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Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on Al Shabaab Terrorist Organization

Via Conference Call

5:24 P.M. EDT

MR. HAMMER: As we mentioned, we're doing a call on background with senior administration officials on the Al Shabaab terrorist group. I'm going to turn it over to our senior administration official number one to make some introductory remarks. And then we'll open it up for your questions.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for being with us. First of all, I think as you're all aware, Al Shabaab has claimed responsibility for what can only be termed as a heinous and cowardly terrorist act that claimed the lives of I think about 76 individuals, most of them Ugandans, innocents, at these two sites, but also claimed the life of one American and injured five others.

This is certainly in keeping with Al Shabaab's threats that it has made, as well as its history of attacking innocents. And at this point, there are indications that Al Shabaab was indeed responsible for it and that its claim of responsibility is real.

The President has reached out to President Museveni offering support and all assistance. The FBI has sent a team there to help with the crime scene. We are making whatever assistance available to the Ugandan government as they deal with the aftermath of this attack. We've also made sure that other countries in the region understand that the United States stands with them against these types of attacks that are carried out by groups such as Al Shabaab.

Now, just a little bit of background on Al Shabaab and what we're doing. This is something that we have been focused on for quite some time. Al Shabaab is an organization that was formed in 2006, and since that time, it has threatened the United States as well as carried out a number of violent acts inside of Somalia. This would be, though, the first terrorist operation that Al Shabaab carried out outside of Somalia.

But its history is a bloody one. And it is dedicated to the perpetration of violence in order to achieve its ends. As you know, Somalia is a war-torn country and Al Shabaab is one of the groups engaging in activities in Somalia in order to advance its interests and its presence. It engages in regular activities against other Somalis. It has this domestic agenda that is designed to increase its presence, its reach, its influence throughout the country. And it is dedicated to the overthrow of the recognized government of Somalia, the Transitional Federal Government.

Al Shabaab has what I'd refer to as a dual persona. In one respect, they are engaged in a domestic fight in order to advance their political agenda, but they do use terrorist tactics and exceptionally violent means to advance their agenda inside of Somalia.

At the same time, there are a number of individuals within the Al Shabaab organization that have close links with al Qaeda. And I would say that Al Shabaab is a group that is associated with al Qaeda and that these links between the organizations have existed for quite some time. Its agenda is very similar to al Qaeda's agenda. It advances a distorted and perverted version of Islamic goals and agenda. It has engaged in terrorist tactics inside of Somalia extensively. It is responsible for the assassination of a number of Somali peace activists, international aid workers, numerous civil society figures, as well as journalists.

They are engaged right now in attacks against the African Union peacekeeping troops which are in Mogadishu, the AMISOM mission, which has lost approximately 35 soldiers as part of this peacekeeping mission -- it's been there since 2007.

There are a number of U.S. persons who have traveled to Somalia to join up with Al Shabaab as well as with al Qaeda, and this is something that we've watched very closely.

Al Shabaab also has denied the passage of humanitarian assistance to a number of displaced individuals inside of Somalia by preventing access to certain areas and hijacking humanitarian aid and assistance.

Al Shabaab was designated a foreign terrorist organization in 2008, and it was sanctioned, in fact, by the United Nations Security Council earlier this year.



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We have taken a number of steps against Al Shabaab, including the President in April of this year issued an executive order, which is 13536 -- an executive order that targets those who threaten peace and stability in Somalia and those who interfere with humanitarian assistance there. We have designated an Al Shabaab military commander, frozen the assets of a major Al Shabaab financier, and increased the tools available to support international efforts to weaken this group.

We actively support the AMISOM mission in Somalia with training and supplies, Burundi and Uganda being the major contributing nations, and continue to work with them in support of their efforts to bring security to Somalia and to support the TFG. We're also providing assistance to refugees and displaced people throughout the country.

So Al Shabaab has a domestic agenda inside of Somalia that is a bloody one. It also has a terrorist agenda that now has manifested itself outside of Somalia, in other countries, and this is something that we are going to work very closely with regional governments to counter.

