

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest

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1:20 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Hey, everybody. I have a few announcements to make at the top before we get started. At 2:00 p.m. -- so, in about 40 minutes -- the President will be making a statement to the pool on camera about the latest developments in Libya. He'll be making that statement at the location where he is staying this week with his family in Martha's Vineyard.

Also this morning, related to Libya, the President was briefed about the overnight developments in Libya by John Brennan, and this afternoon -- and actually here shortly -- the President will convene a meeting of his National Security Council to discuss Libya and next steps.

Q A conference call meeting?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q Or is it secure video?

Q Does he have secure video here?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not sure whether it will be video or conference, but he will convene a conference call -- that's the way I would describe it -- he will convene a conference call with his National Security Council to talk about Libya and steps forward.

Q What time is that?

MR. EARNEST: This afternoon -- here shortly before he delivers his statement.

Q Before?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: I have a couple of other announcements on a couple of other topics that I wanted to flag for you before we get to a few questions, and then I'll wrap it up here shortly just so we can all tune in to the President.

In addition to the briefing that he got from Mr. Brennan on the situation in Libya and the overnight developments there, he was also briefed on Hurricane Irene. And the Federal Emergency Management Association is in close contact with the state and territorial partners that have already experienced or could possibly experience in the future some impacts from the storm. They have already proactively deployed regional incident management assistance teams to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. They also have FEMA liaison officers in the emergency operations centers in both the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

FEMA continues to closely track the storm, and through its regional headquarters in Atlanta has already been in touch with their counterparts and our partners in the Southeastern states that could potentially be affected by the storm later this week. So the President was briefed on that today.

The other thing that a couple of you have asked me about, Brian Deese, the Deputy Director of the National Economic Council, arrived in Martha's Vineyard last night. He also went over to meet with the President this morning and gave the President a briefing on some market developments from overseas and sort of a routine update on the economy.

In addition to that, Brian staffed the President on a couple of phone calls the President made this morning. The first one was to Warren Buffett, the CEO of Berkshire Hathaway. The President and Mr. Buffett discussed the overall outlook on the economy and the reaction to the headwinds we've experienced over the last couple of months. They talked a little bit about some possible measures that would spur investment and increase economic growth. And they also talked about some measures that could address the long-term fiscal situation in this country.

Q This morning?

MR. EARNEST: This morning, yes. The President also placed a phone call to Alan Mulally, who is the CEO of the Ford Motor Company. They talked about developments in the automotive and manufacturing sectors. They

the Ford Motor Company. They talked about developments in the automotive and manufacturing sectors. They talked a little bit about the auto industry supply base and their efforts to work through some of the temporary disruptions that they experienced in the early part of this year. They also talked a little bit about expanding economic growth, stimulating investment and expanding American exports.

And then the final thing that I have for you is a scheduling update. Two weeks from today, September 5th, the President will be traveling to Detroit to spend part of his Labor Day with working men and women in the Detroit area, and he will deliver some remarks to the Detroit Metro Labor Council there.

Q Will that be a jobs speech?

MR. EARNEST: That is different -- that event and those remarks will be different -- is different than the speech that we talked about last week, the major economic address that the President will do.

Q Will that be before or after that speech?

MR. EARNEST: That major address is after Labor Day, so this is on Labor Day in Detroit, and the major economic address will come after that.

So, with all of that, I'll take a few questions and then we'll try and do this quickly before the President speaks.

Kristen.

Q Josh, thank you. Pentagon officials say they believe Qaddafi is still inside Libya, potentially hiding somewhere in Tripoli. What is the best and latest information that you have about where Qaddafi is?

MR. EARNEST: That is the best -- that is the best information that we have. That's the latest. There's no evidence to indicate that he's left.

Q And how are you at this point in time getting information and how confident are you about the information that you're getting?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you know, Kristen, we have for some time been communicating and coordinating with the TNC at a number of levels. We're obviously also closely following the open-source reporting that -- from your colleagues who are there in the region. Even some of the social media outlets -- Twitter and things -- are providing some insight into what's happening there.

Q Josh, what is the United States doing right now to aid the TNC, either organizationally -- how to ramp up, step up this transitional government, number one, or -- and what the United States might be doing to ramp up medical and humanitarian supplies.

MR. EARNEST: Sure. Well, as I think I referenced, one of the things that the President is going to be talking about with his national security team -- his National Security Council today is some possible future steps here. So I don't have a lot of insight to shed on that other than to reiterate that we are closely coordinating with the TNC, as we have been for some time.

If you have additional questions about sort of the nature of those consultations, then I would actually direct you to the State Department on that.

