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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 10, 2011

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jay Carney aboard Air Force One en route El Paso, Texas

Aboard Air Force One, En Route El Paso, Texas

12:14 P.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: Well, I assume I'll have questions about what the President is doing in El Paso today. Briefly, obviously, he'll be giving a speech to talk about the need for comprehensive immigration reform, about the need to increase support, why it's an economic imperative, in particular, to keep us competitive in the 21st century.

And he'll also -- I think as you know, he'll be touring the Bridge of the Americas commercial cargo facility in El Paso. Of the four crossing that comprise the El Paso port of entry, the Bridge of the Americas is the largest, facilitating both passenger and commercial traffic. On average, 1,200 to 1,600 trucks a day import commodities through this location.

President Obama will be led on the tour by Ana Hinojosa, the director of field operations at the Bridge of the Americas, and he'll be accompanied by the Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin.

During the tour the President will be shown a mobile truck X-ray and be given an overview of large-scale technology designed to protect and prevent radiological threats. He will also view a demonstration of border patrol personnel searching commercial cargo.

And with that, I'll take your questions.

Q Boehner last night, line in the sand -- helpful to the process, or no?

MR. CARNEY: What I would say about that, Hans, is that the Speaker indicated that he supports significant deficit reduction. The President supports significant deficit reduction. All parties to these negotiations recognize the problem and share a similar idea about what the goal should be, which is roughly \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over 10 to 12 years. That in it and of itself is progress.

Obviously we disagree with the House Republican budget plan, which we made clear. The President believes that we need to achieve that \$4 trillion in deficit reduction in a balanced way and not solely by cutting entitlements and eliminating, in the case of the House Republican plan, the Medicare guaranteed to our seniors.

However, he believes that the negotiations, the talks being led by the Vice President, will continue to be productive as all sides seek common ground towards further deficit reduction. We believe that will take place.

And no less important is the urgent need to raise the debt ceiling. We continue to maintain that the -- it is folly to hold hostage the vote to raise the debt ceiling to prevent the United States of America from defaulting on its obligations to any other piece of legislation. We will get a fiscal agreement, we believe. We're optimistic. We believe we can get that. But to hold one hostage to the other remains extremely unwise in our view.

And I would simply note some of the things that Speaker Boehner has said in the past, if I have them here, about just that issue. Back in the last day of January -- or, no, January 30th, rather, he said -- this is the Speaker of the House -- to raise that -- failing to raise the debt ceiling would mean, "financial disaster not only for our country but for the worldwide economy. You can't create jobs if you default on the federal debt." We couldn't agree more.

Q If I could fast-forward it to last night, did you hear Boehner as a hostage-taker or a deal-maker?

MR. CARNEY: I believe that it is fine for all participants in this process to restate their starting positions. That we understand. But we believe that there is -- that common ground can be found between Republicans and Democrats in these negotiations being overseen by the Vice President. And we continue to be optimistic.

Q So the idea that cuts will have to equal the amount that the debt ceiling is raised, that's not new to you? You haven't heard -- you've heard that from Boehner before?

MR. CARNEY: No, but what I meant was that the position that eliminating the Medicare program as we know it remains on the table, but dealing with tax expenditures is off the table. Maximalist positions do not produce compromise.

Q It's not just Boehner that's saying that on the tax expenditures, it's Kyl too.

MR. CARNEY: No, I understand, Hans, and I'm not going to negotiate the particulars here, but what the purpose of the negotiations is, is for the -- all sides to find common ground, and I think that common ground can be found. The balance and the particulars are not something that I'm going to negotiate at 30,000 feet.

Q -- his position not undermine the talks that are going on at Blair House with the Vice President?

MR. CARNEY: I don't believe that it does, no.

Q The Texas governor is upset that there hasn't been a disaster declaration covering the wildfires there. Some Republicans have suggested that perhaps politics is playing a role in there, and one has even said it's inappropriate for him to be raising funds in the state without such a declaration. How do you answer that?

