

# WHITE HOUSE DAILY BRIEFING TRANSCRIPT

Wednesday, March 2, 2016

EARNEST:

Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. We'll do a quick statement at the top, and then we'll go to your questions. This is news that you may have seen, but I just wanted to underscore some important developments at the United Nations today.

The international community has strongly condemned North Korea's weapons of mass destruction proliferation activity and its continued efforts to advance its nuclear missile programs with unprecedented sanctions.

U.N. Security Council resolution (sic) -- U.N. Security Council Resolution 2270 contains the most extensive multilateral sanctions measures to date, including new sectoral sanctions on North Korean mineral exports and financial sanctions targeting North Korean banking activities in support of its WMD programs. The resolution also imposes unprecedented inspection requirements on North Korean cargo and closes loopholes in the implementation of sanctions.

To be clear, today's actions are not aimed at increasing the suffering of the North Korean people. Rather, our collective goal is to increase the costs on Pyongyang's leadership as it stubbornly seeks to advance its prohibited nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

We have consistently said that North Korea would face consequences for its actions and we welcome this unanimous resolution as a firm, united and appropriate response by the international community, including China and Russia, to North Korea's recent provocations that flagrantly violated multiple Security Council resolutions.

EARNEST:

We commend the work of the Security Council in sending a strong message to Pyongyang that there are significant consequences for flouting its international obligations, and today, the international community, speaking with one voice, has sent Pyongyang a simple message: North Korea must abandon these dangerous programs and choose a better path for its people.

So with that, Kevin, let's go to your questions.

QUESTION:

OK, Josh. Staying on the same topic...

EARNEST:

OK.

QUESTION:

Does the U.S. expect North Korea seek (ph) to retaliate for the sanctions approved (ph) today? And can you talk about any precautions that are being taken in anticipation of such actions? And can you talk a bit about who will be conducting the inspections of cargo going in and out of North Korea?

EARNEST:

For the way that these sanctions are implemented, I think I'd actually refer you back to the U.N. You know, obviously, it's the international community that would impose these sanctions and redouble our efforts to make sure that the cargo inspections are carried out. So they may be able to provide some additional detail about how exactly this is implemented.

As it relates to our expectations of the North Koreans and what potential reaction they may have, the -- there's not a lot of clarity about that. Obviously, this -- these actions on the part of the international community are a response to provocative actions that North Korea has already taken in the last couple of months and, you know, we obviously have already taken a number of steps to ensure that our allies in the region and the American people here at home are protected from North Korea's potential capabilities.

So we've talked at some length about the -- how over the last several years, the Obama administration and President Obama has directed an increase in assets in the Asia-Pacific to include anti-ballistic missile technology and systems that could protect the United States from any sort of North Korean missiles. There are a number of steps that we have taken to enhance the capabilities of our allies in Japan and our allies in South Korea to protect themselves as well. And we'll certainly be mindful of any additional steps that may be needed to ensure greater protection for the United States and our allies.

QUESTION:

I know you've talked about this a little bit before, but they've been approved today. Why are these sanctions -- why will they be any more successful than past efforts to curb North Korea's nuclear missile program?

EARNEST:

Well, because these sanctions actually go far beyond the sanctions that have previously been imposed on the North Koreans and there -- there are several different ways to evaluate that. For the first time, this resolution would require an inspection of all cargo going into and going out of North Korea. For the first time, this would prohibit the sale of small arms or other conventional weapons to the North Korean regime.

It also would impose broad sectoral sanctions on those aspects of the North Korean economy that are functioning. This is significant because we know that these industries, things like coal, iron,

gold, titanium and rare earth minerals, are industries in which revenue is both dedicated to enhance the lifestyle of the North Korean elite, but also, in some cases, used to advance North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

So we're taking action that would have a direct impact on their capacity to continue to carry out these provocative actions, so that's why it's different than what has happened before. We'll have to see if this increased pressure and increased isolation is sufficient to prompt a change in strategy on the part of the North Korean regime.

QUESTION:

Turning to last night's elections, I wanted to ask how you interpret the results on the group of reconciling (ph) there a clear winner in your view?

And on the turn out, it seemed like the Republican turn out in the Super Tuesday states really increased while Democratic turn out in many of the states was down.

Is the turn out assigned to Donald Trump as making the Republican party bigger?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll say a couple of things about the turn out last -- or about the turn out first. The fact is there were not too many battle ground states that convened primaries or caucuses last night. There were only two, sort of depending on how broad of a definition you have for a battleground states like Minnesota and Virginia.

Virginia being the most important one because of its size and given the way that it was so aggressively contested in the last two presidential elections, I think it -- certainly President Obama's political strategists will tell you that his success in Virginia, both in 2008 and 2012 was an important part of his political strategy.

So there's no downplaying the political significance of Virginia. When you take a look at the results, you see that the winner of the Democratic primary drew far more votes than the winner in the Republican primary. And these are open primaries, so you can go and vote in either the Democratic or the Republican primary based on which candidate you intend to support.

So it is clear that the winner of the Democratic primary is the candidate in Virginia that has the most support in Virginia. I think that is an indication of the level of excitement on the Democratic side. When you take a look at Minnesota, you see a similar dynamic, but in some ways, it's even more pronounced.

Both Democratic candidates in Minnesota, individually, got more votes than any Republican candidate in the Minnesota caucuses. So, I think this is an indication that there is ample enthusiasm on the Democratic side, particularly in the places where it matters most in the general election.

I think what is also true is that again, based on the public reporting from all of you, that at least some of the strong turn out in the Republican party was actually due to hostility to the current Republican front-runner.

And that way, it will also be a troubling dynamic for Republicans in a general election if that were to occur in a general election too.

More broadly, as it relates to the outcome, and this is something we've talked about the last couple of days, anticipating this outcome. And, you know, what we've seen on the part of the Republican leaders in Washington D.C. for the last six or eight years, has been a reflexive opposition to President Obama and a consistent refusal to embrace the responsibility to govern.

And I think the best example of that are the roiling political debates that we have had in Washington D.C. over health care reform. Republicans have proudly talked about the fact that they have voted 50 or 60 times now, to repeal Obamacare. But never once has there actually been a Republican alternative to Obamacare that has been put forward for a vote. Not one.

There's a similar story to tell about immigration reform. We hear all of the candidates on the campaign trail and here in Washington D.C. rail about the broken immigration system in the United States. This administration worked closely with some Republicans to try to cobble together a bipartisan compromise.

EARNEST:

But that bipartisan compromise was blocked in the House of Representatives from even coming up for a vote.