MR. HAMMER: All right, with that, can we open it up for questions, please?

Q Hi, I actually had two questions. First, I know that the administration's position in terms of assistance, military assistance to Somalia has been sort of -- I believe what the State Department has called a limited involvement militarily. I was wondering if the expansion geographically of the attacks by Al Shabaab just might change that and the U.S. might get more involved or offer more assistance militarily to Somalia, to the Transitional Government?

And also I was wondering if you think that local police departments across the country should be learning more about Al Shabaab? I'm sure they're well versed in al Qaeda. I'm wondering if they know enough about Al Shabaab.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, on the first question, we are working with regional governments, as I mentioned, working in support of the AMISOM mission there, working also with the TFG. One of the things that we want to make sure that we do now is take stock of the recent developments and the attacks in Kampala, and to take a look and see what it is that we need to do as a result of those attacks.

In the first instance, what we're trying to do is to lend support to the Ugandan government. But also what we need to do now is to look at the situation in Somalia and to determine if this is now a trend that Al Shabaab is going to be on, and to take all appropriate measures. So there are different mechanisms of support that we can utilize here. But again, this is something that our government is going to be looking very closely at and working with governments in the region on.

Q And what about the locals?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think there have been a number of instances over the past year where individuals have left the United States and traveled to Somalia. I think there have been a number of press accounts and reports about individuals who have traveled there. So I don't think Al Shabaab is an unknown entity to a number of law enforcement organizations in this country. Certainly the FBI has worked on Al Shabaab and has cooperated closely with a number of the local law enforcement entities through the joint terrorism task forces. We're very vigilant for any indication of individuals from Somalia coming here to the United States to engage in these kinds of extremist and terrorist activities.

So if there is a need for new information to be provided to local law enforcement, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and others will make sure that that gets out into those jurisdictions.

Q But you don't think locals should take it upon themselves?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Certainly all police departments should be as vigilant and as mindful of the recent developments in terrorism as possible. And so, again, this is something that the FBI will be working with their local partners, again, through the JTTFs, to ensure that they are aware of tactics, trends, terrorist activities and practices that are engaged in by al Qaeda and Shabaab as well as other organizations.

Q Hi. Thank you very much. Can you help us on whether you had any warnings -- going back now -- have you seen any indications that this was going to happen? Is this something that -- you had anticipated Al Shabaab operating outside of its own borders. Do you think that there is any kind of a, dare I say, intelligence failure here in not having anticipated it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, as I've mentioned, Al Shabaab leaders have made public threats against outside interests, including Western interests. There has been over time reporting that indicates that Al Shabaab, because of its association with al Qaeda, may be planning attacks at different locations. To my knowledge, there was no forewarning or reporting that indicated that these attacks were going to be taking place in Kampala. But Al Shabaab, since it was designated a foreign terrorist organization, it was on our radar screen and we were trying to monitor any reports or indications that it was planning to carry out terrorist attacks. But this is something that was, again, perpetrated in a neighboring country, but we didn't have any advance warning about that attack.

Q And do you think -- are there any indications now that others who are in the (inaudible) should be similarly warned? Are there any additional steps that should be taken by some of the other ally partners?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Rest assured that we are working very closely with the countries in the region, our partners, on the intelligence, law enforcement, and security fronts, ensuring that they have the latest

information available to us; that we provide them guidance and support as far as what we know about any other types of threats that they need to be vigilant for.

But clearly if this indeed was Al Shabaab making good on its threats to carry out attacks and did this in such a manner against a vulnerable target of innocence, I think clearly other governments in the region will need to make sure that they are able to take the necessary security precautions at this time in light of what happened in Kampala.

