

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 5/11/16

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

*Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.

1:05 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. We have some brief comments before we get to your questions.

In response to a specific request that I received yesterday for additional information about the Zika virus, I also have a visual aid. You want to put it up there. You can see --

Q Is that for me?

MR. EARNEST: It's for everybody, but it certainly is responsive to your request.

Earlier this week, I highlighted the letter from the National Governors Association, urging Congress to work "as expeditiously as possible" to ensure that funds are available for states, territories and the public at large to combat the threat of Zika.

Many of you will recall that the President convened a meeting with some of his national security team and our public health professionals back in January to discuss the potential impact of the Zika virus on the United States. That meeting led the President to note in early February that he intended to forward a formal request to Congress for a specific emergency supplemental legislation that would be focused on fighting the Zika virus.

A couple weeks later, in mid-February, the administration put forward that specific proposal to Congress. That is now almost three months ago. And even though we had months to get ahead of this emergency, before we start to see direct transmission of Zika by mosquitoes in the United States, Congress has not acted. Congress has basically done nothing to act on this specific request for funding that was put forward by the administration and endorsed by Democratic and Republican governors across the country, and our nation's foremost public health experts.

As you can see in the graphic behind me, the time to prepare before Zika begins to spread in the continental United States is rapidly closing. As CDC has said for months, based on historical trends, we expect to see transmission of Zika from mosquitoes inside the United States starting in June or July. This graphic shows the expected abundance of this mosquito and the significant increase in its presence over the summer months.

As you can clearly see, the threat from the Zika virus is only increasing. The truth is this is an emergency now, and Congress should treat it that way. We need emergency funding from Congress that allows us to take urgent and immediate steps to limit the impact of the Zika virus.

What this graphic clearly shows is we cannot wait until October for the normal appropriation cycle before we confront this emergency. Action is needed from Congress now to provide necessary funding this year to protect pregnant women and their babies in the United States.

As you all are well aware, we've been asking Congress to take action since we submitted an emergency budget request in February, and you have heard from the foremost public health experts in the world about why we need this additional funding and why we need it now. We are working around the clock. These public health professionals are working around the clock. State and local officials are working around the clock to protect the American public. Congress, however, just returned from recess two days ago, and given the threat that this virus poses to American mothers and their babies, Congress should not leave town for another recess before sending a Zika funding bill to the President's desk for his signature.

And I think the map behind me is a graphic illustration of the need for immediate congressional action. It also is an appropriate illustration for why the current approach that's advocated by Republican leaders in Congress is woefully insufficient. Under the Republican plan that Republican leaders have just started to discuss is that they may get around to passing funding and approving funding for the Zika virus in October. Well, as you can see from the map that would be after the peak of the mosquito season. There's a colloquial expression about closing the barn door after the horse has already left. I would be tempted to use that analogy in this situation if the situation weren't so serious.

So we need some congressional action. We need a sense of urgency and we need it now.

So, with all that, Brad, welcome to the front row. We'll let you get started off with questions here.

Q So before we get back to Zika, I wanted to ask about reports of the Islamic State forces advancing on the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. That seems to put you in an odd position. Are you hoping the Assad regime holds the city?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have the latest battlefield assessment to offer here. As we noted at the time, we obviously were pleased to see ISIL give up Palmyra, and the focus of our efforts has been on degrading and ultimately destroying that terrorist organization.

And we welcomed that development, and we certainly do not want to see ISIL expand the territory that they control, and we certainly do not want to see ISIL put at risk once again such a historically and culturally significant city.

Q Given the threat of ISIS reconquering the city and gaining what would be a major strategic victory, is this a situation where the U.S. could conceivably coordinate with Russia, which has provided backup to Assad and indirectly to Assad's military?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have talked for quite some time about the efforts that are currently underway to de-conflict our military activities with Russia in the skies over Iraq and in Syria. There have been a number of consultations about that. But those consultations have stopped short of any sort of formal military cooperation, and I don't anticipate that that will change.

Q And I just wanted to ask you about Iraq. There have been three car bombings in the last 24 hours or so, over 90 people killed. Daesh is claiming responsibility. Are you worried that Daesh is trying to shape Baghdad again for a possible assault, as we saw about 18 months ago?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just start by saying that the United States strongly condemns the multiple attacks in and around Baghdad today. Initial estimates project more than 80 Iraqi citizens have been killed in those attacks; many more have been injured. These attacks demonstrate the terrorists carry out these abominable attacks without regard to innocent civilian life and in order to stoke tensions between these communities even further.

We reiterate our solidarity with the Iraqi people against the threat from ISIL. ISIL is a common enemy to all Iraqis, Americans, and the 65 nations who are part of our counter-ISIL coalition. By working together, the Iraqi people have made important gains against ISIL since 2014, and every step the United States has taken is to support the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people as they take back their country.

I think what is clear from this incident is that a lot of innocent people have been killed and injured, and it certainly is consistent with ISIL's strategy of wreaking havoc and sowing chaos and violence and sectarian tension. And in many cases, they do that by killing innocent people, by targeting them specifically. Those tactics are abhorrent. And it is a good illustration of exactly what the United States has rallied behind the United States to defeat.

Q And just lastly, are you worried that the Iraqi government's inability to provide security in the capital is going to fuel the political instability that's been going on and which has been hampering critical elements of the anti-ISIL offensive such as the Mosul offensive?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is clear is that the top priority of the Abadi government is the national security of Iraq, and protecting the citizens of Iraq from this sort of violence is the Abadi government's top priority. The administration, the United States government

has been of the strongly held view that the Iraqi government is more likely to be successful in securing the country if they can succeed in uniting that country to face down the threat.

That's what Prime Minister Abadi has tried to do. He has worked hard across sectarian lines to build diverse support for his government and for the effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And that's why the United States has found Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqi central government to be effective partners, and it's why we continue to stand with them as they confront this serious threat.

Jeff.

