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Victoria Nuland

Spokesperson
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TRANSCRIPT:

The video is available with closed captioning on YouTube.

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MS. NULAND: All right. Happy Wednesday, everybody. Before we get started, let me welcome the Choate Rosemary Hall AP U.S. Government class in the back there. Welcome.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MS. NULAND: Absolutely. Got to be true.

I have one little thing to announce at the top, and then we'll do a little bit on what the Secretary has been up to, and then we'll go to what's on your minds.

I had meant to do this yesterday, and we ran out of time. Just to advise that Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Mike Posner has just concluded a three-day visit to Afghanistan to continue to follow up on the U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Commission Working Group on Promoting Shared Democratic Values. In Kabul and Jalalabad he met with government officials, members of civil society, religious leaders, defenders of human rights. The discussions centered on security policies and practices in a democratic environment, building democracy, and ensuring fair and inclusive elections in 2014, peace and reconciliation, and ensuring that women and other vulnerable groups have the constitutional protections that they deserve.

Let's go to what the Secretary has been up to before we go to your questions. Just a little bit on the day to day, and we've put out some tweets on this, as you've probably seen. The Secretary started his day with a town hall meeting with our Embassy in Kabul via video conference, gave him a chance to talk directly to our employees there. He then had a chance to greet a group of Burmese women leaders who are visiting the United States as part of a program supported by Goldman Sachs and The McCain Institute. And there'll be a – if we haven't already tweeted it, there'll be a photo from that coming out later today.

He's also spoken by phone with NATO Secretary General Rasmussen and with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. I'll give you a little on both of those in a minute. Just to say that yesterday, as we put out in the afternoon, he spoke to Ban Ki-moon, and he also spoke to Indian External Affairs Minister Khurshid.

And then, of course you know that we have the public swearing-in. Vice President Biden will swear in Secretary Kerry for his – if you want to call the original one the Las Vegas wedding, this will be the formal wedding, up on the 8th floor at 4 o'clock. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Wait a second. You're going to run into problems here. I think Las Vegas weddings are legal, actually.

MS. NULAND: They are absolutely legal, absolutely legal. Are you planning on one yourself there, Matt?

QUESTION: No, no. Well, not at the moment I'm not, but I'm sure --

MS. NULAND: Is there something she ought to know?

QUESTION: -- the tourist board would get upset if you called it – suggesting that it was not --

MS. NULAND: In no way was I suggesting otherwise.

Okay, just quickly on the phone calls, let me just say, after our fabulous conversation about phone calls yesterday, that these are all introductory phone calls in the context of Secretary Kerry's new roles and responsibilities. So they're not going to be exhaustive. They're not going to cover every issue. Obviously, these are the beginning of conversations that will be continuing throughout his tenure with his interlocutors. So if you don't see your favorite issue in the readout, it doesn't mean, (a) that it didn't come up necessarily, or (b), that it's not something that's important to us.

So first, in the phone call with External Affairs Minister Khurshid, which was yesterday afternoon, obviously both the Secretary and Minister Khurshid underscored the vital importance of our bilateral relationship, the U.S.-Indian relationship, and cooperating closely not only on bilateral issues but on regional issues and on global issues that we work on together. They also both expressed their commitment to continuing and strengthening the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue mechanism. This is our regular mechanism of bringing officials across our two governments together every year.

The Secretary also took the opportunity to thank Minister Khurshid for India's continued assistance to Afghanistan and affirmed our desire to continue collaborating with India on regional issues, as I said.

With Secretary Ban Ki-moon, I'll just tick off the subjects. And again, this is the beginning of a conversation in the Secretary's new role. They obviously talked about Middle East peace. They talked about Syria. They talked about Iran in the context of the upcoming P-

5+1 talks with Iran. They talked about the DPRK and its continued provocative rhetoric. They talked about climate change. And they agreed that they should meet soon, although nothing was confirmed in that phone call. Staffs will talk about when they can meet.

In the phone call with NATO Secretary General Rasmussen – a relatively short opening call; as I said, they will follow up when they see each other – obviously, both underscoring the centrality of NATO. Secretary General Rasmussen noted that Secretary Kerry is a lifelong transatlanticist, and that's good for NATO.

They also discussed the April NATO foreign ministers meeting. That's the next foreign ministerial that's on the calendar. Obviously, they talked about Afghanistan, and they also talked about meeting each other relatively early. Whether it's here, whether it's in Europe, that's to be determined.