Q Earlier today, Ambassador Benjamin implied that the al Qaeda contact that Al Shabaab had, the most direct contact, was al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. I was wondering if you could talk about that relationship. And two, if this tells you even more that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is becoming more and more of a -- when you refer to al Qaeda, is that what you're referring to rather than necessarily al Qaeda that we know in the Pakistan and Afghanistan region?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think al Qaeda in the region, there are, I would say, maybe two identifiable subcomponents of al Qaeda. One is al Qaeda in East Africa that is responsible for the attacks against our embassies in Addis Ababa and Nairobi in 1998, and then Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. And there is a fair amount of interaction, intersection between AQAP and AQEA. And the Al Shabaab organization and individuals within Al Shabaab have contacts and associations with both al Qaeda in East Africa as well as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

There are also, I would point out, though, a large number of Somali refugees inside of Yemen, and it is an area that is frequently traversed between Somalia and Yemen, quite a bit of traffic going back and forth there.

So, yes, we are concerned of what we have seen of Al Shabaab contacts and interactions with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as its more traditional contacts and associations with elements of al Qaeda in East Africa. And there is somewhat of a blending together of these different individuals who are at the top of these organizations. And, unfortunately, I think they are bringing along with them some of the young Somalis and others who are engaged in these local conflicts but are brought into the al Qaeda orbit.

Q Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- I mean, it seems as if more terrorist attacks are getting connected in some form or another to them than any other al Qaeda affiliate. I mean, in your mind, is this becoming the focus of when we hear the words al Qaeda, that this is who we're dealing with these days?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is probably the most operationally active of the al Qaeda franchises in the region, in Yemen, and the peninsula -- Arabian Peninsula, as well as in the Horn of Africa, as well as setting its sights beyond that area. So, yes, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is one of the al Qaeda elements that I am most concerned about. And its involvement in the Horn and its interaction with Al Shabaab elements is of strong concern.

Q Thanks for doing this. A recent assessment by a policy analyst over at Council on Foreign Relations, Bronwyn Bruton, said that the U.S. was in effectively a self-imposed stalemate with regard to options for how to deal with the situation in Somalia and Al Shabaab. Can you talk a little bit more about what you think the way forward is here? There have been any number of reports of those arms that the U.S. does send in ending up in Al Shabaab's possession thanks to corruption and black market trafficking. How much margin for maneuver does the U.S. really have to counteract or limit Al Shabaab's activities?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think if you look at that portion of Somalia, there are two elements or forces that are trying to stabilize the situation there. There's AMISOM and the Transitional Federal Government. Al Shabaab is a destabilizing force. And what we need to do is to ensure that we're able build up the capabilities of AMISOM as well as the TFG. At the same time, we're very concerned about Al Shabaab's capabilities and what it is doing in the area, what it is doing vis-à-vis preventing, again, this humanitarian assistance in there.

Somalia is a complicated and challenging environment and one that the United States is looking at the different actors and proceeding appropriately as far as the policies that we're going to pursue. But this is something that is going to take years to address because the problems that affect the country are systemic, structural. And what we're trying to do is, working with the TFG and AMISOM, is to bring and to broaden the area of Mogadishu and of that portion of Somalia so that there can be a stabilization situation, so that additional assistance can get into the country, and that further progress can be made against those forces of instability including Al Shabaab, as well as the pirates along the coast.

Q Thanks. Let me just follow quickly, there are also reports of associations in the past between Al Shabaab and some other groups in the region, directly with Hezbollah -- some 700 fighters going from Somalia to Lebanon -- and then indirectly through Hezbollah to Iran and Syria. Is that a significant part of what you worry about with Al Shabaab? Or was that sort of a one-off thing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think they're concerned about Al Shabaab making associations with a variety of organizations -- not just al Qaeda, but others -- as they look for assistance and support, whether it be weapons, arms, money. These are things that I think we're taking into account right now in trying to design policies to counter that, again, working with those elements like AMISOM and the TFG.

Q Thanks, very much.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Just to return to this point about the Council on Foreign Relations analysis, I think it's also important to recognize that it's not as if Al Shabaab is some kind of well-loved force in Somalia. It's an

organization notorious for its treatment of civilians and of the Somalia people. So I just want to make sure one doesn't inadvertently paint a picture of a -- this incredibly strong organization that's got control and popular support.

