


# Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 8/24/16

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August 24, 2016

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 24, 2016

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:45 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. I do not have any comments on the top, so, Kathleen, you can go ahead and get us started.

Q I wanted to start with the Turkish operation into Syria, if you have any comments. I know officials have said the U.S. is closely involved in planning that. And particularly, if the U.S. is at all worried about escalating tensions between Turks and the Syrian Kurds.

MR. EARNEST: Well, you referred to a couple of the many complicated dynamics inside of Syria. I think to directly answer your question, the United States has been encouraging the Turks for quite some time to take decisive action to close the Turkey-Syria border, particularly this portion of the border.

Those of you who covered the President's trip to Antalya, Turkey, where the G20 was last fall, will recall that this is an issue that came up in a bilateral meeting between President Obama and President Erdogan. So the fact that Turkey has taken these steps is an indication of important progress. And even in the context of that meeting that President Obama had with his Turkish counterpart last fall, President Obama assured President Erdogan that if the Turks sought U.S. and coalition assistance for those efforts that we would be happy to provide that kind of assistance, because we understand the strategic priority associated with closing that border, in part because we know that some ISIL supply lines traverse the border in that region, and so being able to shut that down can be part of our broader strategic effort.

So that's the first part. And my colleagues at the Department of Defense can provide you some more detail about how exactly the United States is able to provide military support for those ongoing efforts. Obviously, the United States has some unique capabilities that can be valuable in an operation like this. And our NATO allies in Turkey have made valuable contributions to the counter-ISIL campaign, and this is just the latest example.

You also made a reference to the long-running tensions between Turks and Kurdish forces and Kurdish populations in that region of the world. Those kinds of tensions have been simmering for a long time. And of course, that's something that we monitor, and the United States has been decisive and forceful in condemning acts of terrorism. On the other hand, there have been some forces inside of Syria that include some Kurdish elements that have been making an important contribution to our counter-ISIL efforts. So there's no denying it's complicated, and of course, it's something that we're mindful of and monitoring.

Q And just to move on to one other -- there's a lot of discussion about the increase of prices for EpiPen. I don't know if the President has been following this debate, but some in Congress are calling for a hearing, and Hillary Clinton has called the price spike "a troubling example of a company taking advantage of consumers." I'm just wondering if the President shares that view and thinks that there's anything the government can do to intervene there.

MR. EARNEST: Well, this certainly is an issue that's gotten a lot of attention in the media over the last couple of weeks. I'll start by saying that one of the goals of the Obama administration has been to limit the growth in health care costs, including trying to reduce costs of prescription drugs. And the Affordable Care Act has made an impact on putting downward pressure on health care inflation, but there certainly are some other steps that we believe the federal government should take. Unfortunately, all too often it's Republicans in Congress who are standing up for pharmaceutical companies and not looking out for taxpayers and patients here in the United States.

So there certainly is more that we believe can and should be done in general to address the question of rising prescription drug prices. As it relates to this specific issue, obviously I'm not going to make a specific comment or specifically second-guess the pricing strategy or the business practices of one private enterprise. I will observe, however, that pharmaceutical companies that often try to portray themselves as the inventors of lifesaving medication often do real damage to their reputation by being greedy and jacking up prices in a way that victimizes vulnerable Americans. And I think it raises significant questions, even moral questions, in the minds of a lot of people.

So we certainly have seen other high-profile incidents of pharmaceutical companies that have taken a hit both to their reputation and their stock price for engaging in unscrupulous practices. And I think other companies, including other pharmaceutical companies, would be wise to learn those lessons.

Q Is this an example of a company being greedy and jacking up prices?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to second-guess the specific business practices of a private company.

Q Why not?

MR. EARNEST: There's a role for private companies and private entities to make their own decisions, and we're a government enterprise and we're focused on some other things. So I'm not going to second-guess that.

Ayesha.

Q Thank you. There was an attack today at the American University in Kabul, and I just want to see has the President been briefed on that, and do you have any statement on that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know to what extent the President has been briefed on this issue. I can tell you that White House officials are following the situation. Based on the latest update that I have received, there are still forces on the ground -- Afghan forces -- that are still clearing the university. But my understanding is that the fighting has -- or at least the shooting has stopped for the time being, but there's still ongoing efforts to ensure that the situation has been resolved.

I don't have an update for you in terms of what the casualty reports are. But I can also tell you -- and I think this is something that the Department of Defense has indicated, which was that there are coalition advisors that are assisting Afghan forces in the effort to clear the university.

Again, I think this underscores the significant challenge facing the people of Afghanistan, particularly as it relates to their security situation. But we continue to see the skill and professionalism of Afghan security forces improve. And that's not happening by accident. That's happening because of the commitment that the United States and our NATO partners have made to enhancing the capacity and capability of Afghan security forces to provide for the security situation in their own country.

Q So the U.N. Security Council is meeting today to discuss North Korea's latest missile launch from a submarine. Earlier this month, the U.N. was unable to condemn another missile launch by North Korea because China wanted the statement to also oppose the deployment of the U.S. anti-missile defense system in South Korea. I was wondering, is that a concern for the White House? I mean, China is the -- seems to be one of the only countries that has any sway over North Korea, and they're -- and China is raising concerns about U.S. actions in the region. So is that a concern?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by just acknowledging that the U.S. Strategic Command did detect and tracked what we assessed was a North Korean submarine missile launch yesterday -- yesterday afternoon, Eastern Time. The launch of a presumed KN-11 submarine-launched ballistic missile occurred off the coast of Sinpo. The missile was tracked over and into the Sea of Japan approximately 300 miles off the coast of North Korea. And NORAD did conclude that the missile launch did not pose a threat to North America.

