

Press Releases: Bulgaria National Day

Press Statement
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
March 3, 2018

On behalf of the Government of the United States of America, it gives me great pleasure to wish the people of Bulgaria a happy and prosperous national day.

This year, we celebrate the 115th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Bulgaria. The year 2018 also marks the first Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union. In taking stewardship of one of the world's leading political and economic institutions, Bulgaria is demonstrating its remarkable progress and achievements in recent years.

We view Bulgaria as a valued NATO ally, and U.S. soldiers are proud to serve side-by-side with Bulgarian troops as part of the coalition of countries seeking to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. In 2018, we look forward to continued cooperation with our Bulgarian friends and partners and strengthening our relationship built on a commitment to shared values including democracy, free trade, and rule of law.

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Press Releases: Secretary Tillerson to Deliver Remarks at George Mason University

Notice to the Press
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
March 2, 2018

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will deliver remarks at George Mason University on Tuesday, March 6, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. in the Harris Theater on the Fairfax Campus.

Secretary Tillerson's remarks will outline the United States' relationship with Africa and the U.S. government's desire to strengthen ties with African partners through greater security, trade and investment, and good governance.

Secretary Tillerson's remarks will be open to the press. Follow @StateDept during the event for updates and live tweets.

Preset time for video cameras: 9:30 a.m.

Final access time for journalists and still photographers: 10:00 a.m.

Media representatives may attend this event upon presentation of one of the following: (1) A U.S. Government-issued identification card (Department of State, White House, Congress, Department of Defense or Foreign Press Center), (2) a media-issued photo identification card, or (3) a letter from their employer on letterhead verifying their employment as a journalist, accompanied by an official photo identification card (driver's license, passport).

For further information, please contact the Office of Press Relations at PAPressDuty@state.gov

and 202-647-2492 or Michael Sandler at msandle3@gmu.edu.

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[Press Releases: Senior State Department Officials Previewing Secretary Tillerson's Travel to the Continent of Africa](#)

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
March 2, 2018

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 a 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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Press Releases: End of Ordered Departure at U.S. Embassy Havana

Media Note
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
March 2, 2018

The U.S. Embassy in Havana has operated under ordered departure status since September 29, 2017, due to health attacks affecting U.S. Embassy Havana employees. It will reach the maximum allowable days in departure status on March 4.

On Monday, March 5, a new permanent staffing plan will take effect. The embassy will continue to operate with the minimum personnel necessary to perform core diplomatic and consular functions, similar to the level of emergency staffing maintained during ordered departure. The embassy will operate as an unaccompanied post, defined as a post at which no family members are permitted to reside.

We still do not have definitive answers on the source or cause of the attacks, and an investigation into the attacks is ongoing. The health, safety, and well-being of U.S. government personnel and family members are of the greatest concern for Secretary Tillerson and were a key factor in the decision to reduce the number of personnel assigned to Havana.

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Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – March 1, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
March 1, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:37 p.m. EST

MS NAUERT: Hi. Hi, everybody. How are you today?

A couple announcements to start off with today. We're going to have to keep today a little tight because we have some guests joining us here at the State Department in a short while.

I'd like to start off with telling you about something that's taking place here tomorrow, and that is – who watched the women in the hockey – in hockey in the Olympics? Weren't they fantastic? Well, they are coming here to the State Department tomorrow. So our Deputy Secretary John Sullivan and our Under Secretary Steve Goldstein look forward to welcoming the gold-medal-winning 2018 U.S. women's hockey team here at the State Department tomorrow. I'll be meeting with the team prior to a reception that we're hosting for them. They are coming here as a part of our overall sports diplomacy program, so we're really looking forward to hosting them. If anyone's interested in meeting them or talking with them, we might be able to facilitate that. So just let us know.

Secondly, I'd like to mention the Secretary's upcoming trip to Africa. It'll be his first trip as Secretary of State to the continent. Secretary Tillerson will travel to Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria from March 6th through the 13th. Secretary Tillerson will meet up with leadership in each country as well as the leadership of the African Union Commission, based in Ethiopia, to further our partnerships with the governments and the people of Africa. In particular, he plans to discuss ways that we can work with our partners to counter terrorism, advance peace and security, promote good governance, and spur mutually beneficial trade and investment. During the trip, he'll also meet with U.S. embassy personnel and participate in events related to the U.S.-Government-supported activities there.