In the phone call with Foreign Minister Lavrov, they obviously started with how important it is to work hard on both sides to maintain the bilateral channel, to keep open lines of communication together, to collaborate as much as we can on as much as we can, but also to be frank with each other when we have disagreements. They talked about Syria. The Foreign Minister gave Secretary Kerry a little bit of an update on the meeting that he had had at the Munich Security Conference with Syrian Opposition Coalition leader al-Khatib. He had also seen Joint Special Envoy Brahimi. They talked about and both committed to continue to support Brahimi, to continue to use the Brahimi-Bogdanov-Burns channel to support the efforts of Brahimi and now al-Khatib to take forward a transition strategy for Syria.

There was much discussion about the need for all Syrians to feel that they are working towards a country where they will feel safe, they will all feel included regardless of the group or community that they come from. And the two ministers committed that we've got to continue to work to close the gaps between the U.S. and Russia, between Russia and other members of the international community, on how to support a transition in Syria.

They obviously talked about Iran. Again, as the Secretary has with other members of the P-5+1 over the last week, this was talking about the preparations for the Almaty meeting on February 26th.

Obviously, the issue of adoptions --

QUESTION: Almaty or Astana?

MS. NULAND: It's Almaty. It's Almaty. It's colder in Astana, you know that, this time of year. You'd need even a --

QUESTION: It's cold in both places.

MS. NULAND: It's cold in both places, but you'd need the double mittens for Astana.

The Secretary raised the adoption issue, our continued hope to see as many of the cases that had been begun processed successfully so that the children can come join loving families. And the broader issue of human rights, respect for the rule of law in Russia, was also something that the Secretary raised.

So with all of that, let's go to what's on your minds.

QUESTION: You described the conversation with Rasmussen as relatively brief. Would you describe the Lavrov call as relatively brief?

MS. NULAND: It was a longer call. There was – I think it just depends on the interlocutor and how much time there is.

QUESTION: I was told it was about 40 minutes.

MS. NULAND: It was quite long, yes. That's about accurate.

QUESTION: So how long was – that's not accurate?

MS. NULAND: That's about accurate.

QUESTION: Can you tell us how long it actually was?

MS. NULAND: I think it was about 40 minutes. I didn't actually do the math between when it started and when it finished.

QUESTION: And how long was the Rasmussen call, about three minutes?

MS. NULAND: No, I think it was probably about 10 or 15 minutes.

QUESTION: This clearly shows how you don't care about NATO and you're more interested in Russia. I'm sorry; that's a joke.

MS. NULAND: As you know, I strongly personally care about NATO. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Can I – just following up on the phone call thing, can I assume from what you said at the top that these are introductory calls?

MS. NULAND: Yes.

QUESTION: That in the calls that he had yesterday with Ashton, he did not then talk about how the U.S. wants Europe to designate Hezbollah a terrorist organization, and that the issue of the painting of the Japanese – was it, Japanese? – yeah, Japanese ship, a destroyer by the Chinese did not come up in his conversation with the Chinese Foreign Minister?

MS. NULAND: Matt, as you know, I read both of those calls out yesterday. I read them out quite fully. I answered about 14 of your questions on this subject.

QUESTION: No, I just want to make sure. So --

MS. NULAND: No, I just --

QUESTION: So it is correct that he -- that those issues did not come up?

MS. NULAND: That is not correct. You can go back to the transcript from yesterday and you'll see how I characterized those calls. What I wanted to do was to avoid another colloquy like we had yesterday where -- why wasn't there this, why wasn't there that, et cetera. That's why I gave you that little opener. So let's go -- let's --

QUESTION: Well, just wait a second, because you did -- you were quite specific on Lavrov. You said he brought up the adoption issue, which was going to be a question you knew.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: So I would think that a treaty ally of yours would be interested to know if it was raised -- if this belligerent action by the Chinese was raised by the Secretary. Can you not say whether it came up or not? I don't understand why --

MS. NULAND: As you well know, there are aspects of diplomacy that are best done not at the public podium, and so the way I characterized that discussion yesterday was that they talked about regional issues. I'm not going to go any further from here.

Thank you.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) with the conversation with Lavrov --

MS. NULAND: Yes.

QUESTION: -- you said that obviously they began by discussing how important it was to work hard to maintain the bilateral relationship, to keep lines open and so on. And you also talked about the importance of narrowing differences between the United States and Russia over Syria, and between Russia and many other countries over Syria. Did the Secretary get the impression that Foreign Minister Lavrov is interested or is moving, that Russia is shifting, is moving any closer to the U.S. position on Syria?

MS. NULAND: Arshad, I think on the basis of this first phone call I don't think we want to draw any large conclusions. I think, from our perspective, it's a good thing that Foreign Minister Lavrov made time to see SOC President al-Khatib in Munich. Obviously that had just been completed. They will need some time in Moscow to digest the results of those conversations. It's also a good thing that there's a shared commitment to support Joint Special Envoy Brahimi. But this is a work in progress, to continue to try to encourage Russia to take a different stand on Syria.

