

Press Releases: Senior State Department Officials Previewing Secretary Tillerson's Travel to the Continent of Africa

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you very much for joining us for today's teleconference. Today we will have senior State Department officials previewing the Secretary's upcoming travel to the continent of Africa. I want to remind you that today's call is on background, and I'll describe the attribution in just a few seconds.

Today's conference – our briefers today will be [Senior State Department Official One]; from here forward he will be referred to as Senior State Department Official One. We are also joined by [Senior State Department Official Two]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official Two.

We'll open up with brief remarks from Senior State Department Official One, and then we'll turn it over for your questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Okay. Thank you very much, and thank you on this very window day here in Washington, D.C. for joining all of us.

The trip by Secretary Tillerson really is an outgrowth of the ministerial meeting for 37 ministers from Africa back in November of 2017, and this will be a kind of follow-up with the Secretary traveling to Africa. So his trip is going to begin on Tuesday, March 6th, and it will take him to – first to Ethiopia and then down to Djibouti and then Kenya, and then all the way up to Chad, and then down over to Nigeria.

So this trip is really – and we apologize for kind of the last-minute – because we've been just back and forth on how the trip would be arranged and the schedules and the trips going in and out and which countries to select. And so – and also given the Secretary's tight schedule, this is what we came up with, and we announced it yesterday.

So the whole purpose of the trip is really to follow up on the ministerial

meeting, and that is if Africa in the year 2100 is going to form 40 percent of the world's population, over 30 percent of the work force, yet also have the potential of having 50 percent unemployment rate, which is very high, that is a security issue, a economic issue problem, but more important, it's also an opportunity. And so the United States says, "How do we position ourselves to play a significant role in supporting Africa and also as a – to highlight this important relationship?" And we said it's going to be based on – not only on economic and commercial development, but in the context of building strong institutions, governance, and security, as well as human rights.

The other issue, too, that we're looking at is how to really keep African resources and also development beneficial for the people of Africa. Right now we're looking at the growing indebtedness in Africa. That's not a good thing. We're looking at other countries, not helpful countries, other countries too, expropriating a lot of resources. And as you know, high rates of rare earth minerals and metal are from Africa. I mean, just one example is if your cell phone is 10 percent of that material comes from resources in Africa, in the next decade it's going to be 25 percent. Then that's an issue of: How do we do rational allocation of resources? How do we benefit the people of Africa? How do we create jobs? How do we really develop Africa, and not just become a repository for the development of other regions of the world?

So those are some of the issues and challenges that we're facing, and we can – through the Q&As, we can go into what we seek to achieve in each country. But the bottom line is really economic development, how to build strong institutions, and also to move forward in the future for Africa. And just for your information, three of the four – three of the embassies being visited or countries visited has the largest American embassies in Africa. And just for your information, we have 44 American embassies and six consulates and offices in Sub-Saharan Africa.

So we're set. We can turn it up to Q&As.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to ask a question, please press * then 1 on your touchtone phone. You'll hear a tone indicating you've been placed into the queue. You can remove yourself from the queue by pressing the pound key. And if you are using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, if you do have a question, you may press * then 1 at this time. One moment, please, for our first question.

And our first question from the line of Felicia Schwartz with *Wall Street Journal*. Your line is open.

QUESTION: I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about some of the counterterror objectives of the trip. It seems like Djibouti, Chad, some of these stops are very counterterror focused, so if you could talk about some deliverables you expect or what you're hoping to achieve.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So the issue comes in as there's really no deliverables, and the reason why is because for the Secretary of State and

for our trip now it's really to underscore the commitment of the United States to Africa but also to explore with the leadership in each of the countries about what we want to achieve at the – together as partners but also in our overall program.

