

Press Releases: Remarks to Families of Americans Held Captive Abroad

Remarks

Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

U.S. Diplomacy Center

Washington, DC

April 2, 2019

MR O'BRIEN: Good afternoon, congressmen, senator, ambassadors, my colleagues at the State Department, and other officials in the United States Government – most importantly, the families of Americans who are held captive abroad. Welcome to the State Department.

My name is Robert O'Brien. I am the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs. We here at the State Department are all deeply humbled that you made the effort to gather here today from all four corners of our great land. For those of you whose loved ones are held captive abroad, we asked you to make this journey because we want you to know and to feel the deep commitment we have to bringing them home. We want you to meet the people in our government

and some of our foreign partners who are working to make that happen.

For those of you here today who've lost loved ones at the hands of evil men, evil terrorist organizations, and evil regimes, we asked you here because we want you to know that your loss will never be forgotten. We want you to know that you have a community here at the State Department; we support you and we love you.

My team and I at the State Department, the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, headquartered at the FBI, are available to you at every hour. Bringing our fellow citizens home is the single-most important mission we have, and it is also the key mission of this Secretary of State, of this President, and of this nation.

It is now my honor to introduce the Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo. Mike hails from my hometown of – pardon me, the home state of California, but he lived his life, most of his life, in the heart of our country, in Kansas. His career started when he entered West Point as an 18-year-old cadet, and he spent his entire life serving his country.

I am proud to call him a friend. You won't meet a finer, more humble, more decent, more sincere American than Michael Pompeo. Mr. Secretary. (Applause.)

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, Robert. And I want to start – and this is the way that Robert did – by thanking all the families of the hostages for making this journey to be with us today. And for those of you who could not make the trip, thank you to you as well.

I must say that when Robert and I first discussed this, the idea of inviting all these families back to the State Department, it was months ago, and we were too slow. I regret that we didn't get this done more quickly. It very much seems like something that has been worthy and special, and I hope you all feel that way as well.

I want you all to have a personal relationship with us and get to know our hearts and our mission, the mission that we carry forward on behalf of your loved ones each and every day.

I want to welcome – I see in the audience ambassadors from partner nations who have joined us here today. Thank you all for being here. I want to thank everyone who made this day possible as well – Robert; his colleagues; his principal deputy, Hugh Dugan; his deputy, Julia Nesheiwat; and Meredith Stock as well. You all did the legwork to bring this all together. I just show up and there's a microphone where it's supposed to be. So thank you for making this happen.

I want too to make sure that I'm not remiss by not acknowledging all the others – the Bureau of Consular Affairs; Mike Burnett, Georgiana Cavendish, and their team; the White House National Security Council, who deals in hostage affairs as well – I see some of you with us today – our Ambassador Laura Dogu, Diane Ryan, and other team members of the interagency HRFC, who work hand in hand alongside Robert to coordinate diplomatic engagements on

behalf of your loved ones.

I'm glad too – I know I have former colleagues from Capitol Hill, members of the House and the Senate, each of whom is personally invested in helping us make sure we bring Americans home. I see Congressman Hill and Waltz are here, to name a few – raise your hands, please. Thank you for being here. We are grateful for your support.

And we've got folks from all across the government – from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, from the Department of Defense and Justice and Treasury, all the intelligence agencies, everyone who remains nameless who works on this critical mission as well. We thank them, and please thank your colleagues who could not be with us today as well.

For those of you've had a chance to come visit my office – a handful of you did it today – you would have seen on the edge of my desk a Bible that I keep open every day to remind me of what matters most in our life – God and family, doing what's right, protecting the weakest.

Every day, you should know that Susan and I pray for you and your loved ones and that I am constantly reminded when I work on this mission set, the mission set of bringing wrongfully detained Americans home, of Acts, Chapter 12, Verse 6. In it there's an extraordinary encounter.

It's where Peter is sleeping in a cell. He is shackled next to two soldiers. There are sentries stationed outside. It's the night before Herod put him on trial.

And suddenly, an angel appears. The angel shakes Peter awake. His shackles fall off. The angel tells Peter to follow him to freedom.

Peter is bewildered and probably scared, but he follows the angel. They pass by the two soldiers who were standing sentry outside, and then they reach the city's iron gates, which open to them of their own accord.

Those of you who know this verse know it's an incredible moment. Peter was rescued the night before he was to face judgment and likely execution. But his hope and faith allowed him to walk free.

I know too sometimes our rescued hostages feel like Peter must have felt, like they've received an act of God, but I know too that not every American held abroad is saved as Peter was. Sometimes, tragically, our efforts fail, or they don't produce results as quickly as they deserve. And I want you all to know I am not here today to instill in you any false hope. Sometimes our best simply is not enough.

And we mourn all the men and women that have been wrongfully detained and who have been lost to us. I met with some of their families today as well.

We mourn for them, folks like Jim Foley, Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig, and Otto Warmbier. Their families were all with us today. I want to personally thank them for being here.