Please.

QUESTION: And on the -- just one more on this, just on the first part of the question?

QUESTION: I mean, it's interesting to me that the Secretary opened this conversation by talking about the importance of maintaining lines of communication with a country where even during the Cold War there were hotlines, there were ways to communicate. Do you – did you get from Foreign Minister – did he get from Foreign Minister Lavrov any reciprocal sense that after all the recent Russian actions that we're well aware of – tossing out AID, stopping the adoptions and so on – that there is a concomitant desire on the part of the Russians to keep the lines open?

MS. NULAND: I think the way I characterized the conversation at the beginning was that they both committed to the importance of the relationship, to doing what we can to work together, to keeping lines of communication open but also to being frank when we have differences.

Please.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS. NULAND: Jill. Jill.

QUESTION: Toria, did – unless I missed it, did they talk about arms control?

MS. NULAND: Not specifically. I think you know that National Security Advisor Donilon is on his way to Moscow. I think he announced that last night on a certain TV program. Obviously this is a key issue that we've been working on, the implementation of the New START Treaty, what else might be done on the arms-control docket. We would fully expect some of those issues might come up on the visit.

QUESTION: But in this conversation, they did not specifically get into it?

MS. NULAND: No. No. No.

QUESTION: On the call with Secretary General --

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: -- Secretary General --

QUESTION: Can we stay with Lavrov for a moment?

QUESTION: Sure.

MS. NULAND: James.

QUESTION: Thank you. You've made clear in --

MS. NULAND: Nice tie.

QUESTION: Thank you. You've made clear many times that the United States believes that Moscow can play a more helpful role with respect to Syria. Does the Department believe that Moscow can play a decisive role with respect to Syria? In other words, that the Russians have the ability to tip the scales in such a way that Assad would truly be finished?

MS. NULAND: I would characterize it differently, James. Only Syrians can play a decisive role in the future of Syria, and that has been our approach to this from the very beginning. And as you know, we've been talking all week about Syrian Opposition Coalition President al-Khatib's offer to Assad now to play a decisive role and allow his Vice President, al-Shara, to begin talks with the SOC about how Assad can leave power and we can have a peaceful transition. So obviously, first and foremost, it's about Syria and Syrians.

We have said very clearly that we remain concerned that the continuing ties between Russia and the Assad regime, whether you're talking about fulfilling military contracts, whether you're talking about political and economic support, give comfort to the regime, that it is less isolated than it should be, given its behavior. So obviously we continue to talk to the Russians about sending a signal not just to Assad himself, but to the people around him who are still supporting him and being increasingly clear that they too can see a Syria without him.

QUESTION: And could Assad survive if that comfort were withdrawn?

MS. NULAND: I don't think any of us have a crystal ball about how this would go, but certainly we think that it is – that the role that Russia is playing is continuing to give some comfort to Assad and his inner circle.

QUESTION: Victoria.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: On the phone call with Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, you said they discussed the Middle East. Did he discuss with him a possible visit by Ban Ki-moon to both Israel and the West Bank preceding the visit of the President?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything for you on travel one way or the other.

QUESTION: Okay. Did they talk, possibly, about a new initiative, people talking about a new initiative? Do you know if they discussed anything that may be akin to something new?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything to announce here. I think you heard my colleague, Jay Carney, at the White House earlier today talking about the President's plan to visit in the spring and the parameters that he's looking at there, but I don't have anything further of a detailed nature.

QUESTION: Okay. But finally, you don't know whether that Ban Ki-moon said that he would visit the region before the President?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything to share with you on that subject, Said.

QUESTION: Can you stay on phone calls?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: On India-related (inaudible), how long did the phone call lasted?

MS. NULAND: Lalit --

QUESTION: How long was the phone call?

MS. NULAND: I actually don't have a time in my head on that. I'll get that for you.

QUESTION: And given his commitment to India-U.S. Strategic Dialogue, and the next scheduled middle of this year in Delhi, so should we expect him traveling to Delhi in June?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything on travel. I know you all want to know about travel. Obviously, there will be a good relationship, they'll see each other.

QUESTION: Traveling to India like last year --

MS. NULAND: I cannot imagine that during the time he's Secretary of State, he will never go to India. I think we will figure it out, Lalit, but I don't have anything to announce.

QUESTION: And one more thing on Burma. His meetings with the Burmese women leaders, did he made any remarks or did he speak to them anything? Do you have a readout?

MS. NULAND: He did speak to them. It was informal. I frankly don't have anything other than the fact that these are women who had suffered greatly, who -- some of them had been imprisoned. I think he was very moved by the stories that they shared, and very moved that they are now able to live a different way and able to visit us and able to work for a better, more democratic Burma.

