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Office of the Press Secretary

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Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs Aboard Air Force One

Aboard Air Force One En Route Andrews Air Force Base

7:05 P.M. EDT

MR. GIBBS: So to give you -- chart you guys through a little bit about what they saw, where they went. So this lacks a little perspective of a little bit broader -- but if you look at Louisiana, where we are is that fingertip out, right, is -- Venice is where the helicopters took off from -- right? So they went 15 miles due east right to the edge of the coast, and then went -- basically turned back and made a straight beeline up the coast, and that takes you back to the airport in New Orleans. And in some ways it follows a little bit the road that we took down.

But obviously from the aerial perspective -- the President said you could get a real sense of several things -- just the intricate nature of the coastline that you're dealing with, the fact that you could see from the air the year-by-year decimation of these coastal areas. We heard a lot about this in the meeting, which was that a lot of these places have receded because of damage that's been done. So not only do you have the economics of some of the most -- as the fishermen told the President -- some of the most important estuaries in our country, but you also have -- obviously these marshes represent the physical barrier that protects the greater part of Louisiana, particularly New Orleans, from bigger storms and hurricanes.

So that's a sense of what they saw in the helicopter. On the ride were Thad Allen, Governor Jindal, and John Brennan, along with the President.

Q They saw no sign of the actual slick, then?

MR. GIBBS: No. The winds were -- one of the reasons that we -- well, the reason that-- we had four helicopters -- the visibility and the winds were such that there was a genuine concern that we'd have to go from visual to instrumentation flying. That makes them a little nervous to have four helicopters out there doing instruments, which is why we peeled off quickly. And the winds just did not allow them to get out.

Now, obviously that's part of what is complicating some of the booming and some of the response, but at the same time, has kept some of the oil away as well. So the weather is, I would say, on the whole, has not been helpful to the recovery, though.

Q Robert, did the President see any marshland or coastal area that -- where the slick had reached?

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q His reaction?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I mean, you got a real sense of, as he said, what's at stake both economically for the millions of dollars that are made off of fishing in these areas, but also the potential environmental devastation in the further decimation of these precious wetlands.

And we talked a lot about -- in the meeting with the larger group before the press statement -- in once that -- they're obviously setting up and making some preparations in the parish for how to deal with different aspects of the slick as it comes. And they talked about how genuinely hard it is to clean this up once it gets into some of these areas. So I think the President got a real firsthand look at the geography of what we are dealing with.

Q Was Thad Allen --

MR. GIBBS: Governor Jindal, John Brennan and the President.

Q What was happening during the flight? Were they pointing things out to him and explaining things to him?



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MR. GIBBS: Yes, I mean, Thad Allen was talking about -- was pointing out things about the wetlands and about the contours of the geography. One of the things that they talked about -- parish president -- and the President listened to this and asked that the Coast Guard and others do as much as humanly possible as -- the people and the fishermen in these parishes, many of whom are now -- they're not fishing and they're helping to lay boom -- they know these waters best, they know these areas best. They're helping out firsthand with the response.

So one of the reasons that Admiral Allen met with the parish presidents today was to streamline their plans for dealing with the oil slicks when they do come in, how best they want to deal with the contours as we make some decisions about where to lay additional booms and set up additional barriers.

Q Can you tell us why the Wednesday trip to New Jersey was cancelled?

MR. GIBBS: To move -- it was really either -- we weren't going to be able to travel both here and do Wednesday, so the decision was made Friday to come here, and the assets that would have been used for that were moved down here.

Q Logistically, you literally couldn't do today and Wednesday, or was --

MR. GIBBS: These guys had a very little -- there was a very short run-up to this trip. I think the advance teams went in yesterday morning. So there's a lot of logistical assets that are in place here that didn't make sense to try to do both trips.

Q What was supposed to be his theme in New Jersey? What was that trip for?

MR. GIBBS: In northern New Jersey to talk about the economy.

