


Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 8/23/2013

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MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything off the top. I do have a week ahead at the end. And then, keep in mind the President is likely to get asked some of these news-of-the-day questions himself in this town hall, where he'll take questions from the students and parents who are assembled. But if there are a couple of things we want to try and knock out real quick, we can do that.

Q Can we just clarify some of what he said on Syria this morning?

MR. EARNEST: I can try my best.

Q Okay. So there was obviously this big meeting at the White House yesterday talking about kind of options going forward. Is the President -- it's hard to tell in his interview -- is he actively looking for some type of stepped-up U.S. involvement at this point? Or is he still in the place where he thinks that the U.S. getting involved may not actually change the situation on the ground?

MR. EARNEST: I think what the President acknowledged yesterday is that there were reports of widespread civilian deaths in one area in Syria. There is some evidence to indicate that chemical weapons may have been involved. The President described that yesterday in the interview as a big event of grave concern.

And given our interest in ensuring that weapons of mass destruction are not proliferating and the need to protect our allies in the region, the President believes that this is something that requires our attention. This is also something that requires the attention of the international community. That's why you heard from the State Department yesterday that Senator [sic] Kerry has been in touch with some of our allies around the globe on this.

Q Secretary.

MR. EARNEST: Secretary Kerry.

Q But is he actually looking for something that he can proactively do at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have said that the assistance that we provide to the opposition is on an upward trajectory. We've described it as expanding in scope and in scale. And we have long said that all options remain on the table when it comes to Syria. At the same time, the President has also indicated very clearly that he did not foresee a situation in which American boots on the ground would be in the best interest of American national security.

But, ultimately, that is the criteria that the President will use as he evaluates the proper course of action in this situation -- that is the best interest of American national security. But in this situation, when there are weapons of mass destruction involved, it does -- or when there is evidence that weapons of mass destruction may be involved, that would have an impact on the calculus about the impact that this has on our national security.

Q Josh, you -- military steps short of boots on the ground or short of, say, a no-fly zone that planners are looking at just to draw up some options for the President. So if he makes a decision that, okay, now our national interests are at stake and we need to do something --

MR. EARNEST: Well, it was -- we've been asked this question before and declined -- at other junctures in this crisis. And we have declined to describe the kinds of options that are being prepared, other than to say that the Department of Defense is always prepared to provide the Commander-in-Chief with the kind of advice that he may need. But I don't have any insight into that planning to share with you.

Q Can you give us a few more details on who attended this meeting yesterday? Was it deputies --

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to my colleagues at the NSS. I wasn't at the White House yesterday, so I don't have a good sense of who actually attended the meeting.

Q Do you have a sense of how often these meetings are going to happen? Are they happening daily? Will they be happening over the weekend?

MR. EARNEST: It's hard to predict. It's hard to predict. But this is something that the President has asked his team to take a careful look at. So I would anticipate that there will be additional meetings and consultations as they examine -- as they gather more evidence about what's happened on the ground. I would anticipate additional meetings as consultations continue with our allies around the globe. And this will be an ongoing analysis about the impact that this situation has on our national security.

Q Josh, I know you might not bite at this, but I want to try. The President in the interview this morning indicated a kind of shortened timeline for a decision. Can you give us any sort of sense? Are we talking weeks or -- how long?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to be able to characterize for you exactly what that timeline is.

Q But it is shortened, the timeline?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's what the President described yesterday. And the reason for that is because what we saw was -- because of the nature of the event. We saw -- it is evident from the videotape and the photos that are pouring out of the region that we're talking about a mass casualty incident.

It appears that there were -- that many of the victims were children. It appears that -- I guess the other thing I would add to this is there was that U.N. report, either last night or today, that indicated that there were a million children in Syria who have been forced to flee the country, and another 2 million who are displaced internally within the country. So we're talking about a large number of people. And adding to that, the possible use of -- widespread use of chemical weapons is something that gives the President grave concern, as he described yesterday.

Q And just to follow up, you said boots on the ground are not being -- not under discussion.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what the President said was that he didn't envision a scenario in which American boots on the ground in Syria would be in the best interest of American national security.

Q Did he say anything about a no-fly zone?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything new on that.

Q Is the President going to convene his national security team in the next couple of days to talk about Syria? Is that something that's on the calendar or under discussion?

MR. EARNEST: It's something that's under discussion. I don't have any meetings to preview for you at this point, but if there are additional meetings like that that we can tell you about, then we will.

Q When the President talks about what we saw in Syria, getting closer to our national interest with regard to nonproliferation and protecting the allies, that sounds like the stakes have been raised for some sort of unilateral action by the United States. Is that how we should take that? If you go back to his Nobel Prize speech, he sort of drew a distinction between those conflicts where we have a generic humanitarian interest and those where we feel like our national interests are at stake.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction -- and in this case, there's some evidence for that -- it's certainly something that the President is very concerned about, and it does have significant implications for our national security. But at the same time, the President is committed to working with the international community on this. And we even saw, at least what seems to be, an encouraging statement from the Russians, who articulated their support for allowing the U.N. chemical weapons investigative team that's currently in Syria access to the site that's in question here, that they indicated that all parties should cooperate. That is in line with what we have indicated as well.

And I know that there was a phone call that was read out between Secretary Kerry and the leader of the Syrian opposition where the leader of the Syrian opposition indicated his willingness to cooperate with that investigation, and pledged to allow that investigative team access to the area.

So right now, we just see the Assad regime that is standing in the way of that investigation, and that's something that we're quite concerned about and that puts the Assad regime not just at odds with the United States and with the U.N. investigative team that's there, but with the broader international community. And the President wants to continue to build international support to address the situation in Syria.

Q On a separate issue, when can we expect to get the list of people who will be on the NSA panel that the President talked about?

MR. EARNEST: As I mentioned the other day, this is something that they're actively working on. And I don't want to set a timeline for that now because I don't know when they're going to be done, but it's something that they're actively working on.

This is an important part of some of the reforms that the President rolled out when he was talking about making the NSA a little bit more transparent and considering some other ideas that would improve oversight into those programs in a way that would strengthen public confidence in these programs.

Q But you don't have a date?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a specific date right now.

Q Josh, just because I know people are working on preview stories this weekend for the MLK event, is there anything you can say to kind of preview the President's speech, how he's preparing for that event?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything on that for you, but let me see if I can get you something.

Q Do you have a time when he's speaking?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have those logistics. I'm sorry.

Q Do you have a week ahead?

MR. EARNEST: I do have a week ahead.

Q -- make sure we all get the MLK --

MR. EARNEST: Yes, let me see what I can figure out on that. Okay.

In the interest of expediting our entry into the room, why don't I -- can I just give this to somebody on paper who can --

Q Yes, why don't you give it to one of the poolers?

MR. EARNEST: That would be okay?

Q That's the week ahead?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q Thank you.

END

12:34 P.M. EDT