

# Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – May 22, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

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3:58 p.m. EDT

**MS NAUERT:** Oh, thank you. I'm a little shorter than the Secretary, so pardon me here for my – for my little box. I have a couple announcements to make, and then I'd be happy to take your questions, although it's certainly a hard act to follow when you have the Secretary of State.

Today I'd like to mention that our Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan is in Brazil. He's meeting with his counterpart, the Deputy Foreign Minister Galvao, to launch the U.S.-Brazil Permanent Forum on Security. The forum is a result of cooperation between the United States and Brazil, and the Permanent Forum on Security. They are working there to fight transnational crime. They aim to foster continued teamwork, combat drug trafficking, arms trafficking, cyber-crime, money laundering, and also terrorism. Yesterday in Buenos Aires, the deputy secretary joined representatives from Argentina, Canada, Australia, Mexico, and Chile to condemn the fraudulent electoral process that culminated in sham elections in Venezuela on May the 20th. He echoed Secretary Pompeo's vow that the United States will take swift economic and diplomatic actions and welcomed a strong statement from the Lima Group unequivocally calling out the illegitimate electoral process and responding to the national – the regional humanitarian crisis caused by the Maduro regime's rampant corruption and also mismanagement.

I also want to note recent sanctions announcements that were made both on Friday and on Monday of this week. These sanctions reflect the continued commitment of the United States to use every appropriate diplomatic and economic tool to hold the corrupt Maduro regime accountable. The United States stands with the Venezuelan people in their efforts to restore democracy to their country.

In addition to that, I'd like to note our pleasure in announcing the announcement by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, at the World Health Assembly in Geneva, an additional \$7 million,

bringing the total U.S. assistance thus far to \$8 million in the fight against Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As you know, there is an Ebola virus outbreak there right now. The \$7 million in additional funding includes 5 million specifically authorized by Secretary Pompeo to address this crisis. One million of that money came from USAID. The funds will provide immediate resources to help combat the spread of this deadly disease. The U.S. Government is committed to global health security and commends the proactive efforts of the Congolese, and also our other international partners to control this outbreak.

And lastly, I'd like to draw your attention to Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine. This has been one of the most violent weeks of the year. Five Ukrainian soldiers are now dead and 23 have been wounded. The fighting has not spared civilians either. A 13-year-old boy and his father were killed in a Ukrainian Government controlled territory when artillery shells struck their home. A pipe carrying chlorine gas at the Donetsk water filtration station was struck by artillery shells.

The Kremlin controls the violence in eastern Ukraine and could bring this violence to an end tomorrow if the Kremlin wanted to do that. Russia has claimed it wants to protect Russian speakers, but as our Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations, Kurt Volker has pointed out on numerous occasions, there's nowhere in the world more dangerous for Russian speakers right now than in eastern Ukraine. Russian and Ukrainian soldiers and civilians continue to die in a conflict manufactured by the Russian Government with forces that arms, equips, leads, and trains. And while Russia perpetuates the violence in eastern Ukraine by pouring money, soldiers, and resources into the region, the Russian economy continues to stagnate. We call on Russia to end its aggression in Ukraine and live up to its commitments when it signed the Minsk agreements.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Do we start with you again?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MS NAUERT:** That seems a little unfair, but okay.

**QUESTION:** Well, I don't know.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, go right ahead, Matt.

**QUESTION:** I don't think so. Just before I go onto something else, quickly on Venezuela.

**MS NAUERT:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I'm sorry I was spacing out a little bit there when you were reading your statement. Did you talk about the PNGs of the charge and the number two?

**MS NAUERT:** I did not, though.

**QUESTION:** I didn't think so. It's so late that I'm kind of –

**MS NAUERT:** I know. Well, wasn't it worth it? Now you wonder why –

**QUESTION:** I suppose.

**MS NAUERT:** – our briefing – why our briefing was late.

**QUESTION:** Anyway, so what can you tell us about the expulsions of these – your diplomats from Venezuela?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, look, I can just say we've seen the reports. This happened not that long ago. But we've seen the reports that the Maduro regime intends to declare our charge d'affaires Todd Robinson and our Deputy Chief of Mission Brian Naranjo persona non grata. I can say we completely reject the false allegations that have been made by the Maduro regime against our two colleagues. And I have nothing further beyond that, but we'll let you know if we do get anything in addition to that.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Can I move to Mideast for a –

**MS NAUERT:** Certainly.

**QUESTION:** The Palestinians today took the – took their brief or complaints against Israel to the International Criminal Court. And I am wondering: one, what you make of that move by the Palestinians; and secondly, if this is going to have any impact on the way the administration now approaches the Palestinians either legally or any other way.

