

Press Releases: Secretary Tillerson's Meeting With Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn

Readout
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
March 8, 2018

The following is attributable to Spokesperson Heather Nauert:

Secretary Tillerson met with Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in Addis Ababa today, his first stop on his first visit to Africa as U.S. Secretary of State. The Secretary emphasized long-standing U.S. commitment to and partnership with the Ethiopian people. The Secretary thanked the Prime Minister for Ethiopia's continued leadership on regional humanitarian and security issues, noting specifically Ethiopia's role as a host of refugees and one of the most significant contributors to peacekeeping operations, and the role Ethiopia can play in the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to improve regional relations.

The Secretary encouraged completing the democratic reforms to broaden political participation, particularly in light of the ongoing government transition. The Secretary also stressed the role of the private sector and the desire to see increasing numbers of U.S. firms invest in and export to Ethiopia, who bring with them a focus on transparency and training. The Secretary commended the Prime Minister for his commitment to Ethiopia's future, demonstrated by his decision to step down, to facilitate a peaceful transition, and to make way for further reforms.

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Press Releases: Annual Observance of International Women's Day

Press Statement
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
March 8, 2018

As we commemorate International Women's Day on March 8th, the United States renews our steadfast commitment to addressing inequalities between women and men at home and abroad and reaffirms the importance of advancing the status of women and girls globally. We will continue to implement measures to strengthen the economic empowerment of women and girls through policies and programs that promote entrepreneurship as well as broaden equal access to finance, decent work, training, and learning opportunities. We will build upon the success of women who have paved the way for more equality in the fields of defense, peacebuilding, and good governance, and work to solidify gains in these areas. We want to see more girls able to aspire to their full potential and to ensure they live in safe, healthy, and secure environments. Thus, we strive to create and invest in opportunities to enable girls to attain the education and freedoms they deserve.

The United States is committed to working with governments and partners around the globe to ensure that countries everywhere enable women to thrive and realize their rights. In the 21st century, it is unconscionable that about one in three women has experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Far too many societies still deprive women of their human rights, discriminate based upon sex, pose obstacles to women's ability to contribute to economic development, or fail to uphold the laws intended to protect them. Such conditions deprive individuals, families, and communities of the contributions that empowered women can provide. As the U.S. National Security Strategy has asserted, governments that fail to treat women equally do not allow their societies to reach their full potential.

In the spirit of International Women's Day, we recognize the leadership, contributions, and courage of women who have made sacrifices in the past, over many generations, to make the world a more safe, prosperous, and peaceful place. We pledge to ensure such progress continues.

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Press Releases: United States-Armenia Hague Convention on International Child Abduction

Media Note
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
March 7, 2018

On March 1, 2018, the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction entered into force between the United States and Armenia. The United States now has 77 partners under the Convention.

The Convention provides a civil law mechanism for parents seeking the return of children who have been wrongfully removed from or retained outside their country of habitual residence in violation of custodial rights. Parents seeking access to children residing in treaty partner countries may also invoke the Convention. The Convention is important because it establishes an internationally recognized legal framework to resolve international parental child abduction cases. The Convention does not address who should have custody of the child; rather it addresses where issues of child custody should be decided.

The Department of State's Office of Children's Issues, which serves as the Central Authority for the United States under the Convention, welcomes our partnership with Armenia and looks forward to working together on this critical issue.

For more information please visit travel.state.gov and click on "international parental child abduction."

For press inquiries, please contact CAPRESSREQUESTS@state.gov or (202) 485-6150.

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Press Releases: The United States Congratulates Australia and Timor- Leste on the Conclusion of a Maritime Boundary Treaty

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
March 6, 2018

The United States congratulates the governments of Australia and Timor-Leste for concluding a maritime boundary treaty under the first-ever conciliation process under the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention. The treaty, signed on March 6 in the presence of the United Nations Secretary General, is a testament to the efficacy and importance of resolving disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law.

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Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – March 6, 2018

Heather Nauert
Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
March 6, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

3:11 p.m. EST

MS NAUERT: Hi, everyone.

QUESTION: Hi.

QUESTION: Hello.

