

Daily Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 07/09/2013

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July 9, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

July 09, 2013

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:17 P.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: It's a summer crowd. I like that. I noticed during the briefing yesterday how hot it was. I'm glad it's fixed. I thought maybe I was coming down with malaria a little after the fact, since I forgot to take my medicine for a while. (Laughter.)

Q The last one today.

MR. CARNEY: Really? I skipped -- I think I'm done for, I skipped two or three days. So if I break out in a sweat, it's not because of the questions. But I'm glad the air-conditioning is back on. I'm sure you are, too.

I have no announcements beyond that to make, so I'll go to the Associated Press. Jim.

Q Thank you, Jay. I wanted to start with Egypt. A few new developments -- the interim president named a prime minister; ElBaradei has been named vice president. I understand the President had a principals meeting yesterday afternoon and there's bipartisan support on the Hill for suspending aid to Egypt. Senator Leahy, Senator Levin, Senator McCain have all expressed support for suspending it. Senator Leahy pointed out that the U.S. law prohibits aid after military coups.

As you said yesterday, it's not in the U.S. interest to halt aid but that it is also a fact that U.S. law prohibits aid after a military coup. So how is the White House squaring that? What did the President's discussions lead him to decide yesterday?

MR. CARNEY: Well, you are correct that the President has been meeting regularly with his national security team about the situation in Egypt. You are also correct, as I said yesterday, that we have not made a determination about what to call or label the events in Egypt that led to the change in government there. And I tried to be very straightforward about the elephant in the room, if you will, by saying there's an elephant in the room here and it is in our national interest, the best interests of the United States, and the best

interests, in our view, of our goal of assisting the Egyptian people in their transition to democracy to take the time necessary to evaluate the situation before making such a determination.

And this issue goes beyond the question of our financial assistance to Egypt -- \$1.5 billion, roughly, that Congress provides, \$1.3 billion of which is security assistance, roughly. It goes to the essence of our relationship with Egypt, our decades-long partnership with Egypt, and the fact that Egyptians are looking to us for guidance and assistance as they make this very difficult transition to democracy.

So I acknowledge that this is a complex and difficult situation and that we are handling it cautiously for that reason. We don't want to make a precipitous decision. We don't think it would be in the best interests of the United States to change the assistance program quickly or immediately. Rather, we'll take the time necessary to evaluate it. We will review our obligations under law. We will consult with Congress and then move forward.

But for now, we are engaging with Egyptian authorities. We are engaging with leaders around the region. We are calling on all parties in Egypt to resist violence, to protest -- if you are a protester in Egypt, to protest peacefully. We are calling on the military to use maximum restraint. We are calling on all parties not only to resist violence, but to avoid incitement to violence. And we are calling on all parties to participate in a dialogue and a process towards reconciliation, because there is a dangerous level of political polarization right now in Egypt, as we've seen, and the best hope for Egypt's future is for that polarization to give way to reconciliation.

We believe that Egypt will only be able to emerge from this crisis if its people come together to find a nonviolent and inclusive path forward.

Q Given the relatively lack of ambiguity in U.S. law on aid and you guys trying to figure out, as you said, how to deal with the elephant in the room, is the President, is the administration pressing other governments in the region to increase their aid to Egypt so that you have more flexibility on the decision you ultimately make?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think it's important to look at the issue of aid and to look at reports about other assistance provided by other countries, and acknowledge that the numerical figure here is not the issue. It is about our policy objectives and our relationship with Egypt and the Egyptian people and what policy moving forward best supports our objectives here of assisting Egypt in its transition to democracy, assisting Egypt in its quick -- hopefully quick -- but responsible return to a democratically elected civilian government and to democratic governance.

And we are -- that's the focus we're on. So when it comes to our consultations with other governments in the region, we are having those conversations and consultations at every level. You can expect the President will be engaging with leaders in the region, as well as, of course, the other members of his national security team with their counterparts.

So this is all about our effort to urge all parties forward towards a process of reconciliation. We are cautiously encouraged by the announcement by the interim government that it has a potential plan for moving forward with a democratic process and elections, both parliamentary and presidential, and we think that's a good thing. And we call on parties -- all parties to engage in a dialogue about that process and not to refuse to participate. Because we believe, as I said earlier, that the best hope for resolving this crisis is through a process that is inclusive and in which everyone participates.