Q Thanks, Josh. The Brazilian senate is likely to suspend President Rousseff today. What are the implications of that likely action for U.S.-Brazil relations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, you heard the President talk about this when he was in Argentina, and our view at this point has not changed. The President noted our confidence in the durability of Brazil's democratic institutions to weather this political turmoil. Brazil has a system of laws, it's a mature democracy and it has an established system for resolving these political conflicts inside their country.

So there's no denying that this is a challenging time for the nation of Brazil and for the government officials that are trying to lead that country. Obviously Brazil is under the international spotlight. The attention of the world will be focused on Brazil later this summer when they host the Olympic Games. So Brazil is under some scrutiny and under some pressure, and the United States is going to be there to support our friend and partner as they deal with the significant challenges that they're facing right now.

But as it relates to the political situation, we continue to have confidence in the mature, durable, democratic institutions in Brazil to withstand the challenge.

Q Does that mean that the U.S. government does not have any concerns about how that process is playing out right now and whether it's legitimate and fair and following the laws that the Brazilian people have supported?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we obviously believe that these democratic institutions were established for a reason, and the rules that guide that democracy should be followed. I'm not going to render a judgment from here about individual claims or actions that have been taken by political leaders in Brazil. Our hope -- and we continue to have confidence that those democratic institution in Brazil can weather the political turmoil that that country is dealing with right now.

Q And switching subjects to a domestic one. There's a new poll, Reuters-Ipsos poll, out today which similar to some other ones that have come out recently, showing Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in a neck-for-neck race in the general election. Is the fact that that general election is tightening -- even though polls are very early and there's not a Democratic nominee yet -- a concern to this White House, considering the fact that the President has said repeatedly he'd like to see a Democrat succeed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are going to be a lot of polls that are conducted between now and then, and that's an entirely legitimate endeavor. And sometimes they can provide a valuable snapshot of the mood of the country and the preferences of the country's voters.

The President has had ample opportunities already this year to talk about how important this upcoming election is because of the -- in fact, that election is so important that the President expects, over the course of the summer and certainly into the fall, to be dedicating a significant portion of his time to engaging in the debate around the election. And the President does have a strong desire to be succeeded by someone who is committed to building on all of the important progress that we've made over the last seven or eight years. And that I think will be the nature of the President's involvement and the argument that he hopes to make.

Q Are you concerned, though, about polls showing such a tight race right now between the Democrat and Donald Trump?

MR. EARNEST: I think what I would say is there are some polls that have been released that show that the general election is not particularly close right now and there are others that have been released that indicate a closer race. The President's approach to this election will be the same regardless of how close the polls indicate that the race is.

The stakes are too high to take this election lightly. Hosting a presidential election every four years means that the American people have an opportunity to weigh in on who is going to lead the country and who, in fact, is going to lead the free world. So the stakes of this election are high. The President believes that the outcome is critically important. And regardless of what predictions are made about the outcome at this point, the President will be fully engaged in making an argument about having a successor that's committed to building on the progress that we've made over the last seven or eight years.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. Lawmakers in the House missed the self-imposed deadline today to release their Puerto Rico legislation. And I'm wondering how concerned the White House is about this latest delay, whether you believe it's just a temporary hiccup in getting legislation out.

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I do know is I do know that Democrats and Republicans in the House continue to try to work through the differences that have emerged as they've tried to put this legislation together. We have worked to try to nurture that bipartisan effort. There are experts in the U.S. government, particularly at the Treasury Department, that have offered technical assistance to those who are drafting the bills.

Our position on this has been clear from the beginning. It was back in October that we put forward our proposed legislative solution, and the view of the administration is that Congress needs to provide Puerto Rico with an orderly restructuring regime that would give the Puerto Rican government the kind of authority that *states all across the country -- cities and states all across the country already have. And that restructuring authority would allow Puerto Rico to deal with the financial challenges that they're facing right now.

We also believe that in exchange for that authority, the Puerto Rican government should commit to implementing some economic and financial reforms that would be good for the long-term health of the Puerto Rican economy. And we believe that there should be some accountability associated with the implementation of those reforms. And there are a number of proposals for essentially independent oversight that could be provided to ensure that Puerto Rico follows through on the reforms.

There's some other proposals that we have looked favorably upon that would do things like reform Puerto Rico's Medicaid program and extend the earned income tax credit to taxpayers in Puerto Rico. This would have a positive economic benefit for Puerto Rico which would have a corresponding positive impact on the quality of life on the island and a positive impact on the island's fiscal picture.

But right now, you have 3 million Americans -- more than 3 million Americans who are living on an island that is facing some austere challenges that are already having a real-world impact on the lives of the Americans there.

Secretary of Treasury Jack Lew visited Puerto Rico earlier this week and saw firsthand some of these challenges. I was actually in a meeting where he was talking about this today. He talked about the fact that he visited hospitals in Puerto Rico -- at least one hospital where doctors were challenged to acquire medicine that could be used to treat pediatric cancer patients, and the challenge that they have is that they basically have to pay for medicine COD. They've got to provide cash on delivery for that medicine. So it's not a simple -- and they have to do that basically every day. That means that a doctor's ability to provide lifesaving medicine to kids in Puerto Rico is affected by the weakening confidence in the Puerto Rican government's ability to pay their bills.

So there are human costs here. And these are American citizens that we're talking about. So it's easy to get lost in an esoteric debate about which bond holder is going to get paid first and how much they're going to get paid. But the truth is, resolving these challenges and resolving them soon is going to have an impact on the lives of innocent Americans in Puerto Rico.

Q But just to be clear, the latest delay that crept up today, does the White House view that more as, I guess, procedural snafu, like how you termed it during our conversations about TPA, or is this a broader conflict that you're concerned that is not going to be able to be resolved?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I'd go back to where I started, which is that there are still Democrats and Republicans on the committee in the House that are working in good faith to try to produce a piece of bipartisan legislation that would address the concerns that I laid out. So we've got confidence in that process. We're going to continue to support and try to nurture that process to yield a piece of legislation that would address the many challenges facing Puerto Rico.