QUESTION: So we should expect the same -- continuation of the same policy in Burma?

MS. NULAND: Yes.

QUESTION: And on Afghanistan, his town hall meetings, now he's much more focused on Afghanistan, too. What are his thoughts on this office of the Special Representative of Afghanistan and Pakistan? Does he wants to continue with it, want to appoint a new one, or discontinue it?

MS. NULAND: I don't have any particular announcement on that. I will just say that my sense is that for the Department as a whole, having a special office has been extremely helpful. But in terms of future personnel and all that, I don't have anything for you, Lalit.

QUESTION: And on the town hall, can you sketch out for us what kinds of sentiments and concerns the Secretary heard from our personnel in Afghanistan and what assurances he may have provided to them?

MS. NULAND: Well, I'll speak a little bit – a very little bit about his messages. I mean, this was clearly a town hall with employees, so it was an internal meeting. I'll leave it to them if they want to characterize some of the things that they said to him. It obviously wasn't filmed; it was designed for them to have a conversation with him. But --

QUESTION: How many people took part? Do we know?

MS. NULAND: I don't know. I'll find out on the Kabul side how many could jam into the room and whether they were able to video it into other rooms. But as you know, our mission there is very, very large. It's one of our largest in the world. He obviously thanked the staff for their service. He affirmed U.S. support for a strong, secure Afghanistan, and for a strong U.S. mission to Afghanistan as we move through the security transition there.

What else can I tell you here? He also acknowledged some of the challenging circumstances in which they work, and that it takes special kind of people to commit themselves, and that he appreciated very much how personally committed each of them is to a strong, stable, and secure Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Can we go to Iran?

MS. NULAND: Jill. Yeah. On this? No?

QUESTION: No.

QUESTION: With this upcoming meeting February 26, what are the expectations? Can you walk us through where we are now with Iran?

MS. NULAND: I think you tried this one yesterday, Jill. Did you not? Or was it somebody else who tried it? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I must have forgotten. Oh, okay. In any case, where are we? I mean, what's the purpose of this meeting? What do they think they can accomplish?

MS. NULAND: Well, as a general matter, as you know, we had a number of rounds of engagement with them last year. We were disappointed that we were not able to make more progress. Their – as you know, this is part of our larger policy of both offering an opportunity for Iran to engage with the international community and come clean about its nuclear program, reassure the international community that it's for peaceful purposes, at the same time that we apply increasing pressure when that kind of reassurance is not forthcoming.

So I know some of you had a chance to be on the backgrounding phone call that Treasury and State Department offered this morning with regard to our latest round of sanctions on Iran, as well as the humanitarian carve-outs to ensure that they don't hurt the Iranian people on the nutrition and medical side. But our hope is that after applying the toughest sanctions we've had in international history and continuing to be unified as an international community in ratcheting up that pressure when Iran does not come to the table with much that is new, that this round will offer a real opportunity for Iran to discuss substance. And we want those talks to make concrete progress regarding the international community's concerns, and not just be talks for talks' sake. But we'll see. We'll see.

QUESTION: You say that about every round, I think.

MS. NULAND: I think I do. I think I do.

QUESTION: The exact same line, which – and nothing changes, and you say you won't have talks for talks' sake. Would you qualify all previous rounds in the last couple years as talks for talks' sake?

MS. NULAND: I think – and this is a sort of a longer conversation that one can have offline – whenever you're engaged in diplomatic negotiations of any kind, there is an initial stage where you have to get to know each other, you have to put out opening positions, you have to have a sense of parameters for how the talks are going to go. I think some of that work obviously got accomplished in the early rounds, but we've been pretty clear here that we've been disappointed that we haven't had more concrete progress. We're going to give it another go, and then we see where we go.

QUESTION: Toria, can I --

QUESTION: These talks have been going on, if I'm not mistaken, since then-Under Secretary Burns went to Geneva during the-then-Bush Administration in the summer of 2008. I mean, surely a lot of that introductory stuff got done a long, long time ago, didn't it?

MS. NULAND: Arshad, I would characterize that period as different. This period that we're engaged in now – I frankly can't remember if this is the third or the fourth round; you all will remember better than I will --

QUESTION: Fourth.

MS. NULAND: -- it's the fourth round – is the result of the President's commitment to both pressure and engagement. I think this sort of set that we're now having the fourth round of began, what, a year ago, something like that. So we just have to see where it goes, and we will evaluate after Almaty whether we have met the bar that we're putting forward, which is to make some real substantive progress.

QUESTION: Can I ask one more on Iran? There are reports that a European court – it's described as the general European Union court – although I'm not certain if that's the correct title – ruled today that sanctions imposed by the European Union on Iran's Bank Saderat were illegal and should be removed. Do you have any guidance on that?

