

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – August 28, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
August 28, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

2:53 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: All right. Good afternoon, everybody. Great to see you.

I'd like to start with one quick announcement today, and this is a continuation of a story we've talked about for quite some time about Greece. And once again, we would like to strongly condemn the release of a convicted terrorist named Dimitris Koufodinas on a five-day reprieve from his imprisonment in Greece. It is his fourth and longest furlough in the past year. Koufodinas is a terrorist who has been convicted of multiple murders, including those of our embassy defense attache William Nordeen, and United States Air Force Sgt. Ronald Stewart. These furloughs are a shameful injustice to his many victims' families and serve as further incentive for his anarchist followers to commit further violence and destructive acts in his name. Our embassy in Athens has conveyed our serious concerns about this decision to the Greek Government.

Just to put things into perspective, over the past year, he has been granted more than 11 days – actually, 11 days of furlough. We do not believe that a convicted terrorist who has murdered not just our personnel, U.S. personnel, but other – from other governments as well, including innocent civilians in Greece – we do not believe that that kind of person should be given a vacation from prison.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. AP usually starts, so – good to see you.

QUESTION: Yes. Good to be here. Thanks for this. I wanted to start off asking about North Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: After the cancellation of Pompeo's trip, is the diplomatic effort there in trouble? And then I was also wondering if you could give us some further details about why the trip was canceled. There were reports that it was canceled following the receiving of a letter from Kim Yong-chol, and I was just wondering if you could confirm that.

MS NAUERT: Sure. So let me take your second question first. You know we often don't get into the detail about our private diplomatic conversations, but I can tell you that the President and his national security team, which obviously included Secretary Pompeo – and I want to make this clear, too, that Ambassador Bolton, the national security advisor, was a part of these conversations; there were some inaccurate reports that he was not; he happened to be on the phone on a secure call participating in this conversation as well. The entire national security team discussed this. In their judgment, they made the judgment that now is not the right time to travel. The President agreed with that, and that is when the President made the decision to send out some tweets announcing that decision.

QUESTION: All right. And the diplomatic effort?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So the diplomatic effort is still ongoing. I know a lot of people are interested in sort of where this stands. The President overall remains very clear-eyed about the challenges and difficulties ahead of us. We have long said, the Secretary has long said, that this wouldn't be easy from the start, and it would be – could be a somewhat lengthy process. Overall, sometimes we move forward; sometimes we stand right where we are. We look forward to future negotiations when the time is right.

Hey, Lesley.

QUESTION: Has the Secretary spoken to his North Korean counterparts in recent days to explain it? And there's reporting that this letter was rather – it had a belligerent tone, quite aggressive. Can you confirm any of that? I mean, is that the reason why?

MS NAUERT: I can't confirm that. The Secretary, the President, the national security team made the decision that now is not the right time to travel.

QUESTION: So have you been in touch with –

MS NAUERT: That's a good question; I don't know the answer to that. I can go back and ask that question.

Hi.

QUESTION: I guess the decision to go was announced on Thursday, was taken also with a green light or in accordance to what was decided within the NSC and with the President. So what happened between Thursday and Friday that made them change their mind? Because it was the same people deciding to go, and then decided not to go.

MS NAUERT: And some of these would just fall under – and I know it's not fun for all of you to not get what you see as a sufficient answer, but some of these are just private diplomatic conversations, and they made the decision that now – then was not the right time to travel.

QUESTION: Just another question.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Secretary Mattis this morning said or warned that he wasn't planning to suspend other drills in the region anymore. But he said I will have to discuss with State Department to see how the negotiations are going and so on. Would you – would the State Department advise Secretary Mattis to keep on suspending the drills, or he can resume them?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think we would hew very closely to what the President and also what the Department of Defense wanted to do. Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mattis speak a lot about these things; we're very closely coordinated. Also, part of this is having conversations with the South

Koreans and our allies as well. So if we have any changes to that posture, we'll certainly let you know. But I think DOD did a very fulsome briefing today, so I'd refer you back to some of what they said.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: Hi, Heather.

MS NAUERT: Hey, Rich.

QUESTION: Have there been any communications between the State Department and North Korea since those tweets came out?

MS NAUERT: That's a question that Lesley just asked. I don't have the answer to that, but I'll see if I can get it for you.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you. And in the end of the President's tweet messages canceling this trip from the Secretary, he said he looked forward to seeing Kim Jong-un soon. Prior to this, were there discussions about the potential for another meeting between the two?

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything for you on that. That would be more of a White House question at this point.

QUESTION: And just making clear, people were asking about the content of the letter. Can you comment on the existence of that letter?

MS NAUERT: I cannot confirm a letter, and I certainly can't confirm the content of any diplomatic conversations. And when I say conversations, that also encompasses any kind of talks that we would have about those types of things, okay. Hi, Janne.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks, Heather. Usually on North Korea immediately response about these issues. But this time, they not talking anything or have you heard from any mentions about cancelations or –

MS NAUERT: Have – I'm sorry. Start – have I heard any mentions about –

QUESTION: Yeah. The Secretary's visit North Korea cancelations, about how did you expect North Korea going to be response about the cancelation? Did you ever contact UN North Korean delegations?

MS NAUERT: Well, we – I mean, we certainly expect the North Korean Government to adhere and to go along with the pledges and promises that they made at the Singapore summit, in accordance to what they agreed to with the President.

I have a statement from the Secretary that he provided me earlier today, which I'd be happy to give to you, his take on the situation there. He says: Despite the decision to delay my trip to Pyongyang, America stands ready to engage when it is clear that Chairman Kim stands ready to deliver on the commitments that he made at the Singapore summit to President Trump to completely denuclearize North Korea. The world is

united behind the need for Chairman Kim to fulfill that commitment. Every member of the United Nations Security Council voted to call upon North Korea to abandon all nuclear weapons, existing nuclear programs, and other weapons of mass destruction. The goal of final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea, as agreed to by Chairman Kim, is the world's goal. The United States, like the rest of the world, is looking forward to North Korea's compliance with these resolutions, which will enable Chairman Kim to provide a brighter future for his own people.