And we're hopeful -- look, there's no denying that Congress is late to the game here, and there has been some -- there's been an unhelpful effort on the part of some Republicans to gum up the works here, including by lobbing false charges, suggesting that somehow this is a bailout of Puerto Rico. It's not. And the irony is, is that the more success that those Republicans have in gumming up the works the more likely it is that the only alternative for dealing with Puerto Rico will be a bailout. And that's something that we all want to avoid. And that's why we have been urging Congress to act in bipartisan fashion to pass this bill.

Suzanne.

Q If I could follow up with Puerto Rico. Does the administration have a forecast if it doesn't meet its July deadline in making the \$2 billion payment?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sure that there have been a number of forecasts that have been conducted. I haven't seen one that we've made public. But you can check with the Treasury Department about that.

Q Can you talk more broadly about the situation in Puerto Rico in terms of how it's impacting education, health care, and also fighting the Zika virus? I understand there have been more than 600 cases there already.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'd refer you to the Treasury Department again because Secretary Lew was just there on Monday and he saw a bunch of these negative impacts firsthand. And I just relayed the example of him visiting a hospital there. That obviously is a pretty graphic illustration of the challenges that Puerto Rico is facing as a result of these budgetary problems. And I think they are a good illustration of why Congress needs to act as soon as possible so that we can get to work fixing these problems.

I haven't seen the latest tally in terms of the number of Zika cases that have been identified in Puerto Rico. But obviously Puerto Rico is under great financial strain. Obviously that financial strain is having an impact on their ability to invest in their public health system. And given the threat that Zika poses to pregnant women and their babies, now seems like a bad time for investments in public health to be undermined. In fact, this is actually a time when we should be redoubling our efforts to make sure that we can address cases of the Zika virus quickly and try to prevent it from spreading.

Q Have you seen any impact in New York or Florida regarding the financial hardship of Puerto Rico?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I mean, I think what we have seen is we certainly have seen an increase in the number of people who are leaving Puerto Rico. I think that is a testament to the difficult economic challenges that are facing the island, and those are not at all unrelated to the budgetary challenges that are facing the government.

So I can't speak to any of the specific, tangible impact that we've seen in any of those two states, but obviously there are a host of concerns that have been raised and that have been exacerbated by Congress's failure to act promptly here. So we know what needs to be

done. The administration put forward a proposal back in October, laying out exactly how we could address these challenges.

So, fortunately, there does seem to be a tenacious bipartisan effort underway to try to resolve those differences. I say "tenacious" because we've been talking about this for a long time, but we haven't actually seen any action, but hopefully Democrats and Republicans will both continue to stay engaged in this effort because there's a real human toll here that's already being taken as a result of these financial challenges.

Q Hi, Josh. The President has refrained from weighing in the Democratic primary, but the Vice President hasn't done the same. This morning he told Good Morning America that he thought Hillary Clinton would become the nominee and would go on to win the presidency. Did he consult with the White House before making his public preferences known?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think -- again, I had a chance to take a look at the transcript. You'd have to ask the Vice President's office -- I don't think that he was doing much more than just making an observation about the math of the race, particularly as it relates to the delegate count. You'd have to ask his office if he intended that as him putting forward his own endorsement in the race.

Q Does the White House feel like it is an appropriate time to now make endorsements with the delegate map being what it is?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have anything to say about President Obama's plans to weigh in on the race at this point.

Q Okay. And on Zika, obviously the White House is concerned that Congress isn't doing enough to protect Americans. Is there a concern that Brazil isn't doing enough to protect Americans that may be going to the Olympics, with the continuing problems that we're already starting to discuss in Brazil?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we know that the Zika virus is much more widespread in Brazil than it is in the United States. And we have offered our assistance and support to Brazilian authorities as they try to contain this threat. And they obviously are working very hard to ensure that all of the world-class athletes that will be descending upon Brazil can do so safely. And we obviously would be supportive of any effort that they would undertake to ensure the safety of those who are participating in the games.

Q Has the President or any member of the First Family decided if they'd be attending the games?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, we haven't made a decision about the President's summer travel yet.

Q Okay. One last thing on Zika. Senator Flake was saying that \$35 million in taxpayer-funded studies could have been better spent on things like Zika. He points to drunk birds slurring when they sing, some people seeing Jesus's face on toast, and honeybees on

cocaine. Does the White House have any comments in response to Senator Flake?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I think it's pretty pathetic when we're facing a significant public health crisis, as described by our public health experts, that you would see someone try to distract from what is a pretty important issue. I've had an opportunity to meet Senator Flake on a couple of occasions. He's an honorable guy and he certainly is the kind of person that we would rely on to show some bipartisan leadership, respond to the requests of Democratic and Republican governors, respond to the request of public health professionals, and advance the \$1.9 billion in funding that is needed to confront the Zika virus and do everything we possibly can to protect the American people. So I'll leave it at that.

April.

Q Josh, a couple different subjects. First, I want to stay with Zika. The World Health Organization says it's just as important as Ebola. What does this White House feel about that? They are calling it a possible pandemic.

MR. EARNEST: Well, we've gone to great lengths to help people understand the difference between the Zika virus and the Ebola virus. Obviously the --

Q The level of concern is such that it's like Ebola. That's what they're saying.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, the viruses are different; the impact that they have on people are different. But given the significant risk that we know the Zika virus poses to pregnant women and their babies, we believe that urgent action is necessary to do everything we can to try to protect the American people, especially pregnant women and their babies.

So there's no reason this has to be a partisan exercise. This should be a common-sense responsibility that Republicans in Congress should embrace. They ran for Congress so that they could help run the country. Running the country means your top priority should be protecting the American people. This is something that Congress can and should do to protect the American people. They're about three months late in doing it, but they need to put a bill on the President's desk before they leave for yet another recess on Memorial Day.

Q And the next question on Zika -- where does this administration weigh in on the issues being discussed between health officials about the fact that Zika is such a threat that people, families, may want to delay pregnancies? Where does the White House weigh in on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think we would weigh in on this by saying that people should consult their doctors and that the kinds of decisions that families are making about either starting or growing their family are decisions that they should make within their family and with the best medical advice that they can get from their doctors.