So I think from that detailed readout, I think it should be a pretty good indication to you and everybody else that this is something that we're watching closely. And we do continue to be concerned by the provocative destabilizing actions of the North Korean

regime. We have, over the last year or so, been able to work more effectively with the Chinese government to apply additional pressure to the North Korean regime. You've heard me say on a number of occasions now that our ability to unite the international community -- not just our allies, but even some of our partners in this effort, like China -- to present a united front to North Korea and deepen their isolation will be critical to our ability to apply sufficient pressure to change their behavior. That hasn't happened yet. And we're going to continue to work cooperatively in a coordinated fashion with the Chinese to try to steadily ratchet up that pressure.

All of you have reported about the public comments of the Chinese raising some concerns about the deployment of THAAD to South Korea. This is a sophisticated anti-ballistic missile defense system that the United States has offered to our allies in South Korea, acknowledging the threat emanating from North Korea. We've made clear that this is a defense missile -- a ballistic missile defense system that would be oriented toward the threat in North Korea, and that's why we don't believe it should be a subject of concern of the Chinese. But they've indicated otherwise.

We believe this is a prudent step and it's something that our -- the deployment of the THAAD is a prudent step, and we've done it in consultation with our allies in South Korea. And I think the threat that they face is rather obvious to anybody who is paying attention. So we don't believe that it should impair our ability to continue to work with the rest of the international community, including China, to apply additional pressure to the North Korean regime.

Ultimately, China has their own vested interest in seeing North Korea cease and desist from these kinds of destabilizing actions. And it's on the basis of their own self-interest that we believe we can work together to apply additional pressure to North Korea and try and change the dynamic there. But that obviously hasn't happened yet.

Let's move around. Andrew.

Q I wanted to ask you about what's going on in Kabul, and do you have any indication of whether there are Americans involved in this incident at the American University, and where there's a hostage situation going on?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any more granular detail than what I've already been able to provide. I would actually refer you to my colleagues at the State Department. I know that my colleagues at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul are obviously closely monitoring this situation, and they may be able to provide you some additional information, particularly as it relates to the status of Americans who may or may not be in harm's way.

Q And on Syria, what does this Turkish intervention in northern Syria mean for the U.S. relations with YPG and how they can work -- you've worked with them in the past in northeastern Turkey, where there seemed to be some tensions.

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I alluded to in reference to Kathleen's questions -- and I know you've spent a lot of time covering this, Andrew, so you know this as well as anybody in this room -- that the kinds of tensions between the Kurdish population in the region of the

world and the Turkish government are longstanding. And that's been part of the complexity that the United States and the rest of the international coalition has had to navigate in addressing the situation inside of Syria.

What the United States has said is that the crux of our strategy will be supporting local forces on the ground in Syria who are committed to taking the fight to ISIL. And the United States has offered support to those forces on the ground who have taken the fight to ISIL. And that's the case that we have made to the Turks who have made no secret of their unease about this particular situation. But the fact is there have been diverse forces inside of Syria that, yes, include some Kurds, but also are Arabs and Turkmen and others who have been an effective fighting force against ISIL and have been responsible for significant gains on the ground inside of Syria.

Now, those gains would not have been possible without equipping and advice and assistance that has been provided by the U.S.-led counter-ISIL coalition. That progress has been enhanced by air power that's been deployed by the United States and our coalition partners to support their efforts on the ground. And we're going to continue to support those unified forces as they go after ISIL.

Mike.

Q On the EpiPen question, just a couple of specific follow-ups. You talked about it in general in terms with Kathleen. Is the administration doing anything to review this price increase or look at what Mylan did?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific administration steps that are being contemplated at this point. But if any decisions -- regulatory decisions like that were going to be made, I assume they would come from HHS or FDA, or one of those agencies that has some more relevant authority. So you might check with them.

Q Does the President now regret signing the legislation that encourages schools to stock these EpiPens, which obviously gave the company more latitude to increase its prices by increasing demand?

MR. EARNEST: No, I'm not aware of any regret. The fact is, the medicine that is delivered through this equipment saves lives. And I think that's why some of the moral questions I alluded to before are raised in the context of these series of stories. But I'm not going to second-guess the specific pricing decisions of companies. They'll obviously have to make those kinds of decisions on their own. But there have been other pharmaceutical companies that have gotten a lot of unwanted attention for their pricing practices, and it certainly degrades their efforts to build a reputation for themselves as an organization that's committed to developing and providing lifesaving medicine.

Q Is the President at all concerned that the CEO behind this price increase is the daughter of a Democratic senator and that the company has benefitted from this legislation passed by the Senate in Congress?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen some of those news reports. It's not clear to me now, at least, based only on what I've read in those news reports, that there's any correlation or any connection. But I assume that's something that you and your news organizations will be taking a look at.

Q And just lastly, on Syria, there's some reports out now that Assad maybe didn't turn over all the materials involved in chemical weapons reduction in Syria. Do you have any comment on this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously this is something that the OPCW has been carefully looking at, and we believe that they should. What we were able to achieve a couple of years ago in getting the Assad regime to acknowledge that they had a significant quantity of chemical weapons, rounding up those chemicals and destroying them made the world safer. It eliminated a significant proliferation risk. When you have a country that is overrun by extremists, having large quantities of chemical weapons floating around is not a good idea and not a good combination.

So we've been pleased that the Assad regime's declared chemical weapons stockpile was rounded up and destroyed. But the situation in Syria has been murky for quite some time. We've also expressed our previous long-running concerns about the gratuitous violence that's used by the Assad regime against innocent civilians, including the weaponization of otherwise common chemicals to try to exacerbate the violence in that country. And I'm referring to chlorine, a commonly available industrial chemical that, according to some reports at least, the Assad regime is using as a weapon. And that is something that's of deep concern to the international community and certainly to the United States.

