

Press Releases: Senior State Department Official Previewing Secretary Pompeo's Upcoming Travel to Panama and Mexico

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us. Welcome to this background call to preview Secretary Pompeo's travel to Panama and Mexico on October 18 and 19. As a reminder, today's call is on background, so the attribution is to a senior State Department official. For your reference purposes only and not for reporting, we are very fortunate to have with us today [Senior State Department Official].

So I'll now turn the phone over to [Senior State Department Official] for opening comments on the Secretary's trip, and then she'll take your questions. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Good morning, afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to preview the Secretary's trip this week to Panama and Mexico.

I'd first like to say how proud I am to advance the foreign policy agenda in the region for the American people. Our alliances within the Western Hemisphere make us stronger and safer. I'd also like to note this is my second full day on the job, and we are wasting no time getting out to the region to continue to work with our partners there. I look forward to discussing with you in the near future our policy priorities and the range of issues affecting the Western Hemisphere. For this call, I'll be focusing on the Secretary's travel.

Tomorrow Secretary Pompeo will depart for Panama City and for Mexico City where he will meet with regional counterparts to discuss our joint efforts to advance a secure, prosperous, and democratic hemisphere. I want to put this in context for you a bit. Secretary Pompeo's trip kicks off a very busy end of the year as we continue our high-level sustained engagement with regional leaders that we've pursued throughout the year.

As you may recall, in April Vice President Pence traveled to Peru to lead the

U.S. delegation to the Summit of the Americas. He was also in Brazil, Ecuador, and Guatemala in June. In July I was fortunate to travel with Secretary Pompeo to Mexico City to reinforce the importance of the U.S.-Mexico security and economic partnership and to meet with a newly elected president of Mexico and signal our willingness to continue to work with him and his team.

Last week the Vice President joined Mexican and Central American leaders for our important discussions in the second Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America here in Washington.

Looking ahead, as you know, President Trump is scheduled to participate in the G20 Leaders' Summit in Argentina in November and to visit Colombia, where he will meet with President Ivan Duque.

Then on December the 1st Vice President Pence will lead the U.S. delegation to Mexico to attend the inauguration of President-elect Lopez Obrador, again emphasizing the United States commitment to continuing our work with Mexico to advance our common agenda. So it's been a year of continuous engagement and vital diplomacy in the region.

I want to go a little bit into the details of the trip itinerary. The Secretary will depart tomorrow to Panama City. He will meet with President Juan Carlos Varela and Vice President and Foreign Minister Isabel Saint Malo in Panama City. During the meetings the Secretary will discuss ongoing U.S.-Panama collaboration on a wide range of issues in our bilateral relationship and regional issues including counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and illegal immigration. In addition, the Secretary will express our appreciation for Panama's leadership and vocal defense of democracy in both Nicaragua and Venezuela.

As many of you are aware, the Secretary's trip to Panama coincides with the mission of the *U.S. Navy Ship Comfort*, which will be passing through the canal. The *Comfort* is in transit to provide medical assistance in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Honduras. The 11-week mission organized in coordination with these regional partners provides medical services to vulnerable populations at each point of call. This may include Venezuelans who have fled the crisis, and as a result, have strained neighboring countries' medical systems in some areas. Our medical assistance effort is ready to assist those in need regardless of nationality.

This mission will mark the sixth time the hospital ship will provide medical assistance in the region and reflects the United States enduring promise of friendship, partnership, and solidarity with the Americas.

Following the first stop in Panama, Secretary Pompeo will travel to Mexico City. On Friday, October the 19th, he will meet with President Enrique Pena Nieto and Foreign Secretary Luis Videgaray as well as Foreign Secretary-designate Marcelo Ebrard.

While in Mexico, the Secretary will reiterate our commitment to working with the Pena Nieto administration in its remaining weeks and look ahead toward

continuing our cooperation when the incoming Lopez Obrador administration takes office on December the 1st.

Secretary Pompeo is likely to commend the Mexican team for our very exciting conclusion of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which we believe will benefit all three of our countries, including Canada.

The Secretary will also discuss our ongoing security cooperation efforts to disrupt the illicit movement of cash, weapons, drugs across our shared border as well as the issue of stemming illegal immigration and strengthening accountability for corruption and human rights abuses, and bringing members of transnational criminal organizations to justice.

After those meetings the Secretary is scheduled to return to Washington. And that's what I have in terms of opening remarks. I look forward to taking your questions.