Obviously the CDC and the NIH have shared medical information about the risks posed by Zika to pregnant women with doctors all across the country. We have tried to do as much as we possibly can to educate people about what exactly those risks are. And I certainly would encourage people who are thinking about becoming pregnant to consult the CDC website, to consult their doctor, and understand exactly what the risks are as they make that decision.

Q So listening to the doctors debate back and forth about it -- does the White House view it as an ethical issue not to weigh into that debate? Because you're telling people what to do -- women or husbands, wives, or whomever -- about planning a family -- as this is as serious -- as you're saying, possible birth defects for those who are pregnant, for their children.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think our desire is for people to have access to the best medical information possible as they make these intensely personal decisions. Obviously the government is not going to be making decisions for people, particularly when it comes to something as personal as starting or growing your family. But we do want people to have access to the best information they can get as they make that important and very personal decision.

Q And on two other subjects. Any word from the President, particularly as he drank the water three times in Flint -- does he have any comment about this lawsuit, about the mayor diverting funds in Flint?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any comment to share from the President about ongoing litigation. The President did have an opportunity when he was in Flint to see firsthand the impact this crisis has had on that community. The President has made clear he's going to mobilize resources from federal government to help that local community. And that's why you've seen millions of dollars in public health grants go to Flint to help doctors and nurses and other public health workers there deal with the medical fallout of that crisis situation. The President has urged Congress to act on funding so that the state of Michigan and the city of Flint can make the necessary infrastructure investments to protect the people in that community.

But, look, the city of Flint and the people who live there are enduring a significant challenge, and the President's visit there last week was an important sign to them that the U.S. President has the back of the people in that community that are working hard to rebuild that community and ensure that their children can dream as big as ever.

Q And last question -- West Point cadets were clear. Did the President see the picture? Did he weigh in? Did you talk to him about it?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to him about the picture, but I did see the news reports about the decision that was made by officials at West Point.

Q So speaking for the White House --

MR. EARNEST: I'm confident that the President would not second-guess a decision that was made by those who are responsible for discipline at West Point.

Margaret.

Q Josh, given what a deadly it was in Baghdad, are there any plans for the President or perhaps the Vice President to reach out to the Abadi leadership?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any calls to announce at this point. But, typically, when either the President or the Vice President is in touch with Prime Minister Abadi, we read out the call after it's taken place, and I'm sure we'll do that in this case, as well.

Q Given not just today's violence, but the political crisis that's ongoing in Baghdad, I mean, does the White House still believe that Abadi is strong, as the Secretary of Defense described him just a week ago?

MR. EARNEST: The administration is still committed -- the U.S. government is still committed to supporting Prime Minister Abadi's efforts to reform the political system and to govern that country in an inclusive way. That's going to be critical to the ability of Iraq to secure their country and to face down the threat that is posed by ISIL. That is the approach that Prime Minister Abadi has pursued, even under unquestionably challenging circumstances. And the United States will continue to strongly support Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqi people as they work to unite their country to face down that threat from ISIL.

Q But do you believe a political crisis -- I'm sorry, does the White House believe that a political crisis is adding to this insecurity that we're seeing on the streets of Baghdad?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's no denying that what we see is a chaotic situation in Iraq. I suspect that the direction of influence, though, is a little more along the lines of what Brad laid out, which is that the instability around the security situation in Iraq is making governing that country more challenging. And those are the challenging circumstances I was referring to in terms of Prime Minister Abadi's tenure as Prime Minister. So that certainly is why the United States has been so invested -- along with our coalition partners -- in trying to stabilize the -- trying to help the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces stabilize the situation inside of Iraq.

There's a lot of important progress that we've made over the last almost two years now in driving ISIL out of significant populated areas that they used to control, but there obviously is a lot more work to be done. And there was a reference earlier to the effort to drive ISIL out of Mosul, and that will be a tall order. But the United States and our coalition partners have worked effectively with Iraqi security forces to begin the effort to shape that military strategy. And we're going to continue to support Prime Minister Abadi as he pursues a governing agenda that reflects the diversity of the nation of Iraq.

Q I imagine some of this came out during the NSC meeting yesterday. The government spokesperson in Baghdad today said that just 14 percent of territory in Iraq is still under the control of ISIS. Do those numbers sound right to you?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that specific statistic. I would encourage you to check with the Department of Defense to try to confirm it. The statistic that we've used comes at it from a different perspective. What we have said is that our coalition, working closely with Iraqi security forces, has driven ISIL out of about 40 percent of the populated territory that ISIL previously controlled.

What that says in terms of the overall percentage of the country, I haven't seen a statistic along those lines, so I'd encourage you to check with either the State Department or the Department of the Defense to try to confirm that specific statement. But I think the statistic that we have confirmed I think does illustrate the important progress against ISIL that's been made. That progress was only possible because of the willingness and courage of Iraqi forces that were willing to fight for their country.

And the weakness that we saw in the Iraqi security forces, back in the summer of 2014, was a symptom of a lack of a willingness to fight for the entire country. There is a part of those Iraqi forces that, based on sectarian considerations, left them less willing to defend certain parts of their country. And working to pursue a governing agenda, working to diversify Iraq's security forces and to bring them under the command and control of the Iraqi central government -- all those are positive steps and all of those have contributed to the progress that we've against ISIL thus far. And it's a testament to Prime Minister Abadi's leadership that he was able to do that -- again, under some very difficult and challenging circumstances.

But, look, it's also understandable that there would be some impatience on the part of the Iraqi people and other figures in the Iraqi government about the security situation there. But Prime Minister Abadi has clearly made this a priority. And the American government and the United States military and the 65 nations who are part of our coalition have been strongly supportive of Prime Minister Abadi's efforts and pleased with the important progress that's been made over the last year and a half or so.

Q Quickly, on Syrian refugees. Does the President get updates on the numbers of refugees that are being processed into the U.S.? And do you still believe that 10,000 is roughly the number that are going to be taken in this year?

