUESTION: Because we're hearing different point of view. Is the peace plan not ready or is it ready but you're not ready to unveil it?

MS NAUERT: Not ready to unveil it just yet. Anything more specific I'll have to get an update for you from the offices handling this issue most – more closely.

Hey, Barbara.

QUESTION: Just very quickly, there's an Israeli newspaper reporting that Mr. Trump has offered to give the Palestinians \$5 billion in aid if they come back to the peace talks. Have you heard anything about that?

MS NAUERT: Inaccurate. Inaccurate.

QUESTION: It's a – it's false?

MS NAUERT: It's not a correct story, yeah.

QUESTION: So are they going to get anything?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of any amount of money that is being offered to return to the peace table.

QUESTION: So there's no – so there's no at least financial incentive for them to come back thus –

MS NAUERT: That is my understanding, not only that that report is –

QUESTION: Is – that's part of the encouraging plan, right?

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: That's part of the encouragement?

MS NAUERT: I can just tell you that that report is inaccurate.

QUESTION: They get nothing.

MS NAUERT: That report is inaccurate.

QUESTION: Are you saying the peace deal is ready, it's – you're just waiting to present it at a – at a time –

MS NAUERT: We will unveil it when we are ready to unveil it, and I'll

just leave it at that for right now.

QUESTION: Afghanistan.

MS NAUERT: Hey, Laurie.

QUESTION: Hi. In Iraq, both Ayatollah Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr have come out in opposition to a second term for Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi. Do you think it would be – it might be a good idea if he stepped aside?

MS NAUERT: Laurie, that's something that we wouldn't get involved with in calling for that at this time. That would be an internal Iraqi matter that the Iraqis would have to figure out.

QUESTION: Well how about this question, then: Neither of the two blocs – one is kind of neutral or pro-American, the other is pro-Iranian – has the seats to form the next government, and the Kurds control a bloc of seats that is likely to be decisive. Do you think making concessions to the Kurds in order to encourage them to support your side would be a good idea? Because the other side will make those concessions and then you'll lose Iraq.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, Laurie, again, we support Iraq's democratic progress that they have made and their democratic process, recognizing that it is a sovereign government. We support Iraq's efforts to form a moderate, sovereign Iraqi government pursuant to the constitutional timeline that's responsive to the aspirations of the Iraqi people.

QUESTION: But you don't contest my view of the importance of the Kurdish bloc?

MS NAUERT: Of course that is important. All Iraqis are important, and that's why we talk about a sovereign Iraq and we think that Iraqis will be able to figure this out very well on their own.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Afghanistan.

QUESTION: India.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Okay. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Quick question on China. So President Trump has recently signed the John McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2019 in which – so it's law now – in which there are language to restrict U.S. Government's procurement of Chinese telecommunication service and equipment. My question for you is how does that impact State Department's guidelines to embassies and consulates in their procurement process?

MS NAUERT: Oh, goodness. You're asking me about the procurement process. I think you have to be a lawyer in order to handle that one. I'll have

to look into that and get you an answer from our folks who are working on that issue.

QUESTION: Yemen. Yemen.

QUESTION: Does the U.S. have an opinion on – does the United States have an opinion on U.S. allies' reliance on Chinese telecommunication equipment and service?

MS NAUERT: I would just hesitate to answer that. I'd like to get some more information from our experts who work on those technical issues and get you an answer on that later.

QUESTION: Yemen. Yemen.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go right ahead.

QUESTION: India.

MS NAUERT: And then we'll come back to you. Hi.

QUESTION: Just in terms of the certification yesterday on Yemen, the report mentioned a number of things it said that the coalition was doing, but they were sort of like technical things like getting training and drawing up no-strike lists and acknowledged that there were still way too many casualties – civilians being killed. And I know that there is concern after the UN report that the Americans maybe could be implicated in war crimes if some of these strikes are found to be war crimes. Was the feeling here with that certification that you're covering your bases in terms of any culpability for civilian casualties?