MS NAUERT: Hope you're all well. Hi. Good to see you. I'll start out with a few announcements today. I don't know if any of you caught the Secretary's speech at George Mason University, but as a preview to his trip to Africa in which he leaves today.

Today Secretary Tillerson announced 533 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria, as well as countries in the Lake Chad region, where millions of people are facing life-threatening food insecurity and malnutrition as a result of ongoing conflict and prolonged drought. With the new funding, the United States is providing life-saving assistance, including emergency food and health care. The United States is the single-largest donor of humanitarian assistance for these crises. We encourage others to increase their share of funding to meet the growing urgent needs. And as the Secretary underscored in his remarks earlier today, there is an effort to overall break the cycle, meaning providing opportunities for all people in the African continent, both humanitarian and also enabling them to engage economically, and our work with governments there.

Secondly, the Secretary yesterday had a really terrific meeting with the Estonians, the Latvians, and the Lithuanians. Sir, you're from Lithuania, right?

QUESTION: Latvia.

MS NAUERT: Latvia. Pardon me. Okay. Well, your folks were there as well, and we were certainly happy to host them here at the State Department. I'd like to provide you with a readout from that meeting.

Secretary Tillerson engaged in counter – his counterparts from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in a productive discussion Monday. The four NATO allies agreed to deepen their cooperation to combat Russia's disinformation efforts and malicious cyber activity. They discussed strategies to address the threat Russia poses to European security and Russia's lack of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors. They also made preparations for the Baltic Summit that President Trump will host in Washington that is in April, as well as the NATO Summit later this year in July.

In addition to that, I'd like to turn to Iran right now, where we are saddened to hear that yet another prisoner of conscience has passed away while in custody. It's being reported that Mohammad Raji, a member of the Gonabadi dervish community, passed away while being interrogated in custody in Iran. We also continue to receive disturbing reports of the Iranian regime's ongoing forceful crackdown on the Gonabadi dervish community across the country, in which hundreds have been reported arrested and some have been hospitalized. We call on the Iranian regime to respect the rights of its citizens and to release all prisoners of conscience who are unjustly imprisoned.

And lastly, an update to bring you on the situation in Syria, particularly Eastern Ghouta. Brutal airstrikes by Russia and the regime continue, especially in Eastern Ghouta, despite the unanimous UN Security Council vote on February 24th to demand an immediate cessation of hostilities throughout Syria. The strikes on Eastern Ghouta in recent days have demonstrated the farcical nature of Russia's proposed humanitarian corridor. Russia is clearly attempting to feign implementation of UNSCR 2401 while showing complete disregard for the ongoing humanitarian disaster that still unfolds.

There have been no meaningful pause – there has been no meaningful pause in the slaughter in Eastern Ghouta. Bombs and artillery are still falling on civilians and medical facilities in the Damascus suburbs. The long-delayed and insufficient aid finally allowed in yesterday was reported to have been looted by regime forces and stripped of emergency medical supplies that are so desperately needed there.

Russia's unwillingness to adhere to its numerous commitments was fully demonstrated again by the fact that trucks carrying much needed aid were forced to withdraw from the area due to pro-regime attacks which killed dozens of innocent civilians. And let me remind you, this was backed by Russia.

Russia has agreed to unhindered humanitarian access in numerous UN Security Council resolutions, including UNSCRs 2165, 2254, and 2401; yet humanitarian convoys have been chronically delayed or barred by the Syrian regime, and those that do get through are wholly insufficient to

meet the needs of the Syrian people.

Russia has not only failed to follow through on delivering regime adherence, but it continues to conduct airstrikes in Ghouta with its own air force. Russia and Assad regime continues to ignore the terms of multiple UN Security Council resolutions. Russia repeatedly delayed the adoption of the resolution, and it's pretty clear now why they were reluctant to vote for it: They had no intention of following it.

Let me repeat what the White House said over the weekend: The Assad regime along with its backers in Moscow and Tehran should adhere to UNSCR 2401, should cease hostilities, and allow unfettered humanitarian access, in particular in Eastern Ghouta, where nearly 400,000 innocent civilians are in critical need.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MS NAUERT: Hi. Hey, Matt.