Next, I want to highlight that today marks the day the Peace Corps was created by President Kennedy back in 1961. In the decades since, nearly 230,000 men and women from across the United States have volunteered to help combat hunger, fight disease, educate students, and create new economic opportunities in countries and communities around the world. Peace Corps volunteers represent many of our country's highest ideals, including ingenuity, hard work, and sacrifice. For many volunteers, their experiences ignite a love for their host countries and fuel a lifelong passion of government service. Hundreds of returned Peace Corps volunteers currently working here at State and USAID – our department is just one example of how volunteers continue to serve their country after they return. Many of you have met my colleague, Elie; he was a Peace Corps volunteer. I can't remember where, but somewhere he was. So thanks to all of our Peace Corps volunteers who continue to serve here at the State Department.

Lastly, the Kabul peace process conference took place in Kabul, Afghanistan yesterday. And we'd like to congratulate the Government of Afghanistan on its success. The meeting represented a historic step forward in demonstrating the resolve of the Afghan people to commit a peace process that brings an end to the war with the Taliban. President Ghani made clear in the speech that if the Taliban wants peace in Afghanistan the door to that is open. The Taliban should recognize that the Afghan Government and the Afghan people are offering confidence-building measures to show that real peace is possible. President Ghani made clear that there are no preconditions for peace. The United States and the international community strongly support the path to peace that president Ghani laid out in his speech. We echo the calls from across the Afghan Government and civil society for Afghanistan to join peace talks with the Afghan Government and to participate in the country's political system.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Matt, where would you like to start?

QUESTION: Well, actually, I just – I want to – briefly on that Afghan statement that you just read.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: When you said there were "no preconditions for peace," does that mean that the Taliban no longer have to accept the Afghan constitution, lay down their weapons, renounce terrorism, et cetera?

MS NAUERT: I would have to refer you to President Ghani for that, because that's a statement that President Ghani made, and this just came out a short while ago, so I can try to get you some more information. I can't –

QUESTION: I get that, but this was the U.S. position as well. I mean, this had a U.S. position for a long time, that –

MS NAUERT: I would certainly think that –

QUESTION: – they would have to accept –

MS NAUERT: – our position has not changed, that we continue to call upon those to uphold the constitution of Afghanistan.

QUESTION: All right. Then what I wanted to ask is about the statements made by President Putin this morning regarding these new weapons that he said had been tested. I'm wondering what your – what the diplomatic reaction to this is from this building.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Certainly – I mean, I can tell you many of us watched that speech with great interest here from the State Department, and I would imagine across U.S. Government as well. One of the things I want to make clear – and we've talked about this type of thing before – that we're not going to react to every word or idea that world leaders express. It was certainly unfortunate to have watched the video animation that depicted a nuclear attack on the United States. I mean, that's something that we certainly did not enjoy watching. We don't regard that as the behavior of a responsible international player. So I just want to make that very clear. It's – we just don't consider it to be responsible.

QUESTION: So you are reacting to – you say you're not going to react to – but you –

MS NAUERT: To every – but –

QUESTION: But you feel compelled in this case to –

MS NAUERT: Feel compelled to say, look, we saw it and we don't think it's responsible. We don't think that kind of imagery, seeing the portrayal in a cheesy video of that kind of attack being conducted on the United States as being a responsible action.

QUESTION: Okay. Can I ask your forbearance to – there's an issue with some of our Japanese colleagues, who've got a very tight time schedule. They want to ask about North Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Certainly.

QUESTION: Can I ask you to go to them?

MS NAUERT: Sure.

QUESTION: Thanks. So apologies to everybody else.

MS NAUERT: Where are our Japanese colleagues back there on North Korea, who want –

QUESTION: Is it on? Did he leave?

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: Really, he's right there.

MS NAUERT: Is there somebody in particular?

QUESTION: Over here. Sorry.

MS NAUERT: Hi. How are you?

QUESTION: So we haven't got the readout of President Moon Jae-in's phone call, but Japanese wires are reporting the content of that. And we –

MS NAUERT: I just did, so hold on.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Let me find it, okay?

QUESTION: Great.

MS NAUERT: And I'd be happy to provide you with that.

QUESTION: And we would also be wondering State Department's –

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: We would also be wondering – want a statement from the State Department about that as well.

MS NAUERT: Certainly.