MS. NULAND: I didn't see that, Arshad. We will take it --

QUESTION: Can you --

MS. NULAND: -- and see if we have any comment, yeah.

James.

QUESTION: Just to follow up on Bradley's question, what --

MS. NULAND: You've got them all calling you Bradley now. How did that – your mother would be so pleased.

QUESTION: It's on the byline.

QUESTION: Mother --

QUESTION: And the Secretary – I know it's --

MS. NULAND: Yeah. I know. It's really crazy.

QUESTION: What, in the actions and conduct of the Iranian regime over the past decade, gives you any faith or any hint of faith that further talks with them on the nuclear issue would be productive?

MS. NULAND: This isn't about faith. It's never been about faith, which is why the offer of engagement is coupled with increasingly tight pressure. This is about the Iranians making the right choice, the right choice for their own people to bring them out of their isolation back into contact with the international community. You know how often we talk about the great richness of Iranian culture and our respect for the Iranian people. It's about providing an opportunity for a different course if Iran chooses to take it, even as we make clear that the international community is going to ratchet up the pressure if they don't take that choice.

QUESTION: I spoke of faith, you spoke of culture. One final question on this subject: There have been reports that intermittently, and outside of the formal P-5+1 mechanisms the Obama Administration, or members of it, have conducted direct, secret, bilateral talks with Iran. Is that true or false?

MS. NULAND: We have made clear, as the Vice President did at Munich, that in the context of the larger P-5+1 framework, we would be prepared to talk to Iran bilaterally. But with regard to the kind of thing that you're talking about on a government-to-government level, no.

QUESTION: Can I ask you just one more thing on this?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: I notice you haven't mentioned at all that this is a last chance or that this is among the last chances. Is there a reason you're not adding that extra pressure to this meeting, especially given months and months and months of people saying time is running out for Iran to find a negotiated solution?

MS. NULAND: Well, the President's been clear the clock is ticking. It's time for Iran to make the first choice – the right choice. But obviously, we need to see how this Almaty round goes.

QUESTION: Sorry, Toria. This is somewhat related. You talk about ending Iran's isolation and this is their chance to do that, but the Iranian President was, yesterday and today, in Egypt, the first time in – not particularly isolated there; in fact, less isolated than before. They're having a meeting with the Turks and the Egyptians and other ones. So I'm just – one, do you have any thoughts on Ahmadinejad's visit to Egypt and what's going on there? But two, more broadly, what – you talk about they're isolated now, but they seem to be getting less isolated despite the fact that you're – that you, the United States, are increasing sanctions.

MS. NULAND: Well, there are many ways to measure isolation. Countries around the world have ratcheted way back their willingness to buy Iranian oil by trade with Iran, in other ways. Banks are refusing to do business as a result of the increasing sanctions pressure, both the UN Security Council pressure and the bilateral pressure that – and the U.S. sanctions that have implications for our larger relationship.

So with regard to the diplomatic efforts that the Iranians are making – as I said, I think it was yesterday or it might have been Monday – we look forward to President Morsi and anybody else who has a chance to see Ahmadinejad underscoring the importance of taking the opportunity that we're offering in Almaty and actually making some concrete progress. So I think that that'll be one of the messages we would --

QUESTION: Do you have reason to believe that the Turks and the Egyptians are actually telling that to --

MS. NULAND: We do, we do.

QUESTION: Okay. And then just last one on Iran: Do you know anything about this shipment of weapons that has been – from Iran seized in Yemen?

MS. NULAND: I believe that the Yemenis are, even as we speak, making some public announcements about this.

QUESTION: Do you all have any – I mean, no, they're out already?

MS. NULAND: Yeah, and there are some pictures out. Let me just commit that we will have more on this tomorrow. We wanted to ensure that the Yemenis who made the interdiction got a chance to speak to it first.

QUESTION: All right. You can't say anything preliminarily, even like, "It's troubling," "It's -- "

MS. NULAND: Well, I can obviously for purposes of the AP wire story – (laughter) – say that we commend the Yemenis on their interdiction success. This is obviously extremely troubling, but let me make sure that I'm caught up with what they've said before we speak further.

QUESTION: Did Matt sanction the application of "extremely" to "troubling" just now? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: I'll take it. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Can we stick with Egypt for a second?

QUESTION: (Inaudible) conference of the Organization of Islamic Conference in Cairo. Are there any American diplomats present? I know they have attended similar conferences in the past of the Arab summit – the Arab League summit and the Organization of Islamic State summit in past conferences. Is anyone attending this particular one?

MS. NULAND: I'm going to tell you, you stumped the chump, Said. I will take that and get back to you.

QUESTION: One other one on Egypt.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: I think I had asked on Monday if you would check to see whether the State Department is aware of any successful prosecutions of either police brutality or violence against female – women protestors. Did you get an answer on that? In Egypt.