And for folks who need a little nighttime reading, those UN Security Council Resolutions 2371, 2375, and 2397 – they lay them out very clearly. So when you hear other governments or other individuals criticizing the United States, that the United States is perhaps upending these negotiations, I would point you back to these unanimous UN Security Council resolutions, which clearly lay out the world's unanimous expectations of the North Korean Government to denuclearize and all the other things we just mentioned. I can read for you those resolutions if you like.

QUESTION: No thanks. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: No? Not today. Okay. Another time. All right.

QUESTION: The letter –

MS NAUERT: Hey, Kylie.

QUESTION: Hi. So you said now is not the time for the trip. Is the State Department and Pompeo still committed to making a trip to North Korea at some point in the near future or potentially never again?

MS NAUERT: I think that's entirely a hypothetical. We stand ready to talk when the North Koreans stand ready to do so and we think it can be productive.

QUESTION: How else –

QUESTION: And –

QUESTION: How else could it be done that – sorry.

QUESTION: Well, and you also spoke specifically about the President's tweet, which cited no progress on denuclearization, so –

MS NAUERT: No. Actually, he said we feel that they are not making sufficient progress. There's a big difference there.

QUESTION: So they are making –

MS NAUERT: We feel that they're not making sufficient progress. There is progress being made.

QUESTION: On denuclearization?

MS NAUERT: The Secretary is not just hopping on a plane and flying to North Korea for his health. He is going there to have serious, substantive talks. Those talks have, obviously, occurred. Many of you have been on those trips with us. But in the President's view and in the national security team's view, sufficient progress with respect to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was not being made.

QUESTION: And one last question.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Ambassador Sung Kim was also at the White House on Friday. And I'm just curious, why was he here in Washington? Was he here to meet Mr. Biegun? What was the genesis of that trip?

MS NAUERT: I actually can't confirm that Sung Kim was here, if Ambassador –

QUESTION: There was a photo at the White House.

MS NAUERT: Okay. I did not – I have not seen that picture.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: I don't know why he was here, other than that he's an important part of the team and has advised the Secretary and the overall team on the effort regarding North Korea. And in terms of our Special Representative Steve Biegun, we're thrilled to have him on board.

Okay. Hi, Conor.

QUESTION: Just a couple follow-ups on this.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: Ambassador Haley said today that it's possible North Korea has changed its mind on its commitment to denuclearization. Is that a view that the Secretary shares as well?

MS NAUERT: I haven't asked the Secretary that question. All we know is that Chairman Kim has made certain commitments to the President at the Singapore summit.

QUESTION: And then just one more.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, sure.

QUESTION: A close ally of the Secretary, Senator Marco Rubio, also said today – he tweeted that talks have failed. Just get your reaction to that? Obviously, this is someone that the Secretary is –

MS NAUERT: Yeah, you know I tend not to comment on things that other world leaders or even U.S. politicians would say. I would certainly say that when you look at some of the things that have taken place in the

last year: One, we're in a very different spot today than we were one year ago, where there were ballistic missile launches, where there were nuclear tests. We all remember very well what last summer looked like and the fear that many Americans felt at that time. Today, we are in a very different place.

Two, we are in conversations and have been in negotiations with this government that we have not had any kind of real relationship with for just about a decade. Now, the fact that we're having conversations, I would call that progress, and I would call that diplomatic progress, and that's exactly what we do out of this building.

The maximum pressure campaign – the world came together to impose sanctions against North Korea. When we were just at ASEAN, we heard so many of those ASEAN nations thanking the United States and thanking President Trump for his leadership on this issue. Were it not for the UN Security Council resolutions and for the maximum pressure campaign, Chairman Kim would not have gotten to this point where he is willing and open to having conversations with the United States Government.

You recall when President Moon of South Korea first came here, I think it was back in March or perhaps it was early April, and he stood just outside the door of the White House and he thanked this administration for its efforts with that economic pressure campaign.

So those are just a few ways – I can go on and on – about the repatriation of remains, I can remind folks of the three Americans that we brought home just a few months ago. Secretary Pompeo's – I think it was his tenth day on the job – I would call that tremendous progress and would take issue with anyone who would claim that we have not made progress on this front.

I've got to move on to some other issues, and I have to – I have to cut the briefing short today. Yeah.

QUESTION: South Asia?

QUESTION: President Moon is supposed to meet with Kim Jong-un next month in North Korea. Given your past comments saying that – pointing to his comments that there can be no progress on inter-Korean relations without progress on denuclearization, would you call on him to cancel that meeting?

MS NAUERT: No, I think I would just go back to what President Moon has said in the past, that those things have to take place, that has to take place. The denuclearization has to take place. He's been very clear about that. We continue to have good, frank discussions with our allies, both the Republic of Korea and Japan.

QUESTION: So he shouldn't cancel until there's been more progress?

MS NAUERT: Look, I would just go back to what he has said in the past, the importance of denuclearization.

Said, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Has there been any progress on –

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather.

QUESTION: Can you just make it clear if there's been progress on –

MS NAUERT: I've got to move on to other things. I think I just announced that, I discussed that, about denuclearization.

Said.

QUESTION: There's been progress on denuclearizing or –

MS NAUERT: We are having those conversations. The conversations have continued. As you know, we decided not to take this trip because we felt sufficient progress has not been made. But I think I've addressed your question already.

Said, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather. I wanted to ask you about the – the State Department last Friday informed Congress that – of aid cutoff to the Palestinians in the amount of \$200 million. Can you share with us why it was finally decided for this aid to be cut off, considering that this goes directly to help the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza? It doesn't go through the Authority. It goes – it is implemented by USAID and other American-affiliated NGOs and so on. And it goes to aid the youth and the women. Why was it decided to cut off the aid?