Q And how about medical and humanitarian?

MR. EARNEST: The State Department may be able to provide you some more information on that.

David.

Q What change did -- what did NATO forces and what did U.S. forces do differently in the last few days to help the rebels as they advanced on Libya? What specifically did U.S. forces do differently?

MR. EARNEST: Sure. In terms of the operational details of what they've been working on I would refer you to NATO and to the Department of Defense. But they have been for some time closely coordinating with the TNC in this effort. But in terms of the operational details, you'll have to go to the Department of Defense for that.

Q Josh, can you also talk about -- thanks. Was there an 11th-hour call from Colonel Qaddafi to the U.S. in some form, urging that he be given more time? Did he have some contact with the U.S. government?

MR. EARNEST: I have not heard anything like that. So if -- I haven't heard anything like that. You might check with the State Department to see if they have any details on something like that.

Q Do you know then when was the last time the U.S. had any contact with Qaddafi? Weeks ago? Days ago? Hours ago?

MR. EARNEST: I don't. I would refer you to the State Department for that.

Q And also, just a quick thing on Senator McCain yesterday, there have been various critics on the right -- Senator McCain was on CBS yesterday saying, essentially, the President does not deserve credit if Qaddafi leaves, because he charged that the President was leading from behind, that it was the Brits and the French that led this and the President was in a rush early on to get the U.S. out of the lead role. And he said the President was leading from behind. How do you react to that?

MR. EARNEST: Our reaction to that is that I think the President's robust leadership here is actually pretty clear, that he worked very closely with certainly our NATO allies, but some other partners in the region, to put in place an international coalition that has had a tangible impact on the transition that's underway in Libya.

From the beginning, this has been -- well, I should say that -- I mean, this is something that the TNC is leading, and the supporting role that is being played by the international community has been forceful and meaningful to that effort. But beyond that, I don't want to say anything beyond what the President might say this afternoon.

Q Does the President deserve credit for having patience and letting this play out? Does he deserve credit here?

MR. EARNEST: I mean, I think our strategy -- the strategy that the President has laid out has been pretty clear from the beginning, in terms of working to mobilize international support and using to great effect the unique capabilities, certainly of the American military, but also of the robust nature of our military cooperation with our NATO allies and other partners in the region. And I think we're pleased with the way that that has gone.

Q So, in fact, you view this outcome --

MR. EARNEST: Alister.

Q Sorry, just quickly, two things. So what is the administration's assessment of the ability of the rebels to govern, in a sense? Any confidence you have --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to get ahead of the President's remarks today. So I don't want to comment on that at this point.

Q And then more specifically, how quickly can you release the assets that were frozen to the TNC -- \$40 billion?

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to the Treasury Department, who is responsible for administering those sanctions, to give you a comment on that.

Dan.

Q The President yesterday did not want to comment because I guess there was -- the situation was still so fluid and he wanted to get more facts. So can we expect that now that the President is stepping out that you have a pretty good handle on what is happening on the ground in Libya?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say that -- we're obviously in close consultation with the TNC about the circumstances that are -- about the circumstances in Libya, and in Tripoli, in particular; that the information flow continues. But I'll let the President speak for himself and you can sort of assess for yourself about what his conclusions are about that.

Q And just, again, on this situation of the TNC's ability to carry out a peaceful and democratic transition, I mean, is the confidence level high that they can effectively do this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we obviously are working closely -- as I mentioned, we have been coordinating closely with them. But, again, I just don't want to get out of -- ahead of what the President will have to say about this.

Peter.

Q When the President speaks of support for a democratic transition, are we talking financial support, diplomatic support, both? What kind of support does he have in mind?

MR. EARNEST: This is a legitimate question. This will be certainly among the things that the President will be talking about with the National Security Council this afternoon. I don't have any greater clarity on that at this point.

Q So it's not decided the extent of U.S. support? This is something that's TBD in this discussion today?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything to say about in advance of that meeting that they're going to have today.

Q Will you have something -- more of a readout after that meeting for us?

MR. EARNEST: I don't anticipate we'll have a specific readout of that meeting. But after the President does this meeting today and after the President speaks, if there are additional questions that we can answer for you, then we're happy to entertain those on an individual basis.

Erica.

Q You said that the strategy the President laid out has been pretty clear from the beginning. Is this outcome in fact a vindication of that strategy, from the White House perspective?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not here to play political pundit and sort of assess the winners and losers here. It's our view that the strategy that we have put in place in terms of closely coordinating with our NATO allies and other partners in the region has yielded -- and coordinating closely with the TNC has yielded some pretty -- a lot of favorable results here. But I'll leave it to the pundits to sort of assess their own conclusions about winners and losers.