MR. CARNEY: I would love to answer that. I think it's important for everyone to know that this administration has been extremely responsive to the state of Texas' requests for wildfire management assisting grants -- 25 of them at last count. All that have been requested had been, as far as I know it, have been provided. And that -- in each case, because wildfires are different from other natural disasters -- they are ongoing. And in each case the federal government, the federal taxpayer, is paying 75 percent of the costs of fighting these fires of Texas -- 75 percent. So there is plenty, considerable federal assistance flowing to Texas to deal with these serious wildfires. We take this very seriously.

And the fact is, is that because wildfires are the kind of natural disaster that they are and fighting them is a major cost here, the federal government is picking up a substantial portion of that cost.

Q Why is the President --

MR. CARNEY: And I would say -- can I just point out that the suggestion that you are raising that some I guess some Republicans think that this is political, I would just point to the disaster declarations that the President has designated from across the country, and I think there was no discrimination here between red and blue states.

Q Why is the President not meeting with Governor Perry?

MR. CARNEY: Governor Perry turned down our invitation to meet the President at the airport.

Q He wanted a more substantial meeting and didn't want to have to go 800 miles all the way to El Paso to discuss the wildfires and border security and all that.

MR. CARNEY: Again, we invited him to meet with the President and he declined the invitation. We have also in the past offered him a National Security Council briefing on immigration; he declined that as well.

Q Is his request for a thousand more National Guardsmen under any kind of consideration at all?

MR. CARNEY: We have substantially increased the number of border patrol agents twice -- more than 20,000 now -- twice the number that there were in 2004. We have tripled the number of intelligence agents -- analysts who are working on border patrol. We have -- let me just get out my trusty fact sheet here -- we've deployed unmanned aerial vehicles that now patrol the border from Texas to California. For the first time, we are screening 100 percent of southbound rail shipments to seize guns and money going south, even as we go after the drugs that are heading north. We've forged a partnership with Mexico to fight the transnational criminal organizations that have affected both of our countries. And I would add that in terms of the presence of the National Guard there, we intend to maintain that presence and to work with Congress to get the funding necessary to maintain the border -- the National Guard presence.

Q On the immigration reform that the President is going to discuss today, will he be discussing specifics -- for instance, hurdles that illegal immigrants would face in order to get on the path to citizenship?

MR. CARNEY: I don't want to steal the President's thunder. I encourage you to listen to the speech. But he will talk about all the issues that encompass comprehensive immigration reform, from the need for border security, the need to deal with this underground economy that depresses wages, that allows bad actors in business to compete unfairly with those who follow the rules and obey the law, and the need to reform our legal immigration laws so that we're making sure that we essentially take advantage of the enormous talent that we find in our universities and not train the competition, but have those immigrants who are here studying at the best universities in the world start companies here in the United States instead of taking them overseas to our competitors.

Q Does the White House intend to submit its own legislation on immigration reform, or are you going to leave the work to Congress?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to preview our legislative strategy from here, but we're -- the approach we're taking is we are trying to -- recognizing the hurdles that we have faced legislatively, we are trying to build

awareness and support for the need for comprehensive immigration reform, to fix this broken system. And I'd just remind you that the stakeholders that we have talked with represent Republicans and Democrats, businesses, a variety of interest groups. This is -- the need for this, as in so many cases, the train is leaving the station and Washington is still trying to find the train station.

I mean it's -- this is something that we're hoping that we can push from the outside in here to get Congress to address the fact that this is a broken system that needs to be fixed, and that used to have bipartisan support. And one of the reasons why we're told -- we've been told, all of us in the United States have been told, that those who used to support comprehensive immigration reform in the Republican Party backed away from that support because they wanted borders first.

So, again, everything that was demanded has been provided in terms of increased border patrol, increased efforts to secure our borders, and so we look forward to some of those supporters returning to the table to try to figure out this problem and fix the broken system.

Q So if it's so urgent, why aren't you providing a timetable then?