Q A quick note on another subject. Today there is a memorial for the 19 firefighters killed in Arizona. Vice President Biden is going there. I wondered why the President, who has made a practice of going to some of these tragic remembrances before, chose not to go to this one.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think it's very meaningful for Vice President Biden to attend, as you may have heard him in the past speak about his own personal experiences with firefighters. He has a very high regard -- as the President does -- but a personal experience that I think makes him a fitting representative of this administration, of the American people at the memorial. He is traveling out there and will be joined by members of Congress I think from the delegation.

Q Is there any concern about the President and his entourage, any disruption?

MR. CARNEY: I would say in general we always look at that. But I think that this was about the appropriateness of having Vice President Biden attend.

Q On Syria, the President has said he will give more military aid to Syria, but intelligence committees in Congress seem to be holding up that plan. And I'm just wondering if you can explain from the White House perspective why this is happening.

MR. CARNEY: Why?

Q Why aid is not flowing to Syria?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we have consistently stepped up our assistance to the Syrian opposition and we are engaged with Congress in discussions about that policy and why we believe it's the correct policy. I would refer you to Congress and relevant committees for actions they're taking or not taking. But it's the President's belief that we need to, as we have, continue to step up our assistance to the Syrian opposition, as well as the Supreme Military Council, I believe it's called. And we're going to continue to do that.

Q But is the President waiting for a signal from Congress that it's okay to send the new military aid that has been spoken of?

MR. CARNEY: I think that we're going to work with Congress, as the President noted when he announced the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council -- the President said that we would consult with Congress, and that's what we're doing.

Q Can I follow up on Syria?

MR. CARNEY: I'll get to you in a minute. Let me get to the folks -- anything else?

Q I just wanted to also ask about the disaster in Quebec. What's the White House response or reaction to that disaster? And, more broadly, is the White House taking leadership or looking at the safety issues involved in the vast expansion in shipping oil by rail?

MR. CARNEY: We're obviously aware of and evaluating what happened in Quebec. I don't have an assessment to make about it related to the broader questions, but we're in consultation with the authorities about it. But I'll have to take the question in terms of other specific responses.

Q Just going back to Egypt for a moment. The timeframe for elections in six months -- can you comment -- you touched on it, but comment specifically? Does that seem reasonable to the White House?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we will not prescribe a timeline. We are cautiously encouraged by the announcement of a plan that includes a return to democratically elected government; that includes parliamentary and presidential elections. And also, as I understand it, this preliminary plan calls for a referendum on constitutional amendments.

So this is a positive sign. There is obviously a lot that has to happen for such a timeline to be implemented and we expect that this will be an evolving process. Central to, in our view, the success of this kind of transition is the participation of and inclusion of all parties in Egypt. And that's why we call on all parties to participate in a dialogue, and we call on the Egyptian authorities to understand that they need to include all parties, that the success of this transition depends on the inclusion of all parties in the process.

Q Switching topics to Guantanamo Bay. Yesterday a federal judge generally described the force-feeding going on there as inhumane and called on the President to intervene to stop it. Is that something he would now consider doing?

MR. CARNEY: Well, on the questions of litigation, I would refer you to the Department of Justice and the Defense Department, which obviously runs Guantanamo Bay -- I would refer you to them for specifics about the hunger strikers. As the President said in April, we do not want these individuals to die. And he understands that this is a challenging situation, but for the specifics about the hunger strikers and then the litigation itself, I would refer you to the two agencies.

Q You know -- he knows it's quite unusual for a judge to make this kind of appeal to the President to directly intervene. And would the fact that a judge has done this in any way make him change his mind on this issue?

MR. CARNEY: I think that the President made clear in April and I think it holds true today that we don't want these individuals to die and the action being taken is to prevent that from happening.

Broadly speaking -- and you heard him discuss this recently in his speech at the National Defense University -- he believes that we need to close Guantanamo Bay. He has long believed that. And he has returned to this issue because he believes that it's in our national security interest to do so. And he calls on Congress to work with him to ensure that we can lift the moratorium on detainee transfers to Yemen so we can review those detainees on a case-by-case basis. And then, where appropriate, we will bring terrorists to justice in our courts and through our military justice system.

But the long-term goal here has been, in keeping with the views of leading Republicans as well as Democrats, as well as military officials and other national security experts, we need to close this facility because it's in our interest to do so.

Q And finally on Snowden, has anyone in the administration been notified by Russian officials that Snowden plans to accept Venezuela's offer of asylum? And is the administration making it clear to Russia that it would hurt the diplomatic relationship between the two countries if they allow him to travel?