MODERATOR: Terrific. Now we'll go to our first question.

OPERATOR: Your first question comes from the line of Tracy Wilkinson from *The LA Times*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you and welcome to the job, formally. I wanted to ask – you mentioned migration, illegal immigration. How will that come up in the Secretary's talks with the leaders, and specifically this caravan that's coming from Honduras, and President Trump's threats to cut aid to Honduras, or to Guatemala, or to maybe both of them, if they don't stop this caravan? How will that enter into the conversation? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question. I think the first thing to emphasize is that we have broad and deep partnerships with countries in the region. So we're going to be discussing, I'm sure, a broad range of issues of which this will be a prominent one. Certainly it's an issue that we have viewed as a shared challenge and we continue to work closely with countries in the region to address the underlying economic, security, and governance conditions that have driven illegal immigration to the United States.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we actually had a conference on this topic that was attended by Vice President Pence last week. It was our second annual conference with the countries of the Northern Triangle, which are the origin point of many of these migrants and the ones that you referenced. And we are continuing to work closely with governments in the region to see what we can do together to address the challenge.

As you know, the United States has been very generous with assistance to the Northern Triangle countries, providing more than \$2.6 billion in foreign assistance since late 2015 through today to address the various challenges there.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. We'll go to the next question now.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Abigail Williams from NBC

News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi there, I just wanted to follow up on my colleague from *The LA Times*. Will there be any specific asks that the Secretary will be making of Mexico regarding the caravan of migrants from Honduras that the President keeps referencing? And what are the expectations as far as – sorry, and then regarding the budget, the other question was: The Honduran president, when he was most recently in D.C., spoke about the decreasing budget and decreasing funds coming from the United States. Is there any thought to look towards increasing that considering what's being asked of them?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question. I'm certain that there'll be conversations with Mexico about how we can work together on this issue. I'm not going to get into any detail on or get ahead of the Secretary on what those conversations will be. But certainly we're looking for concrete results and for solutions that work for both countries, so I think that will be an ongoing dialogue.

With regard to the funds, the President has made very clear that countries receiving assistance from the United States, we expect that they will work with us to support our interests. And as I noted, I think the American people have been very generous in our budget to the Northern Triangle and I think certainly looking at ways we can make that assistance more effective is something that will be on the agenda going forward.

MODERATOR: We'll take the next question.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Lesley Wroughton from Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Good morning. How much is the Venezuela issue going to come up with the members of – officials from the new government coming in? There's been some concern also – and the second question is also: So let's – first question is: What is your ask going to be of the new government regarding Venezuela? And second of all, I wonder if you can comment on the results in the meantime of the Brazil election, where it looks like the right-wing candidate will come in?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you. Yeah, we certainly are not going to have any specific asks of a new government before it's taken office, but as I've noted, we are having broad and deep conversations with Mexico. This is one of the most diverse relationships the United States has in the world, and certainly in the conversations I expect a lot of different topics to be raised, including Venezuela, and we hope to work closely with the incoming government on that issue as we have with the existing government.

With regard to Brazil, I appreciate the question. I think we're watching very closely what is going on with Brazil, and we are absolutely ready to work with any government that the Brazilian people select in their – in the runoff coming up.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll take the next question, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Nick Schifrin from PBS NewsHour. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks very much for doing this, and welcome to the job. Two questions – one on Mexico, one on Panama, and then I guess perhaps the larger region. Mexico: Specifically, have AMLO and his senior advisors, the people who have already been identified who are going to be part of the government, have they been helpful? Have they been communicative leading up to inauguration on issues like trade and cross-border movement? And the larger question about Panama and the region, perhaps: Obviously, the Chinese have invested quite a lot in Panama recently. Is there going to be, one, a discussion about Chinese investment in the region and to a pushback to that? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks. So on the question about the Lopez Obrador team, I think it would surprise most folks to know that the conversation is very fluid both with the current government and the incoming one, and I am actually very much looking forward to working with the incoming team. I think they have been very helpful and very open to a positive relationship with the United States, and I think President Trump and President Lopez Obrador have set the tone for that in their exchange of letters soon after President Lopez Obrador was elected.

With regard to trade, as you're aware, the Lopez Obrador team had a trade negotiator that joined the current government in the final stages of the negotiation of the USMCA, and I've heard that there were very positive interactions, and that was very helpful to us and I think helps us ensure the sustainability of the agreement going forward.