MS NAUERT: Earlier this year, and you all recall this – I know we received a lot of questions about this issue – the President directed an overall review of U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and also in Gaza to ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars were being spent in accordance with U.S. national interests and then also providing value to the U.S. taxpayer.

The decision was then made, and we sent out a statement to this effect, that that money at this time is not in the best interests of the U.S. national interest and also at this time does not provide value to the U.S. taxpayer. When we talk about the issue of Gaza, we have long said – bless you – Gaza is the primary entity – excuse me, the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinians and Hamas – the primary reason why the security situation and the situation in Gaza is so terrible, why electricity has become an issue, why clean water has become an issue, all of those things. And Hamas needs to take care of its people. It has refused to do so. Instead, it has spent money on other types of projects, and you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Two quick follow-ups. But in fact, your allies disagree with you. They think that cutting off aid will exacerbate an already volatile – volatile –

MS NAUERT: I am sure they do, and that is because the United States Government –

QUESTION: Including the Israelis, including the Israelis.

MS NAUERT: That is because the United States Government has provided far more money –

QUESTION: I understand.

MS NAUERT: – than many other countries in the region have. And I think Ambassador Haley spoke to that today –

QUESTION: I understand.

MS NAUERT: – when she talked about the importance of burden sharing. And that is we believe that the United States alone does not have to shoulder a disproportionate share of financing programs overseas. The United States is the most generous country in the world, and we continue by and large to be the most significant donor to many programs around the world. But we also feel that other countries should step up and take responsibility, and that's a key point of what the President has discussed.

QUESTION: Okay, I understand. But what is the logic, when you say that it was not in the interest of the national security of the United States of America while, in fact, the Israelis, including Israeli generals and intelligence and so on, the British, the French, everybody says it is actually – it can exacerbate this horrible situation? So why is that not in the interest of the national security of the United States?

MS NAUERT: I think we believe at this time that it is not providing value to the U.S. taxpayer. If I have anything more for you on that, I will let you know.

QUESTION: Right. One last issue on the – there's been a great deal of talk about that this administration is going to be pushing – sometime soon, maybe next week, maybe the following week – to cut off all aid to UNRWA and in fact, dismantle UNRWA and to have whatever programs UNRWA is doing now to have it conducted under UNHCR. Could you share with us or could you enlighten us on this effort, if there is such an effort, if that is the thinking of this building? Because this building historically has been supportive of UNRWA.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I can just tell you we have no decisions to announce today. No decisions have been made.

Hi, Laurie.

QUESTION: Hi.

MS NAUERT: I saw you at the Pentagon today.

QUESTION: So I'm following up with an issue that came – was raised at the Pentagon.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: It has to do with Syria's use of chemical weapons in Idlib, possible use. And specifically, Secretary Mattis said this morning that you were in regular contact with Russia on this issue. Can you explain both your concerns and what the situation is, particularly with the Russians?

MS NAUERT: Mm-hmm. And I think DOD did a terrific job of laying out a lot of the issues there, so I would largely echo what the Department of Defense said and encourage anyone who's not taken a look at that transcript to please take a look at that.

I can tell you that the Secretary spoke with Foreign Minister Lavrov last week. We made it very clear, the Secretary made it clear, that any Russian regime offensive on Idlib and an escalation –

QUESTION: You mean a Syrian regime offensive?

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry. Yes, thank you. Any Russian and/or Syrian regime offense – offensive on Idlib and any kind of escalation in that area, we would hold them responsible and we would hold them accountable for that, especially – most especially, for the use of chemical weapons. The United States has taken a very strong stance in the past when chemical weapons have been used. You all know that very well.

We have engaged the Russian Government and also the military at the most senior level. Ambassador Bolton has spoken to his Russian counterparts. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman Dunford, has as well spoken with his Russian counterparts to make it very clear that the United States Government and its partners would respond to any verified chemical weapons use in Idlib, or elsewhere in Syria for that matter, in a swift and appropriate manner.

So we would encourage Russia to make this point very clear to Damascus that that will not be tolerated.

QUESTION: Thank you. And a follow-up: The Syrian and Iranian defense ministers just signed a new defense cooperation agreement. How do you view that?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, we saw that, certainly. Iran has continued its destabilizing activities around the globe, and I think would be a primary example of that.

Okay? Okay.

QUESTION: On Idlib very quickly –

QUESTION: South Asia?

QUESTION: Just to follow-up on Idlib, because all reports say that it is – it has a concentration of al-Nusra forces, the bad guys that you have listed as terrorists and so on. They are concentrated there. Their allies, who are from the same political and kind of militant orientation, are also there. You certainly don't want to provide another safe haven in Idlib, do you?

MS NAUERT: Said, I don't have anything additional for you on that, but I think Department of Defense addressed that today earlier. I can tell you something in addition on the Geneva talks. That is something that has been a real priority of ours and a priority of our Special Representative Jim Jeffrey as well, to reinvigorate the Geneva process.

I can tell you that we have accepted an invitation by Staffan de Mistura. He is the UN special envoy handling Syria. We will be participating in talks in Geneva on September 14th. It's a bit of a ways off, certainly, but I can tell you that Ambassador Jeffrey will be there and looks forward to representing the United States along with our Deputy Assistant Secretary Joel Rayburn.

I want to make it clear that we fully support the Geneva process. We fully support the efforts on the part of Staffan de Mistura to broker a political settlement. We recognize that a military solution is not going to resolve the problem long term in Syria that it has to be a political solution, so I expect that we'll have more announcements and details for you on the days and weeks to come. But we think we're at a good spot right now in getting back to the Geneva process.

And I can take one more question.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Yeah. Heather.

MS NAUERT: I can take more one question and then I have to go. Hi.

QUESTION: Thank you so much.

MS NAUERT: Where you been?

QUESTION: (Laughter.) I've been enjoying the summer.

MS NAUERT: Oh, good for you. Glad to hear it.

QUESTION: Thank you. Good to be back. Do you have any update on the Rohingya report? When should we expect the State Department to release such a report? And I have one follow-up.