And there was never a Republican alternative put forward that had any chance of passing either house, let alone be signed into law by the president of the United States. The same is true when you consider gun safety legislation.

There's strong support all across the country among Democrats and Republicans for common sense steps that would reduce gun violence. There's no reason it has to be a partisan thing, and there are a number of Democrats that have put forward specific proposals for reducing gun violence, but yet it is Republicans that have time and time again blocked those Democratic proposals without putting forward anything of their own.

So, you know, this goes back to what we were talking about earlier. When you have party leaders in Washington, D.C. that don't stand for something, their supporters are likely to fall for anything. And it's apparent that's what happened. All right, Ayesha.

QUESTION:

So I wanted to ask -- I know that moving onto Syria -- I know that you -- that the White House has said that it's going to take time to see whether the cessation of hostilities is actually going to be successful and to determine kind of the outcome of that.

But now that a few days have passed, I wanted to see does the White House have any sense or assessment of where things stand now on the cessation of hostilities. Is it meeting expectations? Are there concerns? Where are things at now on that?

EARNEST:

Well I asked for a -- an updated assessment today, and this is -- so I'd have some information I can share with you here. In recent days, we have seen an overall reduction in airstrikes against Syrian opposition and civilians, and that is a reduction when compared to the number of airstrikes that were conducted against Syrian opposition and civilian targets prior to the implementation of cessation of hostilities. That obviously is an encouraging sign.

However, we are concerned about reports that the Syrian regime has engaged in tank and artillery attacks against civilians near places like Latakia, Homs and Hama and around Damascus. And obviously, those kinds of attacks, if confirmed, would be a flagrant violation of the cessation of hostilities.

Now, we're going to monitor these reports of violations, we take them quite seriously. And we're going to continue to strongly urge all parties to exercise restraint and abide by the commitments that was included -- that were included in the cessation of hostilities.

We're also encouraging all of our partners in the ISSG to use their influence with parties on the ground to not engage in actions that put the cessation of hostility at risk. So this is -- there's a lot of diplomatic work that goes into this, and, you know, as we acknowledged prior to the implementation of the cessation of hostilities, we anticipated all along that we would encounter some resistance, we would hit some potholes, but there at least are some tentative indications of a slightly improved situation inside of Syria.

EARNEST:

There's more that needs to be done and we're going to follow up on every report of a -- of a violation, and we take violations, particularly as it relates to tank and artillery attacks against civilians, quite seriously. But our goal here remember, is the cessation of hostilities can hopefully allow for a more sustained flow of humanitarian assistance to those communities that are in dire need and also try to provide an additional boost to the fledgling effort to reach some sort of broader political agreement inside of Syria that results in a political transition inside of Syria.

And so those -- that diplomatic, political work continues. But that is sort of the -- that's the update I've received about how the implementation and cessation possibilities is going.

QUESTION:

Is there humanitarian relief getting through? I know some opposition groups have raised concerns about that. And, you know, when they talk about continuing on with the peace talks, part of what they want is that humanitarian aid. So is that humanitarian relief getting through at this point?

EARNEST:

It's starting to. There's a lot more that we believe needs to be done to speed the flow of humanitarian aid and allow for the provision of that assistance to become more routine. But, you know, there are -- we have seen reports that the pace of that aid being provided has stepped up. That is obviously a welcome development.

There were a lot of people inside of Syria who were innocently caught in the crossfire who were in pretty desperate need of basic medical supplies, food, water and other basic materials that humans need to survive.

So we would like to see the pace of those humanitarian shipments increased. And hopefully that will happen as the cessation of hostilities continues to be implemented.

QUESTION:

And on the Supreme Court, Harry Reid today said that a nominee is expected within a week or so. So, I know that, you know, you've been reticent to talk about timing and things like that. But, just giving it a shot, I mean, should we expect a nominee within the next week or can you rule that out and if that's the case, if it's moving that fast, are there interviews going on right now with candidates?

EARNEST:

Unfortunately Ayesha (ph) I think we are short of reaching the height of the most frustrating part of this process for those of you who are trying to cover it. Which is that I don't have enough data assessment for you in terms of timing.

And I don't have additional details to share about our ongoing efforts here to make a decision about who the best person will be to serve on the Supreme Court. You know, we won't be able to provide much of an indication about whether or not individual interviews have started.

The one piece of process that I can share with you today, is that I understand that our leg affairs team has now been in touch with the office of every member of the United States Senate about this particular nomination.

Obviously, many of those calls were not placed by the president himself, but by senior members of his team. And it does underscore -- it's another way to illustrate the seriousness of purpose on

our part when it comes to consulting with Congress in advance of making a Supreme Court nomination. OK?

Michelle?

QUESTION:

On the same subject yesterday, after they meeting here at the White House, we heard McConnell very clearly, publicly state this vacancy will not be filled this year. Does that change the optimism that you expressed yesterday, at all? That they still could take this up?

EARNEST:

No, it doesn't -- it doesn't change. The -- I indicated yesterday that out of the -- that during the meeting, no one represented a potential change of opinion here and the view that Leader McConnell articulated after the meeting is that same view that he's been articulating since just a couple of hours after Justice Scalia's death was announced.

QUESTION:

Do you really think after he said that so definitively that there's some chance that he would -- he would change that?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll just say that Leader McConnell has a way of expressing himself rather definitively. In fact, he did that back in 2008 when he said even with lameduck presidents, there is an historical standard of fairness as to confirming judicial nominees. So he seemed pretty definitive then too, and what's most important here is the clarity of the Constitution that says the president shall appoint someone to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court and the Senate shall do its duty to office advice and consent. And that means giving that individual a fair hearing and a timely yes-or-no vote.

That's not a controversial notion, that is not subject to any sort of legal interpretation, that's everybody's interpretation of what the Senate is supposed to do. And the question really is whether or not Senate Republicans are willing to put that Constitutional duty ahead of their political considerations.

QUESTION:

Yesterday, there were some interesting words from the vice president. He jokingly thanked Donald Trump and he said the stuff that he's doing, Cruz and the others, making the American people look in the mirror. And he talked about the divisiveness maybe being a good thing for the American people and saying maybe it's a good thing to awaken the American people.

That's quite a bit different from what we've heard the president say on the rhetoric that's been out there, as well as what you've said. I mean, you guys have said that it's bad for America's standing in the world, and the divisiveness is just making partisanship worse. So, I mean, do you disagree with what he said then?

EARNEST:

Well, I think what the vice president is just making an observation about Democrats' electoral prospects in a general election. I think his analysis actually dovetails pretty cleanly with the analysis of a lot of establishment Republicans in Washington, D.C., who are also concerned about the impact that Mr. Trump's candidacy would have on Republicans up and down the ballot.