QUESTION: Great.

MS NAUERT: So let me provide a readout for you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: President Trump spoke today with President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea to congratulate him on the success of the 2018 Olympics. President Trump thanked President Moon for his hospitality to the United States presidential delegation to the opening and closing ceremonies, led by Vice President Mike Pence and advisor to the President Ivanka Trump respectively.

President Moon briefed President Trump on developments regarding North Korea and inter-Korean talks. President Trump and President Moon noted their firm position that any dialogue with North Korea must be conducted with the explicit and unwavering goal of complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. The two leaders committed to maintain close coordination. And anything beyond that, I'd be happy to try to get for you later, okay?

QUESTION: Great.

MS NAUERT: All right. Hi.

QUESTION: So is the U.S. going to be participating in the Korean decision to send a special envoy to North Korea?

MS NAUERT: I mean, I can just tell you that the United States is latched up very closely with the Republic of Korea and Japan, and so we closely coordinate a lot of our conversations and meetings with them, and I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: But will the U.S. be sending anyone in addition to the South Korean?

MS NAUERT: And we would go where?

QUESTION: To –

MS NAUERT: No, no. Okay. Let's move on.

QUESTION: Can we –

MS NAUERT: Laurie.

QUESTION: Yeah. Several questions.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. One second. What's that Arshad? Hi, Shadar.

QUESTION: Well, you – all that you commented on with regard to President Putin's statements really had to do with the animation and not with what is the fundamental issue, which is –

MS NAUERT: Hold on. I have more on that, if you'd like.

QUESTION: Oh, yeah. I do. I would.

MS NAUERT: Matt paused and deferred to our Japanese friend. So –

QUESTION: And now we're going to Kurdistan.

MS NAUERT: So if we want to go back to President –

QUESTION: I'm happy to go wherever you want.

MS NAUERT: – if we want to go back to Putin, we can do that. Okay.

QUESTION: I have just a follow-up.

MS NAUERT: Oh, goodness. Okay.

QUESTION: I mean, we're looking for a statement on North Korea – I mean, South Korea sending an envoy to North Korea, if that's all right with you. What is the State Department's –

MS NAUERT: Yes. So I think I just answered the question here from

Alicia, that is the United States is latched up very closely with South Korea. We have many conversations with our ally. Those conversations continue. We have a broad range of conversations with them. We share the principle of the denuclearization and the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and that hasn't changed. I'll just say that we are in close contact with them.

QUESTION: Thank you so much.

MS NAUERT: Okay. You're so welcome. Okay.

QUESTION: Russia?

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Back to – do you have something on North Korea?

QUESTION: No.

MS NAUERT: Okay. All right. Let me go to Arshad. We're a little disorganized today. Okay. Arshad, go ahead.

QUESTION: So you responded to the broadcast of an animation –

MS NAUERT: Correct.

QUESTION: – which is, after all, a cartoon, but not to the substance, which is Russian claims of having new weapons systems that could threaten the United States. So can you respond to that?

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: For example, is it not the case that at least one of these weapon systems has been under development or was under development many decades ago and then went away and –

MS NAUERT: Okay. Let me start with that.

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: That is certainly a concern of ours. President Putin has confirmed what the United States Government has known for a long time, that Russia has denied prior to this: that Russia has been developing destabilizing weapon systems for more than a decade, in direct violation of its treaty obligations.

President Trump understands the threats facing America and our allies in this century and is determined to protect our homeland and preserve peace through strength. U.S. defense capabilities are and will remain second to none. We have a new defense budget that's over \$700 billion. We believe that our military will be stronger than ever. The President's nuclear posture review addressed some of this. It made it clear that we're moving forward to modernize our nuclear arsenal and ensure that our capabilities remain unmatched.

QUESTION: Can you read the first sentence again, which I didn't quite understand?

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS NAUERT: Sorry. What?

QUESTION: Can you read the first sentence again, which I didn't understand?

MS NAUERT: Sure, certainly. President Putin has confirmed what the United States Government has long known but which Russia has denied previously: Russia has been developing destabilizing weapons systems for more than a decade in direct violation of its treaty obligations.

QUESTION: And which treaties is it violating?

MS NAUERT: Some of these that are not in – that they are not in compliance would be the INF treaties. That's an area of particular concern to us. Since 2014, they've not been in compliance with that. They've been developing intermediate-range ground launch cruise missiles in direct violation of the INF treaty.