Q And does it remain the White House position or the President's position that there will be no U.S. boots on the ground in Libya?

MR. EARNEST: That has not changed.

Carol.

Q Just sort of -- I think this was asked, but just to clarify -- what does the President envision the U.S.'s role is in post-Qaddafi Libya?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to get out ahead of the remarks that the President will say today and the meeting that he's doing with his National Security Council this afternoon. So I don't want to speculate on that at this point. If there are some questions that you have after those remarks, then we can endeavor to try to answer those questions on an individual basis afterwards.

Q And then just Senator Schumer has put out a statement saying that the U.S. should -- or that the Lockerbie bomber should be sent back to prison. How does the President feel about that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything on that for you, but we can circle back with you.

Yes.

Q Josh, can you talk a little bit about the jobs plan and sort of what the President is doing here this week on that front? Beyond the folks that you mentioned at the top, is he reaching out to anyone else to consult with them about the plan? And are the basic pieces in place at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Those are the two calls that the President has made today, to Mr. Mulally and to Mr. Buffett. The policy process in terms of the policy that the President will lay out in this major economic address after Labor Day is a process that's still ongoing. One of the reasons that Mr. Deese is here is to help the President coordinate with the team, the economic team, back at the White House, who is continuing to work on formulating this policy and crunching the numbers. So he will serve to -- as a conduit of information so that the President can continue to participate in that process as necessary.

So it's fair to say that that policy process is ongoing and probably will be for the remainder of the week at least.

Q Is he meeting anybody here to shape his thinking for the jobs speech or --

MR. EARNEST: Not that I know of on that front.

Q Can I just follow on Dan real quick?

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q When Dan asked the question about -- last night we were told by the President himself he wasn't going to come out because he didn't have confirmation as to what was going on. Now he's coming out on camera. Do you have -- I haven't heard any confirmation of where Qaddafi is. You said it in the briefing you didn't have any information on where he is. So what's changed since last night? What kind of confirmation has he gotten?

MR. EARNEST: I think overnight and this morning that we have gotten some greater clarity and confirmation about the circumstances on the ground in Libya, and in Tripoli in particular.

Q That he'll get into when he speaks later today?

MR. EARNEST: I think that he'll have something to say a little bit about that, yes.

Q Any plans to change his vacation?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any scheduling changes to announce at this point.

Yes, in the back.

Q From the Boston Globe.

MR. EARNEST: Hi.

Q I have a completely different question.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q You mentioned on the plane on the way over that he wasn't going to be doing any fundraisers here.

MR. EARNEST: That's correct.

Q Some of these receptions seem to include people that have donated money, like, on this trip, like the night he came in, some people hosted fundraisers and people paid money to get in. And then in subsequent days, including last night, the President then showed up and met those people. Would you still say there was no fundraising on this trip?

MR. EARNEST: I can state for you unequivocally that the events that the President attended over the last couple of evenings were purely social occasions.

Q Will the President have any more meetings or briefings after his statement today?

MR. EARNEST: I don't anticipate that he will, no.

Q What about on the calling of Warren Buffett and the Ford CEO -- is he likely to make other phone calls -- that sort of outreach --

MR. EARNEST: That's certainly possible, and we'll do our best to keep you up to speed on that.

Q Josh, just going back, one more try here, in the context of the whole year, I mean, going back to Tunisia and Egypt, is this a good day for the Arab Spring?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to get out ahead of the President's comments today. That's, again, a legitimate question, but I don't want to get out ahead of what the President is going to say here in just the next few minutes.

So, one last question in the back, and then we'll wrap it up.

Q Just to follow up on the boots on the ground and the President's position on that, would he consider any troops who were there just in a peacekeeping capacity to be boots on the ground?

MR. EARNEST: I don't want to prejudge sort of what our future policy is going to be here. That will be the subject of the National Security Council meeting that he'll do today, but I don't --

Q But do you see a distinction on that? Would peacekeeping troops not be boots on the ground, in the White House's view?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any indication right now to suggest that the -- what the President said previously is going to change at all.

So, thanks, everybody.

Q What time is the conference call?

Q Quickly, just a logistics thing here --

MR. EARNEST: Last one.

Q -- I don't know if this is your department, but I want to make sure we get something -- a semblance of a two-minute warning before the President makes this statement?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I'll go up right now and we'll see if we can work on that.

Q What time is the conference call?

MR. EARNEST: I think it's ongoing right now. He's going to do that shortly before his statement.

All right? Thank you, guys.

END 1:39 P.M. EDT