MS NAUERT: Sure. So let me first start with the UN fact-finding mission,

and UN just released its report within the last day or so. And I just want to make clear that that is something that – we are reviewing that report's recommendations. So there is that piece of things. The findings in that report, if you've not reviewed it just yet, overall add to a growing body of information indicating widespread human rights abuses by the Burmese military and other security forces in Burma. The United States Government has held individuals – high-level military individuals responsible. We have through different rounds of sanctions in the past and I will certainly let you know if we have any additional announcements on that.

There's a second piece of information and that is the State Department's own documentation project that – it started – actually, let me back up for one second and mention something about the UN fact-finding mission. We were very troubled by the fact that those participating in the UN fact-finding mission were not granted access to the Rakhine State, and that's the key area where this crisis has taken place and so many people were run out of their homes and killed, and you know the rest of that. They have not been able to gather adequate information and that has long been a concern of ours. Humanitarian workers have not been able to get in and provide the important and necessary aid and support that they need to. Media, that has been an issue as well. So I just wanted to highlight that disappointment that we have had that various groups have not been able to get in.

With regard to our documentation project, the State Department undertook one in which refugees located at Cox's Bazar, which is in Bangladesh – many of them were interviewed for their experiences. That has been pulled together into a report which the Secretary will review and has taken a look at it from my understanding, and we will decide whether and to what extent to publicize that final report.

As you well know, we considered this, we designated this as ethnic cleansing last year. It's a very complicated and complex process that involves a whole lot of lawyers, and when we have something ready to announce, we'll certainly let you know. Okay?

QUESTION: Do you share the –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Yeah. I've got to do last question. I've got to go.

QUESTION: Can I just follow up on that one (inaudible)?

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: So the – so do you agree or – that – with the UN report that there was genocidal intent in those attacks against the Rohingya?

MS NAUERT: We have not made a determination on that, and I'll go back to what I just said, and that is it is a very specific legal designation. It's not one that is easily made. To the average person, of course these

things are incredibly horrific and it seems like we should just slap a label on something. Well, there are complex legal designations that have legal meaning and weight in courts around the world. So that is why the Secretary reviews this very carefully and makes the best determination possible.

QUESTION: But does the UN policy affect at all what the U.S. does going forward? Does the UN report in any way change –

MS NAUERT: Does the UN fact-finding mission change –

QUESTION: – anything to do with how the U.S. policy is?

MS NAUERT: We support that process and we are taking a look at the recommendations. And I've got to go unfortunately, but thanks, everybody. We'll see you real soon.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:18 p.m.)

DPB # 43

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[Press Releases: Zimbabwe's Constitutional Court Ruling on the Presidential Election](#)

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
August 24, 2018

Today, Zimbabwe's Constitutional Court declared Emmerson D. Mnangagwa the winner of the election and Zimbabwe's next President and dismissed MDC Alliance's challenge of the July 30 presidential election results. The United States urges all parties to respect the Zimbabwean constitution and the rule of law.

The IRI-NDI Zimbabwe International Electoral Observation Mission reported "several improvements to the electoral process compared to Zimbabwe's past elections, though equally important problems gave rise to deep concerns that the process thus far has not made the mark." Further reforms are necessary to meet standards Zimbabweans expect and deserve and which reflect regional and international best practices for democratic elections.

The United States remains concerned over politically motivated human rights violations and abuses, and acts of post-electoral retribution in Zimbabwe. Violence and unlawful activity should not be part of the political process, and those responsible for such transgressions must be held accountable. Human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and association, must be respected, and victims and witnesses of human rights violations and abuses deserve protection under the law.

The United States encourages the Government of Zimbabwe to hold substantive discussions with all stakeholders and implement electoral and broader political and economic reforms. We stand ready to continue our dialogue with Zimbabwe's political, economic, and civil society leaders to foster inclusive democratic governance for the betterment of all citizens.

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[Press Releases: U.S. Permanent Mission to the Organization of American States \(OAS\) Announces Visit by White House](#)

Advisor Ivanka Trump and OPIC President Ray W. Washburne To Highlight Women's Empowerment in the Americas

Notice to the Press
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
August 24, 2018

Today, the U.S. Permanent Mission to the Organization of American States (OAS) announced the scheduled visit by White House Advisor Ivanka Trump and Ray W. Washburne, President and CEO of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), to address the organization's member states on Administration efforts to advance women's empowerment in the Americas. The event will take place August 27, at OAS headquarters in Washington, DC, at 2:00 p.m.

Ms. Trump and Mr. Washburne will speak before a special session of the OAS Inter-American Council for Integral Development, chaired by Ambassador Carlos Trujillo, U.S. Permanent Representative to the OAS. The presentation will bring focus to women's economic empowerment in the Americas and advance OPIC's 2x Americas Women's Initiative launched at the Summit of the Americas in Lima, Peru on April 13.

The OPIC initiative will mobilize \$500 million in private capital to invest in projects that empower women in the region by addressing economic barriers that limit women's full participation in the economy, and reaffirms the Administration's strong commitment to empowering women in the Americas and throughout the world through public-private partnership.

For more information on press coverage of the event, please contact the Organization of American States press office at: (202) 370-5437 or OASPress@oas.org. The event will be open to the press. The Organization of American States headquarters are located at 17th Street and Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC.

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Press Releases: Presidential Memorandum on International Postal Practices

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
August 24, 2018

On August 23, President Donald J. Trump issued a [Presidential Memorandum](#) outlining bold actions to address international postal practices that undermine American economic prosperity and threaten our national security. The United States delegation to the Universal Postal Union's (UPU) Second Extraordinary Congress in Ethiopia will follow through on the President's directive to make clear that UPU rates of postal reimbursement are unfair to United States merchants, mailers, and businesses. The delegation will also take steps to update unfair rates of reimbursement and ensure that all UPU member nations take action to furnish advance electronic customs data to facilitate the detection of shipments of opioids and other illicit materials. The United States looks forward to working with other UPU members to accomplish these goals.