MS. NULAND: We have seen a handful of convictions of police officers and former regime officials for violence against protestors since January 2011. We're also aware that the majority of those who were charged initially have not yet completed the judicial process. So obviously, as we have on many occasions, we call on the Egyptian Government to redouble its efforts to investigate these human rights violations with impartiality, with transparency, and with as much efficiency and dispatch as they possibly can.

Please. Still on Egypt? Yeah.

QUESTION: A follow-up on this, please. Today in *The Washington Post* there is a report about security measures, and it is mentioned that the U.S. Embassy is involved or U.S. is involved with what is called the community policing project or the policing project. Do

you have any details about this, which is --

MS. NULAND: This is a project that our Embassy is funding with the Egyptian police; is that what you're asking?

QUESTION: Yes.

MS. NULAND: Let me check and see what we can give you on that.

Please.

QUESTION: Can we go to the DPRK for a moment?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: The video that was released by the state news service --

MS. NULAND: I spoke to that yesterday. I don't have anything further on it.

Jo.

QUESTION: Can I ask about Tunis, please?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: What – the opposition leader, Chokri Belaid, was shot dead outside his home in Tunis today, which has sparked angry protests on the streets by his supporters and attacks on the offices of the ruling party. Are you aware of the situation? Have you been in contact with the Tunisian authorities? And what is the U.S. comment on it, please?

MS. NULAND: Thank you for that, Jo. I had actually also meant to do this one at the top of the briefing. And as you can see, we had a lot to do so I misplaced it.

We strongly condemn today's assassination of Chokri Belaid, a Tunisian political party leader and a prominent opposition figure. We offer our sincere condolences to Mr. Belaid's family, his friends, and his colleagues.

It's also important to note that a broad base of Tunisian political parties and actors have also condemned this violent act. There is no justification for an outrageous and cowardly act of violence like this. There is no place in the new Tunisia for violence.

We urge the Government of Tunisia to conduct a fair, transparent, and professional investigation to ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice consistent with Tunisian and international law. We also call on all Tunisians – because there have been some folks going out in the streets in solidarity over the course of the day today, we call on all Tunisians to respect the rule of law, to renounce violence, and to express themselves about this incident and anything else peacefully.

QUESTION: In general, are there concerns about any perhaps perceived repression of the opposition in Tunisia at the moment?

MS. NULAND: Well, obviously, these – as another country in transition, this is something that obviously bears watching, that as you know, our support for democratic transitions is predicated wherever they are on strongest possible human rights standards, respect for citizens, et cetera. Despite today’s tragic events, as a general matter, we’re encouraged by the overall trajectory within Tunisia. These kinds of transitions do take time. There are obviously going to be setbacks. But as a general matter, we think Tunisia is beginning to make some progress.

QUESTION: Can I go back very briefly to Syria for one second?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Yeah. Are you still standing by your comments from yesterday that the complaints about Assad not attacking or retaliating against Israel made by members of the SOC are just individual comments and not representative of the SOC as a whole?

MS. NULAND: Well, it happens rarely, Matt, but you were ahead of me yesterday, or Brad was. Bradley. Should we say Bradley? Yeah.

QUESTION: As you like.

MS. NULAND: Yesterday I said that some of these comments we’d seen from the SOC were isolated from individuals. That’s what we had seen. Subsequently, we saw a broader statement go up on the SOC’s Facebook page.

So obviously, as we said with regard to the Turkish comments, we hope that the Syrian Opposition Coalition understands that it – rather than making these kinds of comments, it should stay focused on the real problem, which is the regime and its violence, and the potential that it can transfer very dangerous weapons to others in the neighborhood.

QUESTION: But do you have any reason to believe that this is not their official stance and that this was some kind of an aberration?

MS. NULAND: Well, I think the larger question is why they felt it necessary to do this. Was it a tweaking of the Assad regime --

QUESTION: Have you asked?

MS. NULAND: We are obviously consulting with them on this. I don’t have a definitive -

QUESTION: But are you concerned, in light of comments like this, that if the SOC or some manifestation of it becomes the ruling – eventually at some point becomes the – part of – at least part of the Syrian Government, that in fact they may be more hostile toward Israel than Assad is?

MS. NULAND: Well, first of all, we need to go back to the founding documents at the SOC and some of the work done by the Syrian opposition over the summer in which they made express commitments to regional security, et cetera. There are issues of sovereignty. There are historic issues. Obviously we're going to have to continue to work with Syrians of all stripes about turning the page not only in terms of democracy internally to Syria, but also in terms of regional peace and security and what the responsibilities of a democratic country would be vis-à-vis neighbors.

