

On-the-Record Conference Call by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syria

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MS. MEEHAN: Good afternoon, everybody. This is Bernadette Meehan at the National Security Council. Thank you for joining this conference call on Syria. This is an on-the-record call without embargo.

We have a senior administration official with us today; that is Ben Rhodes, the Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications. He will make some introductory comments and then we will open it up for questions. And again, this is on the record, without embargo.

And with that, I'll turn it over to Ben.

MR. RHODES: Thanks, everybody, for joining the call. You should have in front of you a statement that addresses our latest assessment of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. I'll just draw your attention to a few elements of that statement.

First of all, you know that this an issue that we have been following very closely. Ever since the assessment made by intelligence community in April, the President has directed our intelligence community to further investigate the use of chemical weapons and to seek credible and corroborative information to build on their April assessment.

This was done in the context of the U.N. investigation being frustrated by the failure of the Assad regime to cooperate and provide the necessary access. As we've said to you, we are going to continue with our own investigation, along with friends and allies, even as we continue to believe that that U.N. investigation should go forward.

Today, at the President's direction, we have pulled together a revision of our intelligence community assessment that we have provided to Congress and we are now updating the public now. I'll just draw your attention to a few elements of that assessment in our

response.

First of all, our intelligence community assesses that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year. Our intelligence community has high confidence given the multiple independent streams of information associated with their reporting.

The intelligence community estimates that 100 to 150 people have died from detected chemical weapons attacks in Syria to date. I would note that that casualty data is likely incomplete, but that is what we've reviewed through our investigation.

This is clearly a small portion of the catastrophic loss of life in Syria that now totals more than 90,000 deaths. But as we've consistently said, the use of chemical weapons violates international norms and crosses red lines that have existed in the international community for decades.

I'd also note that we believe that the Assad regime maintains control of chemical weapons within Syria, and we have not seen any reliable reporting or corroborated reporting indicating that the opposition has acquired or used chemical weapons.

This information is something that we are sharing with friends and allies. We've already briefed some allies on this information, and we've also provided it to the United Nations.

We've consistently sought to present information to Dr. Sellström, who is leading the U.N. mission on this issue. We also intend to provide a letter to the U.N. Secretary General, drawing attention to our updated intelligence assessment, because we believe it's important for the international community to, number one, share the information that different countries have about these attacks. And also, it's important for the U.N. to consider what potential response the international community should make to these attacks.

In terms of the United States, the President, as you've heard him say, has made it clear that the use of chemical weapons or transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups is a red line, given the fact that there's a long-established international norm against the use of chemical weapons. We now have a high-confidence assessment that chemical weapons have been used on a small scale by the Assad regime. And so he has said that the use of chemical weapons would change his calculus, and it has.

Since April, as we've reviewed this evidence, we have increased our support and provision of assistance to the opposition. That includes increased support to the Syrian Opposition Coalition, but it also includes the provision of assistance to the Supreme Military Council in Syria. And so we are focused right now on strengthening the effectiveness of the SMC and helping to coordinate the provision of the assistance to the SMC by the United States and other partners and allies.

So the Assad regime should know that its actions have already led us to increase both the scope and scale of the assistance that we're providing to the opposition, including direct support to the SMC, the military option on the ground. And we will continue to increase

these efforts going forward.

I'd also note that both the United States and the international community have other legal, financial, diplomatic and military responses available to us. We've prepared for many contingencies within Syria. We are going to make decisions about further action on our own timeline. This is clearly a complex and evolving situation in Syria. And we are going to make decisions that are consistent with our own national interests and that advance our objectives, which is achieving a negotiated political settlement that establishes an authority that can provide stability and administer state institutions in Syria, protecting the rights of all Syrians and securing unconventional and advanced conventional weapons within Syria while countering terrorist activities.

We're also going to be consulting in the days ahead with both Congress and the international community. We will be providing this assessment to Congress, and we will also be consulting with them about our assessments on chemical weapons and our policy response.

