

# Background Press Call By Senior Administration Officials On President Biden's Call With President Putin of Russia

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## Briefing Room

### • Speeches and Remarks

Via Teleconference

3:25 P.M. EDT

MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Today's call is going to be on background, attributed to a "senior administration official," and the contents are going to be embargoed until the conclusion of the call.

With that, we'll turn it over to our speaker, [senior administration official]. [Senior administration official], over to you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks. And thanks, everybody, for being here.

There were two main topics, obviously, in the President's call today with President Putin. First, Syria — which I really want to underscore because I think it deserves some attention.

I really — the leaders commended the work of their respective teams following the U.S.-Russia summit that led to today's unanimous renewal of cross-border humanitarian assistance to Syria in the U.N. Security Council. And I genuinely encourage you to reach out to NGOs and other humanitarian organizations about the impact of this.

For months, we've been concerned about the likelihood, if not a near certainty, of a Russian veto of the U.N. Security Council resolution that allows for humanitarian assistance to be provided across the Syrian border from Turkey. And it is our strong sense that only leader-level engagement along the lines that took place at the summit in Geneva would have gotten this extension done and this access secured at a time of severe humanitarian distress and need in Syria.

So, we think that's quite a consequential action and a genuine impact of the President's personal engagement and of the summit.

President Biden also spoke with President Putin, obviously, about the ongoing ransomware attacks by criminals based in Russia that have impacted the United States and other countries around the world. President Biden underscored the need for Russia

to take action to disrupt ransomware groups operating on Russian territory, and emphasized that he's committed to continued engagements on the broader threat posed by ransomware.

The President believes strongly in this leader-level engagement on this issue as well. And we engage in this type of diplomacy not because we agree often or all the time, but precisely because we have these disagreements in so many areas, including this one.

President Biden reiterated that the United States will take necessary action to defend its people and its critical infrastructure in the face of this continuing challenge. And the President has also called on governments and agencies to modernize their defenses to meet this threat, building on the President's executive order on cybersecurity that was released in May.

I want to say a few other things about this: The President really meant what he said just after concluding the summit meeting in Geneva, when he said that our assessment of this process and our evaluation of Russia's actions would take time and play out over time. The President said six months or more.

This is more than just a conversation that's taking place between the two leaders, President Biden and President Putin. This is really about our own resilience, as a nation, in the face of these attacks, and strengthening that. That's what the cybersecurity executive order was largely about.

It's about addressing the challenges posed by cryptocurrency, which provides fuel for these sorts of transactions.

It's about ensuring that our allies and our partners are working with us, collaboratively, and upping their own game when it comes to resilience and these broader issues.

So, this is a broad campaign and won't have an immediate on-off effect like a light switch, but we're going to have to stay on top of this over a period of time and remain focused on it.

So, with that, [senior administration official], I'm happy to take whatever questions there are.

Q On Syria, you mentioned we should call NGO groups, and we have. And they say that this isn't good enough, that six-month extension; even if there's no requirement for another vote — in six months, it's just not long enough to plan for humanitarian groups.

Human Rights Watch said that Russia successfully blackmailed the international community. Amnesty said Russia continues to play games with the lives and welfare of millions of people. So how do you paint this as a success if these groups are saying it's not?

And on cyber, the U.S. has given Russia information on the people it wants arrested. Assuming Russia has not made those arrests, how is it that you can expect Russian action when you've asked for those actions and they haven't been taken?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank, Nick. So, first of all, this was a 15 to 0 vote in the Security Council, broadly, strongly believed by the United States and our closest allies that this was a big step forward on the humanitarian front. And the groups that we've been in touch with have a different impression from the ones that you've just quoted.

We see the six-month extension with a virtually automatic additional six months. In other words, adding up to a full-year extension of humanitarian access is being far better than what was expected in recent months and consider this to be a significant progress on the humanitarian issues. And we're going to have to stay on top of them, obviously.

On Russia's follow-up actions: Look, you know, time will tell. The President was quite clear that part of why he wanted to gauge what President Putin was willing to do with regard to these actions that have taken place from Russian territory was so the United States could gauge what we're going to be willing to do.

And I think the President was asked today if he expected us, the United States, to take action, to follow up. He said, "Yes." We're not going to telegraph what those actions will be precisely. Some of them will be manifest and visible, some of them may not be. But we expect those to take place, you know, in the days and weeks ahead.

Q Hi there. Thank you for doing this. What did Russia get in exchange for not voting to close the crossing into Syria?

And as far as the timing, did the administration wait until Russia did vote that way before making this, kind of, more punitive call on ransomware?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, on your second question: No — I mean, I think the timing of these two topics was more coincidental than linked. I don't think we linked these issues in any way.

On your first question, I guess I would refer you to the Russian government to explain its rationale and its calculus for this vote. I mean, for our purposes, you know, what we were concerned about was the continued, sustained, and ideally enhanced flow of humanitarian assistance into all parts of Syria, and we think that's what this has accomplished.

Q Hey, this is actually Rachel Scott with ABC. We're just in the booth together. Thanks so much for taking my question.

The President was just asked (inaudible) servers that are used to carry out ransomware hacks. So, my first question is: Has the President already directed officials to do that?

And just another follow-up question. We just got a readout from the Kremlin. They say that they've received no formal request to assist in dealing with the attacks from U.S. agencies. What is the administration's response to that? Is there any indication that they're taking (inaudible) this morning?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sorry. Can — the very first part of your question got garbled. Has the President directed agencies and departments to do what specifically, did you ask?

Q Yeah. (Inaudible) now, given —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You're still — you're still really breaking up, so — I'm sorry. I'm — maybe, Operator, you can hear this, but I can't.

OPERATOR: It's breaking up on my end as well. Molly, can you hear us?

Q Can you hear me?

OPERATOR: Your line was breaking up.

Go ahead.

Q Yeah, I can — I'll ask it again. I'm walking out of the booth. Sorry, stick with me (inaudible).

So, the President was just asked on the tarmac if it makes sense to attack the servers that are used to carry out the ransomware hacks. The President said, "Yes." So, my question is: Has he — has he planned to direct — have you already directed any officials to carry out that action?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So — okay, I guess I'll take the two parts of your question. On the first question, that's obviously not something that we would speak to publicly, in terms of any specific actions the President has or hasn't ordered. So I just won't speak to those operational questions in detail.

On your second question about the Kremlin's readout, I guess what I can say is that we have relayed multiple specific requests for action on cybercriminals to Russia through official channels and been clear about what Russia's responsibility is with regard to taking action, including, again, today, at the level of the two presidents. And I'll just leave it at that.

MODERATOR: Hey, everyone. This is [senior administration officials]. Just on that — on that first part of that last question, I would encourage folks to go back and look at the full official transcript of what the President said earlier. I think that there might be a bit of a garble there, but folks should be checking the transcript, please.

With that, I'm afraid that we're out of time, and we have to get our speaker to his next meeting. Thanks, everyone, for joining, and have a good rest of your afternoon.

3:36 P.M. EDT