MR. CARNEY: I think that was a tweet, and we have no further information regarding that. Our general position is as I described it yesterday, which is that Mr. Snowden ought to be returned to the United States, where he is wanted on felony charges, and that although we do not have an extradition treaty with Russia, that there is ample legal justification for Russia to expel him, and that he should not be permitted to engage in further international travel beyond the travel necessary to return to the United States.

And we've communicated that position with our Russian counterparts and with every country, broadly speaking, that has been discussed as a possible either transition point or destination point for Mr. Snowden.

Ann.

Q Afghanistan -- there are reports that the Taliban has closed at least for now its office in Doha. Has the President had any success, or has he made any attempts to restart negotiations with President Karzai on any kind of follow-on force after the U.S. withdrawal? And is there anything that is bringing the President closer to the thought that maybe the zero option with no follow-on force is the right course?

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me address the first part, which is we've seen the reports about the Doha office, and as President Karzai and President Obama said, the surest way to a stable, unified Afghanistan is for Afghans to talk to Afghans and it is up to the Taliban to decide if they are serious about negotiations.

Now, the President said, and I said and others have said, that we knew this would be a difficult process. It has been a difficult process and will continue to be. And if this effort, the Doha office effort does not succeed, we will pursue other means and other avenues for peace, because ultimately peace in Afghanistan depends on a reconciliation between Afghans.

When it comes to a potential residual force in Afghanistan after 2014, we have long been clear that this is something that we will discuss and negotiate with the Afghan government. Going all the way back to January, when my colleague discussed this with you, we have made clear that the options that are available include the zero option, the so-called zero option. But the focus we have in these conversations with and negotiations with the Afghan government is on how do we implement our two policy objectives here beyond 2014, which is to continue to pursue the remnants of al Qaeda in the Afghan-Pakistan region, one; and two, how do we continue to train and equip Afghan security forces so that they can protect the stability and integrity of the Afghan government.

So those are our policy objectives, and we will continue to work with the Afghan government as we look at the options available to us post-2014.

Now, I want to make clear, today's story notwithstanding, that this is not a decision that's imminent and we're talking about a residual force -- a potential residual force in a year and a half. So these are ongoing conversations. They're part of a bilateral security agreement discussion that we're having with the Afghans.

And separate and apart from time -- or separate but actually integral to this is our broader commitment to Afghanistan reflected in our strategic partnership agreement. We will continue to be committed to Afghanistan beyond 2014 in our robust civilian assistance and our support for the Afghan National Security Forces.

Q How did the President's teleconference with President Karzai -- did it end badly, as has been reported? And has there been any communication directly between them since then?

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, the President speaks with President Karzai periodically, and we talk about at the presidential level and other levels all the issues that we have between us -- the U.S. government and the Afghan government. And there is great consensus between Afghanistan, the Afghan government and this administration, the U.S. government, about our view of the need for Afghanistan to be secure and sovereign and democratic in the future.

Now, we've had disagreements in the past, and we'll have them in the future, there's no question. But the core agreement here is on a future in Afghanistan that is stable and democratic and secure.

Q And that teleconference is the last, most recent conversation between them?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't know -- I don't believe they've spoken since. But again, they speak with some frequency, and I'm sure they will have another conversation in the future. I would not -- the article today I think, in the first instance, pointed to an option that we publicly said was available to us six months ago. And the suggestion that a videoconference call was determinative about anything I think is incorrect.

Q Jay, I have a couple on Egypt, but I just want to follow up on this. Would you not say that the arrow was pointing more in the direction of the possibility and potential probability of the zero-troop option, if not just because of the down slope that things are and the status of conversations between the two governments, but you're not even talking about a bilateral security agreement? The President has made clear without that, there's not going to be troops after 2014. So is it the probability of that decision being made more likely now than it was six months ago when you acknowledged it was possible?

MR. CARNEY: No, I don't think that's the case. I mean, I think that it's certainly no more possible today than it was a week ago, prior to the article being published. The option has always been available and it is part of a process that is focused not on troop numbers but on policy objectives, and how do we best do that. And part of how we best do that is if we do decide to leave a residual force there in pursuit of these policy objectives, what kinds of agreements do we have with the Afghan government going forward with regards to that residual force. And that's an ongoing process.

So the suggestion that we are somehow close to a determination or a conclusion in that negotiation is incorrect. We are long -- there is no decision imminent and there need not be. We are on a downward slope. We are continuing to draw down our forces. We're roughly at 60,000, I believe, and the President publicly stated that he is committed to bringing that troop level down even further come early 2014.