QUESTION: What are you going to do about that?

MS NAUERT: That is not for me to say what the United States is going to do about that. We continue to have conversations across the various agencies and departments in the U.S. Government.

QUESTION: Is there an indication that those weapons that they showed today are actually operational?

MS NAUERT: That's not something I'm able to answer. Some of those would be intelligence matters, some of those would come out of the Department of Defense.

QUESTION: But I mean – so – but these weapons – like, you said that confirmed what we've long been known that he's developing, but do you believe that they've actually developed them or they're still in the development process?

MS NAUERT: Some of this is new information that we are seeing today. Some of this is information that we've been tracking for some time. Some of this information the United States Government will not be able to publicly provide to you, and that's part of it today.

Okay. Hi, Rich.

QUESTION: Heather, does the Secretary plan on speaking with Foreign Minister Lavrov in – specifically in regard to this morning's speech? And does this morning's speech change at all the U.S. attempts to try to

work with Russia in certain areas or change this relationship, or is this seen as sort of election year politicking on his part?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think you have to consider the audience that Putin sat before today when he made that announcement and consider the fact that it's basically his equivalent of our State of the Union address. We also would note that there is an election that's coming up. So we think he was playing to the audience, certainly.

In terms of Secretary Tillerson and whether or not he plans to speak with him about it, that I'm not sure. This is something that we have many conversations with the Russian Government, not just here in the United States between the Secretary and his counterpart, but with other officials as well.

Okay, Laurie, let's move on. Okay.

QUESTION: Russia – yeah, on another aspect of Russia which Kurdistan is interested in, General Votel said Tuesday that Russia plays both fireman and arsonist in Syria. Is that a position you would agree with?

MS NAUERT: Yes. I mean, I think I've been pretty clear, as has the Secretary, about Russia's responsibility in Syria. Russia has a responsibility to stop Syria and to stop aiding Syria in attacking its own people. We look at the situation in Eastern Ghouta today, since there was the UN ceasefire that was voted upon unanimously on Saturday – excuse me – yes, on Saturday – and the fighting continues. They are continuing to kill innocent civilians. We have seen more than 100 people die since Saturday alone. This ceasefire is clearly not working. Russia has called for these joke-like humanitarian corridors. Russia needs to just do what the United Nations had agreed to and voted on, and that is a countrywide ceasefire. This is not working. Russia's responsible for this in part because they continue to train and equip and work with the Syrian Government. We've been watching that very carefully. It's a tremendous concern of the U.S. Government.

QUESTION: And he said that there needs to be more pressure on Russia to do the right thing in Syria. Are you thinking of anything now that would constitute pressure on Syria that General Votel said was necessary?

MS NAUERT: In terms of pressuring Syria or in terms of pressuring Russia?

QUESTION: I'm sorry, pressuring Russia.

MS NAUERT: In – we are having conversations with the Russian Government, I can tell you that. The United Nations is having a series of meetings where they're talking with other countries, like-minded countries, on exactly what is going on in Syria right now. You recall the Secretary signed on to the chemical weapons program that Paris – that France put together about a month ago or so. They are expected to hold their next round of conversations sometime in March, sometime later this month.

So there are a lot of different ways that we are keeping a close eye on this. What we do – I've said this before out of this building – is diplomacy. We will continue to reach out to many like-minded countries. Let me remind you of the 15 countries that signed on to the ceasefire resolution over the weekend. We're having lots of conversations with those countries that share our concerns.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: Thank you, and if I could just ask you about Iraq. The parliament passed a resolution –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Let's – let's – hold on, let's stick with anything related to –

QUESTION: You mentioned something about a –

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Let – excuse me –

QUESTION: – joke-like humanitarian corridor. Is that –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Okay, let's talk about that.

QUESTION: Yeah, okay.

MS NAUERT: Let's stick on Syria for right now.

QUESTION: So – and you're saying that the ceasefire is not holding?

MS NAUERT: I think just said the ceasefire is clearly not working.

QUESTION: So what – I understand. So what are you proposing doing?

MS NAUERT: And here's the thing: This idea of a so-called humanitarian corridor, which is a narrow little banner, that if you look at the video that you see on TV, people aren't using that. Why are people not using that? Well, it didn't work in Aleppo very well, did it? People are afraid to use it. They are afraid if they try to leave Eastern Ghouta, that they could be conscripted into working with Bashar al-Assad, that they someday may not be able to go home, or they could be killed. People are fearful of that.