QUESTION:

So the divisiveness of the rhetoric that you've really slammed in the past, do you now think that that's a good thing, or do you think that it's -- I mean, he said that it's a good thing for America to awaken the American people, but you guys have said that it's a bad thing for America and hurts our standing in the world. So kind of which is it? I'm confused.

EARNEST:

Again, I think what the vice president was offering up was his own analysis about Democrats' prospects in the general election. And again, I -- a lot of Republicans that you talk to around this town at least seem to be offering up an assessment that's quite similar to what the vice president has said, which is that most Republicans who are going to be on the ballot, if they share that ballot with Mr. Trump, probably will not see their electoral prospects enhanced by the presence of Mr. Trump.

EARNEST:

But this is all academic at this point. There are still additional Republican votes that need to be cast. Republicans need to do more work to choose their nominee. And we'll -- it's difficult to predict in advance exactly how a general election is going to shape up before a Republican nominee has been chosen and before a Democratic nominee has been chosen. So all that's premature, but I think what we continue to be confident about -- and the vice president will have an important role in this -- is that we'll be able to make a strong case about how Democrats and the Democratic candidate for president is one that is strongly supported by the big tent of the Democratic party and is committed to building on the important progress that our country has made over the last seven years.

QUESTION:

So do you disagree or agree that the decisiveness could be a good thing for the American people?

EARNEST:

Well, my view is that when it comes to our -- when it comes to Democratic electoral prospects, that, you know, as many Republicans have said, Mr. Trump's presence at the top of the ticket may not end up being particularly helpful to them.

What there's no question about and Republican leaders agree with this too, is that the divisive rhetoric that we've heard from Mr. Trump is directly contrary to the values that this country has long defended. And we'll have -- you know, there will continue to be a debate on the Republican side to choose their nominee.

But if this is a debate that we have in the general election I would feel bullish about the strength of the Democratic argument.

QUESTION:

Do you think that that divisiveness and that same rhetoric that you've decried in the past is actually helping Democrats?

EARNEST:

Well again, I think we'll have to see. It's too early to tell.

QUESTION:

OK. And lastly on the North Korea sanctions. Do you have any real expectation that that will North Korea's behavior?

EARNEST:

Well, I think time will tell. They were just passed by the Security Council just a couple of hours ago. So we -- the international community is quite serious about implementing these sanctions.

These will -- these sanctions and restrictions will be more robust and rigorous than sanctions that have been previously been imposed on the North Korean regime. But we would anticipate that they will have an impact on the ability of the North Korean elite to enjoy the exalted lifestyle that they currently enjoy.

We also anticipate that it will have an impact on industries that we know are used to fund their nuclear and ballistic missile programs. This required a significant commitment on the part of the Chinese and the Russians. And we certainly welcome the way that they are working closely with the rest of the international community, including the United States and our allies, Japan and South Korea, to implement these sanctions. And that sends an important message, just as a symbolic matter.

But, you know, once these sanctions and restrictions are imposed, it will have an impact on North Korea, but it is an open question about whether or not that impact will prompt the kind of change that we'd like to see in North Korea. OK?

April?

QUESTION:

Josh, something simple, just on Donald Trump. You've been very strong about Donald Trump in the past. You've talked about his divisive rhetoric, but can you speak to the fact now that Donald Trump is not denouncing David Duke, someone who is a former Grand Dragon (sic) of the KKK as well as a former neo-Nazi before he was a member of the KKK, a Grand Dragon (sic) of the KKK.

EARNEST:

Listen, I know Mr. Trump has indicated that there is more that he needs to learn about Mr. Duke before he can offer an opinion about their endorsement, but I do think that this reveals all we need to know about Mr. Trump.

QUESTION:

What's that?

EARNEST:

Well, again, I think voters will come to their own conclusions. I think the bigger concern frankly is that you have members of the Republican party who are trying to have it both ways. They are suggesting that they are condemning the decision of the Republican front runner to accept political support from this divisive, offensive figure in the country.

But yet they're still vowing to support that person if they become the general election candidate of the Republican Party. I'm not really sure how you square those two things, but they'll have plenty of time to figure that out, I guess, over the course of the next eight months or so as this is publicly litigated.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) the press (inaudible) adversarial relationship. We have a very close relationship. It seems that Donald Trump has now -- he has a member of the (inaudible) his press (inaudible) who is a white supremacist (inaudible) radio show. What do you think about that and the possibilities of that possibly coming here?

EARNEST:

Well, I have to admit, I have not seen those reports. As you know, when it comes to our policies for people who sit in this room and participate in this briefing, there's no sort of ideological screen that we put in place. I think there are people who represent a variety of points of view in this room, including people that the vast majority of whom represent a point of view that's focused on just getting the facts straight and sharing those facts with their readers and viewers and listeners.

But, you know, we regularly protect the ability of professional, independent journalists to do their job. And the independent press corps, the White House press corps, the professionals who work here day in and day out have an important responsibility and they're critical to the functioning of our democracy.

And, you know, hopefully whoever the next president is will continue a tradition that has -- has had a tendency to transcend political party.

OK? Jordan?

QUESTION:

Thanks, Josh.

I have some questions about baseball, but don't get too excited. It's (inaudible).

EARNEST:

OK.

(LAUGHTER)

So, maybe we'll have a briefing where somebody wants to have a long conversation about (inaudible).

(CROSSTALK)

EARNEST:

OK. I'll hold you to that.

QUESTION:

So, the New York Times reported that major league baseball has submitted a proposal to allow major league baseball teams to directly hire Cuban players. And as part of that, they said the White House has been talking behind the scenes with league officials about how to navigate that regulatory environment.

So I'm wondering if you can elaborate on those behind-the-scenes talks, who's involved, and should we expect a ruling from the administration on this before the president attends the game in Havana later this month?

EARNEST:

So, there's a division of the Treasury Department that's called the Office of Foreign Assets Control. And they have responsibility for -- they have the responsibility for regulating the restrictions that have currently been in place -- that are currently in place that apply to commerce between the United States and Cuba.

Since the president announced the change in policy a little over a year ago, there are a number of those regulations that have been changed and altered in a way to begin to normalize relations between our two countries. And it is not at all uncommon for the administration to offer advice to U.S. businesses that are seeking to ensure that their actions are firmly in compliance with those regulations.

So, the kind of conversations that you're alluding to are not unusual and wholly appropriate.

Is that an answer to your question? There are several parts to your question. I don't know if I covered all of them.

QUESTION:

I guess the second part is, do you expect some kind of announcement on a new policy toward Cuban players by the time the president attends the game?