In the end, the residual force and whether there is one will depend on our negotiations with the Afghans and on our assessment of the best way to achieve our policy objectives as I laid out. And this was the virtue and the clarity that was provided by the President's review of our Afghan policy back in 2009, which required, after many years adrift, intense focus on what our objectives would be and why we were there in the first place, and the recognition that we would not -- and this goes to the reconciliation process -- that we were not committed to a U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan simply for the sake of a U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan.

We are there, our men and women are there, fighting and, in some cases, dying for clear objectives of U.S. national interests. And they will continue to fulfill that mission. And going forward after 2014, there will be very clear objectives for our policy in Afghanistan, and those objectives may be met by a residual force of U.S. troops in Afghanistan or they may be met through other means. I mean, there are other ways to train and equip security forces and there are other ways, obviously, to continue our efforts against remnants of al Qaeda.

Q But isn't it true that the awkward launch of the peace talks -- I mean, Karzai denounced them the next day -- there's not a conversation currently going on at any productive level on a bilateral security agreement -- don't those two factors complicate this decision-making process and conversations about the entire issue --

MR. CARNEY: If I allowed the predicate here and said yes, that would only be true if we had to make a decision tomorrow. But there's no decision that's imminent. And I have been -- and you have been an observer of and, in my case, now a participant in at least in

an outer-circle way this process for some time now, and there have long been ups and downs in these conversations that we've had. And we have --

Q You want to downplay --

MR. CARNEY: No. I think that we can go back over time and look at assessments that say things are on a downward slope, to use your language, and then we continue to have our conversations and we continue to focus with our Afghan counterparts on our shared objectives, and we pursue those objectives together. And we expect that we will be able to do that going forward.

Q On Egypt, if I heard you correctly, you were at least encouraging the Muslim Brotherhood to reconsider their announced intention not to participate in this timeline. What is your message to them, broadly speaking? Because they might reasonably say, we did participate and things have been changed in an antidemocratic way after the will of the people was counted and deduced to be conducted fairly? What incentive does the Muslim Brotherhood have for getting back into a process that they saw completely taken off track?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that goes to the incredible complexity and difficulty of this situation. And it is why we expressed, and the President expressed his deep concern about the removal of President Morsi from office by the Egyptian armed forces.

What we have to focus on is where do we go from here. How do we return to a democratically elected civilian government? And the best way to do that, and the best way to ensure that the return to a democratically elected government is not an end point but the beginning point of a process that has democracy becoming embedded in Egyptian society and in the state is to make sure that all elements of Egyptian society are participating in this process.

And it's going to be hard, and it's going to be difficult. But the alternative is continued crisis and continued political polarization. And when it comes to what individuals -- or which individuals will lead Egypt in the future, that's for the Egyptian people to decide. And it's for the Egyptian people to decide in a democratic process.

And as I said yesterday and I'll say again today, when it comes to what happened in Egypt, it is important to note that millions and millions of Egyptians were extremely unhappy with the undemocratic governance under President Morsi. And what the President has long said -- as it applies to Egypt and as it applies elsewhere around the world -- democracy is not elections alone. A successful election, a free and fair election with a result is not the endpoint to democracy. It is an ongoing, organic process that involves participation by everybody in the political process, and compromise -- constant compromise between parties and groups with differing objectives.

And that's what we call on the Egyptian people and all the groups involved here to recognize and accept, and that is reconciliation over conflict; peaceful dialogue over violent confrontation.

Q I want to talk -- one more thing about the aid question. I understand this is complex and difficult, but the law is the law. And what I'm curious about is why the administration won't just say the law doesn't apply because it's not a coup, and we're going to go forward with our own strategic objectives. Because there's a certain element of what you're saying that sounds like it's a difficult law, it's very complicated to live up to it, and that sounds like you're sort of creating a space for you to not adhere to the law when the law, as many members of Congress -- very senior, very experienced -- say is absolutely clear on this particular subject.

MR. CARNEY: And what I'm saying is that in the process of making a determination and making a designation, we will take the time necessary that will allow us to pursue our policy objectives --

Q But it's clear you don't think it's a coup.

MR. CARNEY: -- that are in the interest of the United States and of the Egyptian people.

Q It's clear this administration doesn't believe it was a coup. Why not just make an authoritative assessment and move on?

MR. CARNEY: I think what I've made clear is that the designation carries with it very significant consequences, and that we have policy objectives here when it comes to the return to a democratic government in Egypt and hopefully a return to some stability in Egypt that remains our number-one objective, and that we will take the time necessary, as we review our legal obligations and as we consult with Congress, when it comes to this issue of designating and labeling the events that took place, because we believe that's in the best interests of the United States.