The President will also be consulting with his G8 partners in the United Kingdom beginning next week, and we'll continue to have discussions both with friends and allies, including those who have joined us and the Friends of the Syrian People and at the United Nations where we are sharing this information.

So with that, I'd be happy to move to questions.

Q Hey, Ben, thanks for doing the call. I just want to clarify, when you talk about how you guys have contingency plans and you'll be looking at other options, does that mean that nothing is imminent in response to this crossing of the red line? And can you talk a little bit more specifically about what among the contingency plans you're looking at most closely, most seriously right now?

MR. RHODES: First of all, we believe that we have already taken action because of our assessed use of chemical weapons. Those actions are represented in both the scale and type of support that we're providing to the Syrian opposition. So we've increased the support we're providing to the opposition and we've also increased the types of support we're providing. That goes to the political opposition of the SOC, but it also includes the military opposition, the SMC, on the ground.

And so the President has taken the decision to provide that type of direct support to the SMC that has military purposes. And we're looking at a wide range of types of support we can provide both to the political opposition and to the SMC on the ground.

I'm not going to be able to detail every single type of support that we are providing, but it's suffice to say it's important to note that it is both the political and the military opposition that will be -- that is and will be receiving U.S. assistance.

We've also been consulting closely with allies, and you've seen the President meet with the Emir of Qatar, the Prime Minister of Turkey, the King of Jordan. He's met with a range of his counterparts in the region, and including, I should, the United Arab Emirates. And so

we will be continuing to do that, because part of what we also want to do is coordinate this assistance.

So that is something -- that is a decision that has been taken to increase both the type and scale of the support we're providing, and it's been taken in part because of our assessed use of chemical weapons. Then there are other options that are noted at the end of the statement, and that's a wide range of options available to us. That could include potential military options. That could include potential international action. We'll be consulting at the G8 and the United Nations about what might be necessary, even as we deal with the humanitarian situation in which the United States is providing \$515 million in humanitarian assistance for the Syrian crisis and seeking to rally others to provide more as well.

So there's a range of options available to us, but we're going to do what we think is most important and effective to deal with the situation. And we also are going to act very deliberately so that we're making decisions based on the U.S. national interest as well as our assessment of what can make a difference on the ground in Syria.

Q Hi, Ben. You spoke about direct assistance to the SMC, but other than the food and medical supplies, we've been told that the other assistance, which was assistance approved some time ago, actually hasn't gotten there yet. At the same time, you have General Idris and the SMC saying very urgently that there are other things that they want. How urgent do you assess the situation right now to be? Do you not agree that there's an urgency to it?

MR. RHODES: Sure. Thanks, Karen. I'd just say a couple of things. There's an urgency to the situation. There has been an urgency to the situation for two years. It's particularly urgent right now in terms of the situation on the ground, in some respect, because we have seen Hezbollah and Iran increase their own involvement in the conflict, and that has caused an influx of additional fighters to the conflict. And so that has added an element of urgency.

In our mind, the high-confidence assessment that chemical weapons has been used also adds an element of urgency as well given the norms that exist against the use of chemical weapons. So we are acting on a number of fronts in that regard.

Now, with respect to the first part of your question, it takes time to establish a pipeline of -- to flow assistance into the country. So in that effort, we had to do a number of things. Number one, we needed to identify the opposition that we could work with. And the SOC we are comfortable working with, and General Idris and the SMC we are comfortable working with. And it's been important to work through them while aiming to isolate some of the more extremist elements of the opposition, such as al Nusra.

We now have those relationships. We now have that pipeline flowing. We've seen material get into Syria, including to the SMC.

In terms of the types of assistance, we are aiming to be responsive to the needs of the Syrian opposition, including the SMC. And so we've heard their requests. And, again, our aim is to be responsive and to provide that assistance that has direct military purposes for the SMC on the ground.