So going into Djibouti – so Djibouti is, as you know, mainly French relationships, but we also have – it's also the base for the only U.S. military base in the entire region. But it's more than just the U.S. military. I was there when Camp Lemonnier first started back in 2001. We're really talking to President Guelleh and his government because, as you know, Djibouti after the *USS Cole* bombing in Yemen – Djibouti now becomes really the main refueling spot for all U.S. Naval ships and also support for the U.S. as well as French military bases, the Japanese, our two task forces. We have 150 and 151 which does counterterrorism and counterpiracy.

But the focus is also how do we really continue to have a strong relationship with Djibouti. As you know, Djibouti is part – has troops in Somalia as part of AMISOM, which is to stabilize Somalia and to move it forward. And Djibouti has become an important country in peacekeeping operations.

And let me just kind of give you one factoid. So if 53 percent of all UN operations are in Africa, 87 percent of the world's UN troops are in Africa, and almost 70 percent – actually over 50 percent – of all the troops are African, then that becomes very important. So for us, what we're looking at is how do we deal with Djibouti as a partner in that realm as far as peacekeeping operations. And the second area is to continue having good U.S. military relationships, because that is our base there. And it's not just a base for counterterrorism but also to support the security of all the other countries in the region. So I hope that kind of helps.

On Chad, let me just give – on Chad is we're working with President Deby because, as you know, they were given on the visa sanctions list. That's not a good thing. They have been trying to get off those lists. They've made tremendous motivations and movement toward getting off that list, so we're trying to support them as best we can and also to improve their own personal security.

We also want to give Chad importance because they're part of the G5 countries and their troops have made a tremendous amount of sacrifices in providing troops in supporting Mauritania and Niger and other countries in the G5 area.

So that's what we would – that's part of it.

MODERATOR: Hi. And I just want to remind everyone to please make sure that your phone is on mute if you're not speaking. Thanks very much.

OPERATOR: We have a question from Abigail Williams with NBC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thanks for doing the call.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yes.

QUESTION: At the – towards the top in your opening you talked about the importance of focusing on development in these countries and job opportunities.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yes.

QUESTION: What is it that the Secretary will be doing on this trip to try to help with that in the various countries he'll be visiting?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I think we need to look at how to build – and so for instance, the countries that we're going to, so Kenya is our largest embassy in all of Africa. And then of course followed by South Africa, which we'll probably go later, and then of course Nigeria and then Ethiopia. And so – and Ethiopia, as you know, you're looking at transition from a prime minister to another prime minister, and so there we want to make sure that we're working with the Ethiopian partners on institution building, human rights, engagement, community leadership, et cetera, which will make them a much stronger partner. And also because of its 8 percent economic growth rate, it really is – becomes an engine for economic growth for the entire region. So that's – so we're trying to look at how we can work with that country.

And I'll give you one – sorry, I'll kind of go off tangent here. Ethiopia, had purchased something like \$2 billion worth of Boeing 787s transport airplanes and also 777s. And so the prime minister, the late Prime Minister Meles, said, "You know, we just saved 35,000 American jobs. What are you doing to help Ethiopia?" And that was a very valid, fair question. And so what we've been doing is trying to look at the various sectors where they have economic advantages and opportunities, and that's in the ag sector. So in other words, their coffee, their flour, they even do Fruit of the Loom and Starbucks apron productions. But we're looking at much more. So in other words, in our discussions with Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz and Jeffrey Sachs and others, we're saying, "What is it that we need to do to help these countries develop from agriculture to industrialization and then to consumer-based industrialized growth?" And Ethiopia, I think, is on that track, but what are the mechanisms? What is it that we need to help them with as far as savings rate, education, and industrialization, and access to resources?

And so as you know, the United States, we don't build things, but we teach things. And so our biggest thing is education, girls' education, women entrepreneurs, helping with expanding electrification. And certainly on a continent where most people do not have access to electricity and electricity is really critical for industrialization, that's important.