EARNEST:

Not that I'm aware of, but you should check with the Treasury Department and again, OFAC (ph) can provide you some additional information about the regulations that would apply in this situation.

QUESTION:

One more. Congressional Republicans, I guess, saw this announcement and they were a bit irked because they said, you know, the White House is making a big deal about going to this game, but they haven't announced any kind of solid meeting with political dissidents yet.

Do you have a response to that and is there any plan -- are you going to announce some kind of set meeting with those dissidents in the coming days?

EARNEST:

Well, I think when we first announced that the president was going to travel to Cuba, the president's deputy of national security adviser stood at this podium. He didn't say anything about a baseball game, but he did talk about the fact that the president will certainly meet with dissidents in Cuba.

And part of that is because one of the priorities of our policy is to apply the best interests of the Cuban people and get the Cuban government in a position where there are better protecting the basic, universal human rights of all Cuban people including people who might be critical of the government.

That is an important part of our policy and that's part of our priority here is to empower the Cuban people who want to protest and want to offer their dissent in public to have the freedom to do so.

And we believe that we will -- we are more likely to achieve that aim by deepening and increasing our engagement between the American people who enjoy those freedoms, and the Cuban people who, in many ways, do not at this point.

And that will certainly be an important part of the trip. That is something that we discussed on the very first day. But, the truth is, I think the president, it's fair to say, for different reasons, is looking forward to both meeting with political dissidents in Cuba and attending a game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban National Baseball team. OK?

John?

QUESTION:

I'd like to follow-up on Kevin's question about the turn out that you mentioned in Virginia, how they -- the Democratic leader, Hillary Clinton, she had more votes for her than the winner in the Republican primary, Trump.

But the overall turn out for each party, the Republicans had over a million voters turn out. The Democrats had about 775,000 voters turn out. Does the White House or the president or you, do you doubt the ultimate Republican nominee's ability to unite the party and bring together the full, Obama primary voters around their general election candidacy?

EARNEST:

Well, we'll see. I know that there are some Republicans who doubt that the current Republican front-runner has that ability, but they would certainly know better than I do. When it comes to the raw turn out numbers, it's not surprising to me that there were more Republicans who showed up at the polls, because there are more Republicans in the states that had elections last night.

So when we're talking about Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, these are all states with sizable Republican voting populations. The Democratic states involved were quite a bit

smaller, Vermont for example. So it's not surprising to me that the overall numbers are tilted in favor of Republicans.

That's why I singled out states like Virginia and Minnesota where the Democratic candidates, in the case of Minnesota, both Democratic candidates got more support than any of the Republicans that were on the ballot. And in Virginia, you saw that the leading vote getter of any of the candidates that were on the ballot was a Democrat.

And that's significant because anybody who shows up at the polls can choose either a Democratic or Republican ballot to vote for the candidate of their choice. So I think that's a pretty clear sign that the candidate with the most support in Virginia right now is the Democratic front-runner.

And given the important role that Virginia has played in the last two general elections, I would anticipate that Virginia will play an important role in this general election, and that seems to bode well for the Democrats right now.

QUESTION:

He also mentioned that he didn't think Donald Trump would necessarily be helpful -- said he may not be helpful to the top of the ticket. Does the White House believe that the House could be in play if Donald Trump is the nominee?

EARNEST:

Well, there certainly are lots of people who will weigh in on both sides of this argument. I'm confident that there are Democratic strategists who believe that the House would not be in play if Mr. Trump were not at the top of the ticket. You'll have to ask them if they think that it's in play because he's at the top of the ticket.

I can assure you that Democrats right now are mounting a serious effort to retake the majority in the House because they believe that that's possible. And they certainly are doing the important work on the front end to make that happen regardless of who the Republican candidate for president is.

QUESTION:

And just one quick followup on your opening statement. You mentioned about the U.N. Security Council's resolution that it doesn't target the people of North Korea directly. Is there anything that the international community is doing that would help compensate for any adverse effects that would, you know, that would be directed unintentionally to the North Koreans?

EARNEST:

To the North Korean people? Well, look, the -- the truth is, there is a significant population of North Korean citizens who are suffering right now. And they're suffering because of the policy decisions made by the leadership of that country.

The leaders of that country have chosen to prioritize that country's nuclear and ballistic missile programs over meeting the basic needs of its citizens. That is grossly immoral, but it's a decision that that country's leadership has made.

That's why putting in place sanctions that would have an impact on their nuclear missiles programs and have an impact on the lifestyle of the ruling elite of North Korea does put pressure on the regime that they haven't seen before.

And again, we're just a couple of hours after the United Nations has -- Security Council has passed this resolution. But as it goes into effect, it will have an impact on North Korea's programs, the ballistic missile and nuclear programs. It will have an impact on the ruling elite. We'll see if it ends up having an impact on their ultimate strategic choices.

QUESTION:

But it seemed like your opening statement was specifically talking about the unintended consequences of its citizens there -- supposedly innocent in this, right? So is there anything that was addressed when the resolution was drafted? Or is there anything that the administration's considering now that would compensate for sort of adverse effects directly on the people (inaudible)?

EARNEST:

Yeah, I'm not sure that anything like that is possible, frankly. You have an authoritarian regime in North Korea that essentially is taking all the money that's flowing into their country that they can get their hands on, and devoting it to their lifestyle, their country's nuclear program, and their country's missile program.

And they do that in a way that has a negative impact on their people. In fact, it has an impact on the ability of North Koreans -- North Korea's population to feed themselves and to provide for some of their basic necessities. That's an appallingly immoral choice and one that the international community does not condone.

But one of the challenges here is you have a country that's so isolated. You have an authoritarian government that it's hard to allow money into the country that they aren't able to get their hands on.

That's why what we're trying to do here is to focus our efforts on those revenue streams that we know benefit those areas that we're concerned about, which is specifically their nuclear program and their missile program.

EARNEST:

Ultimately, in order for the needs of the North Korean people to be met, we need to see a North Korean government that's making different decisions and actually making decisions that are in the best interests of the day-to-day lives of the North Korean people. Thus far, they haven't been willing to do that. OK?

Margaret.

QUESTION:

Josh, you keep saying these sanctions on North Korea are going to hit the North Koreans the least. Do you believe that they will be felt by Kim Jong-un himself?

EARNEST:

Well, I'm certainly no expert when it comes to understanding the North Korean economy. I think the -- what we do know is that the North Korean elite in general does benefit disproportionately from some of the revenue that is generated by their gold and their iron and their titanium exports.