**MS NAUERT:** Well, we have long believed that these types of actions are not conducive to peace. We are not a party to the International Criminal Court, as many of you know. We oppose the actions taking place against Israel at the International Criminal Court because we see that simply as counterproductive.

We have spoken about this many times before. Our position on this matter is well known. We oppose actions against Israel as – at the International Criminal – Criminal Court – pardon me – because it doesn't help the cause for peace. And that is one of the priorities of this administration, getting the Israelis and Palestinians back to the table where they can have a good, concrete negotiation about the peace process going forward. And the ICC just doesn't do that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But the ICC was created – and I realize that the U.S. is not a member of it, but it was created to provide accountability. So is there anything that you think that Israel needs to be accountable for to the Palestinians?

**MS NAUERT:** Look, I'm not going to get into that question. I think we have long talked about the situation going on in Gaza. We've long talked about the misery that the people face in Gaza is because of Hamas. We

have seen and have watched as the previous clashes between the Israelis and Palestinians and those of Gaza have taken place. We've continued to call on Hamas to take better care of its people; it's not taking care of its people. And I don't have really much beyond that to give you right now.

**QUESTION:** Just on the Gaza thing.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** I want to ask you about Ambassador Friedman's op-ed column. Is it the position of the administration, as it appears to be the position – the personal position of the ambassador, that the quote-unquote "liberal media" have blood on their hands for their coverage?

**MS NAUERT:** Matt, I can tell you I'm aware of the ambassador's editorial. I don't have anything to say about that. I could just refer you to Ambassador Friedman for any questions about that.

**QUESTION:** Well, does it reflect the administration's view that there is –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have anything –

**QUESTION:** – there is quote-unquote a "liberal media" that has blood on its hands?

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have anything for you on that. I'd just have to refer you to the ambassador for anything (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** All right. Well, do you have anything on him posing for a photograph today that photoshopped out the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount for a facsimile of what would be a third temple?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I'm not going to say much about this because this information just came to us as I was coming out to brief today. So until we have a full assessment of what actually happened, I'm going to be limited in terms of what I can say about this particular incident.

We have received a statement, however, I can share with you from Ambassador Friedman. He says he was not aware of the image that was put in front of him when the photo was taken. He was deeply disappointed that anyone would take advantage of his visit to Bnei Brak to create controversy. The U.S. policy is absolutely clear: We support the status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. I don't have anything for you beyond that because, again, this was just – information was just coming out as I was coming out here.

**QUESTION:** Is that a statement in his name, or is that something that was put out by the embassy?

**MS NAUERT:** I have Friedman's statement. I have Ambassador Friedman's statement.

**QUESTION:** That's a statement from him. So –

**MS NAUERT:** I believe so.

**QUESTION:** So – but does he apologize for it? I mean, this is something that is deeply –

**MS NAUERT:** Matt, that's all I have. Look, again –

**QUESTION:** This is deeply offensive to more than 20 percent of the population. He's laughing in the photograph.

**MS NAUERT:** He is saying that he was not aware of the image that was taken and that someone took advantage of him being at that location. I don't have anything beyond that. I'd refer you over to our embassy to answer additional questions about that.

**QUESTION:** But on the op-ed –

**MS NAUERT:** Hi, Michelle.

**QUESTION:** Surely – thanks. Surely you're able to say whether or not he's speaking for the State Department or not, at least.

**MS NAUERT:** Look, I don't have anything to say for you about this. I can just refer you to the ambassador at this point. Okay, all right.

**QUESTION:** Well, we just need to know: Who do this guy represent? Does he represent himself when he writes an opinion piece that says – that refers to his title?

**MS NAUERT:** Look, all I'm telling you, I don't have anything for you on that. Okay?

**QUESTION:** Does he represent – does he represent the administration? Does he represent the State Department? Does he represent the President? I mean, he does do all of those things with the title "ambassador" on it. And if that's just his personal opinion, then okay, whatever. But if that's the position of the administration, then we need to know about it.

**MS NAUERT:** Matt, I would refer you to the ambassador's office. Anything else? Shall we move on?

Okay. Hi, Laurie.

**QUESTION:** Hi.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up. One quick follow-up on the PLO. Will you take action to close the PLO office because they've now gone to the ICC?