MR. CARNEY: Because, as you know, Hans, there are a lot of ways to skin a cat in Washington when you're talking about getting things done. And we have a strategy here to try to get another hard thing done, and we're following that strategy because we believe it gives us the best chance of success.

Q Can I ask, if it's so urgent, why did the President wait almost two and a half years since he took office to visit the border?

MR. CARNEY: Well, come on -- I mean, there have been quite a few things going on in the last two and a half years -- the worst recession since the Great Depression, two wars, the hunt for Osama bin Laden that ended successfully a few days ago, among many, many other issues.

What is notable -- the irony of your question, if I may, is that I was getting the opposite questions: Why are you bothering when you know it's so politically difficult to achieve this. Are you really serious?

And just like people said the same thing about whether or not the President was serious about fiscal reform, the answer is yes. Is he serious about comprehensive immigration reform? The answer is yes. He feels that he was hired to try to do some hard things, and he's going to try to do them.

Q Could we do one on Pakistan? The offer to let the wives be interviewed, is that sufficient or will the U.S. be calling for more?

MR. CARNEY: Look, we have an important and complicated relationship with Pakistan. We are working avidly with our Pakistani counterparts to continue the cooperation that we've had in the past. And we're optimistic that that cooperation will continue with regards to the issues that you've raised, access to the -- to Mr. bin Laden's wives and also to the materials that were collected by the Pakistanis after the U.S. commandos left, and of course on all the other issues that we need cooperation on with the Pakistanis.

Q The Navy chaplaincy has approved the -- officiating of same-sex marriages at Navy chapels, pending a full certification of the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell." There have been some members that have been complaining that that brings the administration's pledge to uphold -- or to, I should say, follow DOMA, if not defend it. Does the administration feel that that's still legal under DOMA?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't seen that, and so I suggest you ask the Department of Defense since I haven't seen that story.

Q Jay, to get back to Pakistan, what kind of communications and interactions is the administration having with the Pakistani government now?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we maintain our contacts at a variety of levels of -- senior levels of the government, as we did prior to the mission against bin Laden.

Q Has the President spoken again or will he be speaking again with President Zardari?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm sure he will speak again with President Zardari. I'm not aware that's he has had another conversation with him since the evening of May 1st.

Q And just a quick issue here. Some of the folks in the cabin were startled to see a plane fly underneath Air Force One, about the time we were just south of Dulles, I believe. Are you aware that there was anything too close or --

MR. CARNEY: No, I was not aware that happened, and I'm sure I would have been told if there were an issue.

Q Can I ask about the political dimensions of the visit to Texas? He's raising money in Austin. How confident is the President about carrying the state of Texas in the 2012 election?

MR. CARNEY: Well, he obviously did not carry it in 2008, but the President believes strongly that he doesn't give up on any state. And I'm just citing something he said recently about that. And the fact is I've heard him talk on other occasions about how much he enjoys coming to Texas. He's glad to be here. He knows he has a lot of supporters here; it's a big state. And I'm sure he'll be back.

Q If I could go back to deficit and debt, are you -- in an answer to Darlene, you said that you didn't think Boehner's talk -- speech last night undermined the process. And then earlier you said that you didn't think it was helpful to restate starting positions.

MR. CARNEY: I didn't say that. I said it's fine to restate starting positions. I didn't say it was unhelpful. I'm just saying that it doesn't --

Q So it's fine --

MR. CARNEY: We understand that there are starting positions. We also understand that compromise involves acknowledging that you have to move off of your starting position. That's kind of the nature of compromise.

Q Anything on -- the President take a look at the window at the swelling Mississippi?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't seen him do that but I haven't been with him for the full flight so far. I remember when we were flying out of Fort Campbell on Friday there was a lot of flooding in Kentucky. It's obviously quite devastating what we're seeing now on television.

Q Are there any plans for the President to take a closer look at the impact of the flooding?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any scheduling updates.

Anybody else?

Q Thank you, Jay.

END 12:31 P.M. EDT

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