Q What did the President accomplish by coming down here?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, one, you get a firsthand view of the recovery efforts. The President heard from, as I said, the parish presidents and the Coast Guard about the processes that they're setting up. One of the things that they talked about, that the President talked about with the fishermen and the President talked about with the parish presidents is how do we set up a compensation system for those whose livelihoods are threatened because of this oil that are normally out fishing right now? How do we set that up in a streamlined way? How do we make sure that as BP foots the bill for this compensation claims are set up in a way that's fair to the fishermen? How do we -- how are state and local authorities, these parishes, how are they interfacing with the Coast Guard in order to set up adequate and quick response plans as we talked about in here for when the oil does come in, where the booming goes, and a prioritization for that.

And I think the President -- look, there's no doubt that Admiral Allen discussed several issues that I think -- in terms of ensuring that we have everything in place that we need, it was important for the President to hear. So I think the President thought it was a worthwhile trip.

Q In terms of getting down here, was his goal to get here before the oil slick actually hit land? Why did you want to do it so quickly?

MR. GIBBS: Remember when we -- a lot of this is weather-dependent. When we briefed on Thursday, there was a pretty decent chance that the slick was going to be on shore either late Thursday or early Friday. So we didn't think about the sequencing of that because the weather pattern as of Thursday had part of this -- it's not on here, but there was a part of the slick that had sort of broken off and was going in a slightly different direction and many thought would make landfall at first. That's the Thursday-Friday thing. But again, some of the currents that are coming around the edges here, pushing some of the oil away, even as the winds push what has come out of well closer to land. So the truth is I think by all accounts, on Thursday we figured that by Sunday the oil would already be here.

Q Is the President frustrated by this whole thing? I mean, it's been 12 days, there's still oil getting into the ocean, still --

MR. GIBBS: Well --

Q The problem is getting worse, not better.

MR. GIBBS: Because there's a hole that's leaking 5,000 barrels of oil a day.

Q Is that frustrating to him?

MR. GIBBS: Look, I think if you saw Secretary Salazar, who was at the BP command center on Thursday, and then held a meeting with CEOs of the oil companies to reiterate then the frustration in getting things done -- look, I think by all accounts we'd hoped that the blowout preventer would not have malfunctioned. Those are the kind of things that are put in place to prevent what has happened from happening.

They're making plans now for -- even as they drill these two relief wells that optimistically will take quite some time -- how do we plug this leak either through using the robotics to effect the valve -- how are we dispersing this so that that oil never gets to the top and then through a natural system gets -- largely dissipates at the bottom? Or the plans that BP is taking to, in a sense, put a cone or a dome over the leaking.

I think you heard the President today say we expect that BP -- we expect nothing less than every effort that they have to stop this leak as quickly as possible.

Q Has he been pretty firm with them, or is it a collegial exchange?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I point you to what Secretary Salazar said about -- I think the phrase was -- at least the phrase I heard earlier in the week with him was to keep the boot on their throat. So I think that kind of sums up in that Western Colorado way how -- what we're trying to convey.

Q Robert, is the March 31st expand offshore oil drilling plan, is that on hold?

MR. GIBBS: Well, obviously what the President announced on Friday to evaluate what happened and to have all those decisions -- all future decisions on our policy made based on a full examination of what happened. We've got teams obviously that are inspecting the deepwater operations in the Gulf now. And again, I would remind you that there -- even what the President outlined at the end of March requires at least two sets of extensive reviews in order to both identify areas suitable for leasing and then ultimately an environmental plan for what ultimately is leased in an area that is on a new five-year OCS plan. Not to mention the eastern part of the Gulf would still require additional congressional action to open up.

Q Did you get a forecast today from the Admiral about Mississippi and Alabama?

MR. GIBBS: I'm trying to -- I can't recall that there was a specific one on that, to be honest with you.

Q Governor Jindal personally thanked the President for coming down. They talked at great length, very animated -- in a very animated style when the President got off the plane. Do you know what the --

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think the President -- one of the things the President wanted to do was ensure that state and local authorities understand that we're here to be a strong voice, to ensure that those that are responsible -- and that's BP -- are doing what has to be done. I talked about this earlier on the way down that there's several different aspects of this, right? There's -- we've got a leak that has to be plugged. There's oil from that leak that's coming onto the surface. We've got to do whatever is humanly possible to ensure -- to contain its spread through booming, through burning, if the seas can calm down a little bit -- you know, they did a test burn last week that they thought was successful. Now we need to get the seas to calm down to be order to do that. The dispersing tests that they were doing in the underwater -- on the underwater side. And then we've got to worry about, once that oil begins to move, preventing both the environmental and the economic impacts of it. So I'd say there's several things that we're working on and we want to make sure that everybody's voice is heard.