QUESTION: I'm sure we'll get back to Russia and Syria, but I want to start with Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: And the announcement by the South Koreans that I'm sure you're aware of that the North Koreans are apparently willing to talk. I know the White House has kind of taken the lead on this. I'm just wondering what the State Department's role in any such talks will be. Are you involved, or is this something that has bypassed this building?

MS NAUERT: Sure. So first I can say we are closely coordinated with the Republic of Korea on efforts, conversations, and everyday activities that affect our country and theirs as significant allies. The State Department has been speaking with the White House about the proposed upcoming meeting later this week. We've been in constant communication with the White House on this.

In terms of the meeting with South Korea and also with the DPRK, we don't have a play-by-play of that just yet. We will wait for the Republic of Korea to come to Washington and to be able to brief us on those meetings.

As you can well imagine, any phone call that takes place from Pyongyang to Washington, D.C., would have a lot of ears listening to that, so we prefer to have those conversations in person in a secure environment.

We look forward to meeting with our South Korean allies when they do come to Washington to get a full brief on that conversation.

QUESTION: So you're saying that you're not interested, or the administration's not interested in a telephonic conversation? Any

conversation that you would have with the North Koreans would have to be done in person?

MS NAUERT: No, Matt, you've completely misunderstood what I said.

QUESTION: Oh, okay. All right.

MS NAUERT: What I said was –

QUESTION: Did anyone else misunderstand that? (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: What I said was, as you were asking about our conversations –

QUESTION: Right.

MS NAUERT: – coming out of this meeting, and our understanding is that the South Koreans are still in North Korea at this point.

QUESTION: Oh, I see.

MS NAUERT: We aren't going to get a readout of that meeting –

QUESTION: Gotcha.

MS NAUERT: – from the South Koreans while they are in Pyongyang. We look forward to having them come to Washington, where they can fully brief us in person in a secure environment on all the details of that meeting.

QUESTION: Right, okay. Sorry, I did misunderstand that. Well, the Secretary, as you mentioned, is going to be leaving and will be in Africa. So clearly, he wouldn't be able to be involved in such a conversation unless it was by secure video or something like that. Is he planning to be –

MS NAUERT: As we determine who will be coming to the United States from the Republic of Korea, I think the White House will then assemble a list of people who would be appropriate to invite. Obviously, if the Secretary were here in Washington, I think that would be at the top of the President's list; however, the Secretary will be in Africa at this point.

As you all know, there's a lot of protocol that's involved in putting together these meetings. Officials oftentimes like to be matched. The certain numbers of people from the United States, from South Korea is typically matched. So we'll look for the White House for an actual invitation list and to learn more about who will be attending that meeting.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, one person who would be an obvious choice would be the special representative or special envoy for North Korea. How is the – and you don't have one at the moment. That's vacant. How is the search for his replacement going, and is it possible that person could be selected in time for whatever meetings?

MS NAUERT: Matt, you well know that we have plenty of experts in this building, led by Susan Thornton, led by Marc Knapper, led by our other colleagues, Mark Lambert, who is an expert on North Korea. We have plenty of people who are more than qualified to have these types of conversations with the White House and also the Republic of Korea, our ally. So when the White House decides to determine who will be invited to this meeting and who will be represented on the South Korean side, we will look forward to providing our best complement of people to address that.

QUESTION: You know that there is a person, a currently serving senior diplomat, who used to do this job. And I don't know if he would do it again, but he's currently the ambassador in Thailand. Is there any thought given to him?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I – if you want to join our White House PPO team and help find people to join this administration and the State Department, you sound like you know a lot about that, so I could certainly put forward your name. Okay.

QUESTION: For the envoy position? (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: I can put forward your name for the envoy position or if you want to come work for the State Department in recruiting.

QUESTION: Heather.

MS NAUERT: Go ahead. Hi, Michele.

QUESTION: What is the State Department's take on the language that came from North Korea on this subject via South Korea? They actually used the word "denuclearization," talking about if security could be assured and if the threat was removed to North Korea. So what's your assessment of that language that's coming out?