Michelle.

Q There have been so many times that we've talked here about North Korean missile launch -- maybe no one knows exactly how many times it's come up. But what do you see as sort of the result of this? Sanctions and actions don't change behavior, so we know that is true. And the fact that we're talking about missile defense as being kind of the most important element here -- do you see North Korea just continuing in their technology, getting it better and better each time until they finally have a nuclear weapon? Or what do you sort of see the end being here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as it relates to the beginning of your question, Michelle, I think what is true is we have not seen the change in their behavior yet, and that's undeniable. But what's also true is we have been able to work effectively to steadily ramp up pressure and isolation on the North Korea regime, including those elements of the regime that are responsible for funding their ballistic missile program and for those elements of the regime that victimize their population. We've tried to focus our efforts to isolate the regime by trying to hit the elite where it hurts. And we know that despite the widespread suffering by the population in that country, there is a certain elite that benefits from access to some items of luxury, and we've made a concerted effort to try to clamp down on

that. There's more work that we can do, and there's more work that we can do by coordinating effectively with our partners, including China, to address that and to apply additional pressure.

But I think one thing we do know is this is a strategy that has worked other places. Each country is different, and I'm the first person to assert that. But a strategy of isolation and sanctions and unifying the world community in the face of nuclear threat did actually succeed in preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and it did bring about the desired change in strategy and change in behavior in Iran when it comes to their nuclear program, at least, that we would like to see.

That, of course, did not eliminate the widespread concerns we have with other aspects of Iran's policies, including their support for terrorism. But the fact that the terrorists that they support are not going to be able to get nuclear weapons from the Iranian government I think is tangible progress, and progress that was realized not because of a military invasion or shots being fired, but because of an effective, skillful, tough diplomacy that united the international community, isolated Iran, compelled them to the negotiating table, and resulted in the kind of diplomatic agreement that has clear benefits for the United States.

Q So it sounds like you're saying that you foresee more sanctions down the road and that you have optimism that it will eventually change the --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what we have seen is that this is a strategy that has worked well in other places, but that's not immediately -- North Korea is a rather unique place, and it's not clear that it will work in exactly the same way. But it certainly is a way for us to apply additional pressure to the North Korean regime, send a very clear, unmistakable signal that the international community has significant concerns with their behavior, and set up a set of incentives to try to get them to change their behavior. But they haven't thus far.

Q Okay. And I think for plenty of people who hear about hack after hack after hack in the last year or so at a high level and often coming from suspected Russian state sources, it could seem like the U.S. is doing a pretty poor job at thwarting these. But we also know that the attempts on entities like the White House are, I don't know, hundreds of hacking attempts per day. So how would you assess how the U.S. is able to fend off these kinds of -- especially if they're going to be state-sponsored? And it seems like they just keep coming.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the United States has made important progress in strengthening our cybersecurity, and that's because the President has made it a priority. And we're actually in the midst of a process now that the President announced at the beginning of the year to examine what additional progress we can make in this area. I would say a significant source of disappointment has been a failure on the part of Congress to provide additional resources that could strengthen our cyber defenses, and it's Republicans in Congress who have been the chief obstacle to this progress.

And you've heard me say many times that the President included a substantial, robust proposal in his budget to consider strengthening cybersecurity, and Republicans, for the first time in four decades, canceled the hearing to discuss the budget. So it's not just that they are unwilling to work with the administration to try to make progress in areas like cybersecurity. It's that they are refusing to even talk to the administration about how to make progress on cybersecurity. And that's rather disappointing, and I think it reflects an abdication of the responsibility of Republicans to govern, particularly when you're talking about something that shouldn't really be a source of political controversy like cybersecurity.

So the administration has made this a priority. The American people have benefitted from the administration making this a priority. But America is not in the strongest position as we can and should be because of Republicans in Congress refusing to do their job.

Q And when we talked about Turkey post-coup, you mentioned that there are some concerns about some of the actions that Turkey has taken. But would you -- do you have similar concerns around this extradition request for Gülen?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think our concerns about the Turkish government's activity since the coup have been a reflection of our longstanding concerns about protection of human rights inside of Turkey. Turkey is a valuable NATO ally, and we're able to work effectively with them on a variety of issues in a way that advances the interests of both our countries. But even in the midst of our progress in pursuit of those shared priorities, the President has periodically raised concerns directly with President Erdogan, particularly on issues like freedom of the press inside of Turkey.

That said, since the coup, we've understood the significant concerns that have been raised in Turkey and the need for a thorough investigation to get to the bottom of what exactly happened. And I know the Vice President had an opportunity to talk about this when he was in Turkey earlier today.

So as it relates to Mr. Gülen, though, I think the situation there is a little bit different. There is a well-established process, and both the United States and Turkey are engaged in that process. That process is governed by an extradition treaty between the United States and Turkey that's been on the books for 35 years or so.

Q But is there anything about these -- and there have been multiple requests, and the fact that they're not -- the requests aren't related to the coup, directly, at least -- does anything about that bother you?

MR. EARNEST: Well, some of this is related to the fact that there is a rather high bar, a high evidentiary standard that's required. So considering that the coup took place -- what was it -- six or eight weeks ago, I think it's understandable that Turkey wouldn't be able to build such a robust case, if there is one to be presented, against Mr. Gülen in such a short period of time.



But Turkey has longstanding concerns with Mr. Gülen's activity and they have presented significant evidence to the United States, and Department of Justice officials are carefully reviewing that evidence. In fact, Justice officials are in Turkey this week, meeting with their counterparts to discuss and review that evidence. What we have said all along is that the terms of the treaty and the law on the books here will ultimately determine how this is resolved.