QUESTION: Do you consider this to be a profoundly stupid comment to make considering they've been asking for weapons from Western countries? Would that make you more or less likely to provide weapons when they're talking about building a deterrent force against Israel in the future?

MS. NULAND: I'm not going to connect these things. I think what's most important is that we talk to them about their responsibilities.

QUESTION: Can I just ask on the SOC --

MS. NULAND: Samir.

QUESTION: -- on the SOC --

MS. NULAND: Samir.

QUESTION: I don't know if you said that or not. Did the Secretary in his talks with Lavrov agree on the next 3 Bs meeting?

MS. NULAND: No, I think those meetings will be guided by Mr. Brahimi and when he wants to have them. It's he who calls them and then we, Russians and Americans, attend at that point. So he has not yet asked for another meeting.

QUESTION: And Mr. Brahimi presented his Geneva number two to the Security Council, didn't he?

MS. NULAND: He had a briefing to the Security Council at the end of January. He was relatively downbeat. We talked about that at the time.

Jo.

QUESTION: On the SOC, there are reports that they're looking to open offices in New York. Have they been in consultation with yourselves about that, and is that something that the United States Government would support?

MS. NULAND: We are in discussion with the Syrian Opposition Council about opening an office in Washington. With regard to an office in New York, we're supportive of that, too. That would presumably be something that they would work out with a real estate agent in New York. We are looking forward to continuing this conversation and to building our relationship with them.

QUESTION: They would work out with a real estate agent in New York? Do they have the kind of money that it would cost to get an office in --

MS. NULAND: I mean, my point is that this is -- this is not -- we're not -- obviously they're not an embassy. It's not sort of a government-to-government thing where they actually put themselves in New York or anywhere else.

QUESTION: No, but here's the -- but the -- I guess the question would be, I mean, the Syrian -- in Washington at least, the Syrian Embassy is vacant, as is the Ambassador's residence. Are the talks about them opening an office in Washington -- do they involve those properties?

MS. NULAND: Not at this stage.

QUESTION: And is there any timing on it about when this might happen?

MS. NULAND: No, I think we'll have more to share in coming weeks as they work through their decisions, but I don't have anything else.

QUESTION: Would this be --

MS. NULAND: Just to say that they do have a representative. I think you know this. They have appointed Dr. Najib Ghadbian as the SOC's representative in the United States. He's a Syrian American. He's a professor of political science at the University of Arkansas.

QUESTION: And would this precede a visit by Mr. al-Khatib?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything to share on a visit at this stage, although --

QUESTION: He's a professor --

MS. NULAND: -- except that we've said that he's --

QUESTION: He's a professor in Arkansas?

MS. NULAND: Yeah. He's a Syrian American.

QUESTION: Does that mean he lives in Little Rock? I mean, he's not living in Washington, he's not based here?

MS. NULAND: No, no.

QUESTION: Victoria, on the SOC?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Okay. Mr. Moaz al-Khatib, the president, seems to be having difficulty -- I know you welcomed his statement --

MS. NULAND: Right.

QUESTION: -- for talks and so on. But he's having difficulty within the coalition itself garnering the kind of support that he needs to go forward. So could you sort of share with us if there are any activities that are conducted by, let's say, Ambassador Ford with the different opposition groups? Because apparently he was able to collect like, 30 out of 70. So is the Ambassador doing anything in terms of talking to the different groups to sort of encourage them to support Moaz al-Khatib's statements?

MS. NULAND: The short answer to that is yes. I think you know that about 10 days ago, Ambassador Ford spent about 10 days in the region, in Jordan, in Turkey, talking to Syrian opposition leaders, also in Western Europe, encouraging them to come forward with concrete ideas about how to take a transition forward. We clearly now see President al-Khatib with a concrete idea, which is that he and Vice President of Syria al-Shara should talk. We consider this a positive development. We are encouraging, as the SOC begins to discuss or continues discussing internally that proposal that they work together on a concrete way forward. We talked a little bit yesterday about the fact that there are a lot of different views inside the SOC, and that's quite understandable given what they've been through.

Please.

QUESTION: Still on Syria. Syria Deputy Foreign Minister is now in Beijing and he met the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi yesterday. Do you think China is playing a positive role here by having the conversation with Syrian Government?

MS. NULAND: Well, we'll have to see what the conversation entails, and we'll see what the Chinese side wants to share afterwards. You know that we've had our concerns about the Chinese position given the fact that they joined Russia in three times vetoing UN Security Council resolutions. We have in our various bilateral conversations with China urged them to think about the consequences for not only Syria but for the entire region, for economic stability as well in the region, if this violence continues and the risk of extremism grows and the risk of spillover grows.

QUESTION: But the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi yesterday he said China is open to any solution that is widely accepted by Syrians. Do you think this is helpful?