That does not go far enough. The idea that Russia is calling for a so-called humanitarian corridor, I want to be clear, is a joke. What needs to happen instead is a nationwide ceasefire that was voted upon unanimously at the United Nations last Saturday. Fifteen countries supported it. Let me remind you, so did Russia. So did Russia.

I want to be clear also that there are a few exemptions to that ceasefire so no one tries to parse my words. Al-Nusrah, al-Qaida, and ISIS – those are the exemptions. Anything else on Syria?

QUESTION: How about –

QUESTION: But I think –

QUESTION: Russia?

QUESTION: – Said's question here is: What is the United States going to do about it, because so far, as you've said, the ceasefire hasn't held –

MS NAUERT: Right.

QUESTION: – has never even been implemented. Beyond just talking to people about it, is the United States going to take action?

MS NAUERT: Well, again, what we do in this building, we do diplomacy. Okay? We have conversations with countries all around the world, and that's exactly what we're engaged in. Ambassador Haley at the United Nations is doing her part at the United Nations, we're doing our part here out of the State Department. We're engaging in talks with the Russians in Geneva, the State Department is. We are investigating various mechanisms that would hold Russia and the Syrian regime accountable –

QUESTION: What kind of mechanisms?

MS NAUERT: For using chemical weapons on its own people. We have talked about the OPCW and their role in identifying substances that were used.

QUESTION: What about sanctions on –

MS NAUERT: Hold on.

QUESTION: I mean, just – what about sanctions –

MS NAUERT: Elise – Elise, let me finish, because you're asking me a question about some of the things that are being done. There are other mechanisms in place. Paris I mentioned. The accord, the agreement that Secretary Tillerson and 25 or 26 other countries signed onto. We have a new member just as of yesterday. I'm trying to remember if it was Norway or the Netherlands. Let me get back to you on that. There is that.

A lot of these meetings are happening. We will hold Russia accountable and hold Russia responsible. And let me again urge you – I know a lot of you are so obsessed with Russia and what Russia did in the United States in the 2016 elections. I would urge you to –

QUESTION: I –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: – to show your outrage –

QUESTION: I'm sorry, I really –

QUESTION: Actually, I don't think that's true in this room.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Hold on. I would assure you –

QUESTION: Maybe in some other briefing rooms around town.

MS NAUERT: Okay, maybe in other briefing rooms –

QUESTION: Not this one.

MS NAUERT: – but let me ask reporters to turn that around. Fine to ask about Russia's role in influencing or trying to influence the 2016 elections, but look at Russia and what it's doing in killing people in Syria. I would urge you to do that.

QUESTION: I think – I mean, I'm sorry, I think that everybody in this room is asking about that and talking about that. And I don't – I reject your assertion that everybody in this room is obsessed with the –

MS NAUERT: I don't – I don't think I said everybody in this room is obsessed, but in general – in general.

QUESTION: But the point is –

QUESTION: Okay, well, it's just not – it's just germane to the questions –

QUESTION: But the point is you haven't gotten a single question about that topic. You haven't gotten one question about –

QUESTION: It's not germane to the question at hand, and the question at hand is: What is the U.S. going to do to hold Russia accountable when in the past the U.S. has imposed sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine? Are there sanctions not just for chemical weapons, but are there sanctions being considered for supporting the Syrian regime for its barrel bombing of civilians in Eastern Ghouta and elsewhere?

MS NAUERT: You know we never forecast sanctions, but I can tell you there are a lot of options that are now being considered.

QUESTION: You're talking about countrywide ceasefire. Would that – should that include Turkey in the North?

MS NAUERT: We have talked about this in the past. We talked about this on Tuesday.

QUESTION: Today. I mean, today you are calling for a countrywide ceasefire.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Should this include Turkey?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. That –

QUESTION: Should Turkey cease all military operations?

MS NAUERT: We look at the entire part of the country, and that's what was called for – a ceasefire throughout the country.

QUESTION: Sorry, you went – you spoke about that at length on Tuesday, right?

MS NAUERT: Correct.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS NAUERT: Yes, I did.

QUESTION: And the Turks have for two days running said that you should read the resolution, and they rejected your interpretation.