And I guess what I'm saying today is I can't go through an inventory of the type of assistance that we're going to provide, but suffice it to say it's going to be substantively different from what we were providing certainly before our initial CW assessment in April. And it's going to be an increase on both the political and the military side, and we're going to be working that through with the SMC in the days to come, with friends and allies, particularly those in the region who are also providing assistance, and we'll be consulting with Congress as well.

Q Hi, I just want to make sure I'm clear: Is this assistance that you're talking about new assistance that you haven't already announced? And, second of all, what reaction do you think Russia is going to have? What emphasis is President Obama going to put on this news in his meetings with his Russian counterpart at the G8?

MR. RHODES: Yes, this will be both the increases in assistance we've already undertaken since April, but there will be additional assistance on top of that. And, as I said, it will cover a range of different purposes, and it's aimed at strengthening both the cohesion of the opposition, but also the effectiveness of the SMC on the ground and their efforts to defend themselves against a repressive regime that has shown no boundaries and its willingness to kill civilians.

With respects to the Russians, we have made the case for some time now to Russia that it's in their interest to help us restore a stable situation in Syria. In our view, you cannot have stability in Syria with a leader in Bashar al-Assad who has demonstrated that he is willing to kill innocent men, women, and children within his own country.

So we're continuing to work towards a political settlement that ultimately would be the only way to effectively stop the violence in Syria that involves the regime and the opposition coming together. Again, in our view, that process would have to involve Bashar al-Assad stepping down, and the Russians have not yet agreed to it.

I do think -- and I should say that we have briefed this chemical weapons information to the Russians, so we have already provided them with our assessment of the use of chemical weapons. And we believe that Russia and all members of the international community should be concerned about the use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world given the norms that are established against it.

And so we'll be consulting with Russia at the G8 and at the United Nations going forward, and once again making the case that continuing to provide support to the Assad regime without applying the necessary pressure to help achieve an end to this violence is not in the interest of the international community.

Q Two questions. One, just a small logistical one. Is there going to be a National Security Council meeting this evening, a meeting the President will attend on Syria? And then, a broader question: Does the administration -- I think you got at this in your last question, but I want to be very clear about it -- does the administration still believe that the Geneva process is its primary vehicle for trying to resolve this, given that with today's announcement you've effectively said that the Assad regime is outside the norms of international conduct? I'm wondering in light of that how realistic is it to have them be at the table negotiating a political transition.

MR. RHODES: On your first question, Mark, there's not an NSC meeting tonight on this topic involving the President. I will say that there have been a number of meetings throughout the week at various levels on Syria here at the White House among the different officials responsible for Syria policy. The President is also regularly briefed on Syria on a nearly daily basis as a part of his national security briefings and discussions with his team.

And it's important to note that this, by the way, has been an unfolding process. So after the assessment in April, the intelligence community has essentially been exhaustively reviewing information and seeking to corroborate information about the use of chemical weapons. And that has led them to this high-confidence assessment.

And if I might just give some example of that. We, for instance, have focused on different incidents that we associate with this assessment. So, for instance, a March 19th attack of this year in which we assessed that sarin was used in the Aleppo suburb of Khan al-Assal; an April 13th attack that was also in the Aleppo area in the neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsood; a May 14th attack, also this year, in the town of Qasr Abu Samra, which is north of Homs; a May 23rd attack in the eastern part of Damascus, in Adra.

So these are several of the incidents that are associated with our assessment. And the point is we've been pulling this information together over a period of months, so it didn't just come together in the last couple of days. This has been something that we've been reviewing for weeks and are just now given a high degree of confidence in the assessment and a position to share with Congress and the public. And it also will allow the President to consult with his G8 partners in the coming days.

With respect to Geneva, I think the bottom line is a political settlement is still the preferable outcome. The reason why is, in the absence of a political settlement, you're going to have a conflict within Syria -- for all intents and purposes, a civil war within Syria that has foreign involvement from groups like Hezbollah and Iran -- you're going to have that conflict continue until somebody prevails in that conflict. And by definition, that's going to mean more loss of life, more suffering, more refugees in the region. So we have an obligation, despite the difficult odds involved, to pursue a political negotiation, and the Geneva process continues to provide a template for that to take place.