I think -- I will say this -- and I think the governor and I think the parish presidents would probably -- would echo this, as I say that one of the best developments of today was having Thad Allen go talk to those parish presidents about getting the resources from the federal government but also, more importantly, from BP because they're the ones that are going to foot the bill for this -- get them to activate these local parish plans for dealing with this oil as it comes in. As I said earlier and as we heard from these guys extensively, that is, they know these waters best. They know these -- they know the currents, they know the land, and we've got to use that resources and those assets to deal with what's coming in.

Q Do you have any updates on the New York bomb plot and has the President received further updates from Brennan on that?

MR. GIBBS: The President and John Brennan have talked throughout the afternoon as John has gotten more information, but I don't have anything to add.

Q What about the reports that the Taliban have taken credit for it?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I certainly saw those reports but I also noted that those reports came with a decent amount of skepticism. I think these are -- this is the same group, if I'm not mistaken, that took credit for a postal shooting that was also in New York I think sometime last year which we now know obviously they had nothing to do with.

Q -- reporting that BP was using faulty machinery. Is there any -- that BP was using faulty machinery. Is there any administration reaction to that?

MR. GIBBS: No. I mean, I obviously saw what the CEO said in believing that faulty equipment was the cause. Look, our focus is on capping that leak and doing whatever we can to ensure that whatever breaches are there are fixed so we can worry about containing what's already out and not have to worry about more.

Q On the bomb plot, you said those reports came with a decent amount of skepticism. Are you saying the

administration is skeptical about those reports?

MR. GIBBS: No, I'm saying that's what I -- in the coverage of that claim, that's what I read. I would also --

Q And also there's been reports that Viacom was being targeted. Do you have anything on that?

MR. GIBBS: I don't. Don't quote me, but I think if you -- Commissioner Kelly in his press conference there was some skepticism on an answer that he gave about Taliban --

Q Robert, is it a little awkward --

Q How do you stop a vehicle full of explosives from driving into Midtown Manhattan?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I'd say one of the things you do is you have people on the ground that -- alert citizens and alert police officers that are able to get people out of the way and deal with the situation as quickly as was possible in New York. I don't think there's any doubt that the involvement of both citizens and first responders were key in ensuring that nothing happened.

Q What is the President's reaction to the possibility that this might be a terrorist plot, after the underwear bomber and everything else, the possibility of a major attempted attack in New York, of all places? I mean, what is his personal reaction to that?

MR. GIBBS: I haven't talked to him personally about that. Obviously, Caren, there are -- we're working every day to ensure that those that are planning actively to do our homeland harm are unsuccessful.

Q Robert, is it a little awkward that the government is effectively dependent on BP and its oil industry?

MR. GIBBS: The government is not dependent on BP. The government is overseeing and ensuring that BP is doing all that it must do. BP gets the bill, as per the law. But the President has been clear with our team on the ground and I think the administration officials that have met with BP have been clear with them about exactly what we expect needs to happen to -- in order to both stop what's going on now, to contain what has been spilled, and to make economic restitution for those that are the victims of their mistake.

Q But Admiral Allen said yesterday that they've got the submersibles that are adept at doing this, they have the expertise; there is no U.S. department of well capping.

MR. GIBBS: Well, right. I mean, look -- you know, admittedly I've seen unsubstantiated criticism about the fact that more could have been done. Safe to say that the Department of Defense does not have a submersible with arms to shut off the valve of a deep-water oil well. The technology and the expertise lie in the companies that do that.

Q The CIA might.

MR. GIBBS: Let me tell you, I can assure you that everybody that could be called has long been called about ensuring that their assets are used. The truth is one of the outgrowths of involvement has been other oil companies helping the response from BP, understanding that this was -- while this was a BP well, there are wells all over the continental United States and in Alaska that belong -- leases belong to different countries [sic]. But we are -- we're ensuring that they're doing what they have to do.