MS NAUERT: Well, first, let me start out with this – with mentioning this: The NDAA required the Secretary to make a determination on the actions of the Saudi-led coalition operating in and around Yemen. The Secretary, in line with 1290 – section 1290 of the NDAA – certified that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are supporting diplomatic efforts to end the civil war there. There are three things that the NDAA required. It did not require perfection on the part of the coalition's actions. It stipulated making concerted efforts in three key areas: diplomatic efforts to end the civil war – we see that going forward – and strong efforts on the part of the Saudis and the Emiratis to push forward with a diplomatic solution; also taking measures to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

The governments have contributed significant amounts of money to that end and I can detail a few of those, but also refer you back to their governments for more information on that. Next, agreeing to undertake actions to reduce the risk of harm to civilians and also civilian infrastructure. We see those governments and the coalition taking steps and listening to the concerns of the U.S. Government. Those concerns have been expressed on the part of Secretary Pompeo, Secretary Mattis, and I would imagine others in high positions within the U.S. Government.

We see them taking steps. Is it perfect? No, absolutely not. Do we see them doing what they can to mitigate civilian casualties? Absolutely, we do. That's something that the U.S. Government takes very seriously, as you hear the Pentagon speak about that with regard to its own actions that it takes around the world, doing everything that it can to mitigate civilian casualties. So the Secretary made his determination and sent that information up to Capitol Hill.

QUESTION: Senator Shaheen said that the legislation had established firm benchmarks on avoiding civilian casualties before a certification could be made, and the coalition clearly hadn't met these benchmarks. So she's saying that even though they weren't expecting perfection, the Secretary chose different benchmarks basically. Do you have a response to that?

MS NAUERT: I would disagree with that. Some of the information would be classified, so it'd be limited in terms of the scope of what I can say. But I can tell you that they have been working to reduce civilian casualties. The U.S. Government has found them, meaning the coalition, to be receptive to our concerns. They have taken our advice, they've admitted to making errors. The coalition announced that it is reviewing its rules of engagement. We think that that is something that is important. They will hold – the coalition has pledged to hold those at fault accountable for their actions in terms of those civilian casualties. They've also pledged to compensate the victims of those strikes that tragically did kill civilians. So we're seeing them make some good-faith efforts and we're continuing to have conversations with the government about that.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Heather –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – the reaction to this certification from the Hill and from human rights groups, from aid agencies – I mean, they're pretty damning. I mean, charade, charade, farce – I think senator – Oxfam or someone said that he was lying to Congress. Other members of Congress said that this made a mockery of their requirements that were in the NDAA. So how do you square that reaction with the certification? What's your response to that kind of a – that response, which is pretty harsh?

MS NAUERT: Well, first I would say they're taking steps in the view of the U.S. Government and this administration in the right direction. I understand certainly the concerns of aid groups. Our Deputy Secretary Sullivan has been meeting consistently with some of the aid groups who are operating in the region and providing assistance to those in Yemen. In fact, he had a meeting with them just today, and I can provide you a bit of a readout on that meeting he had with some of those humanitarian groups. Our Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan and USAID Administrator Mark Green met – it was actually yesterday, not today – with international and NGO groups to discuss the humanitarian situation

in Yemen and to brief the group on the Secretary's certification to Congress under section 1290 of the John McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019. They discussed recent efforts by the United Nations Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths to bring the Republic of Yemen Government and Houthi representatives to Geneva for consultations.

The deputy secretary reiterated the administration's full support of the UN-led political process and stressed that there is no military solution to this conflict. The deputy secretary and the administrator discussed the importance of all parties continuing to support the UN special envoy; avoiding further escalation of the conflict, including Hodeidah; coordinating efforts to address Yemen's economic and humanitarian situation; and committing to a process to reach a comprehensive political agreement that will bring peace, prosperity, and security to Yemen. Participants expressed their concern about escalating violence in Hodeidah and also noted the continuing dynamic of desperation in Yemen.

It necessitates measures that would yield tangible results and a sense of improvement. The deputy secretary thanked the NGOs for their continuing cooperation and the frank dialogue that they had. He reaffirmed the United States' concern about the risk of harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure, particularly of a humanitarian nature. He said the United States will continue to call on all parties to respect the law of armed conflict, take feasible precautions to avoid harm to civilians, and conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into alleged violations. I would be happy to send that out to you after the briefing.

QUESTION: Yeah, could you? And could you also – could you – did they accept the certification? Did these – would you say that these aid groups welcomed the Secretary's determination that the coalition is doing everything – or doing enough?