With regard to China and Panama, as I mentioned, we're going to have a broad and deep conversation with the Panamanians, I'm sure. There are many issues on the table. We certainly consider China a – I'm sorry, Panama a key partner, one with whom we share common values of history and interest.

With regard to the China piece, I think our view has been very clear, and the administration's policy on this has been very clear. It is ultimately up to the government and the people of Panama to determine the pass of relations with China. But this – our administration has been clear on the view that Chinese practices are not always beneficial to governments in the region.

MODERATOR: All right, thank you. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Joel Gehrke from *The Washington Examiner*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this call. I just wanted to follow up on my colleague's question about Panama. Specifically, is there going to be any engagement related to whether China would perhaps have any military presence in the region? There's been some concern on the Hill about the Chinese maybe – potential naval presence growing in some of these port areas.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think – as I said, we're going to have

broad and deep conversations. I'm not going to get into any specific details on the security side. But I should note that we consider Panama to be one of our closest security partners in the region, and we're going to be talking about our collaboration with Panama going forward on a range of issues, and also talking about our sending the *Comfort* through to help the region as a gesture of our support for Latin America and for the populations in these countries.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Haik Gugrats from Argus Media. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. To go back to Venezuela, I wonder if – the situation there is going from bad to worse with almost, like, inevitable end, and I wonder if your approach is to watch how it happens and wait until a possible collapse to intervene and somehow help with reconstruction, or are there any steps you're considering to take in the interim?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you for the question. I think it's very clear that we have not been standing by and watching the deterioration of Venezuela. I think the administration has been very active in our Venezuela policy and signaling our concern about the way the government is carrying forward.

We have been very clear that U.S. policy is to seek a peaceful return to democracy and prosperity in Venezuela, and the crisis can only be resolved by the restoration of democratic governance, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. We have done a number of things that show I think a very proactive approach by the administration, including cutting off Venezuelan leaders from the financial system, using our sanctions, we've had visa restrictions, and we've been working through the Organization of American States and through an ad hoc group called the Lima Group in the region.

So I think I would take issue with your premise. I think we've been a very active participant.

MODERATOR: All right. We'll take the next question now, please.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from the line of Conor Finnegan from ABC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for holding the call. I wanted to follow up on Abigail and Tracy's question as well. Your – these countries are asking more from you, in particular the president from Honduras last week, but as Abigail pointed out, you guys have cut the budget. You've also closed down some legal pathways to the U.S., like by limiting asylum definition, ending the Central American Minors Program. So how do you expect to decrease illegal migration?

And then just a quick follow-up if I could: Does the administration still expect Mexico to pay for a border wall?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I was wondering if I was going to get through this without that question, but I guess you've answered it for me.

On Honduras, listen, I mean, I think if you look back at the history of the program, this was a program that was previously begun by the Obama administration in Fiscal Year 2015 and it was designed to be a program – this is something that will not go on forever, and I think this is a program where we are committed and have been continuing to put in the resources to fund programs that we hope will address the root causes of migration and help people thrive at home. That's what this is really about, promoting the prosperity and security in these countries so that people can thrive at home.

With regard to the wall, I would refer you to the White House and the Congress as to funding. My piece of that working here at the State Department is to work with the Government of Mexico to see if we can deter threats and address things before they get to our shared border, so my piece is the piece that is out closer to the perimeter rather than the one right at the border.

MODERATOR: All right. We have time for one last question.

OPERATOR: That question comes from the line of Beatrice Pascual from EFE. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you very much. I was wondering, Mexico has been a key player in the OAS working on the Venezuela issue, and they are part of the Lima Group. However, Lopez Obrador has said that maybe they don't want to be so active working with other countries about Venezuela. Is Secretary Pompeo going to talk about this specific issue in Mexico, and what the U.S. thinks about this position of Mexico? Should Mexico keep doing – keep playing an active role in the Venezuela crisis? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you. As I noted from the top, we have such a broad and deep set of conversations with Mexico. I'm sure that the issue of Venezuela would come up because of the size and the effect of the crisis in the region, and we'll continue to have ongoing conversations with the incoming government about it. As to what decisions they will take, I will refer you to them. Those are their sovereign decisions after the 1st of December.

MODERATOR: All right, and that concludes our background call today. The call is now – the embargo on the call is now lifted and we thank you very much for joining us. We hope to hear from – have another call when we get back and see how it went. Thank you very much.

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