Q So to use the word "concern" for maybe the millionth time, are you -- is there anything about this extradition request that concerns or bothers the administration?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, no, because, again, the Turks have asked us to engage in a process that's codified in this treaty. They've presented a lot of information and we are doing our due diligence to take their concerns seriously and to follow those guidelines in determining what the final disposition of the case should be.

Ron.

Q Just on the Kabul situation again. You said that you weren't sure if the President had been briefed, you think the shooting has stopped, and the coalition are assisting and advising. The reports there are suggesting that there are hundreds of people perhaps trapped at the school, that there was probably a significant American presence there because there's staff there, there was an American professor who was kidnapped a couple weeks ago. I'm just trying to get a sense of the magnitude of this situation. You sound like it's not -- I don't want to -- well, concerned -- but can you give me some sense of what you think the magnitude of this was?

MR. EARNEST: Look, I think anytime we see innocent civilians, whether they're Americans or Afghans or other innocent people of any nationality in an international city like Kabul in harm's way, we're, of course, deeply concerned about that, and the security situation inside of Afghanistan is still one that is concerning. So it certainly is something that we're monitoring closely. But obviously it's hard to get accurate information in the midst of a dynamic situation like this.

Q But it's over now -- is that the --

MR. EARNEST: Well, no, I don't think it's over now. What I think has happened is that the shooting has stopped and that they're in the process of trying to rigorously clear this rather large facility.

Q U.S. and coalition forces never had to actually be engaged in the process -- they were advising? Because there were some reports that they were actually advising on the scene. Again, this whole idea of non-combat and -- well, not non-combat, but trying again to gauge the involvement of the American forces there. How involved were they in whatever clearing operations --

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, at this point it's too early to tell. I don't want to hazard a guess at this point. This is a dynamic situation, but I'm confident that my colleagues at the Department of Defense, as we get a clearer sense about what exactly happened there,

they can give you a better sense of how U.S. forces were involved -- if there were any U.S. forces. At this point, I'm not even sure if there are U.S. forces or other members of our coalition who were involved. But I can tell you that coalition forces were involved in a train and advise -- I'm sorry, in an advise and assist capacity as Afghan security forces were responding to that situation and clearing the facility.

Q And the earthquake in Italy -- the White House had nothing to say about that today, I don't think. That seemed like a fairly significant event -- 75 or so people killed at last count, I believe; an American ally. Why nothing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, I can tell you that the President spoke by telephone today with President Sergio Mattarella of Italy to offer his deep condolences on behalf of the American people to the people of Italy following the devastating earthquake that struck overnight. President Obama saluted the quick action of first responders and volunteers who have been working to save lives, and the President used the occasion of the phone call to reaffirm the strong bonds of friendship between the United States and Italy.

Obviously, Italy is an important and valued partner and ally of the United States and there are obviously deep cultural ties. There are a lot of people in the United States that have family in Italy, and so I think there are a lot of people in the United States who are deeply concerned about the situation there. And our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Italy as they deal with this situation. We're certainly thinking about the families who have lost loved ones. And the status of a lot of people continues to remain in doubt, and that's deeply unsettling and a source of deep concern. And our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Italy right now. And I think Pope Francis had some quite poignant words to say today in offering some prayers for those who were affected by the earthquake, and I think his prayers are representative of people of all faiths around the world at this moment for the people of Italy.

Q You're not clear about -- sure yet about whether there were Americans involved there -- American military personnel in that country?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, this is obviously something that our diplomatic presence inside of Italy is very focused on. So I don't have an update on the status of any Americans at this point, but embassy officials in Italy and Rome are focused on this and are working hard to provide needed assistance to Americans who may have been affected by the earthquake in Italy.

Q And lastly, on this issue of the Clinton Foundation and the State Department, now, I don't want to argue the detail, the minutiae of it so much as I just want to --

MR. EARNEST: Neither do I. (Laughter.)

Q I didn't think so. (Laughter.) That's why I tried to make this -- but as a bottom line, is the President -- what is the President's view of whether there was adequate separation, rules followed, whatever the question is, during the Secretary's tenure at the

State Department between State Department and the Clinton Foundation? Was there a concern about a melding of the two entities? Was there an adequate separation or firewall between them? Is the President satisfied that all the rules were followed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I think in order to draw a final assessment like you're asking for requires a detailed understanding of the minutia that, frankly, I don't have. But what I can tell you are a couple of things. The first is before Secretary Clinton even started her service as Secretary of State, there was a memorandum of understanding that was signed by Secretary Clinton and by a senior representative here at the White House to ensure that the ethics requirements that are in place went above and beyond those guidelines that are set by law.

And I think that's an indication of just how seriously the President takes these issues. And he's quite proud of the record of his administration writ large. And this observation has been made by some of you about how -- the way that President Obama and his team have chosen to run the federal government over the last eight years I think is a testament to the President's commitment to good government and competence and ethics in government. And the President is quite proud of that record and, frankly, is ready to set that record up against anybody who wants to compare it to previous administrations. So he's quite proud of it.

And he's also quite proud of the work that Secretary Clinton did while she was at the State Department. She served the President and the country quite well in that job. And you've heard the President speak on many occasions about what an excellent job he thinks that she did in that role.

Q So the fact that a significant number of donors also had access or meetings with the Secretary is not a concern, or is a concern, or how should we interpret that? How does the President --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think there are lots of different ways to interpret it. I know that one of the names that's been thrown about is Melinda Gates, and she's obviously somebody who is at the top of a large foundation that's doing valuable work around the world. And I don't think it's particular surprising that she might have relevant business before the Secretary of State, and that by the two of them coordinating, the interest of the country and the interest of the world could be advanced.

So, look, I'll let -- I know all of you are closely covering this story, as you should, and the American people will ultimately consider the facts and draw their own conclusions about these kinds of questions.