So going back to girls' education, in all our areas of development is – girls' education is very inexpensive, but it really brings out a lot of high-volume growth. Anywhere we have high girls' education, we also have high rates of growth. And when I was in Afghanistan, we were in the northern part. We had 40 percent girls' education there and economic development was great, but in the southern area it was less than 20 percent, economic growth was very bad. And we see the same results all over, from Ethiopia to Nigeria to the Congo. Areas we have 40 percent or higher rates of girls' education, we

have tremendous amount of development, and it's sustainable development, and it goes to other areas. So that's some of the things that we're looking at in these areas. And the same thing with Kenya and Nigeria as well. I hope that helps somewhat.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question from Laura Koran with CNN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you so much for doing the call. I'm wondering what message we can expect to hear from the Secretary in terms of how he views the role that China plays on the continent, and particularly, what the U.S. is willing to offer to some of these countries to counter that growing influence in the coming years.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah. Okay. So here's an interesting point is that we, the United States, especially part in – by region. So in the Africa region, we are going to have a heart-to-heart discussion with the Chinese. We've invited the Chinese to come to Washington to talk about their programs in Africa. And so on the one hand, the unhelpful role is the providing low-interest but really concessionary loans which really indebts the country. So for all of us who worked on HIPC – in other words, getting African countries post-colonial period off of debt – to see these countries re-indebted again is not only outrageous and terrible, but for us it's really just – I mean, we spent so much time getting them off of debt, and to see them to go back on debt is just terrible. And it goes back to not only corruption in some of these states, but also the ease in which not only China – and you're talking Russia, Iran, and other countries providing low-interest loans. And this is really kind of another forum of impoverishment and poverty, because it's – unlike HIPC, we can't really kind of repay loans back to banks, and so this is going to be a very tough issue to address.

The other issues aside too, though, is China builds things. We don't construct. And so in that regard China can play a helpful role. The other issue, too, is that China has some really good ideas on development in developing areas, such as how to do better healthcare, how to do water production. So those are things that are good. Also China did a good favor for us in Sudan, providing an engineer battalion to provide assistance to the UN operations there.

So when you look at China, it's a very complex relationship. We have a lot of areas and issues that we're in conflict, but the issue comes in is that we're trying to find the areas where we can build some type of support and cooperation that will be to the betterment of Africa. But one area that's not to the betterment is these loan rates, which is terrible. So we've looked at countries, and we're doing data dumping. Some – a lot of countries in Southern Africa and parts of the east and west are having anywhere from 50 percent to in one case 200 percent of GDP debt. And 80 percent and 50 percent are probably Chinese loans, and that's really not acceptable, and that's an area that we really need to address and focus on.

So when you said "countering China," I think the better word is probably how are we going to resolve tensions, problems. How can we make China much more

supportive of the overall development of Africa. Because what we don't want to see is – let's say, for instance, Congo, which is very rich in resources – where you see Russia, China, North Korea, Iran taking out resources, yet the Congolese don't receive very much in benefits. How do you resolve that? How do you develop, how do you get these countries to really benefit from the resources that they have, yet at the same time these countries such as China, Russia, Iran is also developing but also they give back a lot to the Africans? And that's an issue and a question we need to pursue during this trip over.

OPERATOR: We have a question from Nike Ching with Voice of America. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you so much for doing this phone call. It's really appreciated. My question is regarding the political development in Africa. Twenty countries in Africa are holding national elections in 2018, which include Chad and Djibouti's national assembly elections. And separately, we saw the state of emergency in Ethiopia, and in Kenya a demand for greater diversity in the presidential cabinet. Now, my question for you is given the history of unrest in Ethiopia and other place, in the U.S. vision, what is a genuine inclusive political process look like in those countries? And in your assessment, what should those governments do to improve press freedom and human rights? Thank you very much.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: And thank you, Nike, and then I look forward – we look forward to seeing you next week as well.