MS NAUERT: Well, okay, let me –

QUESTION: You have a comment on that?

MS NAUERT: Let me go back and read the resolution one more time. I think I was pretty clear, and I think you all understood it as well, that the resolution calls for – and this is the UN resolution – it affirms that the cessation of hostilities shall not apply to military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, also known as Daesh; al-Qaida; and al-Nusrah Front, and that other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with al-Qaida, ISIL, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council.

So I think that the United Nations and the resolution is pretty clear and that it speaks for itself.

QUESTION: A question on Iraq.

QUESTION: Are you still considering –

MS NAUERT: Okay, let's move on. Okay, go ahead.

QUESTION: All right. So just to go back to the Russian missiles for a minute, as you say, Putin seems to have confirmed that he's developing these weapons that would breach the various treaties, including the INF treaties. The United States is also modernizing its nuclear arsenal. Do you still consider yourselves bound by these treaties that Russia, apparently, has already broken?

MS NAUERT: We are in compliance with the treaties. We put up –

QUESTION: You're in compliance currently, but do you –

MS NAUERT: We put –

QUESTION: Would you – you intend to remain within the compliance?

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware that we – we certainly would intend to remain in that. I'm not the arms control and verification expert, so if you

want a deeper dive on that, I can certainly put –

QUESTION: It's a matter of policy whether you –

MS NAUERT: Pardon me?

QUESTION: It's a matter of policy, diplomatic policy, whether you remain in a treaty or not.

MS NAUERT: We believe that we remain in the treaty. Okay?

QUESTION: Thanks.

QUESTION: Are you still considering (inaudible) negotiate with Russia in the bigger sphere?

QUESTION: Who is the arms control expert?

MS NAUERT: Our – we have our AVC Bureau. They're our experts there.

QUESTION: Right. Who is the under secretary?

MS NAUERT: The – cute, Matt. (Laughter.) Okay, let's move on.

QUESTION: Are you still considering –

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry. Who are – your name is?

QUESTION: Alexander Khristenko, Russian TV. Are you still considering negotiations with Russia on global security issues and nuclear arms issues after today's announcement?

MS NAUERT: Would – are – so your question is would we cut off conversations and negotiations?

QUESTION: I mean do you change something in your attitude toward this?

MS NAUERT: Well, look, it's certainly concerning to see your government, to see your country, put together that kind of video that shows the Russian Government attacking the United States. That's certainly a concern of ours. I don't think that that's very constructive, nor is it responsible. I'll leave it at that. Okay?

QUESTION: It was not attacking the United States. It was not attacking the United States. It was two missiles sent to different directions. So why do you say that they are –

MS NAUERT: Are you – oh, you're –

QUESTION: Sorry. I'm from Russia. Channel One in Russia.

MS NAUERT: You're from Russian TV, too.

QUESTION: Yes, yes.

MS NAUERT: Okay. So hey, enough said then. I'll move on.

QUESTION: Wait, I'm sorry. What does that mean?

MS NAUERT: What does what mean?

QUESTION: I mean, it's – they're not – they're not officials of the Russian Government. They're just asking a question about Russia.

MS NAUERT: Oh. Oh, really? Okay. Well, we know that RT and other Russian news – so-called news organizations –

QUESTION: They're a –

MS NAUERT: – are funded and directed by the Russian Government. So if I don't have a whole lot of tolerance –

QUESTION: As are other media in this room, Heather.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Heather, can I just ask you one thing about the video?

MS NAUERT: Oh, my gosh. Yes.

QUESTION: This video that you're talking about, the cartoon.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Excuse me. The – as I understand it, and I could be wrong, the video that was played doesn't actually show the missiles hitting anything. Are you – but I'm just asking. Is it the assessment of the U.S. Government that had the missiles in the video ended up at their presumed target, that presumed – that that target was the United States?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I think it's certainly looks like that. I'd ask you to go back and take a look at that.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: It's pretty clear what their target is, okay?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: So this is – let's move on from this.

Nazira, you have a question about Afghanistan?

QUESTION: Yes, Heather. Thank you very much. As you mentioned, Kabul Process conference. What was the U.S. expectation from that conference?

Still United States will satisfied or something else? The conclusion. What was the conclusion from it?

