

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs and Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

4:31 P.M. EDT

MR. GIBBS: Good afternoon. Before I bring John up to answer a few of your questions, I wanted to run you all briefly through a tick-tock of some of the events of the last few hours, starting, as you know from our earlier statement, that at 10:35 p.m. last night, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan alerted the President of the credible terrorist threat. The President directed U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies and the Department of Homeland Security to take steps to ensure the safety and security of the American people and to determine whether these threats are a part of any additional terrorist plot.

John provided the President with additional updates throughout the evening.

From 11:00 p.m. on Thursday to 12:00 a.m. on Friday, Brennan held a phone call to discuss the threat with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, FBI Director Robert Mueller, NCTC Director Mike Leiter, TSA Administration John Pistole, and officials from the Central Intelligence Agency.

At 1:00 a.m. on Friday, Brennan and Senior Director Nicholas Rasmussen of the national security staff held a secure video teleconference to discuss the threat with officials from across the intelligence community, including NSA, CIA, TSA, NCTC and FBI, as well as the FAA, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, Northern Command, the Coast Guard and other White House officials.

At 5:15 a.m., Brennan held a phone call with British Deputy Secretary -- Deputy Security Advisor Ollie Robbins to receive an update on the suspicious package identified in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom. Brennan and Robbins held a second call at 7:30 a.m. on the same topic.

At 8:00 a.m., John held a secure video teleconference to discuss the threat with officials from NCTC, CIA, DOD, FBI, TSA, CBP, NSA, DHS and FAA. At 9:15 a.m., John held a phone call to discuss the threat with President Saleh of Yemen.

At 10:00 a.m., Brennan held a phone call to discuss the threat again with Director Mueller, and a third phone call with Ollie Robbins shortly afterward.

At 10:15 a.m., John, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon and Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough discussed the threat with the President at the President's daily brief.

These are the activities from this morning that were coordinated out of the White House. Obviously this, as you can see from the rundown, has encompassed activities throughout the government, but agencies also were doing a lot and have been doing a lot since we were first -- first made the President aware last evening.

I'm going to direct some traffic while John answers some questions. I will remind you that this is an active investigation involving sensitive intelligence, so there is a limit to what John will be able to talk about publicly here.

Jake.

Q Mr. Brennan, if you could talk about what we know beyond the fact that this was from Yemen, there are people in Yemen with AQAP who want to harm us -- if there is more that can be established to create a direct link beyond the country of origin?

MR. BRENNAN: I think, as Robert said, this is an active and ongoing investigation. We are working very closely with our partners in Yemen and United Arab Emirates, as well as in the United Kingdom and other countries, as well.

We know that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has been trying to carry out attacks against U.S. and Western interests, as well as against Yemenis. So as we continue with this investigation, we are trying to understand who is behind it, the responsibility, and make sure that we understand the scope of the threat that we might face.

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We've identified these two packages right now. They have been isolated and they have been made inert. So, therefore, what we're trying to do now is to make sure that we are able to address any other threats that might be out there.

Q Just a quick follow, you said you've identified two. What about reports that there are up to 15 packages out there that you're looking for? Is that possible?

MR. BRENNAN: What we are doing is making sure that we take a close look at other packages that might also have some type of materials in them of concern. Both of these packages that we've identified to date originated in Yemen, and so I think it is very prudent for us to make sure that other packages that might be coming in similar routes or from Yemen, as well, are looked at very carefully. And that's what we're doing right now. But there are only two packages right now that have materials of concern.

Q The President described this as a credible terrorist threat against the United States. Can you say whether this was actually an attempted terrorist attack, or some sort of practice run for something down the line?

MR. BRENNAN: I think, as the President noted, it is -- does appear that there were explosive materials in both of these packages, that they were in a form that was designed to try to carry out some type of attack. The forensic analysis is underway. We are relying heavily and working closely with our partners in this regard. But clearly, from the initial observations, the initial analyses that's done, that the materials that were found and the device that was uncovered was intended to do harm.

MR. GIBBS: Chip.

Q "Do harm." Do you have any sense on the extent of the harm or the extent of the damage that could have been done by this? And secondly, are you looking into the possibility that al-Aulaqi was involved in this?

MR. BRENNAN: I don't want to speculate at this point in terms of what the damage could be from the devices, the explosive material that we have found. That's the analysis that's underway. It's still at the very early stage of that analysis. We're working, as I said, closely with our partners.