So the issue right now is – you're absolutely correct. Over two decades ago, we were looking at the number of really democratically elected countries, and it was really very few. It's only three or four or so. But now we have over two dozen, which means those are two dozen countries which are not going to have transitions in government through coup d'etats and illegal methods, et cetera, we hope. Now, obviously, a lot of those countries are fragile democracies and we're trying to strengthen them, but look at the most recent elections in Liberia – so the first really free, open, fair, and peaceful transition of governments in over 75 years, and that's a good thing. And really, after the horrendous rule of Charles Taylor and the degradation of the institutions there, but now we'll going back and they're building, and I think with the election of George Weah that's going to be a positive thing.

And you see the same thing in – with Akufo-Addo in Ghana and Ouattara in Cote d'Ivoire and Macky Sall in Senegal. So you see a lot of developments. And as we look at the 20 elections, obviously Nigeria, though it's not this year – it's going to be next year – that really is a major priority focus, because that's going to be the third most populous country in the world by 2050. And it has really very complex political issues and ethnic and tribal issues and security issues, and that's an area that we really are focusing on how to do a peaceful transition, a democratic transition, but more important is how to hold governments accountable to the people.

Now, you raised Ethiopia, and that is – remains a challenge for us and a focus for us as well and an opportunity, because we're looking at trying to

build institutions, really strengthen institutions, and also have peaceful transitions and hold governments accountable to the people. We're looking at how we can have reconciliation and dialogues between all of the different groups – the Oromos, the Amharas, the Tigrays, and also in Kenya with the opposition and with the ruling government. And so those are some of the things that certainly during this trip are going to be the subjects of discussion, is how do we do these – building strong institutions, holding governments accountable? How do we advance political and economic reform that will help in the transition process? Those are issues too that we're working in Zimbabwe with the transition between Mugabe and Mnangagwa, and also we're looking hopefully at South Africa with the election of Ramaphosa from Zuma and seeing how that's going to transition.

And – so we're very hopeful. We're very high on Africa, and let me just give you one factoid that's very interesting: So we were doing some data crunching, and in the early days – in the '80s and '90s – we were looking at 19 evacuations of some country around the world. And evacuations are full evacuations or partial, and Africa had its fair – fair number. But if you look at the last couple years, actually, the number of evacuations or countries in crisis really are not in Africa. We had, like, four in the last year and a half. We've had, I think, it's like eight or so in the last couple years, three years.

And so those numbers in Africa look really good. I mean, you still have the problems of DRC and Sudan, which really grab the press; but overall, across the continent, it's pretty good, it looks really good. And so that's what we're trying to do is: How do we build on it? How do we boost stability? How do we do security? How do we build institutions? And so those are the things that this trip is going to try to highlight, and it's going to be really a start, a dialogue, that we can really work with our African partners to achieve. Over.

OPERATOR: We have a question from Simon Ateba with Today News Africa. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. The president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, says there cannot be business without peace. And as you know, yesterday Boko Haram killed several UN humanitarian workers and also kidnapped hundreds of student last week. Will Secretary Tillerson, will he propose any new cooperation with Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon in the fight against Boko Haram, or will this be only about business?

And finally, why didn't the Secretary go to Cameroon since the U.S. has hundreds of troops in Cameroon fighting Boko Haram? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, those are very – they were very good questions, and thank you. And just kind of starting out last, the Secretary's trip, this is his initial trip to Africa. He's going to come back again, and we are going to look at Cameroon, we're going to look at South Africa, we're going to look at other countries. Of course, with South Africa, with the transition to Ramaphosa, we were kind of saying, well, probably this is a very critical country for the U.S., but I think it's once the government

is established and set, I think then we'll probably go there.

But Cameroon, yes. Cameroon raises an issue, but so does Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali. And so there's a lot of countries, and which countries do we head to? So on Nigeria, this is really a really important issue, and I know that in the last administrations, even the last three, we have always said going to Nigeria is critical to stability and the future for the U.S. relationship in West Africa.