MS. NULAND: Well, it's obviously helpful and I think we share that view. You'll recall also that China joined us when we drafted the Geneva ideas. So the question now is how we implement them. And we would be -- so we'll see what comes of this meeting.

Please. Behind.

QUESTION: Yeah. Over the course of history --

MS. NULAND: Are we going to do history now? Are we going to do the course of history an hour into this briefing? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: No, sorry. There's a question here.

A single stupid mistake has at times triggered the outbreak of war. The Chinese navy frigates locking onto its fire control radar are painting the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense warship was one of these typical stupid mistakes maybe or miscalculation. But even if the U.S. has insisted that China should stop these provocations, China seems to openly ignore the U.S. messages. It appears that the U.S. message is weak these days --

MS. NULAND: Is there a question here or are we having a dissertation?

QUESTION: Yeah, coming up, coming up. I'm sorry. (Laughter.) So China continues to act kind of arrogantly. There is a hope within the Japanese Government that the U.S. would take a stronger approach toward China. Do you think that the U.S. now will adopt a stronger message to China after what's happened?

MS. NULAND: I think the message that I gave yesterday was pretty strong, so I would refer you back to what we said yesterday.

QUESTION: Although you didn't say who delivered it. (Laughter.)

MS. NULAND: Please. Please.

QUESTION: On North Korea.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Regarding on the North Koreans' strong nuclear test soon, South Korea and the United States is considering a preemptive strikes against the North Korea was reported. What is your comment on that?

MS. NULAND: You know where we've been on this. We've talked about it pretty much every day for the last 10 days. We remain firmly committed to the undertakings in UN Security Council Resolution 2087, and if provocations continue, there will be continued consequences.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS. NULAND: Scott in the back has been -- had his hand up, his arm is hurting. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Could we return just for a moment to Iran, please?

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Do you have anything to say about the recent arrest of Iranian journalists on charges of communicating with outside media?

MS. NULAND: I don't have that, Scott, but let me check up on it. You know how strongly we feel about the treatment of journalists in Iran.

Please.

QUESTION: On Iran.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Is there any bilateral expected in Almaty with the Iranians?

MS. NULAND: I think I spoke to that at the top that we are, as the Vice President said in Munich, within the framework of the P-5+1 process, if it makes sense to meet bilaterally within that context, we are open to it. But we don't have anything separate.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) in Almaty's --

MS. NULAND: We just have to see how that meeting goes.

QUESTION: It's not ruled out, but nothing is expected?

MS. NULAND: The Vice President had it straight down the line in Munich.

Please.

QUESTION: Is there enough time (inaudible) quickly?

MS. NULAND: Yeah, yeah.

QUESTION: Are there any kind of new initiatives set in motion by, let's say, David Hale as a result of the President's announcement?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything to share about David Hale travel. I think, as I said, Jay Carney gave you the frame walking up to the trip. If we have more to share in coming weeks we will.

QUESTION: But is the Department here launching any kind of new initiatives to coincide with that?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything to announce today, Said.

QUESTION: Last week I asked you for comment on an Italian appeals court's decision to vacate three acquittals in the -- I don't remember what year it was -- the kidnapping of a man in Milan.

MS. NULAND: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: You said at the time you didn't have the chance yet to study the verdict. Have you had a chance since?

MS. NULAND: We still haven't seen the written decision. I think if you know much about Italian courts, you know that there's something an oral decision and then it can be a while until you see the written decision. So we haven't seen it yet.

Please.

QUESTION: I've got one, sorry. According to a report in the Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet*, the United States has asked for the extradition of Usama bin Ladin's son-in-law, Suleiman Abu Ghaith. Is that – could you confirm whether that's true?

MS. NULAND: I'm going to refer you to the Department of Justice. You know we never talk about that stuff here.

Anything else?

QUESTION: Yes.

MS. NULAND: Please.

QUESTION: Toria, are you aware of any fallout, negative or otherwise, from the revelation that the U.S. has a drone base in Saudi Arabia? And if you are not aware of any fallout, negative or otherwise, or if you are not going to tell me that you never talk about intelligence from here, can you explain why this is so – was so important to keep secret if there was nothing at all that happened as a result of this being – becoming public knowledge?

MS. NULAND: Well, I'm going to say to you is what I always say when the "D" word comes up: I have nothing – no comment what – at all.

QUESTION: Are you – have you – are you aware of any complaint by the Saudis or the Yemenis about any reporting on this issue?

MS. NULAND: I don't have anything to share on that one way or the other.

QUESTION: So does that mean no?

MS. NULAND: I have nothing to share one way or the other, Matt.

Okay, thanks very much, everybody. We'll see you at the swearing-in.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:59 p.m.)

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