MR. EARNEST: The President does receive periodic updates about the progress that's being made to accomplish the goal that he laid out, I believe at the end of last year, to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees during this fiscal year. There are reports indicating that we've got some work to do to meet that goal. The President has made clear, both publicly and privately, that this is a priority. And the national security officials that are responsible for implementing this progress understand exactly what the Commander-in-Chief's priorities are.

The President acknowledged at the beginning that this would be a challenging goal to meet, in part because individuals who enter the United States through the refugee program are subjected to more background checks and screening than anybody else who enters the United States. And the President was clear that we would meet this goal without cutting any corners when it comes to security. So I think that sort of describes the

nature of the challenge facing those who are implementing this program. But the President is serious about meeting this goal, and there's a lot of work to do to make that a reality.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Interesting piece by David Ignatius in the Post, quoting Director Clapper, who said, among other things, about the battle to retake Mosul -- you admitted it's a tall order -- he said he didn't think it could be accomplished within the time frame under this administration. How much of a surprise is that to you? And is that something that the President anticipated?

MR. EARNEST: Well, when the President has talked about this, the President has been focused on the kind of shaping operations that I described earlier. And the goal that we've laid out is to try and put in place the conditions by the end of the year where Mosul could be retaken. So that is the goal that we're aiming for. Obviously, all of this work is being led by the Iraqi central government and the Iraqi security forces, but the United States and the rest of the international community has bought in on this strategy, and the groundwork is being laid even as we speak. But this is a tall order. This is the second-largest city in Iraq. So this is going to be a big challenge, but it obviously would be, and will be, a significant strategic accomplishment once that city has been retaken.

Q He went on to say that he didn't think that the U.S. could fix it -- talking about the grander problems that are prevalent not just on the ground, but systematic problems that are there. What does the President think of that perspective?

MR. EARNEST: The President agrees wholeheartedly. This is a problem that the Iraqi people are going to have to solve when it comes to addressing the challenges in their own country. We've tried the path of the United States trying to impose a solution on these countries that are facing so much turmoil and violence, and that didn't work out very well. It didn't work out very well for the United States; it didn't work out very well for the Iraqi people, either. So we need to pursue a strategy where we are empowering the Iraqi government, the Iraqi security forces, and the Iraqi people to confront successfully the problems that are plaguing their own nation.

Q And the President then, you would say, also agrees with his assessment that we should be there because leaving would create a problem as well?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President believes that, at this point in time, we should be actively supporting the efforts of Prime Minister Abadi to unite his country to face down the threat from ISIL. We cannot afford to take the risk of allowing ISIL to fill a security vacuum. We know that that would have a direct and negative impact on the United States' national security.

So we take this quite seriously, and I think it would explain why the President has ordered more than 12,000 airstrikes against ISIL targets in Iraq and in Syria. It's why the President has given his military orders to implement a strategy to build up the capacity of Iraqi security forces to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. It's also why we've pursued

the other elements of our strategy to shut down ISIL's financing and stop the flow of foreign fighters, all in an effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, because we know that the consequences of allowing ISIL to establish a safe haven inside of Iraq would be dire, both for the United States but for our partners and allies around the world.

Q And based on that, should the American people receive that as a message that it's going as expected?

MR. EARNEST: I think the American people can be confident that the Commander-in-Chief understands what's necessary to protect the American people. They can also be confident that President Obama understands that getting the United States directly involved on the frontlines of a ground war in the Middle East where the United States has committed tens of thousands of ground troops in a combat operation would be a bad idea and contrary to our interests. This President --

Q I wasn't clear. I meant based on what you were saying -- some of the things you just pointed had successes. Should the American people then take from that the President feels like it's going as it should be?

MR. EARNEST: I think people can be confident that the President recognizes the stakes; that people can be confident that the President believes that we've made important progress, but I think we can also be confident, and the American people can be confident, that what the President expects to do is to continue this progress through the eight months that are remaining, and present the next President with a path toward accomplishing this broader goal.

But it's going to require the United States to continue to support the Abadi-led government that's committed to an inclusive agenda, and it's also going to require continuing to engage the rest of the international community in this effort. This is not something that the United States can or will do alone, but we will play a leading role in leading an international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And under President Obama's leadership, that's exactly what we've done.

Q Last one. Would the President consider backing an idea of partitioning the country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are obviously people that have floated this idea in a variety of contexts, including even the Vice President in his presidential campaign eight years ago. What our policy and our belief continues to be is that Iraq will be most successful in their fight against ISIL if they can succeed in uniting that country to face down the security threat that ISIL poses.

We believe that Iraq is stronger when it's united. And I think the best evidence that we have of this is that President Abadi's predecessor, Prime Minister Maliki, did pursue a rather sectarian governing agenda, and the vulnerabilities in that agenda were laid bare when you saw Iraqi security forces that were charged with protecting that country essentially melt away when ISIL began their initial assault on their country.

So that's why the President essentially made a precondition of robust U.S. military involvement in the counter-ISIL effort in Iraq that the Iraqi people elect and support a Prime Minister who's committed to reforming the government in pursuing the kind of inclusive governing agenda that would unite the country to face the threat. That's exactly what Prime Minister Abadi has done. That's why the U.S. government has been supportive of his efforts to do so. And that's why we continue to stand with the Iraqi people in this very difficult time.

Ron.

Q A couple of quick ones. Zika -- there was money taken from the emergency fund, right -- the Ebola fund? What is the status of that? And is it your position that that money is going to run out soon and that there is no other opportunity to tap into that same fund if Congress doesn't come up with something?

MR. EARNEST: Our posture on this has been that using that money was essentially a last resort to try and do as much as we possibly can to protect the American people from the Zika virus. But what our public health professionals have said, what Dr. Fauci said when he was standing at this podium about a month or so ago is that that money, about \$600 million, was insufficient to fund all of the things that the federal government can and should be doing to try to prepare for the onset of the Zika virus.

Q So there's no more money in that fund? There's no more money available from that emergency fund to the administration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we can check with OMB on this. I think what it actually is, is that we have basically taken as much money as we can from those accounts without undermining the important public health work that they're already doing. We didn't want to be in a situation where we were essentially eliminating all of the funding to fight Ebola to try to come back and fight Zika, because that would be a pretty unwise decision, as well.