MS NAUERT: I would say that we would have access to different kinds of information than some of the NGOs on the ground. They do some incredible work, these NGOs, and I can tell you we were pleased to have them in to the State Department. It was a frank discussion, of course, as you can imagine it would, but here is the readout that I was just able to provide for you.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Unfortunately, I wasn't in the room. I wish I had been in that meeting.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) Thank you.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay. Next – next question. Cindy, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Just to follow up, can you provide any more information about

what exactly the Saudi-led coalition – what steps they're taking?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, and I think this is something that Secretary Mattis had addressed not that long ago, and so, in fact, the Department of Defense is better positioned to be able to discuss some of the activities of the coalition and some of the direct things that they are doing. So let me just read a portion of this for you. Pardon me, I have to grab my glasses. Secretary Mattis said about a week and a half ago, "For the last several years we've been working with the Saudis and Emiratis doing what we can to reduce any chance of innocent people being injured or killed. We recognize that we are watching a war in which the Houthi-led effort involves launching weapons out of residential areas into Saudi Arabia.

We recognize the complexity of this. At no time have we felt rebuffed or ignored when we bring concerns to them," meaning the coalition. "The training that we have given them we know has paid off." He goes on to say, "We recognize every mistake like this is tragic in every way, but we have not seen any callous disregard by the people we are working with. We continue to work with them and to reduce this kind of tragedy."

This is something that the United States Government takes seriously. I understand that some NGOs, some folks on the Hill are perhaps angry and frustrated with the decision, but I can tell you we took a very careful and close look at the information, some of which is classified, and the Secretary made his determination. Okay?

QUESTION: Syria.

MS NAUERT: Okay, go right ahead.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Syria.

MS NAUERT: Hi.

QUESTION: Thank you, madam. Two questions, please. One, before heading to India for 2+2, Secretary was in Pakistan meeting and greeting civilian government and the military officials, including Prime Minister Imran Khan. What I'm asking you is that was Secretary carrying any messages for the Pakistani or Indian prime minister from the President?

MS NAUERT: Did he have any particular messages?

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: For both of them from President Trump? That's your question?

QUESTION: Right. Yes, ma'am.

MS NAUERT: We certainly had lots of messages that we brought. India is a very close friend of the United States. We have among the strongest people-to-people ties. I think there are more than three million Indian Americans living here in the United States, so that was certainly part

of the meetings and the conversations. COMCASA was something that was signed between the Department of Defense and also the ministry of defense in India, and that was something important that had been a long – a long time in the making. So we were pleased to have signed that with the Indian Government because that not only supports jobs but also supports better military-to-military cooperation. They also agreed to doing more work on the military-to-military front. So that was part of the conversation but also to go over there and thank the new government for our strong friendship that we have.

In terms of Pakistan, the Secretary had some meaningful and important meetings with the new government, looking forward to forging a relationship with that new government, recognizing that there are, of course, some tensions and some areas where we – or the government can work harder. And so those were the types of meetings that we had and we were pleased to have gone.

Short trip, but nevertheless an important trip.

QUESTION: And second –

MS NAUERT: Let me just move on because I want to –

QUESTION: Second question, please.

MS NAUERT: I want to be able to hit everybody in the room, so Rich, go right – go right ahead.

QUESTION: Heather, really quick. Yesterday secretary – former Secretary Kerry acknowledged that he's spoken with Foreign Minister Zarif after he's left office. Does the current Secretary, Secretary Pompeo, does he have thoughts on that and does he believe that that is potentially countering this administration's policy?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, so let me – let me start with this. I've seen former Secretary Kerry do rounds on the talk shows and talking with the press in terms of print and also radio. I've seen him brag about the meetings that he has had with the Iranian Government and Iranian Government officials. And I've also seen reports that he is apparently providing, according to reports, advice to the Iranian Government. I think probably the best advice that he should be giving the Iranian Government is stop supporting terror groups around the world, stop supporting Hizballah.

We were just talking about the Saudi-led coalition and activities that it is undertaking in Yemen, and we see the Iranian Government offering help, expertise, money, material to the Houthi rebels in Yemen that is causing so much misery in that country. We see them – meaning Shia militias – trying to kill U.S. service members in places like Iraq. We see them launching attacks on some of our partners. If anything, we should – he should be calling on the Iranian Government to stop spending money on all this adventurism and terrorism around the world and start spending their money on their own people, as we have seen so many

Iranian people express their serious concerns about this kind of military adventurism.