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Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – August 23, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
August 23, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

3:42 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: Good afternoon. Hope you're all doing well. Some of you may have seen the Secretary's announcement earlier today. The Secretary announced that Steve Biegun joined our team as our new special representative for North Korea. He will lead negotiations and spearhead our diplomatic efforts with our allies and partners to achieve our goal of the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea. With nearly two decades of foreign policy work on Capitol Hill and in the executive branch, he's qualified – more than qualified – for the task. We welcome this announcement, and it's consistent with the Secretary's desire to get his team on the field as soon as possible.

You may have also seen that, since last Thursday, the White House has sent 14 ambassadorial nominations to the Senate. Thirteen of those nominees are career members of our senior Foreign Service. So we're thrilled to see them moving ahead, and we hopefully will have a speedy confirmation process for them.

And since I've been out on vacation, I'd be happy to just take your questions. But before we do that, let me welcome, for those of you who have not seen or met Robert Palladino first – yet, Robert Palladino is our new official – not acting, official – deputy spokesperson. He comes to us by way of the National Security Council. So look forward to having him meet all of you.

Okay. Thanks.

QUESTION: Welcome.

QUESTION: Well said.

QUESTION: Robert. (Laughter.) So let's start –

MS NAUERT: That's kind of an odd welcome, Matt. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Yes.

QUESTION: Well, it was sincere. Right?

MS NAUERT: We're thrilled to have him.

QUESTION: Yes. It's good for you have a deputy.

MS NAUERT: Team on the field.

QUESTION: Exactly.

MS NAUERT: Okay. What's up?

QUESTION: Let's start with South Africa. You will have seen, I'll bet – hard to miss – the President's tweet last night in which he instructed Secretary Pompeo to look into land expropriations and – from white farmers in South Africa. I'm wondering if the Secretary takes this seriously at all.

Now, the reason I'm asking that is because I went to the Human Rights Report for South Africa, the one that the State Department puts out, and it doesn't mention anything about this being a problem. I would think that this is the report where it would mention it. In fact, when it talks of discrimination, it says most of it is directed at blacks, and the incidence of racism that it points out are all directed at blacks as well. So does the Secretary actually intend to look into this?

MS NAUERT: Well, I can tell you that the Secretary and the President certainly discussed it. The President asked the Secretary to look closely at the current state of action in South Africa related to land reform. This is something that has been going on for many decades, the conversation and debate about land reform there. I should mention that the expropriation of land without compensation – our position is that that would risk sending South Africa down the wrong path. We continue to encourage a peaceful and transparent public debate about what we consider to be a very important issue, and the South Africans certainly do as well.

QUESTION: Right. But did – is this something that was a concern of yours before the President tweeted? And you mentioned the 13 or 14 ambassadorial nominations have gone up. You might get on the phone and call the ambassador to South Africa – if there was one, but there isn't –

MS NAUERT: Matt, as you well know, we are working very hard to get our team on the field.

QUESTION: I know.

MS NAUERT: Nominations are –

QUESTION: But where was –

MS NAUERT: May I finish?

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS NAUERT: Nominations are announced by the White House. The Secretary has done a terrific job of getting more people in place. It doesn't happen overnight. We also need the cooperation of the U.S. Senate to get our folks through.

QUESTION: Well –

MS NAUERT: And they have pledged that they would get them through expeditiously.

QUESTION: That's fine. But does the embassy think that this is a serious problem?

MS NAUERT: I can tell you that our embassy has had meetings with the South African Government. Anything additional beyond that, I just don't have it.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: Can you say when the President –

MS NAUERT: Hi.

QUESTION: Can you say when the President and the Secretary had the discussion?

MS NAUERT: I would say sometime in the last day or so.

QUESTION: In the last day, meaning in the last 24 hours?

MS NAUERT: The last day or so. That's all I'm aware of.

QUESTION: And one –

MS NAUERT: Okay. Hi. Hi.

QUESTION: Can I follow up on this, please?

MS NAUERT: Go ahead. Go ahead.

QUESTION: So apparently the U.S. charge was called into – was summoned by the South Africans today.

MS NAUERT: I know that they met today. I don't have a readout of that meeting, but they did meet today.

QUESTION: Was that at the request of the South Africans?

MS NAUERT: I don't know who requested it, but I do – I can confirm that they did meet today.

QUESTION: So does the U.S. believe that – from what you’ve seen, and I believe that there’s been meetings between the two sides on this – believe that what’s going on, that the South African land policy would be similar to that of the land grabs that we saw in Zimbabwe?

MS NAUERT: Well, I think the situation between South Africa and also Zimbabwe are quite different. It may be easy for some to try to draw a comparison, but there are very big differences. In Zimbabwe, we saw the government there squash civil society, shut down the media from doing their jobs and reporting, and destroyed an independent judiciary. And we have not seen that happen in South Africa. So I think they’re different situations altogether.

Okay? Hi.

QUESTION: So given that, according to the State Department’s own reporting that Matt mentioned, discrimination and actions against blacks in South Africa is a far, far bigger problem than this, what is the Secretary’s view on what is happening right now, and what is he going to do after the President’s tweet?

MS NAUERT: I can just tell you that it was discussed with the President and he will focus on this issue, and I’ll leave it at that, okay.

QUESTION: What does focus on it mean?

MS NAUERT: Well, he will take a look at it, just as he had discussed with the President.

Hey, Francesco.

QUESTION: And are sanctions an option you will look at?

MS NAUERT: (Laughter.) You know we would never forecast that, but that is such a hypothetical.

QUESTION: I mean, (inaudible) –

MS NAUERT: That is a hypothetical. No. That’s a hypothetical and I’m not going to comment on it.

QUESTION: – Turkey with sanctions.

QUESTION: Well, how about this: Is the department aware of – is the embassy aware of a concern that there are land seizures going on without any compensation?