Q When you talk about keeping the boot on their throat, there has been disappointment with how quickly they reacted. And while you're keeping the pressure on them, do you feel that they're doing -- that they're currently doing all they can?

MR. GIBBS: We're ensuring that they're doing all that they can. But, you know, Caren, look, we've got a big problem. I will reiterate that we -- the Coast Guard and the Navy were on the scene immediately with reports of a fire -- an explosion and ensuing fire on an oil rig. There have been boats in the water. There has been boom that's been laid. Everything that can be done has been done. We have planned for -- the preparations that were made in response were done to take on the worst case scenario. Everything -- every asset that we have available is being used. We are -- but as you said, we don't possess the type of equipment that BP does to deal with a well at 5,000 feet.

Q Does the President plan to call the executives personally and talk to them about that or meet with them in the near future?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I don't know of anything that's on the schedule. Again, I know that Secretary Salazar has spent quite a bit of time as the agency -- the department in charge of the Outer Continental Shelf in the Gulf ensuring that they're doing what they can.

Q I know you would reject any comparison between this and Katrina, but has the President expressed that he's mindful that some people might want to draw those connections? I mean, it's happening even though -- there are a

number of --

MR. GIBBS: And other than geography, I haven't figured out how.

Q But I mean, are you all mindful of that?

MR. GIBBS: Only because you keep asking.

Q Well, I'm just asking; other people are writing this.

MR. GIBBS: I would say this. I have no doubt that -- well, I'm happy to compare the response. I think it's -- we're obviously dealing with a situation of great potential environmental and economic devastation. I think the analogies though are tougher to make in an event that -- a storm that you track for several weeks that comes ashore and kills 1,800 people. And again, I think if you look at the fact that -- I think the timeline I was looking at this morning had this explosion -- had the Coast Guard and the Navy there on site immediately after this explosion. We've done everything that we could.

Q We haven't heard a lot about FEMA. Are they involved in any way, shape, or form?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know what their role is on this. Obviously there's different -- this is somewhat unique, as I said, because you've got -- the Department of Interior and Minerals Management deal with drilling; DHS has equities here; once oil hits land it becomes EPA. That's why it's important to have somebody like Thad Allen as a national incident coordinator who has experience in coordinating across departments and agencies to ensure that the response is timely and effective, and somebody who understands systems have to be stood up. Again, the President talked several times about the compensation issue and ensuring that for fishermen who depend on making a catch, selling that catch to be able to pay for resources to go out and do it again, that their lifeline isn't cut off during a pause in their fishing because of the spread of this oil.

Q When do you expect oil to hit land now? What's the latest?

MR. GIBBS: Truthfully, we expected it either last Thursday or last Friday. You know, the truth is the winds, as you saw today, they're quite powerful. They're moving -- I mean, I think if you look at some of the predictions on these things, it's just not a -- this is overly simplistic, but you can't just look at a patch and then in a day the patch all moves and then -- it's a nebulous thing that based on currents and wind moves and changes. So I think that is why you -- if you get a sense of both the booming that's been laid as well as the potentially deployable booming throughout the Gulf Coast is being done to protect many different states to ensure --

Q So you don't know when it will hit or even if it will hit?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think once it's in the water you expect that it will hit and we're making preparations as if it will and ensuring that we do all that we can to minimize any amount that does come ashore. I would say because of the size of the Gulf you've got -- it's not just one place that we're focused on. That's why we've done -- the calls that we've done with governors have included everybody in the Gulf states in order to ensure that we're doing all that we can across the arc of where a potential oil leak could go.

Q A quick question about the Supreme Court. Are you still saying "soon" for when he's going to make a decision?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q And how many people has he interviewed, formally sat down?

MR. GIBBS: Several.

Q Several?

MR. GIBBS: Several. None today.

Q The White House has said May 26th is a deadline, though. The President has said that. Does this alter that at all?

MR. GIBBS: No.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. GIBBS: Thanks, guys.

END 7:33 P.M. EDT

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