Q Jay, if I heard you correctly yesterday, you suggested that you'd have more time to make this assessment if the Egyptian military was able to keep things cool and there not be an explosion of violence. What's your understanding of what happened yesterday, when 50-plus people were killed?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we condemn and are deeply disturbed by all violence across Egypt. And we call on the military to exercise maximum restraint, and we call on protesters to protest peacefully and to not engage in or incite violence. We call on all groups to call on their supporters to engage in this process peacefully and not to resort to violence. And we call on those groups not to incite violence.

A path of violence and conflict on the streets of Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt is not a path that will lead to a resolution of this crisis anytime soon. And we, again, are cautiously encouraged by the preliminary plan that was put forward by the interim authorities, and we encourage all parties to participate in dialogue and reconciliation rather than conflict, and to resist decisions that would exclude them from the process going forward. Because the best chance for resolving this crisis, the best chance for a return to a democratically elected government and for eventual prosperity and peaceful democratic transition in Egypt is reconciliation and dialogue and negotiation.

Q Do you accept the military's explanation that its troops were attacked? Do you accept Morsi's supporters claim that they were shot at while they were in the midst of prayers?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have an assessment to make specifically of what happened and who was responsible for the terrible violence. What we know is that there was not enough restraint; there was violence that resulted in death. And that is not helpful to a process that needs to move towards peaceful reconciliation and transition.

Q The issue of U.S. aid, does the United Arab Emirates and now, apparently, Saudi offers of aid to Egypt mitigate what may be the U.S. need to cut aid?

MR. CARNEY: I think as I said earlier, the issue of our assistance to Egypt encompasses more than the dollar figure involved. This is a longstanding partnership, a longstanding commitment to the nation of Egypt and to the Egyptian people by the United States, by both major parties in the United States. And we need to keep that in mind as we make decisions going forward about our assistance programs and about the designations we make that could affect those assistance programs.

It is our view that we should not change those assistance programs abruptly or immediately. We need to take our time to evaluate the situation, to evaluate the implications of any designation we might make, to consult with Congress, to review our obligations under the law, and to be mindful throughout this of what our policy objectives are and what actions we can take to help us achieve those policy objectives.

Q Can I boil that down by saying we need to continue to have influence with the Egyptian military and cutting aid would impair that?

MR. CARNEY: I think that that question, at least the underlying point behind it, kind of contradicts the underlying point of the question you asked initially about aid from other countries. If it were just about the dollar figure, then it would be less relevant. It is apparently, based on the reports that you cited, it's about more than that. It's about a commitment to the Egyptian people and about the best way we can achieve our objectives in Egypt and the region.

Chuck.

Q What is the status of President Morsi? Is he still under house arrest? Is that what you guys know? Have you guys talked to him? I know you've reached out to the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. What do you guys know?

MR. CARNEY: I am not aware of any conversations that our government has held with him, and I don't have any information beyond what we've seen in public about his status. We have made clear that we are urging the authorities to resist arbitrary arrests and to release those who --

Q Do you believe he is under house arrest?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I have no reason not to believe that. I'm saying that I don't have any information that goes beyond the public reports. We are engaged with Egyptian authorities at various levels. Secretary Hagel has been engaging; Secretary Kerry; and then obviously the Ambassador and others. The President, as I said, will be having conversations with leaders in the region about Egypt. But I don't have any additional information about President Morsi beyond what we've seen in public.

Q Is his incarceration the trigger for whether you guys identify this as a coup or not?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think that I'm trying to be blunt here about how we're going through this deliberative process and the policy objectives we're trying to achieve. The fact is we oppose any arbitrary arrests and we urge the authorities to resist doing that and to release those who might have been arrested or have been arrested arbitrarily. Beyond that, we're going to take our time, the time necessary to assess the situation and make a decision regarding the designation.

Q Is there a point -- I mean, does the decision about whether or not to take a second look about aid become a different situation if they don't release him? Is there a timeline that you're trying to --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I wouldn't want to link these issues to if X happens, Y happens. I would simply say that --

Q Are they not linked? They are -- they're related, right?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think there are a number of issues that are linked here to our assessment of what's happening in Egypt and the progress that we hope to see towards a transition back to a democratically elected government, and that includes obviously addressing the constitution. It includes parliamentary and presidential elections. And importantly, it will necessarily include participation by all parties so that the process produces a result that is durable and has a better chance for long-term stability in Egypt and, therefore, for fostering economic and -- positive economic growth in Egypt.