And so, by targeting that, we hope to have an impact on their ability to fund their destabilizing activities and on their ability to fund the extravagant lifestyle that they enjoy at the expense of the North Korean people.

QUESTION:

But you don't see these as specifically targeting the leader himself?

EARNEST:

My understanding, as based on the sanctions that have been put in place, they are not sanctions that target him personally, but again, the North Korean people have suffered enough in the way that these sanctions and restrictions are designed, is to have an impact on those revenue streams that benefit the ruling elite and benefit their destabilizing activities.

QUESTION:

You used a point a while in negotiating this with the Chinese, but do you see this -- does the White House see this as a breakthrough with China? You know, a new direction for their client (ph) to be tougher on them?

EARNEST:

Well, it certainly does reflect a greater commitment on the part of the international community to taking steps against North Korea that were never taken before. And China voted for them. China worked with the United States in a series of intensive, high-level diplomatic discussions to reach an agreement and commit to implementing these sanctions.

I do think that it represents an increased capacity for the United States and China to coordinate our efforts when it comes to North Korea. But it's not just the United States and China that are taking actions here. You know, this is something that Russia for and this all taking place with the full support of our closest allies in the region, including South Korea and Japan.

QUESTION:

But you talked in the past about really needing China on board with this, not just the U.N. Security Council. But it doesn't seem -- while it does North Korean elites, it doesn't seem explicitly to say it's freezing accounts in China and elsewhere.

Is there an assumption that China is also going to take unilateral action like the U.S. did today in adding those sanctions?

EARNEST:

Well, I was just going to say that. There are some additional steps that the U.S., government did announce today that are complementary to this U.N. action and separate from the Congressional legislation that was passed last month on this matter.

So, what you do see is you see the United States ramping up our activities too. But, as it relates to China, we have long acknowledged that China has unique influence and a unique relationship with North Korea. They have a more active relationship with the North Korean regime than any other country in the world.

We know that the North Korean economy depends more on China than any other country in the world. So they do have unique leverage. But we also know that China is quite concerned about North Korea's nuclear activities.

EARNEST:

We know they're concerned about their ballistic missile activities. And we are pleased to see China using their influence and demonstrating a willingness to coordinate their efforts with the rest of the international community.

QUESTION:

We haven't seen that while the use is hailing this as the toughest bit of sanctions in 20 years, more than two decades. It still allows the regime a life line, or as the Russians and Chinese wouldn't have signed up for it. The Russians said that they didn't want the economy to collapse.

So this goes farther than before, but still allows the regime to survive. Would you acknowledge that?

EARNEST:

Well, again, for -- I think only time will tell exactly what the impact is of these sanctions. But there's no denying that these sanctions go farther than we have before and there's no denying that these sanctions will have a tangible impact on the North Korean ruling elite, on North Korea's missile program and on North Korea's nuclear program, all of which are in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

QUESTION:

Quickly on SCOTUS. You said we're now in the most frustrating part of covering this, so I guess you're feeling our pain. Do I take that as understanding the next time we hear an update from you, it will be that you've sent a nominee to The Hill?

EARNEST:

I don't want to get your hopes up.

QUESTION:

Not get my hopes. But you're not going to -- we're not going to have a photo of the president carrying a binder like we had before. We're not going to have a photo of a bunch of Senate leaders coming to the White House again. That's it?

EARNEST:

No, I wouldn't rule those things out.

QUESTION:

Is that the schedule?

EARNEST:

I just don't want to get your hopes up that the next thing you'll hear us talking about when it comes to the Supreme Court is the president announcing a decision about a nominee. You know, his work continues and we'll do our best to keep you updated. OK.

Byron.

QUESTION:

Thanks Josh. I saw some reports that President Obama endorsed Ted Strickland in the Ohio Senate race. Is that right?

EARNEST:

That is true. The president also announced an endorsement of Congressman Patrick Murphy in Florida as well. He's also involved in the Senate race.

QUESTION:

If I'm not wrong, Strickland voted against a bill that included the federal assault weapons ban. He said in 2004 he was against the assault weapons ban. He opposed the city of Columbus' assault weapons ban.

He opposed the Brady Handgun Bill and was endorsed by the NRA for reelection in 2010. Did the president say in an often touted New York Times op-ed that he would not support the candidates who do not support common sense gun control measures and is this the kind of record of candidates that the president will support going forward?

EARNEST:

Well Byron, as we've discussed before, the -- what we're focused on are candidates who will support and will promise to support common sense gun legislation.

And you have to talk to Mr. Strickland about the policies that he will support as a member of the United States Senate. You know, obviously, an individual's record matters. But when it came to that particular promise, it related to -- or gave candidates the capacity to change their mind.

After all, that's what we need to see. We need to see more people in the United States Senate and the United States Congress change their mind and embrace common sense gun control, gun safety legislation that could prevent at least some incidents of gun violence without undermining the second amendment rights of law-abiding Americans.

But for Mr. Strickland's current position on these issues, you should check with him or his campaign.

QUESTION:

But it's fair to say, that you think, going forward, he would be a good candidate on these issues and one that the president can support? Because that was a litmus test that the president drew in his op-ed.

EARNEST:

There is a -- I think the president's endorsement is pretty strong. But again, for Mr. Strickland's position on those issues, you should check with him or his campaign. OK?

EARNEST:

Ron.

QUESTION:

There was a report this morning about an ISIS significant operative and then key operative being arrested by being detained, captured in Iraq somewhere. In as much as targeting leadership is a significant aspect of the U.S. strategy there, what's going to happen to those individuals? Where will they be taken? And where will they be held? And what's the judicial process that they will face if they're alive, presumably?

EARNEST:

Well, Ron, there's a -- there's not a whole lot about this that I can say. I can tell you in general that the president directed the Department of Defense to stand up an expeditionary task force because we have seen this tactic that yields some important results. There have been at least one raid that has been publicly discussed that was carried out by U.S. special operators against a high-ranking ISIL official. This was last year. And that raid resulted in the death of that high-ranking official, but it did allow U.S. special operators to obtain significant quantities of valuable intelligence information.

And the Department of Defense, recognizing and following the president's instructions to intensify our efforts that are yielding some progress, decided to create these expeditionary task forces to operate inside of Iraq and to carry out raids on relatively short notice against leading ISIL figures.

At this point, I can't discuss the details of any missions, particularly when it comes to risking operational security. But I can tell you that one of the goals of this expeditionary task force is to capture (sic) -- is to capture ISIL leaders, but these operations will be carried out in coordination and in partnership with the government of Iraq.