MS NAUERT: I can just tell you this is obviously an issue, debate that’s been going on for quite some time. We encourage – an expropriation of land without compensation would risk sending South Africa down the wrong path. We encourage a peaceful and transparent public debate about this important issue that seems to be happening in South Africa right now. If policies are poorly implemented, there are potentially detrimental

political, socioeconomic, and other issues.

QUESTION: So you're aware of a plan being debated by the South African Government that would seize white-owned farms or land without any compensation?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I'm just saying that expropriation of land without compensation would not be a good thing. It would send them down the wrong path.

QUESTION: Okay. And is there any reason to be concerned about it?

MS NAUERT: Matt, that's just what I'm telling you right now, okay. Thank you.

QUESTION: Did the Secretary –

MS NAUERT: Last one. Then we're going to move on. I don't have anything further for you on this.

QUESTION: Okay. Did the Secretary correct some of the reporting and maybe views that the President holds on this issue? Did he explain to the President what actually is happening, what is proposed versus –

MS NAUERT: Michele, you know we never get into the private conversations between the Secretary and the President – on any issue for that matter, okay.

Hi, Laurie.

QUESTION: Hi. President Erdogan's spokesman complained yesterday about U.S. procedures against Halkbank. Could you comment on his remarks and explain the situation regarding that bank?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, Laurie, I'm sorry. I have not seen those remarks just yet. I can look into it and see if I can find something for you. I just have personally not seen those.

QUESTION: Well, he said – I could tell you, quote – he says unacceptable that certain baseless and false allegations were made against the bank. You don't –

MS NAUERT: I think that would fall under Department of Justice and also Treasury as well. But again, I'm hesitant to comment on anything that I haven't seen myself, but I appreciate your work to try to synthesize it for me.

QUESTION: Okay. Another question then.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: Russia has announced that it will move up the scheduled delivery of this S-400 air defense missile to Turkey from 2020, which it

was originally scheduled, to 2019. What is your response to that?

MS NAUERT: Well, if that is the case – and I've not seen that report myself either – but that would be a concern of ours. You know it goes against our policy to have a NATO ally such as Turkey use an S-400 system. Part of the problem with that, it is – that it is not interoperable with other NATO systems. And so we are against the – having some of our partners and allies around the world potentially purchase S-400s.

QUESTION: And it would trigger CAATSA sanctions too?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to get into that. But we have made very clear what could trigger sanctions for other countries and entities around the world.

Okay. Hey, Rich.

QUESTION: Hey, Heather. Pakistan is asking for an immediate correction to the readout that you guys provided this morning on the telephone conversation between the new prime minister there, that it is factually incorrect that they discussed the terrorists operating in Pakistan. So is there a correction, or are they wrong?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So you saw our readout. In the readout the Secretary notes that he spoke with the new prime minister and expressed his willingness to work with the new government toward a productive bilateral relationship. They had a good call. That may surprise some of you, but they had a good call. Pakistan is an important partner to the United States. We hope to forge a good, productive working relationship with the new civilian government. My understanding is that the beginning of the call or the call itself was a good call and a good discussion toward our working with the new government and the new administration.

QUESTION: So the U.S. Government continues to stand by the readout, that there's no correction to the readout –

MS NAUERT: We stand by our readout.

QUESTION: When you just mentioned the readout and read almost the whole thing, you didn't mention the fact that terrorism was discussed. So are you saying that terrorism was discussed in the call?

MS NAUERT: I'm saying we stand by our readout. I don't necessarily read an entire readout, word-for-word, for you here at the podium.

QUESTION: Do you know how it is that the Pakistanis could have gotten this so wrong?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I'm not going to speculate, okay.

QUESTION: Well – but, I mean –

MS NAUERT: And I can't speak on their behalf. I can only say we stand by our readout. They're an important partner. The Secretary had a good call with the new prime minister and we look forward to having –

QUESTION: Okay. So in other words, can you –

MS NAUERT: – a good relationship with them in the future.

QUESTION: Can you just say, in clear English, there will not be an apology forthcoming, there will not be a correction?

MS NAUERT: Matt, those are your words. We stand by our –

QUESTION: Well –

MS NAUERT: We stand by our readout.

QUESTION: All right.

QUESTION: Can I get a follow-up?

QUESTION: And then real quick again on Pakistan, does the U.S. and the State Department and the Secretary still stand behind the comments the Secretary made earlier about an IMF bailout and there should not be one for Pakistan?

MS NAUERT: I don't see that our position has changed in any way, but I'm not going to forecast anything that could happen in the future.

Hey, Jessica.

QUESTION: Hi. Can you confirm that the Secretary has asked Zalmay Khalilzad to be the new special representative to Afghanistan?

MS NAUERT: We have no personnel announcements. If I had an announcement to make, I would be thrilled to bring it to you today. We've obviously had a great day with Steve Biegun being announced as our new special envoy handling North Korea.

QUESTION: Heather?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Hi, Janne. How are you?

QUESTION: On North Korea and South Korea. As you know, that South Korean Government announced that South and North Korea will open Liaison Office soon. Do you think this will have a negative impact on denuclearization or –

MS NAUERT: I mean, we're certainly aware that North Korea and South Korea are talking about opening a Joint Liaison Office there. I think I'd go back to something that President Moon had said not too long ago, and that is his opinion and his stance that the improvement of relations between the North and South can't advance separately from resolving North Korea's nuclear program. We, of course, closely coordinate with

both the Japanese and the South Koreans. I just mention the Japanese because our close allies there as well. So we continue to coordinate closely and have lots of conversations with them about a lot of things.

QUESTION: But South Korea providing a lot of things, like goods, energy, to North Korea. Is this a violation of sanctions against North Korea? What was it?

MS NAUERT: We would take a look at all of that. Okay? Yeah.

QUESTION: Can you just be a little bit more specific than the Secretary was about his travel to North Korea next week? When is – exactly is he going with the new special envoy?