Q Is the United States government involved in the negotiation of Morsi's release, or not?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any information on that, and certainly not that I'm aware of. I think we are in conversations with -- I know that we are in conversations with the Egyptian authorities about all of the issues that I just discussed. And that would include steps forward. It would include resisting the use of the force. It would include our opposition to arbitrary arrest. So within that category, I would say the answer is yes. But I don't have anything specific about any individual.

Q But if they've got him under arrest, there's been arbitrary violence, I mean all these things you have laid out, they've not taken the advice of the United States government on this. So at what point -- you've laid out all these criteria, and yet it doesn't appear -- at least according to our reporters on the ground --

MR. CARNEY: And which is why we are disturbed by all the violence that we've seen. Now, we hope that violence abates, and we hope that there is progress towards reconciliation and progress towards a return to a democratically elected civilian government.

And this is an early stage in the process, so I want to emphasize the "cautiously" part of saying that we're cautiously encouraged by the preliminary plan that was announced. But that is -- the plan as it's been presented reflects what we believe is the path that Egypt needs to take. But it also -- in order to take that path successfully, we think it has to include everyone.

Q Do you have a position -- does the administration have a position on the Manchin-Lamar Alexander-Angus King bipartisan student loan compromise bill in the Senate?

MR. CARNEY: The President, as you know, is for a long-term fix here, but we are generally for a resolution of this problem because we have already passed the deadline whereby students face a doubling of their loan rates. And there is no reason why, in our view, this cannot be worked out by the Senate and the House.

Q So you're supportive of this compromise?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to -- I don't have a specific -- we're supportive of a process that leads to a compromise and a resolution here, one that does not -- that ensures that rates are kept low for students, that does not try to reduce the deficit on the backs of students by jacking up their rates, and that ensures that middle-class families are able to pay the cost of college and that those who aspire to the middle class have a chance at paying for college.

Q I understand -- but no position on it?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have a specific position on a piece of legislation beyond the assertion that there is a path here towards compromise that achieves the President's principles, and we urge members of both houses and of both parties to reach that compromise because the clock is ticking.

We are confident that we can reach -- that a compromise can be found that will be retroactive and therefore not cause harm to students and their families. But the fact is that students are -- the longer we wait, students will be, and their families will be, planning for the fall and the future, and have to make decisions based on what they believe will be their rates. But I --

Q Could you support it or not support it?

MR. CARNEY: We support a process that -- supporting a single bill is not the answer here. Supporting a compromise that can get the votes necessary that meets the President's principles is our position.

Scott.

Q Jay, Russia's U.N. Ambassador talked today about evidence that he says his government has given the U.N. about chemical weapons used by the Syrian rebels. Has the U.S. changed its position that that's --

MR. CARNEY: No. We have yet to see any evidence that backs up the assertion that anybody besides the Syrian government has had the ability to use chemical weapons or has used chemical weapons.

I think it's an interesting point that this assertion has been made to or presented to the United Nations because there is the sticking point. Bashar al-Assad called for a U.N. investigation into the use of chemical weapons and then he blocked the ability of the United Nations to conduct that investigation. The way to answer this question is to allow the United Nations to investigate, because our ability as an international community to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria is hampered by Assad's refusal to allow a United Nations investigation.

Now, we have been able to do the work that we've done, both on our own and working with our partners and working with the Syrian opposition, but if Bashar al-Assad is seriously interested in proving his assertion and now the assertion that Russia is making, they should allow -- Assad should let the U.N. investigators in and Russia should use its relationship with Assad to press Assad to allow the United Nations investigators in.

Q So when you say you haven't seen any evidence, have you seen what the Russians have provided the U.N. --

MR. CARNEY: I don't know the answer to that question, but we seriously doubt that chemical weapons have been outside of the use and -- have fallen outside of the sort of sphere of control of the Syrian government.

Mark. I mean Peter, sorry.

Q Jay, on the health care reform law, what's the response here to the letter and the statement that the House GOP leaders made today calling on the President to justify delaying the employer mandate while keeping the individual requirements in place?

MR. CARNEY: A few things. The Affordable Care Act, Obamacare -- well, let me start for this -- we, as I said yesterday, have delayed the implementation of the employer responsibility provision to allow for the time that businesses said they needed to prepare properly for the implementation of that provision.