MS NAUERT: Well, look, I can tell you that we were certainly a part of it, that the United States was pleased to have representation at the Kabul Process conference, and we congratulate the Government of Afghanistan for holding that conference. I mean, I think that that is a – certainly a good step forward in doing so.

We continue to have conversations with the Government of Afghanistan and continue to engage them on a daily basis through our ambassador there or through our acting assistant secretary here. We support the cause of peace in Afghanistan, recognizing that peace talks have to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Okay, all right. Said.

QUESTION: Very quickly.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: There was a news item yesterday, both in the Saudi press and in the Israeli press, that there is some sort of a peace proposal that will be coming out shortly. It was – so I wonder if you have anything on that, if you could share anything on that with us.

MS NAUERT: The report that we saw – I think it is an unfortunate report because it prejudices people against a plan on the part of the United States that is not yet complete. We have not released our plan. When it is ready to be released, the White House will go ahead and put that out. And some, I think, are trying to not only prejudice it but to try to draw conclusions about what is in that plan.

QUESTION: Is the Secretary of State involved in this process?

MS NAUERT: Yes, the Secretary of State has been involved in meetings and conversations about this entire process.

QUESTION: And lastly, there's going to be a big conference in town this weekend. It's the AIPAC conference. Is anyone from the United – from the State Department attending or speaking at that meeting?

MS NAUERT: I would imagine so, but I just don't have any confirmation to read out to you for that. Okay. All right.

QUESTION: Religious –

MS NAUERT: We're going to – we're going to have to wrap it up, but –

QUESTION: One on religious freedom.

MS NAUERT: Hold on. Hi.

QUESTION: Yes. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback told VOA in an interview that what happened in Rohingya is a religious cleansing against Muslim. (Inaudible) is already released on our website. My question for you is: Is it the United States position that Rohingya crisis is religious cleansing against Muslim; and secondly, is religious cleansing now a new category that the U.S. would imposing sanctions. Thank you.

MS NAUERT: So part of your question – is that a new category? No, there is not a new category that would include that. The Secretary had defined this after taking a very close look at this as ethnic cleansing. It is a long road to making those sorts of determinations, getting a lot of information and evidence that we have to compile. The Secretary made that determination back in the fall. Okay.

QUESTION: I have a question on Iraq.

QUESTION: A follow up on –

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Hi, Lalit.

QUESTION: The Burma – Burma has increased its troop presence in the border with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is opposing it. Do you have anything on that?

MS NAUERT: Bangladesh is?

QUESTION: Has opposed the presence of additional troops for the Burmese on the border.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I can just tell you that we're watching that carefully. I can certainly understand that that would be a concern of the Government of Bangladesh, but we're watching that one closely. And that's all I have for you, okay?

QUESTION: A question on Iraq?

MS NAUERT: We're – we have to wrap it up.

QUESTION: A question on Iraq.

MS NAUERT: Let me get – I've gotten to you already. Let me get to somebody else.

Miss, hi.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm Cristina Garcia with the Spanish newswire EFE.

MS NAUERT: Yes, hi.

QUESTION: I have a question on Venezuela. So today Venezuela has decided to postpone the election to May, and also there is now an opposition candidate running. I want to know does it affect the sanctions that the

United States is considering and if you have some update on those sanctions. When will they come – before the election, after the election? I know you don't forecast sanctions, but that's (inaudible).

MS NAUERT: Yeah, so I'm not going to have anything for you on the sanctions. I can just tell you that we're considering a lot of different economic and diplomatic options in dealing with Venezuela and, hopefully, its return to its constitution as we have watched the situation deteriorate in Venezuela over the past year or so. We have said we are considering all options to restore democracy to Venezuela, including individual and potentially financial sanctions.

QUESTION: And what about the election that has been postponed? Does the United States like this step a little?

MS NAUERT: Last I had known, the election was set for April the 22nd, I believe. So it – you're saying it's been pushed from there?

QUESTION: Yes, for May. Take place in May.

MS NAUERT: Okay, all right. I had not heard that, so my apologies. I'll see if I can get anything more for you on that. Okay?

QUESTION: Thanks.

QUESTION: Heather, can we –

MS NAUERT: All right.