QUESTION: Heather, just on that.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: One of your colleagues, Assistant Secretary Singh, was on the Hill earlier today and was asked a very similar question about this by Representative Zeldin. And she said in response to his question, which – and his question suggested that former Secretary Kerry was going to do backdoor diplomacy here to thwart the will of this new administration. She said – Assistant Secretary Singh said, “It’s unfortunate if people from a past administration would try to compromise the progress [that] we are trying to make in this administration.” And then she said she didn’t have personal knowledge of the meetings that Secretary Kerry is talking – former Secretary Kerry is talking about, but if that is happening again, she said, quote, “I would find it very inappropriate.”

Are those her personal feelings about this, or is that the position of this Secretary and the State Department that –

MS NAUERT: I have not spoken to Assistant Secretary Singh. She may still, in fact, be on the Hill at this hour, so I have not yet consulted with her on some of those remarks. But I think I just laid out concerns that we would have in offering advice to the Iranian Government. If someone is going to have conversations with the Iranian Government, let’s make them productive conversations. Let’s make them about how the President sees the activities of the Iranian Government.

This administration no longer looks at the Iranian Government just through the narrow scope of the JCPOA, the nuclear deal. We look at the totality of Iran’s bad actions around the world in fomenting terror and causing so much misery around the globe, including misery in their own country.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, I think the former administration would disagree that it only focused on the JCPOA.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: But regardless, I’m just trying to find out whether or not Secretary Pompeo, who is the current Secretary of State, has any problems or plans to raise any concerns about this with his predecessor, former Secretary Kerry.

MS NAUERT: I have not asked him that question –

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: – but I will be sure to do so, certainly.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Afghanistan?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Okay, okay. Hey, Nazira. How are you?

QUESTION: Good, thank you very much. Heather, as you mentioned, a lot of achievement from Indians regarding Afghanistan, it's good things. But unfortunately, the security is bad in Afghanistan. We have the day before yesterday, almost 200 people have been killed and injured. Based on this situation, still United States generally you are optimistic about the peace process with the Taliban? What do you think?

MS NAUERT: Well, it's a long road, right? We have a new military commander in Scott Miller, who's over there. We have a lot of respect and hope for the work that he will be engaging in. Ultimately, this is going to become a conversation or will be a conversation between the Afghan Government and also the Taliban. The United States Government stands ready to assist, to facilitate, but this has to be an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.

Things have been very, very difficult in Afghanistan lately. As you well know, Nazira, since you're from Afghanistan, you know the terror acts that have taken place there recently. We continue to stand by the people of Afghanistan, who have been so brave and have lived through so much over many decades where they've had to live through terrorism. But this ultimately has to become – be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned.

Okay? And we're going to have to wrap it up pretty shortly. Hey, Michelle.

QUESTION: Heather, just two quick questions.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: This week, some Democrats in Congress sent a letter to the State Department criticizing State and a particular deputy assistant secretary for not calling out racism and xenophobia in international fora, and they demanded that he be made available to answer questions to their staffs. Does the State Department plan on doing that?

MS NAUERT: Michelle, I don't have any information for you on that. I can tell you that allegations of racism, political retribution, anything of that sort, is not something that the Secretary tolerates. It's not an accepted practice here at the State Department. Anyone who has any issues or concerns, I would encourage them to contact our Office of Civil Rights, raise those concerns. We have internal mechanisms here at the State Department to handle those types of issues and concerns. In fact, the State Department has more offices, more avenues in which people can express their concerns about those allegations than other federal departments do in the United States Government.

QUESTION: Okay. And yesterday, the author of a preliminary GAO report on

the State Department's response to the attacks in Cuba took issue with State's explanation for what went wrong in communication. He called it unsatisfactory, saying that there was genuine confusion, a lack of clarity in the department's policy; some but not all State employees that were involved even knew of the existence of this office that they were supposed to report it to.

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry, in which office?

QUESTION: In the office that was supposed to call for the creation of an Accountability Review Board. So they didn't – there were people who didn't even know that that office existed and that there were communications issues across the board at the State Department. So he disputed the – State's explanation.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. We conducted – let me just pause you there. We pulled together an ARB, an Accountability Review Board. The Accountability Review Board released its report to Capitol Hill about two weeks ago or so –

QUESTION: Right, right.