Now, this is a provision that affects only 4 percent of businesses, roughly, with more than 50 employees -- 96 percent of businesses with more than 50 employees already provide insurance to their employees. So there's that. The experts have already said this will have no significant impact on implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

Secondly, we will go forward with the individual responsibility provision because Obamacare provides financial assistance through this provision to low-income Americans, and it provides built-in flexibility to ensure that those who cannot afford

coverage are not punished. In fact, next year, millions of Americans will get the help they need to purchase quality health insurance that they currently cannot afford.

So it's pretty rich, coming from leaders who have now voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act going on 40 times and who promised to do it again, to charge up that hill only, again, not to reach the top, rather than focus on the work that the American people want done, because they have no alternative. Repealing the Affordable Care Act means taking away from senior citizens the assistance that they already have to help them pay their prescription drug bills. It means telling young Americans across the country who are 26 or younger who are currently on their parents' insurance policy that they're uninsured. It means telling people with preexisting conditions who now cannot be denied insurance that they're out of luck. And it means telling people who used to worry about lifetime caps on the provision of insurance benefits but who no longer have to worry about that because of the Affordable Care Act that they're out of luck.

That's the alternative that Speaker Boehner is talking about, because there is no alternative put forward by House Republicans. Even the hint of a possibility that Majority Leader Cantor might actually try to come up with some Republican alternative for health care reform was eviscerated by the conservative elements and the tea party elements in the Republican Party who pressured the Speaker of the House to kill it.

So the Republican alternative is repeal and replace with what? A system where the insurance companies got to tell you whether you could keep your insurance, they could throw you off when they wanted to, and when millions of Americans who because of the Affordable Care Act will have access to insurance that they otherwise could not afford would still not have insurance.

So implementation is moving forward. And the benefits that more and more Americans will gain from that implementation I think will make clear that the absence of an alternative put forward by House Republicans in particular is not an alternative at all.

Q Well, to what extent might you or the people involved in this issue here, policy people, be concerned that the public's confidence, belief in this law has been shaken by this change, by the word of the change in the smoking provision and some of the other adjustments, major and minor, that have come along?

MR. CARNEY: A piece of legislation like this, to be responsibly implemented, needs to be implemented in a flexible way. We have demonstrated our flexibility in implementation of this law repeatedly.

When it comes to giving states more flexibility in the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, we've made clear to states that we want them to use that flexibility. When it comes to listening to businesses who have concerns about the timeline and the deadline for implementing the employer responsibility provision, we listen to those concerns and we've delayed that deadline because we think it's the right thing to do and we don't want to punish those employers -- the overwhelming percentage of employers who have more

than 50 employees who provide insurance by implementing it before those businesses who want to do the right thing and provide insurance are ready to implement -- for the implementation of that provision.

So I think that our flexibility here and our adaptation to the needs and concerns of different communities -- whether it's business or statehouses -- reflects the fact that we're interested in doing this right so that all the benefits that are available to the American people become available in a timely fashion.

Jon-Christopher.

Q Back to Egypt. Needless to say, the U.S. is not the only player on the world stage here. You mentioned that the U.S. has been in touch with the players in Egypt with -- having discussions and recommendations. But there are European allies, U.S.-European allies who have had long-term relationships with Egypt going back hundreds of years. How closely has the United States -- and what is their mindset and this administration's mindset of involving those people, those individuals in Europe, especially Great Britain, et cetera, who have a real stake in the region, as well as the United States, in terms of moving on to the future?

MR. CARNEY: Well, when it comes to the transition and turmoil that we've seen in the Middle East overall, we have obviously and consistently worked with and consulted with our European allies, as well as our regional allies and others, and that includes the UK and France and others. And we continue to do that when it comes to the situation in Egypt, as, of course, we do when it comes to the situation in Syria.

You're absolutely right that this is not just a U.S.-Egyptian situation. This is a crisis in Egypt that all of the nations who have an interest in Egypt having a better future and the Egyptian people making a transition to democracy need to engage in. And we're engaged with our allies in this.

Q Anything specific --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any readouts of conversations, but these are the kinds of sort of top-tier issues that we work with our allies all the time on.

Cheryl, and then Roger, and then --

Q Thanks. Do you have any update or timeline on when the Attorney General might finish his review of federal benefits and laws in light of the Supreme Court DOMA decision?

MR. CARNEY: I don't. I would refer you to the Department of Justice. Sorry.

Who else? Roger, yes.

Q Yes, back to Afghanistan. You said there was no imminent decision on the troop pull-out and stuff like that. How long can the President go into next year and make a decision and still achieve his goal by the end of 2014? Can he go like into next summer -- make the

decision?