MS NAUERT: Yeah, I think what we're going to do, we're not going to parse that language. There were obviously meetings that just took place in Pyongyang. We will sit down with the Koreans; we'll have a conversation about what next steps we want to take. I mean, I certainly think that this is a step in the right direction. The President addressed this a short while ago. Many people didn't think that this day would come where we would be at this point. The President tweeted about this earlier today when the President said that possible progress is being made in talks with North Korea. For the first time in many years, a serious effort is being made by all parties concerned. The President was realistic but also recognizing that we are at, I think, what is a fairly good point when we are having conversations with our allies about the next steps. But I'm not going to characterize everything that the – that North Korea said.

QUESTION: Well – okay. But just a few weeks ago you were characterizing the fact that South Korea and North Korea were starting to talk, and you

expressed skepticism on the part of the State Department.

MS NAUERT: Well, and I think the President did too in his tweet earlier today, where we have – obviously recognize that talks have not gone as well as we would like – have liked them in the past, where North Korea has pulled back on promises that it has made in the past. So that's why I say I think the President is appropriately realistic in this. But I don't want to box in the White House, the State Department, or any other government entity of ours in going into these conversations. We want the United States and South Korea to be able to have full conversations about the next steps.

QUESTION: Why – I mean, the State Department – it seems like on virtually everything to do with North Korea and a number of other matters, it's always a referral to the White House, or it's quoting the President's tweet, or the Secretary himself says you're going to have to ask the White House about that. Why is there no –

MS NAUERT: I – Michele, I disagree with that assertion completely. If you look at the amount of time that – out of the State Department that we have talked about the issue with North Korea, it is probably about 70 percent of our time has been spent on North Korea. The Secretary – and I've witnessed this on many occasions – this is his top issue that he will bring up with not just our allies, our partners, other countries all around the world. The Secretary has spent a tremendous amount of time on trying to handle the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and pushing that forward as a part of our maximum pressure campaign. The White House – of course, an important part of it – the White House will be hosting this meeting, and we look forward to being a part of that.

I'll move on. Janne.

QUESTION: Thank you, Heather. North Korea demands compensation for the nuclear freeze. Would the United States compensation for that, or –

MS NAUERT: I'm not familiar with that, but no, I can't imagine that we would be.

QUESTION: But the U.S. –

MS NAUERT: I don't have anything for you on that. Okay?

QUESTION: Okay. But the other one.

MS NAUERT: Let me get to somebody else, because we're going to stick to North Korea –

QUESTION: One more. One more, please.

MS NAUERT: – and then I'm going to go to another issue. Sir, do you have a question about North Korea? No? Okay. Okay.

QUESTION: North Korea.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Go right ahead.

QUESTION: Yes. The DPRK just said that it will freeze all the weapon testings before the summit next month. So I'm just wondering that is the South Korean officials had just contacted the U.S. side to say that probably we could consider freeze the military drill that is just scheduled this month. Is there any contact or they just assess something about that to the U.S.?

MS NAUERT: I can tell you that our principle and our policy of denuclearization and working toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has not changed. It's something that we share with Japan, with South Korea, and many other countries in terms of getting in conversations about what will come out of our meeting with the Republic of Korea. I'm not going to get ahead of those conversations, okay. Let's let them play out.

Laurie. You want to talk about Iraq?

QUESTION: How'd you guess? (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: Well, sometimes you ask me other questions.

QUESTION: It's about Iraq.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: The Iraqi budget that the parliament just passed drastically cut the share for the Kurdistan region. And the Kurdistan regional leadership is very disappointed, and it's even disappointed in the United States. It says you said you do the right things, but nothing happens. It says you want – you say you want a strong Kurdistan region. How would you define a strong Kurdistan region?

MS NAUERT: Laurie, I think some of these issues – and we cover them a lot – that Kurdistan and the Government of Iraq and Baghdad have to work together. We have a lot of areas that you and I have spoken about in the past where they still have not come to an agreement. That is important. You recognize that; the folks in Baghdad certainly recognize that as well, as do we. We have a good relationship with the Kurds and also with the Iraqi Government. We encourage them to work out their issues.