QUESTION: Can we stay in WHA for a second, just to – I just want to ask you. This is a bureau that over the course of the last couple weeks has – seems to be – have – well, doesn't seem to – is losing a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge and experience, the latest being Roberta Jacobson announcing her resignation today, effective in a month or so. But this is after your ambassador in Panama and Tom Shannon also announced their plans to resign. I'm wondering if there's concern in this – in the building about WHA and the loss of knowledge and experience there.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, so you're referring to our ambassador, Roberta Jacobson, who serves in Mexico. She's been with the State Department for – I believe it was 31 years. And if you look at the amount of time that many of these individuals have invested in their careers at the State Department – her, 31 years; Ambassador Joe Yun was – I believe it was 30-some years; Under Secretary Tom Shannon was – I think it was 35 years – that's a tremendous amount of time to be working in any one industry, building, service, government agency, or department. People choosing to retire for personal reasons – and that's perfectly fine with us.

We thank her for her service. She has certainly done a tremendous job in representing U.S. interests with the Government of Mexico. We thank her for that. But when people choose to retire – and we've noticed that they've all served for about the same period of time – it is not

uncommon that people will eventually choose to move on.

QUESTION: Well, yeah. That's not my – that is not my question.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: But I mean, the three people and the careers that you've just mentioned, that's 95 years cumulative experience. And my question to you was not – ambassador – people move on, yes. But I'm wondering if there is any concern at all on the seventh floor that this particular – this region in particular, WHA, is losing such a huge wealth of talent and –

MS NAUERT: Well, we have a –

QUESTION: – experience.

MS NAUERT: We have –

QUESTION: You don't have an assistant secretary even nominated; you have an acting one, which is okay. The President gets to choose ambassadors; that's his prerogative, and that's fine. But I'm just wondering more broadly, regardless of the reason for their departures, if there is some concern that WHA – which the United States is actually in this region, right; so these are –

MS NAUERT: We certainly are, yes.

QUESTION: – our closest neighbors – if there's a concern that this is – that you're losing this amount of experience.

MS NAUERT: No.

QUESTION: No?

MS NAUERT: I mean, we are thankful for their service. They have served our country and this department with dignity and with distinction, and we are grateful to them for that. We have a tremendous number of qualified, good people who are here in this building who work for us every day.

QUESTION: Right, but you don't have –

MS NAUERT: All around the world.

QUESTION: But you don't –

MS NAUERT: And it doesn't mean that just because there are a few people sitting in the bureau, or a few people out at post doing those jobs, that there aren't other experts. You all may not know their names; it doesn't mean that they don't exist and they aren't excellent at their jobs. There's also the fundamental belief that people should be promoted in their careers, and we look to the future generations of people who are younger in this department to be able to bring them up through the

ranks and take over these positions.

QUESTION: I'm all in favor –

MS NAUERT: Do you want somebody –

QUESTION: I'm all in favor of youth.

MS NAUERT: – around forever? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'm all in favor of youth; that's wonderful. Remind me again who the nominees are for Mr. Feeley – Ambassador Feeley in Panama. Who's going to – who's been nominated to replace him? Who's been nominated to replace Ambassador Jacobson? Who's been nominated to replace Under Secretary Shannon, and who has been –

MS NAUERT: Matt, I would refer you then to the White House for those nominations. You know very well –

QUESTION: And who – has anybody?

MS NAUERT: You know very well where nominations come from.

QUESTION: That nobody has. So if you're interested in promoting the youth and the experience, or midlevel people who should go into the – then one would think that you would have replacements in line.

MS NAUERT: And Matt, you well know –

QUESTION: And there – the point is –

MS NAUERT: – that some of these are political positions –

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: – and some of these are career positions, and we work every day to find the people who are the best fit for those positions.

QUESTION: But the point is is that people are not – I think there would be less concern – well, according to you there is no concern at all that these people are leaving – but there would be less concern for people on the outside who are – who do think that this is an issue, if there were people in line to replace the people who are leaving. And the fact of the matter is is they're not.

MS NAUERT: Just because you're not aware of it does not mean that that does not exist. Okay?

QUESTION: They haven't been nominated.

MS NAUERT: Okay. There are people in mind and in line for those types of positions; perhaps you've just not heard about it yet, okay?

We've got to go.

QUESTION: I have a question on Iraq, Heather, please.

MS NAUERT: I will talk to you after the briefing, then.

QUESTION: No. The Iraqi parliament voted Wednesday to call for a timetable for the Iraqi – for foreign –

(The briefing was concluded at 3:12 p.m.)

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