MS NAUERT: We are leaving relatively soon. Exact time and date I don't know, but we'll be headed out soon.

QUESTION: All right. And is he going anywhere else?

MS NAUERT: Not to my knowledge. I'll let you know if we have any additional stops to announce. Okay?

Hi, Francesco.

QUESTION: On North Korea. The Secretary said he was looking forward to have progress, diplomatic progress, towards denuclearization. Can you tell us what exactly he expects from this trip? Are there some steps he would like North Korea to announce, to take, on the denuclearization?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I think we'll say this: The conversations continue. We have made significant movements over the past six months. In fact, we've had more conversations and consultations with the North Koreans in six months than we have in virtually the past 10 years. So we think we're on fairly strong footing here.

We look forward to having those conversations. I'm not going to get ahead of the Secretary's meetings by highlighting what we are going to be expecting or asking of them. I can just tell you the consultations will continue, and I imagine you'll see more meetings and trips ahead.

Elise.

QUESTION: Heather, you are – just to confirm, the Secretary is expected to meet with Kim Jong-un?

MS NAUERT: No, no. We have no plans for a meeting of that sort, but I'll let you know any additional details as we get them.

QUESTION: I mean, this would be the second time that he's traveled there without meeting with Kim Jong-un. I mean, if you've already – you've said, like, a lot of times that Kim is the kind of ultimate decision maker. So what is the – obviously, there could be – his envoy could go and meet with Kim's envoy, but why would the Secretary continue to go to

North Korea if he's not going to be able to meet with the key decision maker?

MS NAUERT: I think what's important is that we are regularizing these meetings and these conversations with a government that we have had very, very little interaction with over the past decade or so. The Secretary has now appointed Steve Biegun, and Biegun will be picking up some of those meetings that perhaps the Secretary normally would have gone on or would have conducted.

So I think this is just sort of the more – more of a normalization of our types of conversations. We have long said that none of this in terms of working toward denuclearization would be particularly fast. We go into this eyes wide open. But this is all going to take some time, and I think we have been clear about that.

QUESTION: Are you saying that a meeting with Kim isn't scheduled, or you're not – he's not expecting to meet with him at all?

MS NAUERT: We don't have – we don't have that scheduled. We have no expectations of meeting with Chairman Kim. That is not a part of this trip. Okay?

QUESTION: And so will he be meeting Kim Yong-chol?

MS NAUERT: I will – those are all the details that I have right now. I'm not going to get into it beyond that. When I do have additional information, I'd be happy to bring it to you.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Did North Korea need to –

MS NAUERT: Hold on, hold on. We've talked a bunch of times already. Let me just get over to Kylie.

QUESTION: Hi. It's a little unclear as to Steve Biegun's background, how it's been so focused on Asia and North Korea. Can you elaborate on that a little bit in terms of why he was chosen for this position?

MS NAUERT: Well, Steve has certainly spent time in and around the region, has spent considerable time on behalf of Ford covering Asian nations. Stephen, having served as the head of international relations for Ford Motor Company, as the vice president of international government affairs, knows his way around the block, knows his way around so many of these nations around the world and has negotiated on behalf of that major auto corporation. And he will take those skills and abilities and apply them to this task. The Secretary is really good at determining talent and getting his people on the field. That is something that's important to him. And in picking Steve for this role, he picked the person he felt was best suited for this job.

QUESTION: But why not pick someone who's sat across from the North

Koreans in negotiations in the past?

MS NAUERT: I think he has an excellent pick in Steve, and the Secretary is comfortable with Steve and Steve has his full confidence, and so do we as well.

QUESTION: Would you –

QUESTION: Do you happen to know if he's ever been to North Korea?

MS NAUERT: I don't offhand. No, I don't.

QUESTION: Certainly not in his job at Ford, I would hope.

MS NAUERT: I don't –

QUESTION: Because that would be a violation of sanctions, I believe.

MS NAUERT: I don't know the answer – I don't know the answer to that, but he is a well-traveled guy. And I hope he's ready to travel a lot for this job too, because it certainly requires that.

QUESTION: Does he speak with him?

MS NAUERT: Hey, Ben. I don't know the answer to that.

QUESTION: Heather, going back to the Liaison Office.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Foreign Minister Kang said that South Korea was waiting on an endorsement from Washington before they moved ahead, and also there's been some concerns. The South Korean Government is supposed to be providing fuel oil and electricity for this Liaison Office. Would that be a violation of UN sanctions?

MS NAUERT: I think to the second part of your question, Janne already asked that. We would certainly look at that, whether or not that would be a violation of sanctions. And to your first question, I just don't have anything for you on that whether we needed to sign some sort of a certificate of sorts. Okay.

QUESTION: Would you say that in order to take these meetings next week, North Korea had to show something or do something to indicate there was more willingness or readiness? Like, did they have to meet some expectation before the Secretary would go?

MS NAUERT: Michelle, I don't understand the point of your question. We are continuing to have conversations and consultations with the North Korean Government. Our goal is the denuclearization of North Korea.

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: That goal has not changed. We continue to have conversations

with them. Much of those conversations you know I will not be detailing for you here from this podium. The conversations continue to take place.

QUESTION: Heather, if I might.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: But you've also said that your patience is not unlimited and you need to see some progress from North Korea, and the trip was announced the same week that the IAEA came out with this report that said that – that it has grave concern that North Korea is still continuing to develop its nuclear capabilities and hasn't – nothing has abated at all. So at what point do you say that we can't continue the conversations unless there's progress, otherwise you're just giving North Korea time to continue to develop?

MS NAUERT: I think I would look back to how long we've been having these conversations and look at the Secretary's first trip to North Korea before he was here at the State Department. That was what? In April, so just several months ago. I know you all want to speed up these things. I know you want it to happen overnight. But this thing, this issue, is going to take some time, and we've been very clear about that. We've been very upfront about how this will take some time.

As to your question about the IAEA, we share these concerns. I think the Secretary has addressed that in some of his congressional testimony, and we're working forward to implement the agreements that came out the Singapore summit. So we'll keep working at it.