In terms of the overall budget that was passed over the weekend, that would largely be an internal Iraqi matter, which we would not weigh in on, but we have clearly demonstrated our support for the Government of Iraq and specifically for the Kurds as well. That's an important ally of ours, as you know. Or partner of ours, I should say.

QUESTION: Maybe – if I might suggest this –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: You need to take a page out of the President's playbook. He

called for tariffs and says that trade wars, easy to win, and everyone goes, "Oh, horrors," but then it turns out that maybe this is a bargaining position, and he is creating leverage. Maybe you need more leverage with Baghdad, because it seems that Baghdad is the one who is not ready to compromise with the Kurds.

MS NAUERT: I think the Kurds and Baghdad both need to do more to get it – to have these conversations and resolve some of these issues.

QUESTION: And you're not looking for ways to create more leverage?

MS NAUERT: Look, we look for opportunities to have these conversations and help facilitate these conversations. I think our position is well known, okay.

QUESTION: Poland?

MS NAUERT: Hi, Dave.

QUESTION: Hi. The Polish press is reporting that Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell has informed their government that they will have no meetings with the prime minister and the president of Poland until they have reformed their Holocaust law. Are you able to confirm this conversation took place? And if not, could you just generally characterize what the U.S. Government's position is on Poland's recent Holocaust law?

MS NAUERT: Certainly. We have very clearly – and we have one of our Polish friends in the back here. Marcin, great to see you as well, always. We have clearly articulated our concerns with that legislation. Statements from Secretary Tillerson, statements from me, information that we have put out from our European Bureau as well. We also had a video message that went out from our ambassador, Ambassador Jones, on this matter.

The reports that allege any kind of a suspension in security cooperation or high-level dialogue – all of that is simple false. NATO – excuse me – Poland is a close NATO ally. That will remain; that hasn't changed. That does not mean that we don't have disagreements about the legislation that has taken effect. We have made our position on that very well known. We believe that being able to have full and honest conversations – we believe in being able to have the media report in a free manner, even in a way that countries may not agree with. That is important. That is how people learn from things of the past. And so we would encourage the government to listen carefully to our positions that we have clearly stated.

QUESTION: But on the specific issue of can the president of Poland meet the President of the United States before this is –

MS NAUERT: I'm not aware of any meetings that are being discussed or scheduled at that time. But I can tell you there has been –

QUESTION: Imagine they'll both be at the NATO Summit.

MS NAUERT: There has been – the NATO Summit in July? Yeah. Oh, nothing's been announced on the NATO Summit in July. A lot of things can happen, certainly, between now and then. But we are not going to abandon our security commitment to Poland. Poland is a close NATO ally. But I want to be clear that we have concerns about that legislation and we have made our concerns very clear.

Marcin, go ahead.

QUESTION: Heather, so I understand, that the conversations are ongoing between Warsaw and Washington?

MS NAUERT: As far as I know, yeah, certainly, that our ambassador has been deeply engaged in this. I just spent quite a bit of time with our Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell yesterday. We did not talk about the Poland matter. We were talking about our friends from Latvia and Estonia and Lithuania as well. But I can certainly go back and ask. If I have anything new, I'd be happy to bring it to you. Okay.

QUESTION: Is there a – is it possible that there were just suggestions from the U.S. side, from the State Department, that there may be a problem with such high diplomatic meetings?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to speculate, but I'll just tell you we've made our concerns clear. But our security posture, as it pertains to our ally, Poland, is not changing. People are trying to find distance or space between our longstanding relationship, and there is no space there, okay?

QUESTION: So the foreign minister of Poland is welcome at the State Department?

MS NAUERT: I have no meetings or no plans that I can – I am able to announce at this time from this position, okay? Okay.

QUESTION: Sorry. You just said there is no distance or no space –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – but there is.

MS NAUERT: Well, on this matter. On the matter, and we've made our disagreements or our disappointment with that legislation clear.

QUESTION: All right. When you talk to Wess Mitchell about it, can you ask him what he thinks that he could have said that could have given the Poles the impression that they were being – I don't know –

QUESTION: Shunned.