Any detention of ISIL leaders in Iraq would be short-term and coordinated with Iraqi authorities, and one of the things that you know about the one raid that's been carried that's been reported publicly is that the individual who was detained in that raid was an individual who was subjected to an interrogation where important intelligence information was obtained, and then that person was then -- has been turned over to Kurdish authorities and is currently in the Kurdish criminal justice system.

QUESTION:

So you can't say if or how many other ISIL figures have been detained?

EARNEST:

Unfortunately, I cannot. There may be additional guidance that the Department of Defense can share with you, though.

QUESTION:

But you can't say -- can you say what the -- you said short-term, they'll be held. Where the -- long-term are they going to be held?

EARNEST:

Well, this -- this -- I can rule out a couple of things. These individuals would not be transferred to the prison at Guantanamo Bay. This is -- there's no one that's been transferred to that prison in the -- during President Obama's seven years in office. Our goal is to close that prison. Adding to that population would be contradictory to that goal.

I think what the Department of Defense will tell you is that they'll have to make their own determinations about the best way to handle these individual cases. When it came -- when it came to the case of the Umm Sayyaf, the woman -- the wife of the ISIL leader who was detained in that raid, she was turned over to Kurdish officials and she'll be brought to justice in the Kurdish system.

QUESTION:

So none of these individuals will ever come to the United States?

EARNEST:

Again, you'll have to check with the Department of Defense about how they would resolve those cases.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) the case of Ms. Sayyaf, there was a -- there was a DOJ warrant for her arrest based on providing material support to a terrorist (inaudible). So why would someone like that not be brought to the United States to answer to a -- a -- a warrant issued by the Department of Justice?

EARNEST:

Well, you'd have to talk to the Department of Justice about that. Their specific warrant that they - that they filed related to alleged crimes related to Umm Sayyaf's involvement in taking an

American citizen hostage. And so those are very serious crimes and that's a warrant that's been filed.

How the Department of Justice wants to pursue that is something that they will decide and you should ask them for their latest update. But right now, she is in the custody of Kurdish law enforcement officials and she is being brought to justice in their system.

QUESTION:

But the answer (inaudible) -- you kind of answered my next question. Because that case involves an American citizen, why is there not a case to be made that that person should be prosecuted in an -- in the courts of the United States so that there's justice done here?

EARNEST:

Well, again, I think for how the Department of Justice will proceed, you should check with them. But obviously, they have made filings in an American court. So I think that the -- the possibility that you have raised is probably not one that they would rule out. But that also is going to involve a conversation with law enforcement authorities who are currently holding her.

QUESTION:

So just to be clear on it, then, the administration policy, and I know we can talk to each individual department, but the administration -- is there a clear policy that says no ISIL figures will be brought to the United States for that? Or is there a policy that says clearly some, under certain circumstances, some of these individuals detained on the battlefield could end up in the United States?

EARNEST:

Well, let me just try to be helpful as helpful as I can be here, given the constraints that I'm operating under here. What is true is there have been situations where individuals have been picked up on the battlefield around the world. These are terrorists who were actively plotting against the United States or our interests.

Those individuals in some cases have been brought to the United States. They have gone through Article III courts. They have been charged. They have been convicted and they currently are serving time on American soil in American prisons.

So, if something like what you're describing were to happen, it would not at all be unprecedented. In fact, our system has demonstrated its capacity to handle these kinds of challenges. I think the thing that I will go back to, though, is that our principal goal when it comes to the expeditionary task force is obtaining information that can be valuable in our campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

And, you know, we made clear that when Umm Sayyaf, the wife of the ISIL leader, was detained that she was interrogated for intelligence purposes prior to being put into the Kurdish criminal justice system. That sort of process is one that is in place anytime U.S. officials detain an accused terrorist.

There is a process for sending professional interrogators in to interrogate that individual, to obtain as much information and intelligence as possible; if necessary, to obtain information about potential plots or potential threats so that those threats can be mitigated or even eliminated.

EARNEST:

Then where appropriate, those individuals can then be turned over to law enforcement officials who can conduct an investigation and obtain information that could be used in a civilian court of law. This was a process that was created and implemented under President Obama's leadership and it is one that has resulted in important terrorism convictions against individuals who sought to do harm to the United States and our interests.

QUESTION:

You made a point earlier about Scorze (ph) when you said that the White House has now talked to every office of every United States senator. In the past, I think we had a couple of names, Kurt Mayotte (ph), maybe others, who have indicated a willingness to let this process go forward with a nominee to some extent.

Now that you've talked to all -- these -- every senator, is it -- do you think or can you give us any other names of individuals who, on the Republican side, who you think are willing to essentially break with the leadership and let this process go forward.

EARNEST:

Well, obviously there are a lot of Democrats who believe that this process should go forward. I think all of them do. When it comes to Republicans, I'll allow them to announce their own views.

We have seen, as you point out, statements from Senator Kurt and Senator Collins from Maine. I don't believe that Senator Ayotte has indicated a desire to put her constitutional duty first. This is something that she will have to decide for herself and something that I'm sure she's considering.

But look, we're going to be making a case to Senator Ayotte and others about the priority they should -- we believe they should place on their constitutional duties. I think most of their constituents believe that their constitutional duties should come ahead of any more narrow political considerations that they may have. OK.

Kevin.

QUESTION:

Thanks Josh. Do you know Judge Jane Kelly? Have you ever heard of her? Have you ever met her?

EARNEST:

I've read some public reports about her, but I have not met her in person.

QUESTION:

Have you seen her here by chance?

(LAUGHTER)

EARNEST:

That's clever.

QUESTION:

You can? No?

EARNEST:

No, nothing on that.

QUESTION:

Can you say with any certainty that anyone who might be willing...

(CROSSTALK)

(LAUGHTER)

QUESTION:

I know, we were doing wrong to do this everyday. Have you seen anyone that you can think of who might be a candidate for the Supreme Court, a potential nominee inside this building?

EARNEST:

Well, even if I had, I don't think I would say so from here.

QUESTION:

Does that mean, yes you have?

EARNEST:

It means that if I have, I wouldn't say so from here.

QUESTION:

All right. Fair enough. On Gitmo, do you have any announcements to make about potential detainee transfers? We've talked about that a few times and spent a little bit of time -- I know the process is moving forward on a few. And might you have any announcements today or in the coming days?

EARNEST:

I don't anticipate any announcements today. I'll have to check and see if there are any that are in the pipeline. We probably wouldn't announce them in advance, just because of the diplomatic work that we have to do with other countries.

We have to coordinate our announcements with other countries who are agreeing to take in these detainees under the security precautions that the secretary of defense has certified are necessary. So I don't have any additional transfers to tell you about.