That would have to involve credible representation from both the opposition and the Assad regime, and it would have to involve support from the international community. We have no illusions that that's going to be easy to put together in the coming days and

weeks given both this assessment and given, for instance, the involvement by Hezbollah and Iran in some of the recent fighting. But it is something we're going to continue to pursue because we just think it's the preferable outcome.

But even as that process continues, we're going to move forward with our own efforts to strengthen the opposition. And so we're essentially moving on those two tracks -- an effort that is focused on coalescing and strengthening the effectiveness of the political and military opposition, but also seeking to pursue a political settlement.

I would note that we do believe that this further adds to the illegitimacy of the Assad regime, as you suggested in your question. That's why we believe Bashar al-Assad can't be a part of the future of Syria.

At the same time, ideally a political settlement would not have to necessitate the dissolution of all the institutions of the state, because ultimately the goal here is an end to the conflict, but also some type of administration that respects the rights of the Syrian people but can also deliver the basic services upon which a state depends.

So there is a future for those in the Assad regime who are willing to accept the end of Bashar al Assad's reign but willing to work for a better future for Syria. I should add that those members of the Assad regime should not want to associate themselves with something like the use of chemical weapons, given the fact that there are accountability measures in the international community for those who give or carry out orders to use weapons of mass destruction like chemical agents.

With that, we'll take another question.

Q Ben, it's Major here and I'll take it for Mark. You said "additional assistance will be provided," and there's some confusion already in the Senate on this. John McCain said even before this conference call started that the President decided to arm the Syrian rebels, and he congratulated the President on that. And then about six minutes later on the Senate floor, he said, oh, I'm not sure, maybe the President hasn't so decided. And then he talked to reporters afterwards and said that he had heard from very reliable sources and people in the know that the President had already made this decision. So there is some great expectation, at least within some quarters of the Senate, that this will happen or the President has already decided. Does the additional assistance you're talking about envision arming the rebels? Is that a decision that's eminent, or should we anticipate that in some weeks ahead? And can you in any way, shape or form account for this confusion?

MR. RHODES: Yes, Major. Thanks for the question. Let me put it this way -- the President has made a decision about providing more support to the opposition. That will involve providing direct support to the SMC. That includes military support. I cannot detail for you all of the types of that support for a variety of reasons, but suffice it to say this is going to be different in both scope and scale in terms of what we are providing to the SMC than what we have provided before.

So the President has made a decision in part because of the assessed use of chemical weapons to provide additional types of support to the SMC, which I cannot inventory for you, but which will be aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of the SNC on the ground. And so that is something we have decided to move forward with. And we are going to do so in consultation with and cooperation with other countries in the region. For instance, we have been working with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and we've also, again -- going to be consulting with allies like the United Kingdom and France and others about the best way to support the Syrian opposition.

Q Hi, thanks again for doing the call. I'm sorry to be a broken record but I'm going to try again. Has the President decided in his own mind whether he's willing to arm the rebels, but he just doesn't want to announce a decision until he has some multilateral and congressional consensus? And same on the subject of no-fly zones -- is that something that he is -- wants to pursue, doesn't want to pursue, is closer to pursuing? And are you waiting for the G8 to announce this? It's just on these two issues -- both on arming and on the no-fly zone -- that I think we all need a little more clarity if you can. Thanks.

MR. RHODES: On the first one, the President has made his decision. And there's not a delay in any type of announcement associated with the types of reasons that you laid out, Margaret.

I'm not going to be able to inventory the types of support that we're going to provide to the SMC, but I'd point to my previous answers -- suffice it to say that decision has been made about providing additional direct support to the SMC to strengthen their effectiveness. This is more a situation where we're just not going to be able to lay out an inventory of what exactly falls under the scope of that assistance other than to communicate that we have made that decision. And the decision is focused on how do we -- how to be responsive to their needs, how do we increase their effectiveness, and how do we work with other countries who are also providing assistance so that we're maximizing our efforts.