What I can do today for each of you is to make my personal commitment known, to talk to you about what it is we're doing and will continue to do every day – our very best every day to deliver every wrongfully detained American home.

I want to talk to you in practical matters about what this commitment means, what this pledge means.

You should know I've been at this now for over two years, first as the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and now in my role as Secretary of State, and the President asks every week for an update. He wants to know the status; he wants to know what we're doing and why we haven't been more successful. He is personally invested in the safe return of each and every one of them.

I talk to my counterparts in foreign capitals regularly, seeking their assistance, trying to get our hostages home. I do it by phone, I do it from my office, I do it from my home office, I do it when I travel on the road. I talk to Robert, too, and our team to make sure that they're on track, that they're on mission. He and I have an incredibly close relationship working on this important mission set.

He and his team spend every minute of their time at work, liaising with the White House, with the Hostage Rescue Fusion Cell, with foreign governments, to craft creative diplomatic strategies to pressure our enemies to release our people.

He meets too with congressmen on both sides of the aisle. He works to keep families as well informed as we can. And he and his team too think about this 24/7 – how is it that we can get just one more good result and then another.

I saw this too when I was in the intelligence community. It was a priority for collection. We try to collect as much data as we can about loved ones, sometimes in very difficult places, hard places to get information, and they work with their counterparts too to see what they know. I wish I could talk about some of those more than we sometimes can, but know that they are extensive and real and ongoing.

Our military too stands ready, some of our bravest and most skilled warriors, ready to rescue when possible.

In my personal experience, I must say that of all the places that all the government agencies work together, it is on this mission set where I find the most capability and people really focused on their mission, intelligence professionals working to help us rescue Americans alongside all of our diplomatic efforts. It is unparalleled in any other corner of our government.

I think the reason you see this, whether it's folks in the Legislative Branch, folks in the Executive Branch working together, it's because this mission is deeply held in the American spirit. It is nonpartisan. It's a mission that is just. It's a mission that's right. And you should all know that we will never abandon our people, and I am confident that the entire country is with us and with you in this endeavor.

As I close today, I want you all to know that sometimes it doesn't seem that way. Indeed, many of you shared experiences today where you were frustrated that not enough was being done. I understand how it can seem that way. I can't put myself in your place, but I understand that you want more. I understand the days sometimes turn into weeks and weeks into months and months into years. I implore you, don't give up, don't despair. We will not.

Don't be discouraged when you hear folks in the media say things that make no sense to you and to this mission.

And please, too, don't despair if a particular member of Congress isn't doing everything you think that they need to do, that they're giving – they have a lack of attention to the plight of your family member. There are so many others working so diligently, acting as advocates for them from both houses and from both parties.

Please, too, don't be discouraged by propaganda from our enemies. They want to divide us. They want to distract us from our mission to rescue your loved ones. Know that we are not distracted. I'd urge you to help us, be with us, and stay the course.

I know too that there are those who have talked about this idea that the United States ought to return to the practice of paying ransom for exchanging – exchanging the return of individuals back to the United States. I understand this plea from the bottom of my heart; indeed, I am confident that if I stood in your shoes, I too would be willing to do anything. I can understand that the suffering is unspeakable.

But please do remember: As we move in that direction, we create risk. Indeed, we know that there are nations that take Americans less because there is less money coming from America. I've seen it; I've seen the information. It's what's happened after we paid the mullahs in Iran. I've seen this kind of activity. Please remember that any payment to a terrorist or a terrorist regime gives money so that they can seize more of our people. We cannot accept that risk. You wouldn't ask that of us. Even a small payment to a group in, say, Africa can facilitate the killing or seizure of tens or even hundreds of others, including Americans or foreign nationals in that region.

We also know for a fact that some terror groups don't seize Americans because we won't pay. It's a trend I want to continue.

Look, this administration has had failures, but we've had many successes. We've rescued many people without concessions, some of whom you've heard about and others that we have kept from the public eye. And indeed, I'm proud of the record that we've achieved.

We were thrilled to welcome home Danny Burch just a few weeks back; Pastor Brunson, Kim Hak-song, and many others. Please know that my team – Robert and his team – will not rest until everyone is home.

And for those of you who today have a loved one held wrongfully or held hostage, I'm under no illusion that today's events will provide relief from

your suffering. No words can do that, nor will we be successful every day.

But perhaps, perhaps with this gathering, with my prayers, and with the actions of our team here at the State Department and our partners all across the government, you will wake up tomorrow knowing you are not alone in this mission to achieve freedom for every American hostage.

Know that we are treating every hostage situation with the urgency that it demands, that it deserves. Know that we're treating your family in the way we would want ours treated, because as Americans, we are indeed all family.

Thank you. I look forward to getting the chance to talk to some of you here in just a few minutes. I hope that the Lord blesses each of you, blesses your loved ones who are wrongfully detained, and blesses our great country. Thank you. (Applause.)

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department.

External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.