So what we've done is basically taken as much money as we possibly can without totally gutting the Ebola program to direct it towards Zika. Now, to succeed against Ebola, we're going to need that money to be repaid, and to be repaid quickly. So we need Congress to act on that, as well. I don't want them to think that this is money that was just sitting around with nothing to do. The fact is, this is money that was available that we could use toward Zika without undermining the Ebola effort, but we need the Ebola effort to be fully funded, as well. And I think everybody who covered this White House in the fall of 2014 would acknowledge that we're not going to take Ebola lightly and that that would be a bad decision for the country.

Q In Iraq, following the breach of the Green Zone, is the -- what has been done by the United States to make sure that -- and are you confident that that will not happen again? There were reports that Iraqi security forces basically let these protesters in. There was

some concern about the American embassy and that -- there's been more Marines sent in. What is the administration's level of concern about that embassy, and who is responsible for that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously the nation of Iraq has obligations to protect all of the diplomatic facilities on their soil, and we've received assurances from the Iraqi government that they understand that that's their obligation.

In addition to that, the State Department has ordered some steps to ensure that the embassy -- the U.S. embassy in Baghdad is secure. I think for obvious reasons I won't be able to detail all of the security precautions that have been taken, but the safety and security of our diplomats serving the United States around the world is the President's top priority. And he has made clear to his team that all the necessary steps that need to be taken to ensure their safety at the embassy in Baghdad are taken. And I'm confident that the State Department has done that.

Q And given the continued violence there, and the concern obviously about embassies everywhere in light of the Benghazi situation and because that's become such a political issue, the administration is confident that that embassy -- that leaving the primary responsibility to the Iraqis is sufficient?

MR. EARNEST: Well, every nation has an obligation to safeguard the diplomatic facilities that are on their country's soil. The United States, for example, has an obligation to ensure the safety and security of foreign diplomats that are serving here in the United States. We take that obligation seriously, and we obviously expect that other countries around the world take that obligation seriously.

But, of course, at U.S. diplomatic facilities all around the world there are United States Marine Corps servicemembers who are standing guard. And the President takes that security quite seriously, but that certainly does not absolve local governments of the responsibility that they have to ensure the safety and security of our diplomats as well.

Q One more. On this issue of the President and the press that's been out there lately -- I sent you this this earlier -- the American Presidency Project in Santa Barbara -- UC Santa Barbara -- did an analysis that shows that President Obama has had fewer press conferences -- is on pace to have fewer press conferences than his previous two predecessors. And the monthly and average rate that he's been doing these at is less than his three previous predecessors. Is that correct?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think there are a lot of different ways to slice and dice these numbers. Obviously the President was just out here five days ago doing a news conference with all of you, standing at this podium. So he does them with some regularity. But there are a lot of different ways to slice and dice the numbers here.

Q But they counted press conferences -- formal press conferences, briefing room appearances, joint press conferences with other world leaders. I believe it's a fairly credible institution. But the point is that, by a couple of different measurements, the

President has been much less accessible -- less accessible -- I don't want to put an adjective in there -- to the press than his previous predecessors. And, of course, there is still time to go. But you don't see it that way or he doesn't see it that way?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President has done a lot of news conferences. It certainly is your job as you sit here in the briefing room and as you cover the President every day to advocate for more access to the President and for more news conferences and more opportunities to ask him questions. We certainly understand that's a part of your job and that's part of the give and take that has characterized the relationship between the White House and White House press corps for at least one century, probably two.

I think what is also true is that this President has done more one-on-one interviews with reporters, both from the White House and from other places, than any of his predecessors. I think that is a testament to the President's desire to try to engage with independent professional journalists who are interested in understanding exactly what he's doing.

But, look, I don't take any exception to your advocacy for more access to the President. That certainly is part of your job description.

Mark.

Q Josh, is there any White House response to the growing complaints about the TSA and the long lines at airport security checkpoints lately, with the summer travel season nearing?

Mr. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific White House order that's been issued on this. I do know that the TSA certainly takes very seriously the responsibility that they have to protect our aviation system, but also to minimize the inconvenience to U.S. travelers.

So they're mindful of the responsibility that they have. Certainly some of the challenges that they're facing right now could be alleviated if they got all of the funding that we would like to see them have. So once again, a problem that people have noticed can be traced back pretty directly to the inability of Republicans in Congress to govern the country. But what I also know that the TSA has done is they've brought on some additional staff, including those with some management expertise, to try to address some of these problems, given the resource constraints that they're operating under.

Q I also wanted to ask about the national mammal bill that the President signed on Monday. Were there any White House deliberations on honoring the North American bison among all other mammals, including people, I guess? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mark, I can tell you -- that's an interesting question. Well, I can tell you that there was a robust legislative effort on the part of the White House on this one. We were determined not to get buffaloed on this. (Laughter.)

Q I did not set him up. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: But obviously, this is a piece of legislation that's passed through the Congress and I would anticipate that the President will sign it.

Q I also wondered if you saw that New York Times story yesterday about Mrs. Clinton promising to get to the bottom of the UFO and Area 51 conspiracies. And I wondered if the President would like to beat her to the punch by showing his degree of transparency on this issue, which is of concern to a lot of Americans.

MR. EARNEST: I have to admit, I don't have a tab in my briefing book for Area 51 today.

Q Or a joke.

MR. EARNEST: Or a joke.

Q Because it's (inaudible).

MR. EARNEST: Maybe it has -- part of a grand conspiracy. I'm not aware of any plans that the President has to make public any information about this.

Q Does he feel he's gotten to the bottom of it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that he has joked publicly before about one of the benefits of the presidency is having access to that information. I don't know whether or not he has availed himself of that opportunity. But if we have more on this, we'll let you know.

Q At night, under the cover of darkness? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Potentially.

Scott.