QUESTION:

OK. So, to the best of your knowledge, at least today, is there any effort to plan discussion or initiative underway that you're aware of to alter the status of the naval station at Guantanamo, including not making payments, transferring it over to a caretaker, body or abandoning it all together?

EARNEST:

No, I'm not aware of any plans like that. But, for the way that the military base at Guantanamo Bay is maintained under the Department of Defense.

QUESTION:

And lastly on -- let me just take another run at that very quickly. Should we expect any announcements about the military base at Guantanamo Bay during the president's visit to Cuba?

EARNEST:

Well, I know that the president is not planning to visit the military facility on this trip. So, I guess not.

QUESTION:

Not? OK.

EARNEST:

Yeah. OK. Andrew?

QUESTION:

I wanted to ask you about Vice President Biden (inaudible) the West Bank. I was wondering if you could tell us whether the president asked him to go, and if so, for what purpose? To what end?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll -- obviously, we did just recently announce that the vice president is traveling to the Middle East. I believe that he's gonna stop at the UAE and Jordan, in addition to Israel, on this trip, and he'll obviously have an opportunity to meet with leaders in each of those countries.

At this point, I don't have a detailed preview of his trip to share with you. Obviously, when it comes to our efforts to coordinate our international counter-ISIL coalition, countries like Jordan and the UAE have been played (ph) -- have played important roles in that.

And I'm confident that will be a subject of discussion. It certainly was a subject of discussion when King Abdullah was here in Washington -- I believe that was just last week. And so I'm sure that discussion will continue when the vice president travels to Jordan.

But we'll get you a little bit more on his trip as it gets closer to -- to his departure.

QUESTION:

So we shouldn't read this as a sign that the vice president is going to find out what's possible in terms of steps that could reduce tensions between Israel and the Palestinians?

EARNEST:

Well, again, I'm -- I think it's difficult for any U.S. leader to travel to Israel and to meet with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders and not have that issue come up. I'm confident that it comes up every time.

But to the extent that -- to the precise nature of those discussions, I'd refer you to the Vice President's Office for now, but I'll see if I can get you some additional information before he departs to help you understand what the goal of his trip exactly is.

OK? Angela.

QUESTION:

Thanks, Josh. Yesterday, Director Comey and Attorney General Lynch said that they don't think that new legislation is needed to compel -- or to -- to allow law enforcement to crack phones in the Apple case. Is that the official administration position -- that existing law gives law enforcement the ability to get into phones if necessary?

EARNEST:

Well, that's -- that's not just the opinion of the attorney general and the director of the FBI. It's also the opinion of at least one federal judge in California, who, based on a filing by -- to the court by the FBI, suggested that the -- that Apple should cooperate with those efforts.

That's just one very specific case. That is a case that is being led by independent federal law enforcement investigators, and they are very -- they are focused on learning as much as they can about the terrorist incident in San Bernardino so that, if there are additional steps we need to take to protect the American people, that we'll do it.

So that's very -- that's one very specific case, but that's where this argument was applied, and a federal judge agreed.

QUESTION:

Is there anything the White House does want in legislation on this topic right now? There's obviously movement on the Hill to write some sort of bill.

EARNEST:

Well, we certainly will be in touch with -- with members of Congress about -- about that kind of -- of -- of legislation. And -- you know, we would welcome -- you know, a productive conversation about that.

I will say that at least I personally harbor some skepticism about whether or not that's something that Congress can successfully complete, just because this is a really complicated topic, and -- you know, we've seen that even simple, straightforward measures have some difficulty getting through this Republican-led Congress that has been reluctant to embrace their governing responsibilities.

QUESTION:

On another topic, Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, on CNN this morning, became the latest in a series of diplomatic -- high-level diplomatic officials to say that Trump's candidacy and how well he's doing is causing concern among world leaders.

QUESTION:

The president, obviously, has frequent meetings and phone conversations with these world leaders. Is this something that's coming up in those conversations, and is he finding himself in the perhaps awkward position of having to usher his counterparts that are countries that the U.S. is on solid ground, despite what may happen in November?

EARNEST:

Yeah. Well, I'm not at this point prepared to get into a detailed discussion of the president's conversations with world leaders.

The president himself has observed many times that other countries around the world closely follow our politics, and they're aware of the ongoing debate in this country and the upcoming election to choose the next president of the United States.

So, the stakes are significant, and other countries recognize that. But -- you know, for the reaction that is shared by other world leaders, you know, I'll let them talk about that publicly if they choose to do so.

QUESTION:

OK. Lastly, a quick followup to your response to Kevin. You said that the president isn't planning to visit the Guantanamo Bay base on this trip.

Is he planning another trip to Cuba?

EARNEST:

Not that I'm aware of. But if we do, we'll let you all know.

All right. Cheryl (ph)?

QUESTION:

Thanks, just one quick point. Yesterday, House Speaker Ryan came out against the Department of Labor's fiduciary rule, a conflict of interest rule.

A lot of business groups have been running ads against that. Is the White House prepared to try to change that or reconsider that before it's finalized?

EARNEST:

Well, there is a process for considering these kinds of rules that is going through that regulatory process right now.

The president and the secretary of labor have both been pretty clear about precisely why we believe this rule needs to be changed.

Right now, because of the decisions that are made by financial advisers across the country, about \$17 billion in retirement savings is wasted. This is -- when we're talking about the need for more middle class families having greater access to retirement security, that is money we need to protect -- particularly when you consider that this is the hard-earned income of workers all across the country.

That money is wasted because there are some financial advisers that are not obligated to put their customers' financial interests ahead of their own. That doesn't sound right.

And the fact is, for the vast majority of financial advisers who do follow those rules, this flaw, or this rule, this regulatory action, wouldn't require them to do anything differently. This would just be a rule that would apply to those financial advisers that don't currently commit to putting their customers' interests ahead of their own.

And -- so, this is a -- we see this as a common sense change that could have a substantial, positive impact on middle class families that are working really hard to try to save for retirement.

That is a good thing, and this is exactly the role that government should play.

QUESTION:

So, then, you're proceeding forward on this and don't believe it needs to be delayed or...

EARNEST:

We believe that this is an important rule. This is a -- this was a change that was announced, I think almost a year ago now. So, there has been a process in play here. And I don't have update for you in terms of where we are precisely in that process, but given how long it has been playing out, I hope we're getting close to the end.

But we'll see if we can get you an update, if that is necessary.

OK. Mark?

QUESTION:

Josh, you mentioned Ohio and Florida. Are there any other Democratic primaries which President Obama is taking sides?

EARNEST:

If the president does take sides, we will make that decision public.