Clearly, what we are doing is looking at all individuals that we think might be involved in this. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has been rather open in its venom towards the United States, towards Western interests. There are a number of individuals there that we're very concerned about, so we're looking at all possibilities.

When I had my conversation with President Saleh this morning he did pledge the full cooperation of the Yemeni government. We are working closely with them and we are going to get to the bottom of this plot.

Q Did al-Aulaqi's name come up? Is he considered a top suspect?

MR. BRENNAN: Anybody who's associated with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is a subject of concern.

Q Do you have a sense of the quantity of the explosive, even if your analysis hasn't determined the quality of it yet?

MR. BRENNAN: We have had some preliminary discussions with our partners. I don't want to go into the details about the quantity or the exact types of materials because I think this is still preliminary and I wouldn't want to say something that was going to be then corrected in the future.

Q Are there any suspects in custody?

Q Prior to learning about the plot was the intelligence community aware of this option as a possibility, using cargo planes with packages to attack?

MR. BRENNAN: I think over the years al Qaeda has demonstrated that it has focused intently on the aviation sector. A lot of its plots have focused on trying to carry out attacks against aircraft, using aircraft also as potential missiles, as we well know. So the aviation industry has taken those steps over the years expressly because al Qaeda -- and when I'm talking about al Qaeda I'm not just talking about al Qaeda in the FATA area in Afghanistan. I'm talking about the franchises, including in Yemen, which have demonstrated very clearly that not only are they intending to do certain things against this homeland, but that, as we saw last Christmas Day with Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, that they will, in fact, take steps to carry out those intentions.

Q Were cargo planes, though, were those ever focused on as a possibility?

MR. BRENNAN: We've been concerned about passenger aircraft and cargo planes, commercial airliners, others, for many, many years.

MR. GIBBS: I cut off the questions on the fourth row. You had your hand up.

Q Oh, yes. Were there any suspects -- are there any suspects in custody?

MR. BRENNAN: Not to my knowledge, no.

Q Is there any reason to believe that this plot goes beyond cargo flights to regular passenger travel, and is there any consideration being given to putting an embargo on packages from Yemen -- originating in Yemen, or even urging people to reconsider travel plans?

MR. BRENNAN: We're looking at all possibilities at this point. We don't want to presume that we know the bounds of this plot, so we are looking at all types of packages, air travel, whatever. We just want to make sure that we are going to whatever length we need to, to ensure the safety and security of air travel at this point.

Q And an embargo on any packages originating in Yemen?

MR. BRENNAN: We are working with the Yemeni government right now. I do believe that it would be prudent and we have taken some steps to ensure that packages that come from Yemen are going to be carefully screened. We're working with the Yemeni government right now.

So at this point, one of the reasons why we looked at some planes that were coming down into Philadelphia and Newark today is because they were, in fact, carrying cargo from Yemen. So we have had these interagency meetings to discuss all these options. I don't want to go into the details of this because this is all part of the security measures that are in place, but several of these measures have already been instituted.

MR. GIBBS: Helene.

Q Can you walk us through the decision to send fighter jets to escort that Emirates flight into JFK today?

MR. BRENNAN: These are decisions that are made by U.S. military/Canadian military air force. If there's a threat -- and my understanding -- and I've only seen some of the preliminary reports about this -- is that there was concern about possible cargo on that flight. And so, again, with an abundance of caution, sometimes air force -- our air force, the Canadian air force -- will scramble some jets to make sure that everything is okay.

Q There's been a lot of concern about threats against European targets. Is this at all related to any of that chatter that was picked up in recent weeks?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, as you well know, we issued the travel alert because of concerns about al Qaeda carrying out attacks in Europe; that one package was uncovered in East Midlands Airport in the UK. We are looking at all the parts of the puzzle that we have been piecing together over the past several weeks from al Qaeda. But we're not presuming that this is part of that plot. We're not presuming that we've disrupted that plot. We need to maintain our vigilance. And that's the message that we share with our European partners.

MR. GIBBS: Chuck.

Q Considering what the targets were in Chicago, the Jewish places of worship, any extra precautions that you're putting out for synagogues?

MR. BRENNAN: The FBI, Department of Homeland Security and other domestic agencies are looking at that very carefully and have reached out to the appropriate private-sector entities as well as organizations to ensure that any other potential targets of such attacks are alerted. So we're working very closely with state and local officials.