QUESTION: – shunned or would be shunned by –

MS NAUERT: I will see what I can find out. No guarantees, okay?

QUESTION: – by the President, Vice President. Okay. Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Hi.

QUESTION: Heather, when we last gathered, the Venezuelan Government had announced that it had moved its election back one month. Does that change the administration's calculus at all on its next steps on how to (a) deal with the crisis and (b) deal with the government there?

MS NAUERT: I – look, just moving an election, which we don't consider to be a fully fair and democratic election, because we've seen the hand of the Maduro regime; we have seen the repeated elections that have had – where the regime has pushed people to vote a certain way, provided monetary encouragement to vote a certain way. Just pushing back the election doesn't make it any more free, doesn't make it any more fair. Our concerns still remain about the erosion of democracy in that country.

QUESTION: And the refugee crisis ongoing there, was that something that the Secretary discussed when he was in the region last month?

MS NAUERT: I would ask you to ask him that question, because you were there. You were tagging along with him. But that is an issue that always comes up with many of our – the countries in the Western Hemisphere. It's an issue of concern between the United States and Colombia, as Colombia has seen more and more Venezuelans cross their border because they're in need of food and medical supplies. We've seen terrible stories about children who've been abandoned on the streets because their parents feel that they are not able to care for them or feed them. This is a tremendous concern of ours, the humanitarian situation. We're continuing to watch it and we're engaging closely.

QUESTION: And considering any other further assistance or anything to that government – Colombian Government to help with the Venezuelan crisis?

MS NAUERT: I don't have – I don't have anything specific to provide you with regard to Colombia right now.

Okay, hi.

QUESTION: On U.S. embassy in Ankara.

MS NAUERT: Yes.

QUESTION: Is there any update on the security – the closure? And the Turkish police arrested four Iraqi nationals as – after the closing the embassy, saying that was the security threat. Can you confirm was that the security threat?

MS NAUERT: So some of the security issues with – particular to this

investigation I'm not going to be able to address. I'd have to refer you back to the Turkish Government on that and their police forces. We did put out a security alert. As you well know, our embassy had been closed today for consular and visa visits. Tomorrow, our embassy will be fully open. I can refer you back to the security alert, but today our embassy was open but remained closed for the consular and visa services, and I just want to make sure that we thank the Government of Turkey – the police and also the security services – for facilitating this investigation.

QUESTION: But these are the same police and security services that detained your consulate staff?

MS NAUERT: Yes, I suppose so. I suppose so, but you know what? If it helps thwart something that could have happened, we would certainly thank them for that.

QUESTION: Okay, but you're not giving them a clean bill of health for everything, are you?

MS NAUERT: Matt, I mean – really, do you have to parse everything? Something positive happened –

QUESTION: Yes.

MS NAUERT: – in our relationship where they provided assistance to a NATO ally.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: What would be – have been a concern and they addressed a legitimate security issue. There is – we are fully in right to be able to thank the Turkish officials for having done a job well done.

Hi, how are you?

QUESTION: Good, thank you. One question on Turkey and Afrin. Today, Turkish president once more stated that Turkey or Turkish-led forces are going to – very soon will get in Afrin center. We know – we are aware that American forces are not operating in Afrin, but do you have any position with regards to Turkish forces planning to take over the city center in Afrin in upcoming days?

MS NAUERT: Sure. We have real concerns about that because of an escalation of violence. We have called for however long this has been going on – a month or so – for a de-escalation of violence. The more that we would see Turkish forces enter into Syria proper, deeper into Syria, the more that it stands to create a potential humanitarian crisis. We've also seen the reports of the Turks needing to set up IDP camps as a result of people possibly having to leave their homes. So I think this further underscores the importance of the UN Security Council resolution that calls for a nationwide ceasefire. Having a nationwide ceasefire would certainly help to stabilize the situation.

There's another issue here, and that is the fight of – against ISIS, the entire reason why the United States is operating in Syria at all. And we would like to see the focus stay on the fight against ISIS, but as has been reported and as I've spoken about and others in the administration have as well, there's a concern about some of the forces that the United States and coalition partners are working with not being solely focused on the fight against ISIS because, for familiar reasons and other reasons, they're being – heading over to the Afrin area.