**MS NAUERT:** I know that was an issue that was brought up before under our previous secretary. As far as I am aware, that is all under consideration – the status of the PLO office, I mean. And I'm not going

to get ahead of any additional – potential steps or actions on the part of that office and any determination.

Okay. Hi, Laurie.

**QUESTION:** Hi. So yesterday, Secretary Pompeo said, and I quote here, “Iran must respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi Government and permit the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of Shia militias.” That is an issue that you’ll be working on now? That’s the strongest statement any U.S. official has made about the problem. Is that an issue that you’ll be working on now with the Iraqi Government?

**MS NAUERT:** Sovereignty is something that’s in our National Security Strategy, the administration’s National Security Strategy, and that is respecting the sovereignty of another government and respecting the sovereignty of Iraq. You heard what the Secretary had to say about that yesterday. We respect Iraq’s sovereignty and we partner with the Iraqi Government. We have for very many years. We have a great relationship with the Government of Iraq. Their efforts to protect their sovereignty from malign forces both inside and outside its borders continue to stand and they are quite strong in that action.

**QUESTION:** And Muqtada al-Sadr, since he’s so anti-Iranian, would be a good partner for this?

**MS NAUERT:** I’m not saying that. We will work with whoever the Iraqi Government and the people of Iraq decide to elect into its government. We’ve had a long, good – longstanding, good relationship with the Government of Iraq and we will continue to have a good relationship with them.

**QUESTION:** And if I could ask you one more question?

**MS NAUERT:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** The Iraqi electoral commission released the election results without dealing with the multiple complaints of fraud. Do you think that issue needs to be more seriously investigated?

**MS NAUERT:** My understanding is that is still under investigation, and that investigation or the look at the election process continues.

**QUESTION:** And you support that?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, we certainly continue to support the organization that’s going through and taking a look at the election results, including complaints that you mentioned, and as far as I know, that that process continues.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on that?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah. Hi.

**QUESTION:** Brett McGurk has been meeting with multiple parties in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Iraq. He met also with those parties that complained about the elections and the – can you share with us what is the meetings about? What is he talking to –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have the specifics about Brett's meetings. What Mr. McGurk typically does is he meets with a range of parties from the north, including in Baghdad as well. I don't have the specifics from those meetings, but I know that he's engaged in a lot of conversations with the government.

**QUESTION:** And also at the same time, Qasem Soleimani is also meeting with a range of political parties, and so what is – are you doing anything or what is the U.S. doing to contain the Iranian influence on the formation of the next government in Iraq?

**MS NAUERT:** We have long said that we think that – not long said, but we have said since the election that we thought for – a coalition government would be formed. We're not going to get ahead of that process. We will work with the government, whoever the people elect, whoever the people decide. In terms of whether or not he's meeting with Muqtada al-Sadr, I just don't have any information for you on that. Okay?

Let's move on to something else.

**QUESTION:** Burundi?

**MS NAUERT:** Hi, there. Yes, go right ahead.

**QUESTION:** We saw a statement yesterday – thank you very much. Just wondering if you have more to add regarding the Burundi referendum, because the constitutional referendum could extend the president's rule through 2034.

**MS NAUERT:** Let me see if I do. I do somewhere have something on that. And of course, we had watched the news come out of Burundi as they were stifling conversation and debate within the media, including your organization, Voice of America.

The May 17th referendum process in Burundi was marred by lack of transparency, the suspension of media outlets, including Voice of America and also your colleague here from the BBC as well, and also attempts to pressure voters. The government allowed vigorous campaigning by the opposition during a designated two-week period, but prior to that, we had heard about numerous cases of harassment and also repression of the referendum opponents in the months that preceded the vote and contributed to a climate of fear and also of repression, and that's a serious concern of ours. The overall absence of independent



observers also undermines confidence in the reported results.

I want to be clear about our condemnation of the government's recent decision to suspend the Voice of America and also BBC broadcasts. The decision, along with other media restrictions, arbitrary arrests, harsh sentences for human rights defenders signals a continuing limitation on civil and political space in Burundi.

Lastly, I'd like to say we remain concerned about the passage of a revised constitution, that passage of the revised constitution will be interpreted as resetting the presidential term limits. We want to highlight that the ruling party made a commitment under the Pretoria Protocol with respect to the principles of the Arusha Agreement, including the respect for term limits.

Thank you. Okay. Let's move on. Hi, Michelle.