MR. CARNEY: Well, before I hazard a guess, I would say that we're 18 months from the end of 2014, so -- and we are in the process of drawing down our forces already, and that process will continue and will continue beyond January 2014 as we draw down our forces towards the goal of zero as we consider the option of a residual force, a much smaller than current level force.

So I think there's ample time. And I'm not going to predict when that sort of becomes pressing, but it's certainly not in the near future.

Q He could put it into -- the decision, he could put it into next year sometime?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I wouldn't -- I don't want to have an answer to that question result in a headline in Bloomberg saying, the President will announce early next year or sometime next year, because I'm not hemming -- I mean, I'm sort of circumscribing his -- the timeline here. But I am saying that it's not imminent, and it doesn't need to be imminent. He's in discussions with his national security team, and obviously our representatives are in discussions with the Afghan government about a bilateral security agreement and about implementation of our strategic partnership agreement, and within the context of the BSA, the potential for a residual force.

Q And is it fair to say that the President is considering the zero option with a bit heavier weight now than he'd been, say, a few months ago?

MR. CARNEY: I think that, as I said to Major, is a misreading of the situation. I'm not -- I think it's important to note that we stated here -- I think it was here, but it was certainly publicly and in January -- that zero was an option.

Q It was a conference call.

MR. CARNEY: A conference call made I think from this building.

But the point being that this has been -- it's of course an option, because the issue here isn't troops -- the number of troops for their own sake. The issue is, how do we best, working with the Afghan government and working to provide the conditions necessary for a residual force, implement our policy objectives, which includes continuing to go after the remnants of al Qaeda and providing the training and equipment to the Afghan National Security Forces that the ANSF needs to protect and keep stable the Afghan government and the Afghan nation.

So we're making assessments about how we fulfill those objectives. We're in discussions with the Afghan government about what a residual force might look like if we choose that option, if that's the best option that we agree to in terms of pursuing those objectives. But we can pursue those objectives in a number of ways.

Yes, in the back. And then -- sorry, you know what, I did promise you. Sorry.

Q Thank you. One on Syria and one on Turkey. Quick on Syria -- according to the latest credible reports, Syrian opposition still have not received any kind of military aid from your government. My question is, it has been six weeks now that the U.S. government accepted that the red line has been crossed and it has been months from the first time Defense Secretary mentioned that. So my question is, unless your government was bluffing, what kind of game-changing step and when are you going to take it, or are you still determined to take the game-changing

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MR. CARNEY: Well, as I said earlier, in keeping with the President's announcement of our stepped-up assistance to the Supreme Military Council, we are going to consult with Congress on these matters, and we intend to provide that stepped-up assistance. I don't have any more details on that for you, but we were not bluffing. The President was very serious, as I think he made clear. And I think that -- well, I'll just say that we'll continue to consult with Congress on this matter because it's very important.

Q On Turkey, the protests are still going on, and just last night, there were dozens of people detained and arrested. What's your comment on this? And also, there were investigations in Turkey and you said that you had full confidence in the Turkish authorities according to police brutality on the protestors. Do you have an update on how

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MR. CARNEY: I don't have any update. I mean, we continue to obviously monitor the situation. We have a very important and close relationship with our ally, Turkey, and we will -- our position hasn't changed on those matters, and I don't have an update.

Yes, in the back.

Q Jay, continuously calling for the return to democratic governance in Egypt, implying that there was indeed a departure from democratic governance, but when does the President believe that that departure from democracy happened? Did it happen under President Morsi's policies or did it happen when the military suspended the constitution and removed President Morsi from power?

MR. CARNEY: I think we made clear that the President and his representatives had expressed concern, and our view that -- of the need for President Morsi to govern democratically, and that there were concerns about that. And those concerns were reflected obviously in the streets of Cairo by protestors and demonstrators.

So I think that when it comes to what I'm saying about what we hope will come in the future is a return to a democratically elected civilian government that would then govern democratically. Because it is important -- as I said earlier and the President has noted -- to be clear that democracy is not simply the holding of elections, it is democratic governance. And democratic governance requires compromise and inclusion, and it requires decisions that don't always go down easy with every member of your coalition, whether it's in the United States or in the Middle East or Europe or Asia or Africa or elsewhere.

So that is something that we were focused on with the Morsi government and it is something that we continue to be focused on, because the process here is the key. It is not about individuals or groups, it's about a democratic process that is as inclusive as possible and that reflects a consensus among the Egyptian people.

Thanks all very much.

END

2:13 P.M. EDT