But at this point, I believe those are the only two Senate races -- or Senate primaries where the president have weighed in with an endorsement. I wouldn't rule out additional decisions about endorsing candidates.

QUESTION:

What is his thinking when he involves himself in a primary?

EARNEST:

Well, you know, the president evaluates the record of the candidates.

EARNEST:

He evaluates their performance in the campaign thus far. And you know, obviously, I think, you know, we've certainly seen, over the last year or so how the country and how the Democratic president benefits from having a Democratic majority in the United States Senate.

That's why you've already seen the president do a couple of trips to raise money for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and I certainly wouldn't rule out the president campaigning aggressively for Senate Democratic candidates in the general election.

QUESTION:

Pre-primary?

EARNEST:

I don't know that we would necessarily do any campaign stops pre-primary. I guess I wouldn't rule it out, but that would probably be more the exception than the rule. But I do -- I would expect that over the course of the fall, you would see the president working hard to support Democratic candidates for the United States Senate.

QUESTION:

And on the outreach to senators, what is the principle message that the White House offers to the senators or their offices? Is it exclusively about holding a hearing, confirmation hearing, and a vote?

EARNEST:

Well again, I think that's one of the virtues in this argument that we'll make and have been making, which is that the message that we're delivering publicly is the same as the message that we're delivering privately. It's pretty persuasive.

The United States Constitution does not include an exception for election years. It insists that the president fulfill his Constitutional duties every year that he's in office, for all four years. It similarly insists that senators fulfill their Constitutional duties for all six years that they remain in office and that they do not -- in the same way that the president is not appointed or elected to a three-year, one-month term, senators aren't elected to a five-year, one-month term. They're in office for six years, and we expect them to do their job for that entire six years.

You know, the other -- the other argument that we've heard from some Republicans is that somehow, you know, this is something that should be decided by an election. I was asked about this yesterday, and I made the observation that in some ways, this actually was decided by an election, the one that was convened in 2012 with a lot of fanfare, and President Obama won.

But Chairman Grassley has weighed in on this in the past. Back in January of 2006, he said something that attracted my interest today. He said a Supreme Court nomination is not a forum to fight an election, it is the time to perform one of our most important Constitutional duties and decide whether a nominee is qualified to serve on the nation's highest court. He's right about that.

QUESTION:

Any chance the president mentioned that in the meeting with Grassley yesterday?

EARNEST:

I don't believe that the president mentioned that in his meeting with Chairman Grassley yesterday, but I did notice that he delivered these remarks on the floor of the United States Senate, so presumably, there's an opportunity for all of you to see the words coming out of his mouth.

All right?

QUESTION:

Thanks Josh.

EARNEST:

Goyal, I'll give you the last one.

QUESTION:

Thank you, Josh. Two questions. One, as far as this upcoming nuclear summit is concerned, this is the first time that many things will be happening. One, it is in Washington, D.C., of course, and President Obama will be there; and two, Iran and nuclear -- and North Korea and other threats are going on that whoever has a nuclear weapons and maybe ISIL or -- those threats are -- to those countries. And I'm sure this summit will address those issues.

And also, Prime Minister Modi, this will be the first nuclear conference as far as prime minister is concerned. What message you think will be different than the last one this time?

EARNEST:

Well Goyal, you alluded to one of them, which is that the last time the nuclear security summit was convened, there was intense concern about the possibility that Iran was on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons. Their breakout period was just a couple of months, but because of the recently completed international agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, they've committed, in a verifiable way, to never obtaining a nuclear weapon. And there are -- in the meantime, there are significant limitations that have been placed on their program that included a 98 percent reduction in their nuclear stockpile, unplugging thousands of centrifuges and a number of other modifications that can give the international community ongoing confidence that Iran will not obtain a nuclear weapon.

So that certainly is one thing that I would anticipate will be discussed at the summit and represents a tangible important progress that makes the region and the world safer. I'm confident that North Korea will be the subject of some discussion. Obviously, we continue to be concerned about their flagrant violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that do apply to their nuclear program.

I'm confident that there will also be an extensive discussion about the need for other countries around the world to engage effectively with the international community to -- to prevent the proliferation of nuclear materials and other nuclear equipment. That's an important priority, primarily because we know there are extremist organizations like ISIL that would love to get their hands on those materials. So safeguarding those materials and safeguarding that equipment is a top international priority.

And the United States, through the form of the Nuclear Security Summit, has been able to make progress in securing loose nuclear materials in a way that has enhanced the safety, not just of the American people, but of the entire world.

QUESTION:

I find this enteractment (ph) concerned (ph). Talking to many minorities groups in Iraq about two weeks or so, they are very much worried about what is going on against minorities (inaudible) treatments during this election (inaudible). But they were saying that (inaudible) under Obama, they are safe there. They are safe because Obama has been protecting the minority (inaudible) in many ways.

And also, during Secretary Blinken's statement, she said that she will continue (inaudible) President Obama's mission and concern as far as the minority (inaudible) issues. My question is how much -- if the minority will play the role in this coming elections? Because one poll (ph) is saying that minority (inaudible) will decide who will be the next president of the United States because of -- the unity is going on among the (inaudible) in the country that (inaudible) the U.S. and for the minority rights.

EARNEST:

Listen, Goyal (ph), I think we have heard quite offensive rhetoric coming from a number of Republican candidates for president and there has been an attempt on the part of a number of Republican candidates to marginalize and single out and treat differently American citizens because of the way they look, because of the color of their skin, because of the sound of their last name, and in some cases, because of the religion they choose to practice.

EARNEST:

All of that flies directly in the face of the kinds of values that all Americans cherish. And the fact is, it's not just racial, ethnic and religious minorities in this country that have been offended by that Republican rhetoric, it's a whole lot of Americans, including Americans that don't fit those categories that have been grossly offended by that rhetoric and by those political tactics. And I do anticipate that there will be an opportunity for us to have a robust debate about those values and priorities in a general election.

And I do feel confident that whoever the Democratic nominee is will be somebody who will present a stark contrast to the rhetoric and values and offensive views that are occasionally spewed from the podiums occupied by Republican candidates for president.

QUESTION:

Finally, don't you think president will be talking about these issues in the coming months after (inaudible) minorities and other groups in the country?

EARNEST:

Well, I think -- I'm confident in telling you that in the general election, the president will be lifting up the kinds of values that our country has long cherished. And that certainly includes a commitment to ensuring that everybody in America has an opportunity to succeed regardless of their -- their last name or the color of their skin or the way they choose to worship their God.

That's what makes this country great and it certainly is a message that you'll hear from President Obama and Democrats up and down the ballot this fall.

Thanks, everybody.