**QUESTION:** On North Korea –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** – the major hesitation that we saw from the President today on that subject, how much of that would you say could be due to an early overselling of the situation on the part of South Korea? Or do you think that we're way past that by now and that this is something else?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, I think the Secretary addressed a lot of these questions, so I am not going to step on what the Secretary just had to say about –

**QUESTION:** Oh, come on.

**MS NAUERT:** – about our meetings potentially on June the 12th. Look, I think the South Koreans proposed to us some meetings that the government – Kim Jong-un of North Korea – was willing to undertake with the United States. I think the United States met this in a full, good-faith effort to try to have those conversations, but beyond that, I'm not just – I'm not going to step on what the Secretary just had to say, or the President, for that matter. I think they did a sufficient job of addressing that and I couldn't – certainly couldn't do any better.

Hi. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Going back to the bilateral for a moment, the President said that there are certain conditions that we want to happen in reference to the U.S.-North Korea summit. Can you offer any clarification on what those conditions are?

**MS NAUERT:** I think we've been very clear all along – and the Secretary alluded to this before – complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization. How many times have you heard me say that here? A lot. That's our policy. Our policy has not changed and we stand there.

**QUESTION:** Heather.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** So still on North Korea but not on the meeting per se. So the closure of the Punggye-ri site – we’ve talked about this before, but because – especially since they didn’t bring in expert, like, witnesses mostly; they just let in the press. So what is the U.S. position on that? Do you see that as a good sign for them moving to denuclearization?

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, look, I’m going to be very careful about what I say on this entire topic, and I hope you will all understand that. I can only say we saw as reporters went there and covered what the Government of North Korea had said was happening, the dismantling of a nuclear site. We certainly welcome the announcement of plans to dismantle its nuclear test site. I’d go back to permanent, irreversible closure that can be inspected and fully accounted for. That is a key step in the denuclearization for North Korea, and we look forward to learning more about the details of that.

Okay.

**QUESTION:** Heather, can I just follow up on the –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** – on the closure of the nuclear site. Did the U.S. request for any officials to be able to attend that closure?

**MS NAUERT:** I can only tell you that we have not had a – an invitation that was extended to us. My understanding is that the journalists were invited, and I just don’t have anything beyond that, okay?

All right.

**QUESTION:** Heather.

**MS NAUERT:** Hi, sir. How are you?

**QUESTION:** Iran, please.

**MS NAUERT:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** A couple days ago, the ambassador – Russian ambassador in Syria urged all foreign forces to leave the country, including Iran and Hizballah, and a spokesperson in Tehran at the foreign ministry said no one can make Iran do anything against its will. How do you read that and were you surprised?

**MS NAUERT:** Well –

**QUESTION:** It looks like there is a tension between the –

**MS NAUERT:** Well, look, I think it's particularly rich that Russia would say that other countries must leave Syria and that Russia wouldn't choose to do so itself. So I'm pretty suspicious of countries that are there backing the government of Bashar al-Assad. We've had a lot – far too many conversations about the brutality and the nature of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. They continue to this day to be backed by Russia and also Iran. They continue to gas and kill their own people. The United States will continue to work to hold them responsible and hold those other regimes responsible, as we believe the world will increasingly step in and try to do so as well.

**QUESTION:** But to mention Iran by name didn't – it didn't surprise you? Did it surprise you or –

**MS NAUERT:** That –

**QUESTION:** To mention Iran by name.

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not going to comment on anything beyond what the Russians may say about the United States or other countries. What they have to say about Iran – they can say whatever they like, okay?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Hi. Yeah.

**QUESTION:** From the Secretary's remarks yesterday and today, there's – particularly yesterday, obviously, there was some speculation that essentially what he wants is – the U.S. wants is regime change in Iran. Do you –

**MS NAUERT:** That is not our policy.

**QUESTION:** But does the United States believe that it can work with this – the Government of Iran to achieve its objectives –

**MS NAUERT:** I think the Secretary was very clear in his speech yesterday about our government's concerns – and other governments share these very rational concerns – about the activities of the Iranian regime. For far too long, administrations have simply looked at Iran through the lens of the JPCOA, through the nuclear agreement. This administration is choosing to focus on not only keeping Americans safe, keeping our allies and partners safe, and frankly, keeping the world safe.

**QUESTION:** But his answer today wasn't, "We think these sanctions will work even if it takes a long time," it was once again calling on the Iranian people themselves to do something about that. So if he's not advocating regime change, why does he keep making it sound exactly like he's advocating regime change?