Q Is the President's meeting with the Secretary of Treasury this afternoon mostly about Puerto Rico, or could you give us a little insight on what they're talking about?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is just part of the regular -- I believe it's a bi-weekly meeting that the President has with the Secretary of the Treasury. I would anticipate that high on the agenda will be getting a readout from Secretary Lew about his trip to Puerto Rico.

And I just described to you some of what Secretary Lew saw firsthand when he visited Puerto Rico, and I would anticipate that he'll talk with the President about that a little bit more as well.

I would also anticipate that other budgetary issues will be on the agenda as well. But once that meeting concludes, we'll see if we can get you some more details about what they discussed.

Angela.

Q Thanks, Josh. Following up on the line of questioning about Brazil, there's a very real possibility that there could for some time be two Brazilian Presidents concurrently, one interim President and one suspended President. How would the administration handle

relations with Brazil if that does come to pass?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we obviously would follow the traditions and the laws of Brazil. And, again, what I understand about this process comes entirely from reading news accounts of what's happening there -- or almost entirely of news accounts from what's happening there. And the way that I understand how this process works is that if the vote in the Senate goes the way that many people are predicting, then President Rousseff would step aside while the charges against her are heard by the appropriate legislative body. And the current Vice President would assume the constitutional powers of the presidency until such time as the allegations against President Rousseff are resolved. That's my understanding about the way the process works, and the U.S. government and our diplomats who are serving in Brazil would engage with the Brazilian government according to their rules and traditions.

Q And does this situation provide an opening, potentially, for an improvement of relations with Brazil? They've been an important partner of the U.S., but the government has been in power for over a decade -- the party has been in power that was aligned with the U.S. interests. Is there a silver lining here for the U.S. in the disarray of the Brazilian government?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, President Rousseff was here at the White House a little over a year ago, and I think that a hallmark of that visit was effective coordination between the United States and Brazil on a whole range of issues -- everything from the economy to national security to even climate change. So we've been able to do a lot of important work with the Brazilian government, and we'd certainly look for any additional opportunities that are available to cooperate with them even further to make progress on priorities that President Obama has identified.

Gardiner.

Q Does the President support Paul Ryan's plan to confront the opioid crisis? He recently came out with a plan.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I have heard some discussion about their plan. I think it's a series of bills that they have -- I believe it's 18 different bills that they're considering, none of which actually include any funding, which is unfortunate and it raises questions about what exactly they hope the impact of these bills would be. I know that there has been some concern expressed by the Speaker's office that the political turmoil inside the Republican Party is overshadowing this particular legislative effort. I think my observation would be, if there were actually some substance behind this legislative effort, it might get some more deserved attention. If there were actual funding in here to support more access to treatment and more evidence-based treatment options for people across the country, I suspect it would be worthy of more public attention.

But, unfortunately, that's not the option that Republicans have chosen. It is particularly unfortunate because the President put forward his own proposal, totaling about a billion dollars that would make important investments in research and treatment and recovery

programs. But as you'll recall, Gardiner, Republicans for the first time in four decades declined to even hear from the President's Budget Director about that priority.

So Republicans paying lip service to an issue that they know is important to voters, without actually doing something substantive to address it, and, in fact, actively blocking Obama administration efforts to address it is kind of an old story, but it's the reputation that Republicans have embraced for seven years now and it's a reputation that they demonstrate is well-earned.

Q Back to the refugee numbers. The President is hosting a refugee summit in September. It looks like, as you have somewhat admitted, you're going to be way behind on admitting even the small number of Syrian refugees that the President has vowed to admit. How is the administration, how is the President going to speak with these world leaders and urge them to do more when the United States seems to not only have such a paltry goal on Syrian refugees to begin with but is probably not even going to be close to meeting even that small goal at that point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Gardiner, there are several more months left in the fiscal year. And at this point in time in the last fiscal year, there was skepticism about whether or not the administration would succeed in meeting the goal for admitting refugees that we had set for last year. And in the last few months of the fiscal year, the pace ramped up and that goal was met.

This administration is focused on doing that again, but we will not do that in a way that results in a weakening of security standards. This is a challenging task. Individuals who enter the United States through the refugee program are subjected to more scrutiny, more vetting, and more background checks than anybody else who enters the United States. And the President is determined to keep those strict security measures in place, even as we ramp up the number of people who are admitted to the United States. That imposes a significant strain on our system, but the President is determined to meet that goal. He has made that clear to his team, and that's something that we're going to continue to strive for.

I think when you step back and look at the longer-term picture in terms of the United States record on the U.N. refugee program, it's hard for other countries to criticize, particularly when you consider that over the last several years the United States has taken in more people through the U.N. refugee program than every other nation in the world -- than all the other nations in the world combined.

But given the significant crisis in Syria, it's clear that those efforts need to be expanded not just here in the United States but in other countries around the world. And that's what the goal of the U.N. meeting will be, will be to encourage nations around the world to raise their ambitions when it comes to meeting the basic humanitarian needs of people who are fleeing their homes to escape violence.

Lauren.

Q On Capitol Hill today there is a meeting -- a hearing about Boko Haram, and one of the people who are testifying is a schoolgirl who was abducted. What the lawmakers are saying is that Boko Haram is the most dangerous terrorist organization. Does the White House agree with that, or does that honor go to al Qaeda and ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously, the President understands how dangerous Boko Haram is. That is why we have devoted significant resources to assisting the Nigerian government and building up their capacity to confront Boko Haram in their country. We're mindful of that threat, and we understand the terrible violence that they have perpetrated against innocent people not just in Nigeria but across that region.

So the United States continues to stand with the Nigerian government and the Nigerian people as they face down this threat. And we're mindful of the need to continue to apply pressure to those extremist organizations, and aren't able to establish the kind of foothold that would allow them to significantly expand the territory and people that are affected by their violent acts.

Q Are they worse?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, it's hard to say. But obviously we take the threat that they pose quite seriously. This is a terrible, violent extremist organization, and we've worked hard to support the Nigerian government as they've gone after them.