Laurie, do you have something more on that?

QUESTION: Yeah, follow-up on that. Do you have any idea about how many of the SDF forces have gone to Afrin?

MS NAUERT: I'm not going to be able to characterize that, but we have long said that that wouldn't be helpful and that we want the focus to stay on the fight against ISIS.

QUESTION: And the SDF said today that it was withdrawing 1,700 of its men to go to Afrin. Do you have a comment on that?

MS NAUERT: I've seen that number. We would encourage everybody to stay focused on the fight against ISIS. Okay. But I do want to add that we also understand that Turkey, a NATO ally, has some legitimate security concerns, but we want the overall de-escalation of violence, whether it's in Afrin or whether it's in Eastern Ghouta.

Okay, something on –

QUESTION: Yes, regarding the Cuban diplomat, Fernandez de Cossio, he said just recently that the decision to lower the number – or keep it permanent, the number of employees at the embassy in Havana – is really a political decision. How does the State Department view this case?

MS NAUERT: Sure. I addressed that in a on-the-record comment not long after the Cubans said that. I wish that the Cuban Government would remember why the United States and why Secretary Tillerson made that decision to go to ordered departure, and now our State Department employees are no longer able to bring their family members to Cuba because of the health concerns.

So I'd like to remind Cuba the entire reason why we went to that, because we could not ensure the safety and health of U.S. diplomats who are working in Cuba. So that remains a concern of ours. We still have an investigation that's underway, so I hope Cuba would focus instead on helping us with the investigation and be less concerned about claiming this is political. This is entirely about the health and the safety and the well-being of Americans.

Okay. All right. We're going to have to wrap it up pretty soon. Sir, go right ahead.

QUESTION: When President Trump's – Trump meets Latvian President Vejonis

next month, are they going to discuss the issue of rising internal tensions in Latvia over the new law which, in effect, eliminates all Russian-language schools and all Russian-language education?

MS NAUERT: I'm not sure, sir. I know when Secretary Tillerson spoke with his counterpart yesterday, one of the big conversations was talking about the safety of that country and many other countries in the region, reaffirming our position on Article 5 NATO, and also having conversations about Russia's malign influence in elections around the world.

QUESTION: But internal –

MS NAUERT: Yes. I don't know. I'm not the President of the United States, so I'm not going to get ahead of his conversations, okay?

QUESTION: No, I know.

MS NAUERT: All right. I'm going to have to wrap it up.

QUESTION: Can I ask – I've got one more.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: It was suggested by – after the Russians canceled the Shannon-Ryabkov meeting, I guess Deputy Minister Ryabkov suggested that it might be possible for the Secretary and his boss, Foreign Minister Lavrov, to meet while they're both in Ethiopia at the same time later this week. Is that anything that's being considered?

MS NAUERT: We have not received a request for a meeting from the Russian Government to meet with anyone while – with the Secretary, and we have no meetings to announce at this time.

QUESTION: And is it still true that the U.S. has no plans to meet or hear out this Russian woman that's detained in Thailand?

MS NAUERT: So let me – I have a little bit of information on this for you but not a whole lot. She is not an American citizen. We're certainly aware of her arrest. The Russian authorities may have more information on her case. Certainly, the Thai or Thai law enforcement may have additional information, but we're limited in terms of what we have.

QUESTION: Well, I'm just interested to know if U.S. embassy people are – have any plans to talk to her.

MS NAUERT: Not that I am aware of. Look, we support and assist American citizens. She is not an American citizen.

QUESTION: No, but she has offered information – what she says is information about alleged Russian activity during the 2016 election as – I realize that you're not Special Counsel Mueller, but is – but you just talked about – with the Baltics talked about combating Russian – alleged

Russian interference. So I'm just wondering, I mean, is the administration interested in at least – in hearing her out, or do you give no credence to her story at all?

MS NAUERT: Look, I don't know. This sounds like a pretty bizarre story. The woman has been detained there. I'm sure if there is anything of great interest that we need to be aware of that our Thai officials would inform us of that. Okay?