So on Nigeria, you really raised really good points, is that – so we are following the recent kidnappings of 110 school girls, which really kind of follows up on several years ago of the Chibok girls. And those are horrendous, they're unacceptable, terrible, and how do you do security? But the issue that comes in, it's not only a security issue – and it is a terrible security challenge – but it's also political issues and really building those institutions and political dialogue between north and south, and also with the region.

And so those are some of the things that we need to look at. It's a comprehensive approach. The other issue, too, is on economic development and education. So looking at the UN, we have fresh UN reports about some of the extremist operations in the G5 countries, the Trans-Sahel, is for some of these groups it's not – it's about getting jobs, it's about looking at getting an income for families. And if terrorism or trafficking of persons, if that's going to get them the jobs, then that's unacceptable and we really need to find alternative ways to help the economic development in these regions.

And so those are some of the issues and challenges that we'll be working on is political institutions, political dialogue, reconciliation, supporting community-based development, helping growth, education. And then on the other hand, as you said, is the security, particularly in the north, and how do you enhance security. And it just can't be constantly a kinetic strike operation or bring in U.S. military. That's not the answer. The answer has to be developing institutions and also providing good police training, military training, and having governments accountable to the people and having people really have faith in their institutions, and also having opportunities for job creation.

And what happens in Nigeria is going to affect the Lake Chad region, and that includes Cameroon as well as the G5 countries. So those are some of the things that we're looking at, much more broad-based, comprehensive, and really interrelated with security. Over.

OPERATOR: And we have a question from Michele Kelemen with NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. I wondered – just following up on Nike's question – how the Secretary plans to navigate the political turmoil in Ethiopia. Is he going to have any meetings with opposition figures or former political prisoners, and what messages he has to the government there? And then while we have you, you have any reaction to what happened in Burkina today?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah. So those are very good points, and in Ethiopia, again, it's – is to reaffirm that we're committed to the continued institutional development, and that we are looking – everyone's looking at how they conduct this transition from Haile Mariam, who belongs to really a minority group in southern Ethiopia. And there's a lot of rumors on who might be – it could be an Oromo or it could be another group. But whatever it is, is that the process really is going to bring all these various ethnic groups and regional groups and other political parties into the room.

Again, the Secretary's trip is very short, and so that means there's going to be a follow-up. So obviously, after the Secretary's ministerial last year, we all went on – all over Africa to kind of follow up. I went on a 15-day, 10-country trip. I'll be going out after the Secretary's trip again to this region. And it's not just – Michele, not only just the interrelating with the Oromo and the Amhara groups, but again, community leaders, women-based groups, opposition. Yes, the people in prison, that remains a concern. That's something that we're addressing. But also regional issues – relationships with Eritrea, looking and supporting the Ethiopian negotiations with – in South Sudan, and also their troops in Somalia.

So it's going to be an initial discussion. There's going to be follow-up and a lot of discussions. And even now, before the Secretary's gone out there, I've – we've all spoken to the leadership. Our ambassador, Michael Raynor, and his team are doing a fabulous job really reaching out and just setting up the base for a discussion. And we're going to follow up, and this is going to be a long-term process. And it's not just Ethiopia. It's Kenya, it's South Africa, it's Zimbabwe, and it's Nigeria.

Going to your second question, is on Burkina Faso. We're still getting a lot of information that is – that's troubling. Burkina Faso is a focal country for our G5 operations. The \$60 million that was committed by Secretary Tillerson, about 30 million is going to go to Burkina Faso for military training and security training, but also we're looking at all different communities. Burkina Faso is a very diverse community. It has a large Christian community – it actually has Catholics, has a number of Catholic bishops. It has a Muslim population. And it's looked on as being much more relatively calmer than the other states. But I think this attack on the French military, the local military bases, that raises concerns. We're looking at – we're still getting assessments as this comes in, and it's still a very fluid situation. But it does raise concerns.

Any follow-up? Over.

OPERATOR: Thank you. It'll be just a moment for our next question. One moment, please.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah. Oh, hello. Any more questions?