**MS NAUERT:** I think what he's saying is this is up to the Iranian people. The Iranian people for far too long have lived under a regime that has mistreated its people. We've seen the human rights abuses, we've seen

the clampdown on the media, we've seen the clampdown on freedom of expression. That continues to happen each and every day. People are imprisoned; we don't always know where they are, including Americans who are being held there as well. So I think the Secretary was very clear about concerns that the Iranian people have themselves – the Persian people, a very proud people. And we've seen a certain level of frustration and anger at their own government for promises that the government has not fulfilled. That government, back when the JCPOA was put into effect said, effectively, "We will share this money with you. You will see the fruits of this." The people have not seen that. Those promises were not fulfilled, and so we see an increasing level of frustration by their own people. Our policy –

**QUESTION:** So what does he want them to do?

**MS NAUERT:** Our policy is not regime change; but if the Iranian people were to choose somewhere down the road to make their views known, they're certainly welcome to do so. But that is not our policy.

**QUESTION:** Just to follow up on that –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, yeah.

**QUESTION:** I mean, on your previous comment about Iraq, you've said essentially that the U.S. is willing to work with whichever government the people of Iraq elect.

**MS NAUERT:** I think it's up to the Government of Iran how they want to behave. We certainly haven't seen them behave as a responsible international partner for very many years. There's no one who knows that better than my colleagues here at the State Department when we look back at what happened to our colleagues and our embassy so many years ago. We've seen that as Iran has had such a destabilizing influence in the region.

The Secretary was recently in Saudi Arabia, where we had conversations with our Saudi Arabian partners about the missiles that had been launched on Riyadh. I'd go back to you and say this: Imagine that happening at any other country around the world, where the Iranian regime is launching missiles at an airport, a commercial airport. You could hit civilians, you could hit Americans, could cause a great deal of damage. The world should not tolerate that from Iran. The world certainly wouldn't tolerate it from other countries.

**QUESTION:** A couple things.

**MS NAUERT:** And we're going to have to wrap. We're going to have to wrap in just a minute.

**QUESTION:** It's not actually Iran that's – are you saying that Iran is firing these missiles?

**MS NAUERT:** Iran is backing the Houthi rebels, and we've been very clear

about that. This is not the first time we've had that conversation.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) Also, when you say for far too long the Iranian people have lived under this – these abuses that you talked about –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** – you're referring back to '79, to the Iranian Revolution?

**MS NAUERT:** This has happened for a very long time. This is nothing new, Matt. I don't think you should be surprised by this.

**QUESTION:** No, I just want to know: Are you drawing a distinction between the human rights paradise that Iran was under the shah?

**MS NAUERT:** Matt, I am simply saying that people there have experienced repression. They know that repression very well. Okay.

**QUESTION:** And then last one on Saudi, because you just mentioned it –

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I just want to – you can go back to Iran. I just need to get a – I just need to get your reaction to the arrests of these women's rights activists. There seem to be more today.

**MS NAUERT:** Are there reports of – of that?

**QUESTION:** It might have been yesterday. I think it's up to 10 now, if I'm not mistaken.

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have the number. I can just tell you Saudi Arabia, as I just mentioned, was a country we recently visited. We remain supportive of their overall reform agenda. I think that's an important step in the right direction. A lot of people here and around the world were pleased and very happy to have heard their decision about women being able to drive on their own, attending movie theaters, and things of this sort. I can tell you that we are watching this carefully. We are concerned about the announced detention of activists in Saudi Arabia. We support space for civil society and also free speech, but overall, we're concerned about it and we are keeping a close eye on it.

Okay, last question.

**QUESTION:** On Iran, the Secretary of State yesterday and today talked about assassinations in the heart of Europe being carried out today by the Quds Force. Are there any details about that? We looked and couldn't find anything.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I'm surprised you didn't ask the Secretary about that himself.

**QUESTION:** I was rather late. I apologize.

**MS NAUERT:** He has information and access to information that I do not. I'm not able to comment on that in particular, but I can tell you that the Secretary has assured me that there is a basis for that point in his speech and he stands firmly behind that. Okay.

**QUESTION:** So it's sort of classified intelligence information he's saying there.

**MS NAUERT:** I won't comment beyond that, but I can tell you that the Secretary has assured us of that.

Okay, guys, we have to wrap it there. Thank you so much.

(The briefing was concluded at 4:23 p.m.)

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