Q So this is politics?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't describe --

Q Or is there something now that the President wants looked at more closely?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is certainly clear is that there are critics and organizations who are looking for an opportunity to score some political points, but we're also three months away from an election. So I think, again, the American people will have to sift through all this and draw their own conclusions. I think when you consider the President's point of view, the President's view is he has made ethics in government and competence in government a high priority, as he promised to do when he was running for this office, and he is quite proud that he and his administration have delivered on that promise. And he's proud to put this administration's record up against any other in reaching that assessment.

Mark.

Q Josh, on Italy, is the U.S. offering any assistance in earthquake relief?

MR. EARNEST: Mark, I can tell you that in his phone call with President Mattarella, the President did -- President Obama did offer U.S. assistance to the Italians as they respond to this situation. Unfortunately, the Italian government has an expertise in responding to earthquake situations like this. This is a region of the world that is rather prone to earthquakes. So it is not clear to me at this point that any of those offers have been taken up, but that, frankly, is a testament to the expertise of the Italians in responding to situations like this.

But if our friends in Italy need our help, particularly dealing with a situation like this, you can rest assured that we're going to provide it.

Q Is there any White House reaction to the CBO report yesterday projecting a significant increase in the deficit this year, and in the out-years, projecting that the deficit could reach a trillion dollars in eight years?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mark, we'll get you a more detailed response. My understanding is that a lot of the changes in that analysis were actually a result of different projections about future interest rates. So I know that affected the numbers. But I think what President Obama has acknowledged throughout his tenure in office is that we need to be focused on the fiscal situation in this country, and the President is quite proud of the record under his tenure in office of reducing our deficit by about three-quarters. And that's an indication that we have things moving in the right direction.

But it's clear that as the population in the United States ages that there are additional steps that we're going to need to take. And that could include additional steps to reform the health care system in this country that is certainly increasing in cost. But it's also going to require Democrats and Republicans working together more effectively. And there hasn't been a lot of cooperation on the part of Republicans from working with the administration to try to get this done.

I'm also confident that a bunch of those numbers were not aided by the significant tax cuts that were passed by the Republican Congress at the end of last year that primarily benefitted wealthy corporations. So there's certainly a lot of money that can be saved, and

this will be a challenge that the next President and the next Congress will have to do. But there's no denying the important progress that we made on our fiscal situation in this country under President Obama's leadership.

Q One last item. I wanted to follow up on the exchange Monday about access to the President at fundraising events. Some of those fundraiser statements that he makes are open to press coverage of either print pool or, on rare occasions, the entire press pool. Is there any reconsideration by the President to allow coverage of his Q&A with donors at fundraisers, which is always -- we've always been barred from?

MR. EARNEST: I know that there have been situations where the press corps has been included in the President taking Q&A with groups of people. I know the last couple of times --

Q Not fundraisers.

MR. EARNEST: Not fundraisers, that's right, but on occasions where the President, for example, is doing Q&A with governors when the National Governors Association has been here. I know that there was a rather remarkable event early in the presidency where the President was doing Q&A with members of the House Republican Conference.

Q Very early.

MR. EARNEST: That event got a lot of attention.

Q And he didn't repeat it. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, I suspect that the reason that that hasn't happened again wasn't a decision made by the White House, but rather a decision made by congressional Republicans, who I don't think felt like they came away looking too good in that exchange. But you can check with them on that. It's probably been a while since the President has been invited to that meeting, so that may also affect access there, too.

But, look, as a matter of -- when it comes to the matter of the President's fundraisers, our policy is a good one in terms of providing access to a representative of the White House press corps, or a handful of representatives in the form of the print pool, to observe the President and hear the case that the President is making even when he's making that pitch to small groups of donors in a private house. And that kind of transparency goes beyond what just about every other President in the modern era has allowed.

But I certainly would expect, Mark, you and your colleagues to be angling for more and you should. I don't anticipate a change in our policy across the board, but, look, we'll see what happens. Maybe there will be a time when we just decide to open it up just for fun.

Q Maybe?

MR. EARNEST: Maybe.

Q Just for fun?

MR. EARNEST: Just for fun. Exactly. (Laughter.)

Phil.

Q Thank you. Vice President Biden is meeting with Turkish President Erdogan right now in Turkey. And here's a quote from the Vice President about the four extradition requests that now exist for Fethullah Gülen. He says this: "God willing, there will be enough evidence," concerning the extradition requests for Fethullah Gülen. Is that the point of view of the administration right now, that "God willing," there is enough evidence to be able to extradite Gülen to Turkey?

MR. EARNEST: Look, I think the point that the Vice President was making is that this is not going to be a decision that is made by the executive branch. The decision about the evidence that Turkey has compiled is one that will follow the guidelines of the extradition treaty, and will ultimately involve a federal judge who will have to render their own judgment, their own assessment of the situation consistent with U.S. law and consistent with the terms of the extradition treaty. I think that's the point that Vice President Biden was making.

Q Isn't he going a little bit too far here? If you're saying this is in the hands of DOJ officials and the DOJ and a judge, eventually, someone from the executive should not really try and influence the judicial branch should they, like he seems to have been doing in Turkey?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think Vice President Biden has been -- somebody who has served on the Senate Judiciary Committee and certainly has been involved in making foreign policy in this country for several decades -- understands that those kinds of decisions and those kinds of determinations will be made independent of any preference or any other public comments, frankly, from anybody else.

Those decisions about the evidence that's presented and whether they meet the evidentiary standard included in U.S. law, and whether or not they meet the evidentiary standard included in the extradition treaty -- the officials at the Department of Justice and, ultimately, if it comes to it, a federal judge -- those are decisions that will be made by the book and based on the merits and based on these well-established guidelines, not based on the public comments from, frankly, anybody else.