Q And a quick big picture -- the Yemeni cooperation -- considering this is now multiple attempted terrorist attacks it looks like emanating from Yemen, is it fair to say that we don't have the best cooperation yet with the Yemeni government?

MR. BRENNAN: I would say that over the past 22 months or so, during this administration, and even in the prior administration, there has been a steady improvement in that cooperation. I would say that the CT cooperation right now with Yemen is better than it's been ever before. That doesn't mean that it can't improve more. It needs to improve more. I've been out to Yemen four times during the past two years. We're working very closely with them. And we found that they are courageous partners. Many Yemenis have lost their lives in the battle against al Qaeda.

MR. GIBBS: Wendell.

Q Have U.S. authorities been able to inspect these packages? Have we increased our presence, or do we plan to do so in Yemen?

And, Robert, Philadelphia and Chicago involved in this -- will the President's travel plans this weekend change?

MR. BRENNAN: We're working very closely with the authorities both in Dubai, as well as in East Midlands Airport, so that we can participate in whatever investigative efforts that are underway.

MR. GIBBS: And, Wendell, let me just add, the President's travel plans both this evening and tomorrow at this point are not expected to change. And I think at the end of the statement, the President was clear, as you can see from John and others who have been here overnight, that our counterterrorism professionals are on the job. And the President is not going to change his schedule and there's no cause for Americans to change their schedule.

Q Robert, do you expect this issue to come up at all during the campaign events at all in the next few days?

MR. GIBBS: I have not talked to -- I'll get some guidance from the speechwriters to see if this gets mentioned. Certainly, I will say, as the President said, we will take the opportunity if need be throughout the weekend to continue to update the public on information as it comes in.

Q Considering what al Qaeda has done in the past in targeting other countries during an election season, are you taking that into account that there's anything -- that this is more than just a coincidence of timing?

MR. BRENNAN: There's never a day that we relax our guard against al Qaeda and its potential to carry out attacks or attempt to do that -- whether it's Election Day or any other day of the year.

Q I wonder, Mr. Brennan, if you can back that tick-tock up just a little bit. What did you know at the time when you briefed the President last night? And were these packages just discovered through random screenings? Or was there something that tipped you off to these packages?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, I knew enough last night to be able to brief the President, number one. Number two, I think the American people should feel particularly good that since 9/11, the U.S. government has built up a very, very capable and robust intelligence, law enforcement, homeland security system. And as a result of the strength of that system, information became available that we were able to act upon very quickly and that we were able to locate these packages.

So I'm not going to go into the details about how we became aware of it. But the redundant layers of security, the tremendous work of the counterterrorism professionals, law enforcement, homeland security, intelligence, was the reason why we were able to succeed.

Q If I can just follow up on that -- you're saying then that you were aware of this plot not because of the packages but because of something else?

MR. BRENNAN: I'm saying that whenever you pull a string, there's a reason why you start to pull that string. And we had a reason to pull it. And as a result of what we were able to uncover in East Midlands Airport, with the very strong cooperation of British authorities, we were able to also then take additional steps. And that's why those prudent measures were taken today to ensure that we were able to identify any other packages that might be out there of concern.

Q Can I just follow up on that? Were you able to -- did you direct the authorities in the East Midlands to look for this package?

MR. BRENNAN: We were working very closely with our British partners to identify -- locate, identify and isolate that package.

Q To be clear, which of the two packages was found first? Was it Dubai, and that led you to East Midlands? Or was there any connection --

MR. BRENNAN: The first one that was found was East Midlands.

Q And so that -- did that lead you to Dubai then?

MR. BRENNAN: The first one we found was East Midlands.

MR. GIBBS: Christie.

Q John, the other packages that are being looked at, were they also addressed to destinations in Chicago or also to Jewish organizations?

MR. BRENNAN: There were two packages, as I said, that we identified -- one in Dubai and one in East Midlands. Both of them were addressed to synagogues in Chicago.

Q Can you say if they're -- if any of the other packages that you're looking at now are also addressed to Chicago?

MR. BRENNAN: With all the mail that goes through the system, I'm not going to say that there isn't something. But again, the only two packages that we've been able to identify of concern are the one in Dubai and one in East Midlands.

All the other efforts that we have underway is to see whether or not there's something else out there of concern that we can similarly isolate.

Q Were either of the Chicago synagogues the one next to the President's house where I believe he will be staying this weekend?

MR. GIBBS: No.

Josh.

Q Mr. Brennan, can you just clarify -- so you found the first package after the President was briefed on this issue

last night, is that correct?