MODERATOR: I think there are a few. I think we have time for maybe one more.

OPERATOR: Okay. Thank you. We'll go to Rosiland Jordan with Al Jazeera

English. Your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing the call. Three quick questions. One: Will there be any discussions with any of the governments about refugee outflows, particularly to EU countries and possibly on to the United States? Any possible ideas to try to deal with that problem?

Number two: Is there any reason, or was it ever considered, that the Secretary might try to visit Somalia in order to show visceral support for President Farmajo? There's a lot of talk about supporting the Somali security forces, but what about supporting the actual government in Mogadishu?

And then finally, regarding Nigeria and Chad and the G5 Sahel situation, what specific conversations will there be about trying to deal with radical Islamic groups that have pledged their fealty to ISIL and who are wreaking political havoc, particularly in West Africa? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Okay, very good – great point. So going back to the refugee flows – and that is – that remains foremost in a lot of – in our minds, et cetera. As you know, the whole refugee flows – we're looking at approaching 10 million refugees in all of Africa. But I think we also should not forget the number of internally displaced, which is probably approaching around 12 million. And the two countries that are of highest concerns is South Sudan and the DRC, and those are two countries that will be under discussion, as the Secretary visits the African Union. And also with Ethiopia, which is leading the high-level discussions in – with South Sudan and Salva Kiir. So that does remain, but also the internally displaced.

The other issue too is, as you said, on Somalia. Somalia remains a very critical issue, but where the Secretary goes, I think what he announced obviously open to – subject to change, but right now, what he announced yesterday, those are the countries he's visiting for now.

But what you raise on Somalia is a point. So I've worked in Somalia quite a number of times since the last – since Black Hawk Down. I was just there recently. We are looking and working very closely with the TCCs of the AMISOM troops and also the countries that are – the African troops and the African Union, also the UN envoys working on Somalia. But again, it's more than just security. It is a security issue, but it's also a political will issue about, as we have said to President Farmajo, is working with the six other regional leaders and also working on institution building and also working eventually to a one-person, one-vote, which we hope will be by 2024 or 2028. So that will be – continue to be a high point of interest for not only the Secretary, but for the U.S. Government.

Then going back to Nigeria, so again, that is a challenge – the ISIS-West Africa, Boko Haram, and also the – where these groups are emanating from Nigeria to Lake Chad area and to the G5 countries. But the question comes in is – we continue to assess the changing and the evolving relationship. We look at the recent UNDP report which said that 71 percent of people who are radicalized in Africa were radicalized because of the abuse by the security sector in their own country. So that means that we need to do a lot more on

security reform, training, institution building, democratic values, accountability to eliminate those – and the other area too is on job creation and economic, so building economic issues.

And so when you say a lot of groups are claiming allegiance to al-Qaida or ISIS or whatever, we're seeing in some instances where these are aspirational, other areas of opportunities, but the other issue too is that it's economic in nature as well. So it's very complex as things that we're still looking at very carefully, and really how to address it. And those are issues that – it's not just Nigeria. It goes across the Trans-Sahel and it goes all the way down to Somalia. And then we look at how is it that – what do we need to do as the United States in our partnership with Africa and the African Union to really build stability so that they don't have these organizations and groups. And one of the things that we point to is the DRC in Eastern Congo, where you have a proliferation of these groups which have become extraordinarily violent, and a lot of it is due to the political instability, insecurity, and not knowing about the next electoral process in the DRC, which we're trying to push towards December of this year.

So those are some of the things that we're looking at, but again, it's complex, no easy answers, and I think we probably need to have a much more in-depth discussion. Over.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Okay. I want to thank everyone for joining us today. I'm sorry we weren't able to take every single call, but we really appreciate you calling in. And you can follow up with the – you can contact the press office if you have follow-ups. And with that, we'll end today's teleconference. And thanks, [Senior State Department Officials].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, and thank you very much. Thank you very much.

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