MS NAUERT: – acknowledging that there were some things that certainly could have been done better. I think any time you have a tragedy, anytime you have a crisis, anytime you have a medical situation – and let me remind folks that with regard to our Cuba situation, we still don't know the cause, we still don't know what or who is responsible for health attacks that took place that affected our personnel in Cuba. We still don't know what is responsible despite the interagency efforts and investigations that are still underway today.

So we are working to try to provide the best of care that we can to our personnel. We have not only the Accountability Review Board, but we also have a task force that meets regularly, that meets – I think Robert goes to those meetings just about every day. We remain very busy, very engaged in this and take this situation extremely seriously.

QUESTION: But on –

QUESTION: But the question was –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – this all – the explanation for the problems that the State Department gives to this day, the author of this report takes issue with and calls that explanation unsatisfactory. So, I mean, from the podium, do you feel like these issues and how these things are handled –

MS NAUERT: I think you're raising a lot of issues that I can't get into in totality, issues in a very detailed and complex report. So I'm not going to comment broadly on something that I don't have all the specific details on in front of me.

QUESTION: Can you just talk about the meeting today with the Cubans?

MS NAUERT: Yes, yes. So as some of you may be aware, some officials from the Cuban Government are here at the State Department today. I believe at this hour it's still ongoing; there's a briefing taking place between some of our colleagues from our various bureaus that are involved in this very issue that Michelle and I were just talking about. They're having meetings with the Cuban Government to discuss some of the medical issues that our people have experienced.

I will not have a readout for you coming out of that meeting. That is something that involves the private medical information that is coming forth from some of our people, but I can confirm there is a meeting taking place here at the State Department.

QUESTION: Does that mean that the Cubans, who have complained in the past that you refused to give them that – some of that private medical information, does that mean that you've now agreed to give them what –

MS NAUERT: I'm not exactly certain what information will be provided to them, but I won't be able to provide that to you publicly. There may be some information –

QUESTION: No, no, no – okay.

MS NAUERT: – that we are sharing with the Government of Cuba about what our people have been experiencing.

QUESTION: More than what they had – what had been shared in the past?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of the specifics of that. I can just tell you that our medical professionals and some of our experts on this area are meeting with Cuban officials at this hour.

QUESTION: Can I get you on one last thing?

MS NAUERT: Sure.

QUESTION: And that is something we talked about a little bit yesterday.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Then we have to wrap.

QUESTION: That was – yeah. So I did finally get an answer to the question, my question about where the administration thinks it might get the authority to issue – to impose sanctions on ICC employees, and that was the IEEPA. But even former Republican legal counselors in this building – one of whom worked with Ambassador Bolton himself – are very dubious that that could – that IEEPA, which means that there has to be a national emergency declared with respect to security issues, could be used for that sanctions. But assuming that this administration thinks it can make the argument for that, I still – I don't have an answer to the question of where Ambassador Bolton and the administration thinks that it would get authority to prosecute ICC employees in U.S. courts. The –

it seems to me that that would smack of the same kind of universal jurisdiction that Ambassador Bolton is so un-fond of.

MS NAUERT: I would say some of this is hypothetical. So Ambassador Bolton's speech spoke of options that we could take if the ICC were to choose to prosecute or investigate some U.S. service members. So it was simply an option that Ambassador Bolton highlighted.

QUESTION: So it's not definitive. It's not – so –

MS NAUERT: I would hesitate to –

QUESTION: – you're walking back what the ambassador said?

MS NAUERT: No. I would hesitate to speak for Ambassador Bolton on this very issue, but I can just tell you that it is an option that the U.S. Government could explore if the ICC were to go down that road and attempt to prosecute or investigate our U.S. service members.

QUESTION: Okay. Does that go for both sanctions and/or prosecution in U.S. courts? Is it –

MS NAUERT: You know we typically don't comment on possible specific sanctions or prosecutions.

QUESTION: Okay. So it's not a definite; it's just a possibility?

MS NAUERT: That's what it seems to me.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: But I would also ask you to speak with Ambassador Bolton's office –

QUESTION: Will do.

MS NAUERT: – for any more clarity on that.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Okay. We've got to –

QUESTION: The new charge d'affaires to Cuba, will they be taking up their post, or just waiting here until things are –

MS NAUERT: I don't know the exact timing of it. We just got this information out today, so I'll let you know. Okay.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:48p.m.)

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