MR. BRENNAN: Yes, from a sequencing standpoint, yes.

Q And is it your belief that the institutions in Chicago were the targets of the attack and not, say, the cargo flights? Because you made some reference to the security of cargo flights and so forth. The intent was to injure people at these institutions?

MR. BRENNAN: It is less than 24 hours since we first started to look at this very intensively and so it's still the very early stage of the investigation, and the analysis as far as the intended target, the impact of the explosives, how it could have been used, and I don't want to speculate at this point, at this time.

Q Can you give us any more detail on just the size of these packages? Are these letter bombs? Are they large boxes? And is it your belief they were designed perhaps to explode when opened? Can you give more detail?

MR. BRENNAN: They were not letters. They were larger than that -- think about breadboxes or so in terms of maybe size. We don't know yet how they were intended to be activated.

Q So we don't know if they had a detonator or a main charge?

MR. BRENNAN: There are a number of things that we know and we're piecing together those puzzle pieces. And we're working very closely with the British and Emirati authorities. But at this point, there's a lot of forensic work that needs to be done, and it's still early.

MR. GIBBS: Sam.

Q Mr. Brennan, is there -- is the threat level being -- terror threat level being raised? Also was there any discussion with these planes in the air of the President's shoot-down authority or landing them elsewhere?

MR. BRENNAN: No, there was no discussion of that. What we were looking for were packages and, therefore, we took the steps that were appropriate to ensure that we were able to identify where packages were globally, as well as where they might be as they were coming into the United States. And so the measures that we took were appropriate to the concern that we had at that time.

Q And the threat level?

MR. BRENNAN: We are right now making sure that we are able to stay as vigilant as possible. There has been no adjustment of the threat level in terms of color code, whatever else. But as a result of this, we're making sure that we're working very closely with our state and local officials, and law enforcement, homeland security and intelligence communities are very much on their guard.

MR. GIBBS: Chuck.

Q Can I get someone to clarify -- and it follows up on Ann's question -- with the packages themselves, what made the packages suspicious, or something else led you to the package?

MR. BRENNAN: As I said, the American people should be very pleased that we were able to get insight into the fact that there were suspicious packages out there that we had to find. And I'm not going to go into those operational details. I think that's the reason why we have a security system in place that has these redundancies and the ability to detect things, from inception all the way to the possible execution of an operation. So we were on to this, but I'm not going to get into details about how we knew.

Q So it's fair to say you were looking for the suspicious packages?

MR. BRENNAN: We were looking for packages that were of concern, yes.

Q Any impact whatsoever on the President's Asia trip, in terms of threat level assessments?

MR. BRENNAN: Whenever the President travels, we take a very careful look at what the threat environment might be and look at what the terrorist environment is. So we're taking this into account, but at this point there is no effect.

Q Mr. Brennan, early on there had been a lot of speculation that this might be some kind of a dry run. Given what you do know about these packages now, would you say that this was more than just a dry run?

MR. BRENNAN: I'm concerned that since there were explosive materials in it, a traditional dry run is something that you would not necessarily use with explosive materials.

That said, I don't know yet what exactly the intent was at this point. There are a lot of different scenarios that some people have speculated about, but -- and what we're trying to do is wrestle this to the ground by doing a good forensic analysis, as well as taking a look from an intelligence standpoint and trying to piece together what we might have known in the past and that would give us a sense of how this was going to be used.

MR. GIBBS: Goyal.

Q Can you say, sir, that al Qaeda have changed their locations of the country, and also these are the same people? And finally, does this threat of these packages have anything to do with the Pakistani man arrested from Ashburn, Virginia? Because he spoke in the past that attacks will be taking place in the Washington area.

MR. BRENNAN: There is no indication whatsoever that the individual arrested yesterday had anything to do with this plot. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is an organization of several hundred individuals that are dispersed throughout the country. They are murderers and they are determined to carry out attacks against innocent lives, whether they be Yemeni, Americans, Westerners or others.

We are working very closely with the Yemeni government, and we've been able to make some significant progress against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula inside of Yemen, working with those partners.

We'll continue to do this. If anything, this just demonstrates to us, and I think to the Yemenis as well, that we need to redouble our efforts so that we're able to destroy al Qaeda. And we will.

Q Finally, if you have briefed the Indian government, because the President's plans next week, as far as this trip is concerned?

MR. BRENNAN: We share on a regular basis with the Indian government. The Indian government is one of our best CT partners.