Q On this subject, there's been plenty of contact between Presidents Erdogan and Obama. Has there been any contact between the White House and Mr. Gülen and his associates?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any contact like that. But why don't I check and see if there's a better way that -- if we can go beyond just my own personal knowledge and see if there's additional insight we can provide to you.

John.

Q I had a couple of quick follow-ups. Beyond Italy, has the President been in touch with anybody from Myanmar? I know there was a big quake there, as well. And any assistance?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, the United States is monitoring developments from the earthquake that hit North Central Burma. We're still gathering information on the event, and we'll stay in close touch with the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon and the government of Burma, and other humanitarian partners in the country.

At this point, we're not aware of any U.S. casualties from that incident, but the embassy is working -- the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon is working to verify the welfare and whereabouts of U.S. citizens in the area at the time of the earthquake. And the U.S. Embassy there stands ready to provide any necessary consular assistance.

I can tell you that the United States government has been in touch with the Burmese government about this situation. But the details about what exactly the impact of the earthquake has been on the region are still a little unclear. But we will continue to remain in touch with the Burmese government moving forward.

Q On Monday, you reiterated that President Obama hopes to close Guantanamo Bay Prison by the end of the administration. Yesterday, Abu Zubaydah had his first hearing where he's appeared in public really since he's been there to review his status and whether he's eligible for transfer. Does the President intend to transfer 100 percent of the population that remains there to other foreign countries? Or does the President still hope to bring some of them back into the United States and hold them here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, John, at this point, there are 61 detainees that remain confined at the prison at Guantanamo Bay. And as of this morning, only 20 of them had been approved for transfer at this point. There is a rigorous process of evaluating the individual cases, and this process is conducted by a review board where there are representatives of a variety of national intelligence and national security agencies who consider these individual cases. And as the name of the board suggests, they periodically review the files to determine if they are suitable for transfer to another country under a set of specific conditions and restrictions.

At this point, only 20 of the 61 who are currently there have been approved for transfer. Now, there's still an important step here, which is that we still have to go and do some diplomatic work with other countries to determine who's willing to assume responsibility for these individuals and who's also willing to assist with the implementation of whatever restrictions may be necessary against them after they're transferred. So there's still a lot of diplomatic work that needs to be done.

What I can tell you is that the Obama administration will not transfer to other countries individuals that have not been cleared for transfer. There's a reason that we've set up this process, and the President intends to follow it.

Q And then another quick follow-up from Monday. When talking about the Iran payment, you really stressed that this was three separate deals -- the payment, the prisoner exchange, and then the Iran nuclear deal. One question I had, if you could explicitly answer --

MR. EARNEST: I'll try.

Q -- is, would each of those deals [have] stood on their own merit? Because you've pretty much stressed that they weren't contingent on each other. I'm just curious, can you explicitly say that they would have each stood on their own?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. I think on the merits, each of them considered in isolation was a good deal for the United States and advanced our interests. So I would be confident in saying that, yes.

Q And then my final question is just do you think that the Republicans and Democratic nominee should be more transparent in their health records and releasing their medical history?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to provide advice to the campaigns. There are plenty of skilled professionals who are working on both sides to make their own determinations about what they should do.

The President is taking seriously the responsibility he had, both as a candidate and as President, to communicate periodically with the American public about his health. And we've periodically provided detailed letters from the President's physician to describe the President's health. And we believe that -- the President did that not because he was eager for all of you to keep tabs on his efforts to quit smoking, for example, but we've done that because the President feels a responsibility to disclose to the American people the health and well-being of the person that was elected to lead the country.

So the President believes as a matter of principle that that's important. But as it relates to the individual candidates and how much information they should provide, obviously they're going to have to decide that for themselves.

Scott.

Q Josh, there were some objections in Maine to the designation of the national monument there. Can you describe why --

MR. EARNEST: Well, Scott, I can tell you that the administration worked very closely with officials in Maine both to reach this determination, and to make sure that the concerns that were raised by Mainers in the area were addressed. And I would single out Senator Angus King as somebody who was a very skillful advocate for the people of Maine both in considering this proposal from the administration and ensuring that the concerns and preferences that were expressed by the people of Maine were manifested in the final decision. And I think you saw the statement from Senator King earlier today indicating his support for the President moving forward in this way.



So the President was quite proud that this piece of beautiful land in the United States will be protected for generations to come, and that future generations of Americans and future generations of Mainers will be able to enjoy it, and will be able to fish in those waters and camp on those grounds and hike through those mountains and enjoy one of the more picturesque parts of America.

Q Can you give me an example of what kinds of things you did to address the local concerns?

MR. EARNEST: We can follow up with you with some specific examples of that, but I know that as this process moved forward there were specific instances where Mainers said -- where local communities or local citizens said that there's one aspect of the proposal they'd like to see implemented differently. And Senator King played a valuable role in serving as an advocate for the people of Maine in making sure that the final proposal reflects the preferences and interests of the people who live in that area.

Mark.

Q Yes, Josh, can we get back to Syria --

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q -- just one more time?

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q Admittedly, the complexity of the situation and the number of parties involved, but my question is a pretty straightforward one. We have -- the Turks are our allies, they're our NATO allies.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q The Kurds are our allies. Did we say to the Turks, did the administration specifically say ahead of time to the Turks, do not attack this Kurdish group which is working with us? Similarly, did we say to that Kurdish group, the Turks are coming, you'd better pull back across the river and get out of the way?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is true, Mark, is, given the complexity of the situation there, we certainly do not want to see partners of the United States in conflict with one another.

Now, I think that it's possible you may be conflating two different regions of the country. There had been one region in northeastern Syria where Kurds had been in a skirmish with Assad forces, and then there was another region in northwestern Syria where there has been some U.S.-backed forces that do include Kurds making progress and eventually clearing ISIL out of Manbij, which is close to Jarabulus, where the Turkish activity is taking place.