Hey.

QUESTION: If meeting Kim Jong-un is not one of your – a part of your plan, do you expect at least to get a list from North Korea of their nuclear program?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to get into or ahead of the Secretary's meeting on that front. Okay? Okay.

QUESTION: India?

MS NAUERT: Yes, go right ahead.

QUESTION: I have two questions, please. Thank you. As far as U.S.-India relations are concerned, in the next few weeks we are going to have 2+2 in New Delhi rather than Washington, and two Secretaries, of course, Defense and State, will be in New Delhi to discuss the issues. What are we expecting from these talks there as far as U.S.-India relations are concerned?

MS NAUERT: Well, we haven't announced any trips yet, but when we do I'll be sure to let you know. But as you well know, we have a good working relationship with the Government of India, and if and when we travel there, we look forward to having those meetings.

QUESTION: Heather –

QUESTION: And second –

QUESTION: Sorry.

QUESTION: And second, yesterday a general talking live from Afghanistan, he said that as far as terrorism in Afghanistan or peace in Afghanistan is concerned, Pakistan is not doing enough going after Haqqani Network or other terrorist groups inside Pakistan, and it's now up to the State Department diplomatically what they have to do as far as the new government is concerned. My question is that Afghan Government and the people in Afghanistan are still blaming Pakistan as far as peace not in Afghanistan or terrorism in Pakistan – in Afghanistan.

MS NAUERT: Well, I think you're referring to General Nicholson's briefing that he provided, and there's one part of that I'd like to highlight, and that he said, "Wars end with a political settlement." There is not a military solution to this 17-year-long war in Afghanistan, and I think you see that reflected in his comments.

There is a lot of work that is left to be done. Many of you probably saw the Secretary's statement that he put out that – in support of President Ghani's call for a ceasefire. We're certainly hopeful. We hope that that ceasefire will take effect and will hold so that Afghans can have the peace that they so dearly need and want.

QUESTION: Madam, one thing is clear that there cannot be peace in Afghanistan as far as many U.S. and Afghan officials and think-tanks that unless Pakistan is fully cooperating with Afghanistan and U.S. So what are we expecting now from the new prime minister, Mr. Imran Khan, of Pakistan? Because he is, I think, serious to have talks with the U.S. and Afghanistan.

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I think I would just say that the Secretary had a good initial call with him and we'll have more on that in the days and weeks ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: So your friends in Moscow – or maybe they're not your friends, but your counterparts in Moscow say that the Secretary and Foreign Minister Lavrov had a call today that focused on Syria. I was wondering if you can confirm and/or elaborate on that and also tell us if the new special – is it envoy or representative, I can't remember –

MS NAUERT: Representative.

QUESTION: – Representative Jeffrey has got any Syria-related travel or events afterwards?

MS NAUERT: Certainly, and that was one we were really happy to be able – to have been able to announce last week the joining – Jim Jeffrey’s joining the State Department.

I can confirm that the Secretary did speak with Foreign Minister Lavrov earlier today. He spoke with Sergey Lavrov about the Ukrainian political prisoner Oleg Sentsov, who has been on a hunger strike for more than three months in a Russian prison now. The Secretary noted our concerns about Sentsov’s health and urged Russia to immediately release Sentsov and all Ukrainian political prisoners. The Secretary discussed the ongoing challenges in Syria and the United States serious concerns related to possible military activity in Idlib. He also asked Foreign Minister Lavrov to support efforts in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, OPCW, as well as efforts to hold the Syrian regime accountable for its use of chemical weapons. And we can give you that paper readout in just a bit.

Yeah. Yeah.

QUESTION: Anything about the – relating to the conversations about – that Ambassador Bolton had in – with his counterpart in Geneva about getting Russia to help get the Iranians out of Syria? Was that an issue that Secretary Pompeo discussed?

MS NAUERT: I’m not sure if that came up on the call or not. I’m sorry, I just can’t comment on that.

QUESTION: Does the Secretary plan on bringing the Rocket Man CD back to North Korea with him next week?

MS NAUERT: You know what I’m going to bring to North Korea with me, and I’ll show this to you. My best friend from junior high school – you’ll love this story – Julie Michealchuk, she lives in Peru, Illinois –

QUESTION: Is that a Flat Stanley?

MS NAUERT: – sent me this Flat Stanley. This is what I’m going to bring to North Korea, Flat Stanley, because Julia’s been asking me where her daughter’s Flat Stanley is –

QUESTION: Are you going to bring the Elton John –

MS NAUERT: – and I have yet to bring Flat Stanley anywhere other than this briefing room. As exotic as all of you are, I think North Korea’s a little bit better. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Heather, Kim Jong-un might not understand what you’re trying to say.

MS NAUERT: Yeah. Wouldn’t that be great, though?

QUESTION: But he might think it’s him.

MS NAUERT: Do you think this is the first Flat Stanley to head to North Korea?

QUESTION: It looks a little like Kim Jong-un. But are you going to bring the Elton John CD?

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything that I'm bringing along with me other than some comfortable clothes.

QUESTION: Apparently, the Eagles' Greatest Hits is quite popular now.

MS NAUERT: Good to know.

QUESTION: Has outsold Thriller.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Okay.

QUESTION: Can I have a question on Iran, please?

MS NAUERT: Sure, and then I'm going to have to wrap it up.

QUESTION: Yeah. This is a question actually by some TV colleagues who had to leave because of the briefing's late –

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: – but the question is: There's a few Republican senators that have written a letter actually to Treasury, and I'm not sure if it's State Department, calling for the – for Iran to be discontinued from SWIFT, which is the payment system which will affect students and there's bigger implications for it. Do you know anything about that or that request or whether the U.S. is planning –

MS NAUERT: I will have to take that question and get back to you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Not ashamed to say that.

All right, thanks, everybody. We'll see you soon.

(The briefing was concluded at 4:07 p.m.)

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