MR. GIBBS: Josh.

Q Do you think, Mr. Brennan, in the past when there have been specific attacks, as has been highlighted by the administration, that terrorists have had to modify their ways because of the hurdles that the government has thrown up in front of them -- do you think that's the case that we saw here, the use of cargo planes instead of passenger planes reflect the intense scrutiny that passenger aircraft have gotten in the last year or so since they've come under -- being used as a vehicle for attacks?

MR. BRENNAN: Absolutely. The al Qaeda organization has tried to adapt to all of the obstacles and hurdles we've put in front of it. And that's why we have to remain very agile. We have to make sure that we stay one step ahead of them.

But clearly, they are looking to identify vulnerabilities in our system and take advantage of those vulnerabilities. But fortunately, because of, again, the good work of the people here, as well as the very important partnership that we have with our allies overseas, we've been able to stay ahead of them.

Q Are you surprised that they keep focusing on airplanes -- so long after 9/11, that still remains an attraction for them?

MR. BRENNAN: There's nothing about al Qaeda that surprises me anymore. And that's why we have to be prepared to deal with every eventuality that is out there.

Q How did your response to this in the last 24, 36 hours, to this incident, differ from the response to Abdulmutallab over the holidays last year? And what did you learn from the last year attempted Christmas Day bombing that helped you better prepare for this?

MR. BRENNAN: In some respects, they're very different because you're dealing with two packages as opposed to an individual, but in other respects, there are similarities.

What we -- whenever something like this happens, what we want to do is to make sure that we take all appropriate measures to identify additional threats that are out there. Whether it's somebody who arrived in Detroit or whether a package is found in East Midlands, we're trying to find are there other individuals that are trying to blow up a plane? Are there other packages out there?

And so the community kicked into gear right away and took those steps so that we would find out where those packages were and take the appropriate steps with TSA, FAA and others, and the system worked very, very well.

MR. GIBBS: Sam, do you have a follow?

Q Yes, I was just going to ask you, how do you respond to -- there's sure to be accusations that this is all happening a couple days before an election, used to sway the election towards Democrats. How do you respond to that?

MR. GIBBS: I think -- John briefed the President at 10:35 p.m. last night off of very credible terror information. And after -- I think that's largely put to rest any speculation that may be out there after the testing the President talked about that showed apparent explosives in those devices.

As John said, counterterrorism officials at all levels of our government quickly went into action in order to take the steps necessary to protect the American people. That has -- that is exactly what has governed his actions and the actions of those in this government since that time.

Jake.

Q Mr. Brennan, how many credible threats have come from Yemen in the last two years?

MR. BRENNAN: There are a number of threat streams that we've been following, a number of individuals that we're very concerned about.

Q What number?

MR. BRENNAN: I wouldn't put a number to it.

Q Dozens? We know of under 10. How many --

MR. BRENNAN: Well, it's a question about whether or not there's reports of a threat that may be separate from other reporting. Is it part of the same threat stream? Sometimes we're concerned that al Qaeda is trying to carry out some type of attack, so we might have dozens upon dozens of reports related to that one attack.

So over the past year, the intelligence community, the counterterrorism community has been kept very busy with reports about al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula trying to carry out attacks in Yemen and in that region, as well as against the United States.

Q Is it fair to call AQAP the primary terrorist threat to the United States?

MR. BRENNAN: I think my concern is, outside of the Afghan-Pakistan area where the al Qaeda core and senior leadership reside, I would say that the al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is the most active operational franchise right now of al Qaeda and that this is one that deserves a lot of our attention.

MR. GIBBS: Chip.

Q Any concerns, Robert, that the President is going to be having a rah-rah rally tonight while all the cable channels and local news stations and everybody else is going to be airing this terrorism scare?

MR. GIBBS: No, again, Chip, I think the President was quite clear on this, that we are taking this threat very seriously. At the same time, he is not, and I don't think the American people should have any reason to change the way they go about their lives or change their schedule.

I will say this, that we are -- regardless of whatever season we're in, our commitment, Democrat and Republican, to keep this country safe will not waver.

Q Will he talk about this tonight?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I'm going to check on that when I go back.

Listen, let me get John back to working on this. We will, as we get information, update you if there are any additions to his schedule or what have you over the course of the weekend. Stay in touch, and we'll let you know as we get more information.

Thank you all.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you, Mr. Brennan.

END

5:00 P.M. EDT

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