

Remarks by Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo in Press Conference | Ankara, Turkey

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Remarks

Foreign Policy

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: One week ago, Turkish forces crossed into Syria. Earlier this week, President Trump took decisive action to call on Turkish forces to stand down, to end the violence, to agree to negotiations. And today, I'm proud to report, thanks to the strong leadership of President Donald Trump and the strong relationship between President Erdoğan and Turkey and the United States of America, that today, the United States and Turkey have agreed to a ceasefire in Syria.

The Turkish side will pause Operation Peace Spring in order to allow for the withdrawal of YPG forces from the safe zone for 120 hours. All military operations under Operation Peace Spring will be paused, and Operation Peace Spring will be halted entirely on completion of the withdrawal.

Our administration has already been in contact with Syrian Defence Forces, and we have already begun to facilitate their safe withdrawal from the nearly 20-mile-wide safe zone area, south of the Turkish border in Syria.

Let me say this also includes an agreement by Turkey to engage in no military action against the community of Kobani.

And in addition, the United States and Turkey have both mutually committed to a peaceful resolution and future for the safe zone, working on an international basis to ensure that peace and security defines this border region of Syria.

In addition to the settlement today with the ceasefire, Turkey and the United States mutually committed to the Defeat ISIS activities in northeast Syria. This will also include an agreement renewed today to coordinate efforts on detention facilities and internally displaced persons in formerly ISIS- controlled areas.

Also, Turkey and the United States agree on the priority of respecting vulnerable human life, human rights, and particularly the protection of religious and ethnic communities in the region.

I spoke to President Trump just a few moments ago, and I know the President is very grateful for President Erdoğan's willingness to step forward and to enact the ceasefire, and to give an opportunity for a peaceful solution of this conflict that commenced one week ago.

For my part, I'm grateful for the President's leadership. I'm grateful for the more than five hours of negotiations with President Erdoğan and his team that arrived at a solution that we believe will save lives.

And let me also say I'm very grateful for this team. To be able to have, alongside the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo; our National Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien; Ambassador Jim – Jim Jeffrey; and Ambassador David Satterfield was a great privilege. And each of the members of this team contributed equally to achieving this outcome, which is a great contribution to security in this region, and it's a great contribution to the strong and enduring relationship between the United States of America and Turkey.

Lastly, I want to express my appreciation to millions of Americans who I know were carrying this moment in prayer. We heard from people all over the country whose hearts were heavy with the loss of life in this conflict over the last week — longed to see it brought to an end. And I believe their prayers, the strong leadership that President Trump provided to this moment, and the cooperation with President Erdoğan and Turkey has made this possible.

And so again, let me say: A week after Turkish forces crossed into Syria, Turkey and the United States of America have agreed to a ceasefire in Syria. It will be a pause in military operations for 120 hours, while the United States facilitates the withdrawal of YPG from the affected areas in the safe zone. And once that is completed, Turkey has agreed to a permanent ceasefire. And the United States of America will work with Turkey, will work with nations around the world, to ensure that peace and stability is the order of the day in this safe zone on the border between Syria and Turkey.

With that, let me recognize Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. And thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your great work.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thanks. I think the Vice President said it well. I just wanted to add to this thought: There obviously remains a great deal of work to do in the region. There's lots of challenges that remain. But this effort tonight sets the conditions for the successful resolution of this particular piece, which created enormous risk and a real risk of instability. And President Erdoğan's decision tonight to work alongside President Trump to achieve this end will be one that I think will benefit Turkey a great deal. Thanks.

I know you want to take some questions.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Great. Humeyra. Where are you? Go right ahead.

Q Thank you very much. What do you — how do you overcome — how will you overcome the damage that's been caused over the past week? There has been a lot of animosity between U.S. and Turkey. A lot of things have been said and a lot of threats of economic sanctions have been made. How are you going to repair the relationship going forward? Thank you.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, first, as you'll see from the agreement, part of our understanding is that, with the implementation of the ceasefire, the United States will not impose any further sanctions on Turkey. And once a permanent ceasefire is in effect, the President has agreed to withdraw the economic sanctions that were imposed this last Monday.