So it's a complex situation on the ground. So I think to try to answer your question as directly as I can, we certainly do encourage those entities and organizations and forces that have been effective in working with the United States and our coalition in going after ISIL to not fight each other. That would just be counterproductive. And we certainly have tried to use the role that we're playing in leading this coalition and using our influence with a variety of groups to try to prevent or to try to de-conflict those kinds of activities. But as you point out, it's tricky business.

Q It sounds like a yes, though, that you have been urging both sides to keep -- steer clear of each other.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think we certainly want to do everything we can to prevent a confrontation from two different groups or a variety of groups that we've found to be effective partners. That certainly is true. I guess the point is I don't think we've come to a place where they've actually come into conflict. There's not been a situation where that's happened at this point. And, yes, some of that is because of planning that we have executed to try to prevent those forces from coming into conflict.

Ultimately, it is our view that interests are converging. There is an interest that Turkey and the Kurds and the United States and other forces on the ground have in driving ISIL out of this entire region. There is an obvious interest that the Turks have in more effectively sealing the border between Turkey and Syria -- particularly in light of the terrible terrorist attack that we saw in southern Syria just over the weekend.

And it's also understandable that the diverse set of Syrian Democratic Forces that are operating in northwestern Syria have in focusing their efforts on ISIL. And we're hopeful that that's what they'll continue to do.

Connie.

Q Thank you. In all these horrible natural disasters, the United States leads the way in both financial and humanitarian aid. Are you calling on the rest of the world, for the U.N. to chip in more, their fair share in relief -- Myanmar, every place else there were natural disasters?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, we're still assessing exactly what the impact of the earthquake in Burma has been. But if there is a need for the international community to mobilize resources to try to meet the needs of those who are directly affected, then the United States will play the leading role that we often have and we'll certainly use our influence to encourage other countries around the world to step up to the plate and assist, as well.

Q How do you prioritize which natural disaster you deal with first? How do you keep your sanity, if you have kept your sanity?

MR. EARNEST: Well, fortunately, there are experts in disaster recovery who work at places like USAID that are used to operating in very difficult environments to try to bring relief to human suffering. And we're certainly going to be relying on their expertise a lot

in the weeks ahead.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Where is the U.S.-Turkey relationship right now? I think it would be too rosy to suggest it's perfect. I think it might be over pessimistic to say it's completely strained. And yet, given the Vice President's visit there, where is the relationship right now? Is it overstating it to say that it is fraying?

MR. EARNEST: I do think that's overstating it. I think I would say that the U.S.-Turkey relationship continues to be strong. And the United States and Turkey are able to coordinate quite effectively to counter interests -- or to counter threats to our shared interests. And the fact that right now you have Turkish military forces that are moving against ISIL forces along their border, and that they're doing so with the strong military support of the United States and our coalition partners I think is the best illustration you could imagine of that.

What's also true is that our diplomatic relationship is valuable, as well. And that's one of the reasons that Vice President Biden is visiting Turkey today is to reiterate the United States' strong support for the democratically elected civilian government of Turkey. That government was threatened by an attempted military coup just a month or two ago. And it's important for the people of Turkey and for the government of Turkey to understand that the most influential democracy in the world, here in the United States, is strongly supportive of their democracy.

Q But the way you just put that makes it sound great, perfect, outstanding, all smooth sailing. I don't think that's true.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't mean to leave you with that impression. We obviously have -- look, the fact that we have been encouraging the Turks for more than a year now to take more action along their border I think is an indication that we haven't gotten everything that we wanted. But the fact that they're doing it now I think is an indication that our relationship continues to strengthen and that areas of common interest are coming into clearer focus. And the fact that there are U.S. military personnel that are stationed inside of Turkey right now using Turkish military facilities to carry out attacks against ISIL I think is another good illustration of our converging interests and our ability to work together to advance them.

But, look, anytime that the United States is dealing with another democracy, we'll be interacting with a country that has a diverse set of views. That's not just true in Turkey; that's true in the UK, a country with whom we have a special relationship. So I don't think there's any country in the world where we would say that everything is perfect, but I think there are a lot of countries in the world where we would say that our relationship is much better under President Obama's leadership because of his commitment to investing in those kinds of relationships. And that certainly is true when it comes to our NATO allies.

Q Any concern about Erdogan's outreach toward Vladimir Putin?

MR. EARNEST: Well, no. I think you would obviously expect that Turkey would have relationships with important countries around the world -- not just the United States, but also with Russia. And so I wouldn't expect the United States to be concerned when President Erdogan sits down with President Putin any more so than I would expect President Erdogan to be concerned when President Obama picks up the phone and calls President Putin himself.

Q I want to follow up on a question Ron was asking about. Let me see how I want to put this. When we talk about the Clinton Foundation and the sort of intertwined, or at least what the AP has suggested sort of is intertwine of interests, where people who are having conversations -- over 50 percent of the people with whom she had private sector conversations were people who were donating to the foundation itself -- it seems like at least at first blush that there may have been pay for play. That's been the criticism by some. Not everyone. And they've pushed back -- the campaign certainly has. And so my question to you is, is this time now for a special prosecutor to take a look at some of the allegations that have been raised, in particular in this latest AP report, which seems to suggest that there may have been some malfeasance, or at least some intertwine between the State Department and the Clinton Foundation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I can tell you that President Obama and the administration have complete confidence in the independent career prosecutors at the Department of Justice and the FBI who devoted significant time and attention to investigating Secretary Clinton's email practices. That was work they did without any sort of political interference. These are dedicated professionals -- I don't think anybody would call into question the political independence of somebody like FBI Director Comey. He's somebody who served in a senior position in the Bush administration, for goodness sake.