Q There were three suicide bombings in Baghdad today, targeting Shiite Muslims. Is it the U.S.'s responsibility to promote religious liberty in that region?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the values of the United States are values that we're interested in promoting everywhere, and obviously there are different cultures, different security climates, but we certainly -- the President takes seriously the responsibility that our government has to promote our values around the world. And I think that even a casual observer of this situation would acknowledge that just a little bit of religious tolerance in this part of the world would go a long way to addressing the kind of chaos and violence that has stemmed from many of the sectarian atrocities that have been committed.

Atsushi.

Q Thanks, Josh. A couple of things about the President's upcoming trip to Vietnam and Japan. Firstly, on Japan, I understand the President will provide a forward-looking vision when he visits Hiroshima. Will the President also mention not only about Hiroshima but Nagasaki during the speech or deliver that message?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have much of a preview of those comments to share with you at this point. I know that in some places, the President's visit to Hiroshima was covered as the President planning to give a major speech in Hiroshima. That's not accurate. When he visits Hiroshima, I would anticipate the President will have an opportunity to reflect on his time there, but the President does not plan to deliver a major address in Hiroshima. But I don't have any more details about those remarks to share at this point, but as it gets closer, we'll keep you posted.

Q How is the President going to deliver the message? In front of the audience or just in front of the media outlets?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our advance team is preparing to arrive in Japan in just a couple of days, so we're still working through the logistics and we'll keep you posted.

Q Does the President have a plan to visit the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima?

MR. EARNEST: Again, we're still working through the logistics of the President's visit, but we'll keep you posted. These are all good questions. As we get farther down the line of planning the President's visit, we'll be able to give you more detail about what the President will see.

Q On Vietnam, President Obama will visit Vietnam for the first time and the second visit of a sitting President, I believe. Is there any significant meaning in terms of reconciliation between the two countries, the United States and Vietnam? In Ho Chi Minh City, what's the plan? What is the plan for the President to visit, or what kind of message is the President going to deliver in Saigon?

MR. EARNEST: The President will spend a couple of days in Vietnam. It is his first trip to Vietnam as President of the United States, and the President will spend time with the kind of bilateral program that you've come to expect when you see the President travel overseas. He'll meet with high-ranking government officials and spend time talking about the importance of our bilateral relationship. And I'm confident that will touch on aspects of our security relationship but also aspects of our economic relationship as well.

Vietnam has been a part of the TPP negotiations, and the prospect of Vietnam taking steps to raise labor, human rights, and environmental standards, and give U.S. businesses more access to a rapidly growing Vietnamese middle class is a good thing. And the President will certainly continue to assure the government and the people of Vietnam that the United States is serious about implementing the TPP agreement. We recognize that it would have a positive impact on the U.S. economy and U.S. strategic interests in the region. We also recognize it would have a positive impact on Vietnam's economy and on Vietnam's national security as well. We would welcome the deeper ties that would result from an enhanced economic relationship.

Q What about the maritime security cooperation?

MR. EARNEST: I'm confident that will be a part of the discussion, too. Obviously maritime security is quite relevant to the day-to-day security concerns of the Vietnamese government. And obviously the United States would like to see those maritime security questions, particularly as it relates to claims on land features in the South China Sea, be resolved through diplomacy and through established international rules of order. So we certainly will support that effort, and the President will lend his continued support to that in the context of this visit.

Dave, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. Susan Rice gave a speech in Florida today in which she said that the country's various national security agencies suffer from a lack of diversity. And she said that if the leadership at those agencies was more diversified they would "make better decisions." Does the President agree with that?

MR. EARNEST: The President certainly believes that our government is most effective and is making the best decisions when we have a government that looks like the country. And the President has made a concerted effort to encourage Americans of all backgrounds to consider a career in public service. There are obviously a variety of ways to contribute to our country. In some cases, that might be joining the military. In some cases, that may be signing up to be a diplomat to represent U.S. interests around the world. In other cases, that might just be joining civil service and finding ways to serve in communities all across the country.

The President believes that our country is strongest when Americans of all backgrounds both consider that as a career option but also have an opportunity to be promoted and to be considered for high-ranking positions in those kinds of roles. And those opportunities are I think understandably and even rightfully given most often to people that have a lot of experience in those agencies and in that kind of work. So encouraging young people as they are considering the start of their career to consider a career in public service isn't just good for the country, it's also good for ensuring over the long term that the senior levels of the U.S. government are filled with government employees that reflect the diversity of America.

Q Talking about senior-level people, she said, minorities still make up less than 20 percent of our senior diplomats and less than 15 percent of our senior military officers and senior intelligence officials. Given the fact that the President has been President for almost eight years, isn't that implicit criticism of his appointments? Is he having trouble finding qualified nominees?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't think that she intended it to be implicit criticism of the President's appointments. I think when you take a look at the effort that the President has undertaken to ensure that we have a government that reflects the diversity of America, we've made historic progress in that regard. We've obviously talked about the President's record of judicial appointments, and so the President has a record that he's proud of.

But let me just go back to this point because I think this is the point that Susan is trying to make. The best way for us to ensure over the long term that the senior ranks of government positions are filled by people who reflect the diversity of this country is to ensure that as people are considering the beginning of their career, that they're considering a career in public service; that giving more minorities in particular the opportunity to start a career in public service and rise through the ranks means that future Presidents will have a much more diverse pool of applicants to consider when making senior-level appointments, and that's a good thing. If you're asking somebody to take a senior-level management position in an agency, for example, having agency experience is a good credential to have.

And the President has certainly considered that carefully when he has made his senior-level appointments. And so when you have a pool of applicants that has a lot of experience in the government and that pool of applicants is more diverse, it's going to make it easier for future generations or for future U.S. Presidents to have a whole generation of government employees and civil servants to choose from that's more diverse. And that's a good thing, and that will be good for the long-term strength of our country.

I guess the point is, that is an effect that is not going to be felt in the short term, and certainly not one that is going to be obviously detected over the course of just one presidency or even two. But the President is hopeful that 15 or 20 years from now, that a future President will have a more diverse pool of applicants to choose from when considering senior-level government appointments.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:18 P.M. EDT