But make no mistake about it: President Trump was very clear with our ally, Turkey, about American opposition to Turkish military forces entering Syria. The President made that clear in his discussions, in his correspondence with President Erdoğan. And I believe that the candor and frankness that President Trump applied to this and the strength of his relationship with President Erdoğan both contributed to the ability for this agreement to come about.

And now, we will — we will work together to implement this agreement. As I said, our team is already working with YPG personnel in the safe zone for an orderly withdrawal outside the 20-mile mark. And we're going to go forward together to bring peace and security this region. I'm very confident of that.

Okay, I — Gonca Senay. Gonca. Please.

Q Thank you. Gonca Senay from TRT World. There are reports by some international organizations on how YPG is treating ethnic and religious minorities in northern Syria, and Christian leaders in Turkey are making calls to the country to ensure peace and security in the region. I'm wondering your thoughts on this.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, let me — let the Secretary also address that. But I can tell you that President Erdoğan and I spoke at great length about the importance of protecting religious minorities in the region.

President Erdoğan also shared with me the perspective of many leaders in religious communities here in Turkey, who had great concerns about violence and persecution taking place along the border.

And so, part of our agreement is to continue to work very closely to ensure that religious minorities can thrive and that religious pluralism is — is one of the characteristics of this — of this safe zone for some time to come. Mr. Secretary?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'd add only this: We've certainly heard from — the Vice President heard from Christian leaders around the world who expressed much of the same concern that you just described.

We think this reduction in violence, this ceasefire, reduces the risk of that. So we think this greatly contributes to protecting religious minorities throughout — throughout Syria and throughout the broader Middle East as well. This all obviously happens in the context of lots of religious challenges, lots of challenges of religious persecution in Iraq and other places as well. We think this is an important contribution in that regard.

The other thing is — that we talked about at some length — is that, to the extent there are abuses that are identified, we'll ask each leader — certainly President Erdoğan and his team and others — to investigate any allegations of abuse that have taken place.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: And let me maybe add an addendum to that. One of the things I know the President and the American people are most proud of is the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars to help rebuild Christian, Yazidi, and other religious minority communities in the aftermath of the horrifying violence during the — during the ISIS period, both in Syria and in northern Iraq.

We'll continue to flow those resources to support those communities. But as you'll see from this agreement, it is a specific undertaking by Turkey and by the United States to ensure — to protect religious minorities in the affected region.

Shaun Tandon.

Q Thank you, Mr. Vice President. You mentioned that there's an organized withdrawal of the YPG fighters. Could you explain that a little bit more? You said there's been an agreement with them. Where are they going to withdraw to? What do you see of the future of them?

And while there are obviously concerns here in Turkey about the YPG and their links to PKK, many in Washington say, for example, that they lead part of the fight against the Islamic State group, against ISIS. What do you see for the future of northern Syria? Do you see any future for the Syrian Kurds, politically, there?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, our commitment with Turkey is that we will work with YPG members and — we also know as Syria Defense Forces — to facilitate an orderly withdrawal over the next 120 hours. Let me say that's literally already begun. And where they will be withdrawing from is the demarcation line, roughly 20 miles south of the border.

Turkey's willingness to pause and to embrace a ceasefire of military operations, to enable us to — to see to that orderly withdrawal of YPG will, we believe, make it possible for that to occur. And it — I know it's already — already underway, as we speak.

But, look, Turkey has had a great concern about their border. And while the United States of America did not approve of their military crossing into Syria, we have always endorsed a safe zone. And it was a matter of discussion and negotiations.

And we believe that — that the Kurdish population in Syria, with which we have a strong relationship, will continue to endure. The United States will always be grateful for our partnership with SDF in defeating ISIS, but we recognize the importance and the value of a safe zone to create a buffer between Syria proper and the Kurdish population and — and the Turkish border. And we're going to be working very closely.

So we — we think the agreement today first ends the violence, which is what President Trump sent us here to do. I said it again and again to President Erdoğan — is President Trump sent us here to end the violence and to achieve an immediate ceasefire. And thanks to the agreement that we negotiated today and the strong stand that President Trump took in the preceding days, we — we've achieved that.

We've also achieved an opportunity, by working with YPG, to move out of the area to create more peace and security and stability in that buffer zone. And we're going to be working very earnestly to accomplish that. We believe that can be accomplished during the 120-hour period, and after which, there'll be a permanent ceasefire, and then we'll continue to engage.