On the second question, that is a separate question, and we have not made any decision to pursue a military operation such as a no-fly zone. And we have a range of contingency plans that we've drawn up.

But to speak to this issue for a moment, we still believe that the best thing that we can do in terms of effecting the situation on the ground is strengthening the opposition; that a no-fly zone, while there is a contingency plan for many different things, would carry with it great and open-ended costs for the United States and the international community. It's far more complex to undertake the type of effort, for instance, in Syria than it was in Libya.

But furthermore, there's not even a clear guarantee that it would dramatically improve the situation on the ground where you have regime forces and irregular regime-associated forces essentially comingled with opposition forces in a civilian population. That is a very hard challenge to get at from the air. That doesn't mean that we've ruled anything out other than the provision of U.S. boots on the ground -- which nobody has suggested -- but

it does mean that I think people need to understand that not only are there huge costs associated with the no-fly zone, not only would it be difficult to implement, but the notion that you can solve the very deeply rooted challenges on the ground in Syria from the air are not immediately apparent.

So we'll continue to consult with the opposition and with other countries about the best way forward, but we're going to make decisions in a deliberate manner that are consistent with U.S. national interests and that have the best potential to have a positive impact on the ground and to achieve the objectives that we've laid out both in terms of dealing with the humanitarian crisis, but also in trying to accelerate a political transition.

Q Hi, Ben. Thanks for doing the call. I think you've answered the question about the military support to the Syrian opposition, but you mentioned something about wanting to improve the effectiveness of the opposition. What do you mean by that? What needs to be improved?

MR. RHODES: Well, look, there are a number of challenges that we want to help the opposition to address. One of those challenges is their effectiveness as a fighting force, and that is something that we are going to be focused on with friends and allies in the region in particular.

Another is their cohesion and the ability, for instance, for people in different parts of Syria to be in communication with one another. That's why the non-lethal assistance that we provided into the country I think is directly relevant to their effectiveness, because when you talk about communications equipment, you talk about transport -- these are things that allow them to cohere as a unit that can challenge the regime and associated forces.

It also means providing the types of medical equipment that are necessary to help them deal with significant challenges -- with casualties, civilian in particular, within Syria. It also means providing a significant amount of humanitarian assistance into the country to help address the significant challenges that people are facing within Syria. And that's why we have over \$500 million in humanitarian assistance we're providing.

All of these types of things will make the opposition more cohesive as a military counsel, but also as a body that is connected to the political opposition. Because essentially what you need is you need to have cohesion between the Syrian Opposition Coalition -- which is the political entity for the opposition -- and the SMC, which is a military entity. And the more that those two bodies are synched up with one another and the more that they are effective both not just as a fighting force but as an authority that can help meet some of the needs of the Syrian people and be in contact with the international community, the greater legitimacy they will gain both within Syria and within the world.

So that's in large part what this assistance is all about. Because ultimately, when you step back from the day to day, we need something that can both bring about an end to the Assad regime and can also transition to a stronger governing authority within Syria that provides for the rights and needs of the Syrian people. And so, this assistance that we

provided and that other countries are providing is all directly relevant to building and sustaining that type of opposition -- doing so, by the way, in the context of Iran and Hezbollah having dramatically increased their involvement in this conflict over time.

And again, I'll just conclude by saying that this is something that the President will be addressing at the G8 with his counterparts in the coming days, and that we'll be also addressing through the United Nations as we provide our intelligence assessment to the investigation that's underway, and to the Secretary General, given our grave concerns about the situation in Syria but also any use of chemical weapons.

So with that, thank you all for joining the call on relatively short notice here. I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunities to discuss these issues in the days to come. And tragically, I'm sure we'll be dealing with Syria in the days and weeks to come as well.

Thanks, everybody.

END

5:48 P.M. EDT