As we all know, in Somalia one of the big challenges is the absence of functioning and effective entities that can provide security. So it's sometimes easy I think to view Shabaab as perhaps stronger in the Somalia context than it necessarily is. It's just operating in a place where normal structures are so very broken.

But some of that same analysis, as the Council sort of suggests that the right answer is some kind of I think they call it constructive disengagement and sort of a pulling back from the problem. And I think that what we've seen in Kampala is a good example of why that's not a viable way forward.

Q Okay, thanks.

Q A couple of questions about this. I'm wondering, in light of the belief now that the attack -- if it wasn't a dry run, it emboldened AQAP to try to the Christmas bombing. Do you see the Uganda bombing as -- since it's the first external operation by Al Shabaab outside of Somalia, do you see that as a worrisome sign that maybe these guys are capable of launching some kind of attack inside the U.S.? And I have a follow-up.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, certainly, I think it demonstrates their willingness to make good on their threats to carry out attacks. It's clearly -- clear that they were directed into Uganda because of Uganda's sort of role in AMISOM. But there is a concern that Al Shabaab might be trying to carry out attacks or similar types of attacks in other venues, so -- and this is something that we have to maintain our vigilance.

Q But would you extend that -- do you think they're capable of doing it here, possibly? Are you worried about that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm worried about any organization, particularly any one that is associated with al Qaeda and has al Qaeda elements sprinkled within it, and their determination as well potential capability to carry out an attack outside of the region, as was demonstrated by what happened on Christmas Day, as you point out.

There are ways that they can carry out relatively unsophisticated attacks, but still with very lethal results. So again, Al Shabaab has been on our radar screen for a while. They're a group of murderous thugs that direct that organization. A lot of that is directed to the Somali people -- against the African people in a manner that is just totally reprehensible and something that I think the African people find deplorable.

At the same time, what we need to do is make sure that we're vigilant here in the States, as well as in other places.

Q If I could just ask about there is a defendant who walked out of court in Alexandria federal court a couple of weeks ago named Anthony Joseph Tracy -- he had been an ICE agent -- or an asset of some sort for ICE and also DOD and an intelligence agency, according to the court transcript. There was some concern that he had flunked a polygraph test about smuggling in Somalis into the U.S. or helping to smuggle some through Cuba, and that apparently he flunked on the issue of whether or not he had assisted Shabaab in getting some of their people in. Do you have any lingering concern that Mr. Tracy might have helped facilitate some Shabaab operatives or fighters to getting into the U.S.?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to talk about any specific case, but I will say that I am concerned about the different types of attempts and smuggling routes that have been used by Somalis to flee that area, including to the West and here to this hemisphere, and whether or not Al Shabaab has tried to exploit those for its own purposes.

Q Thank you very much. I came to sort of delve deeper into the relationship between the different elements and aspects of al Qaeda and this group in terms of fundraising, in terms of exchange of money and exchange of arms or flow of arms. Have you seen an uptick between the different aspects of al Qaeda and this group in terms of these aspects?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There's a lot of activity that goes on in that part of the world that is outside of normal channels and a lot of things that are done through personal connections and contacts. And given that there is a relative lack of government structures in place in that part of the world, a lot of illicit activity can go on. And I believe al Qaeda and other groups such as Al Shabaab take advantage of that.

Again, I point out the concern about the increasing activity of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that goes beyond Yemen; it reaches out into the Horn. And so the activities of Al Shabaab, al Qaeda, I think sort of run the gamut of different types of activities, including the movement of contraband as well as different types of fundraising activities that allow them to carry on with their agendas.

MR. HAMMER: All right, thank you very much, everybody, for joining us this afternoon. Just a reminder, this was on background as senior administration officials. And enjoy the rest of your day.

END

5:50 P.M. EDT

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