Again, not militarily. The President made it clear that we're not going to have military personnel on the ground. But the United States will continue to engage diplomatically, politically, and, of course, in humanitarian aid and support to affect all of the people affected in this region.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Go ahead there, Zeke.

Q Thank you, Mr. Vice President. You mentioned that — excuse me. You mentioned that the United States opposed to Turkey's incursion into northern Syria — that Erdoğan had always wanted a sort of safe zone here. What concessions did you actually get out of President Erdoğan, number one?

Number two: Have you gotten specific assurances from the YPG that they will comply with the terms of this agreement? Because this is something that they have said that they would not do.

And finally, with the Kurds moving south and now with sort of — with the U.S. sanction, in terms of them moving south, what — how would you address critics who would call this potentially a second abandonment of the Kurds?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think you'll be able to see from the agreement itself what concessions were made. President Trump, in his telephone call with President Erdoğan earlier this week and in the directive that he gave us to deliver, was very clear that he — he wanted a ceasefire. He wanted to stop the violence.

Turkey is engaged in an active military operation. I can tell you that, as our discussions began, over the course of the five-hour period of time, we — we reached a place of agreement about how a ceasefire could benefit Turkey, achieve President Trump's objectives, and also contribute to a peaceful resolution of the safe zone. And I believe that — I believe that we've accomplished that.

With regard to the YPG, the Syrian Defence Forces, we have been in contact today and we have received repeated assurances from them that they'll be moving out, that they greatly welcome the opportunity for a ceasefire to make a safe and orderly withdrawal from those areas in the safe zone where they still have a presence. And we're very confident that that's already taking place.

And we're going to be using all the leverage that we have, of having fought alongside the Syrian Defense Forces in the battle against ISIS to facilitate their safe withdrawal. But we think we — we think this is an outcome that will greatly serve the interests of — of the Kurdish population in Syria, it'll greatly serve the interests of Turkey, and it'll create the kind of long-term buffer zone that will ensure peace and stability in the region.

Q Mr. Vice President —

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Go right ahead.

Q I just want to follow up on that question. What specific concessions did Turkey receive? Specifically, I want to ask you if they brought the issue of the bank — Halbank — Halkbank, rather.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Not in the context of these negotiations. I think when we had concluded the negotiations, I know the topic was raised. And we informed them that that was a matter for the Southern District of New York and the Justice Department.

But let me say the — the concessions that the United States made have to do with the fact that the President had made it clear that if there had not been a ceasefire today, there would have been a new round of massive sanctions against Turkey. And you'll see in the agreement that — on the basis of the pause of 120 hours; a ceasefire over the next five days — that we will not be implementing additional sanctions during that period of time.

Once we have a permanent ceasefire, following the orderly withdrawal of all YPG forces, the United States also agreed to withdraw the sanctions that were imposed on several Cabinet officials and several agencies earlier this week.

Q To be clear though, just to nail this down: So, it was simply the sanctions that would be removed? Nothing else was offered or given to the Turks?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Yes. Right.

SECRETARY POMPEO: That's correct.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's —

Yeah. Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Mr. Vice President. While you were here negotiating with the Turks for several hours, both of you —

Q (Cross-talk.)

Q Can I finish real quick? Wait.

Q Do you think the YPG — do you think the sanctions is a blackmail against your NATO Ally for the sake of PKK, YPG terrorist organizations? This is a (inaudible).

THE VICE PRESIDENT: The United States of America did not support Turkey's military action in Syria. President Trump made that very clear to his friend, President Erdoğan. And the United States imposed sanctions earlier this week. And the President made it clear yesterday, and we made it clear again today, that there would be additional sanctions coming to bring an end to the violence, to the loss of innocent lives in this border conflict.

That being said, let me say: I really believe today — today's ceasefire is a credit to President Trump and to President Erdoğan. It's a credit to the strong relationship between the United States and Turkey. It's also a credit to the strong relationship between our two leaders.

I mean, where there are differences between friends, it's important that the friends let their feelings be known. President Trump did that, in this case. But it facilitated us being able to reach an agreement that has now resulted in a ceasefire and, we believe, will set the stage for creating a peaceful and stable safe zone in the United States. He's committed to achieving that for all the people of this region.

Thank you all.

END

8:58 P.M. TRT