Q I don't think, though, asking for a special prosecutor is somehow impugning the integrity of the people over at DOJ, do you?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think some people have raised it in that way. They've suggested that somehow the FBI investigation was not sufficient and, therefore, some additional investigative work may be required.

Look, I think Director Comey himself is somebody who has also demonstrated not just a commitment to nonpartisanship in preventing politics from interfering in this official responsibilities, he's also demonstrated I think a rather remarkable commitment to transparency himself. He's somebody who gave an extraordinary public statement when announcing the findings of their investigation. He's somebody who went to Congress and testified under oath for four or five hours in explaining the conclusions that were reached by his investigation. And I also understand -- and I know this based on published reports, and you can check the details with the FBI -- but I understand that they've also provided written materials about that investigation to Congress.

So it's clear that the investigation has been thorough, professional, unfettered by politics, even in a highly charged political atmosphere. And I think that's a testament to the work of Director Comey and the professionals at the Department of Justice and the

FBI. I just think it's hard for anybody to make a very persuasive case that somehow there hasn't been enough investigating, particularly when you layer on top of that all of the congressional hearings and testimony that's gone on with regard to Secretary Clinton's tenure at the State Department.

Q Last one I have for you. Are you familiar with this report that the State Department made -- 13 payments from Treasury -- one sent below \$100 million -- in making the payments to Iran? Are you familiar with that report? And if that is true, it sounds like a bit like structuring. And I don't want to draw the direct comparison to what happened to former Speaker Hastert, but I do think it begs the question, does that strike you as odd that that is what happened?

MR. EARNEST: No, it's not odd. It's my understanding that this is essentially the way that these funds are administered out of that account. But this is the payment from the judgment fund to Iran for the \$1.3 billion in interest for the \$400 million that was held in that U.S. military account since 1979. So that's what those numbers reflect, are those payments. And the Treasury Department may be able to provide you some additional information about the mechanics here, but ultimately that's just a reflection of the way that the money is drawn from that bank account.

Jane.

Q Thank you, Josh. The THAAD missile deployment issue. China continues to oppose the program of the THAAD in South Korea. China is not (inaudible) for pressure on North Korea. What is the U.S. -- do you have any idea to convincing Chinese government for (inaudible) against South Korea?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, we're going to continue to engage in diplomacy with our Chinese counterparts. And you've heard a number of Chinese officials, including President Xi and President Hu before him, expressing significant concerns with the behavior of the North Korean regime, including their development of a ballistic missile program that is inconsistent with U.N. Security Council resolutions and their international obligations.

So I think that point that I would make is China has their own vested interest in confronted this situation. They've indicated as much. And that's why the United States and China have been able to work effectively to further isolate North Korea.

As I acknowledged to Michelle, that isolation and the steps that we have taken to further that isolation have not yet had the desired effect. But I'm confident in saying that the North Korean regime is aware that the international community is united and resolved to deal with the situation, to deescalate the situation on the Korean Peninsula, and to lower the tension, and certainly bring everyone into compliance, particularly the North Koreans, with their international obligations when it comes to both a ballistic missile program and nuclear weapons.

Q The leader of North Korea yesterday said (inaudible) sanctions now ongoing. But what does the U.S. have -- any strong sanctions against the North Korea? Do you have anything else?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly don't have anything to announce at this point. But obviously the United States does have significant sanctions in place against North Korea because of their repeated violation of their international obligations when it comes to their ballistic missile program, and I would not in any way take off the table the idea of additional sanctions. But I don't have anything more to preview for you as it relates to potential sanctions activity.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Thank you, Josh. Senator Mark Kirk of Illinois recently said that President Obama was acting like the drug dealer-in-chief with respect to the payment -- the \$400 million to Iran. Is the President aware of that statement? And does the White House have a response?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, this is not the first that we've heard that kind of rhetoric from Senator Kirk. And I don't think that kind of rhetoric is consistent with the views of most people in Illinois about the efforts of President Obama to advance our interests around the world and prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

So I know there's a temptation, particularly for those politicians that are on the ballot, to say outrageous things to try to get attention. But that's certainly no way to run a country, and it's certainly no way to confront issues that are as important as preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, securing the safe return of U.S. Americans that are detained unjustly overseas, and settling a 35-year-old financial dispute with an adversary of the United States in a way that saves taxpayers potentially billions of dollars.

Chris, I'll give you the last one.

Q Great. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton yesterday filed a lawsuit against the Obama administration's regulation under Obamacare prohibiting discrimination against transgender people and health care. By my account, this is the third lawsuit that the Texas Attorney General has filed against an initiative from the administration on behalf of LGBT rights. Is that a source of frustration for President Obama?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, obviously the administration vigorously disagrees with many of the arguments that Attorney General Paxton has put forward. The administration has repeatedly acted responsibly to try to answer questions that have been raised as school districts and other organizations navigate the complexities of establishing policies in this field.

So my colleagues at the Department of Justice have obviously been making a forceful argument in the courts, and they'll continue to do so. And they'll do so rooted in the standing that the Obama administration and the executive branch has in the law. And the President has made clear that he's determined to use that authority to make the country

more just, make the country more fair, to protect the rights of every American, and to protect the safety and security of every American -- not just LGBT Americans, but also straight Americans. And that's consistent with the policymaking that's taking place inside this administration, and that's why we continue to be confident in the power of the arguments that we'll make in a court of law.

Q You say the administration vigorously disagrees with Paxton over his lawsuits, but do you that they are politically motivated?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I won't speak to the motivation of the Texas Attorney General. We'll have an argument on the merits, and we feel confident in our ability to win those arguments.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END 2:55 P.M. EDT