

Press Releases: Background Briefing Previewing Acting Secretary Sullivan's Trip to the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting in Toronto

Special Briefing
Senior Administration Official
Toronto, Canada
April 22, 2018

MODERATOR: [Senior Administration Official] has got a couple of minutes just to give you a little background today.

QUESTION: Oh, terrific. Well, what's on the agenda?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What's on the agenda? Well, the G-7 always has an ambitious agenda, and a comprehensive global agenda. And a lot of the priority topics for us today include discussing the way forward in Syria, the – Iran's malign activities in the region as well as Iran's nuclear and missile program. We'll be discussing North Korea and its nuclear program. I would say, broadly, nonproliferation will be a thematic today in our discussions. We will be discussing maritime security, the importance of freedom of navigation.

QUESTION: Talking South China Sea or –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, just South China Sea and just generally securing the global commons for trade and commerce. And we'll also be discussing the free and open Indo-Pacific and the importance of that. We'll be discussing also the way forward in Ukraine. Venezuela we will also be discussing, and Burma.

So this is just probably a fraction of what we'll end up discussing today, and I'll be able to give a little more detail at the end of the day.

QUESTION: That would be helpful.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This is –

QUESTION: As (inaudible) the topics, did you see Zarif's comments the last two days on if the deal isn't signed – this morning he was about – he was saying it was –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Which one, the supplemental agreement? When you say the deal isn't –

QUESTION: He just said – I don't know.

QUESTION: The original one. The original one.

QUESTION: The original deal.

QUESTION: If the U.S. –

QUESTION: The original one. If the original is abrogated, yeah.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Abrogated? Oh.

QUESTION: Yeah, if the U.S. walks away from it, they are going to resume –

QUESTION: He said it would send a very dangerous message.

QUESTION: – and he said they're going to resume nuclear production.

QUESTION: Resuming is one of the options, is what he said.

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: But faster.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And so what's the question? It's all very interesting.

QUESTION: Does that change anything that you're discussing today? I mean, are you – let's – what kinds of discussions are you going to have on Iran with the rest of the G7? Specifically, do you want to close – can you close further gaps in your discussions so far?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We will be discussing the status of the negotiations with the E3 on securing a supplemental agreement to the JCPOA. The President has given until May 12th as the deadline to see if we can secure a supplemental agreement, and so we'll be discussing the status of those negotiations today with the G7, and then we'll also be – yeah, I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: How advanced are these?

MODERATOR: You all, you guys have to get on the vans. I don't want you to be late. This will be the last one.

QUESTION: Those negotiations, how advanced are they?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We've been negotiating with the Europeans since January, with the E3, and we have made a great deal of progress, but it is – we're not there yet.

QUESTION: Really?

QUESTION: You still don't know?

MODERATOR: Guys, we've got to go.

QUESTION: Real quick, though. OPCW inspectors got into Douma. Are you concerned that everything, all the evidence has evaporated and that they won't be able to find anything at this late date?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would – I'd have to talk to the technical folks on that as well. That's a technical question and I'd need to –

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay? All right.

QUESTION: Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So see you at the end of the day.

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[Press Releases: Acting Secretary Sullivan's Meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Klimkin](#)

Readout
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
April 21, 2018

The following is attributable to Spokesperson Heather Nauert:

Acting Secretary of State John J. Sullivan met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin on April 21, on the margins of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Toronto, Canada.

The Acting Secretary reaffirmed the United States' ironclad support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. He urged Ukraine to redouble reform efforts and adhere to IMF programs by adopting legislation to establish a truly independent anti-corruption court and raising gas tariffs to import parity levels.

Acting Secretary Sullivan and Foreign Minister Klimkin called on Russia to finally fulfill its commitments under the Minsk agreements and end its occupation of Crimea.

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[Press Releases: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Yamamoto Travel to East Africa](#)

Media Note
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
April 21, 2018

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Ambassador Donald Y. Yamamoto will travel to Eritrea from April 22-24 for bilateral consultations with Eritrean government officials, to meet with the diplomatic community, and to visit the Embassy's staff based in Asmara. He will then lead the U.S. delegation to the U.S.-Djibouti Binational Forum April 24-25 in Djibouti, our annual dialogue on matters of political, economic, assistance, and security

cooperation. Ambassador Yamamoto will travel to Ethiopia on April 26 to meet with Ethiopian government officials to discuss shared interests and concerns.

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[Press Releases: Briefing on the Release of the 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#)

Special Briefing
Michael G. Kozak

Ambassador, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Press Briefing Room
Washington, DC
April 20, 2018

MS NAUERT: Ambassador Kozak will take some of your questions, and I'll kick off those questions. So thank you very much. One second. Sir, come on up. Thank you.

Let's start our first question with the Associated Press's Matt Lee.

QUESTION: Thank you. I realize that this report doesn't cover the United States and – but in this preface and in his comments just now, Acting Secretary Sullivan talked about how the U.S. is promoting – promotes and defends rights, and that that's central to us as a country, and that the United States will lead other nations by example in promoting rule of law and respect for human rights.

And I'm just wondering how effective you think that you can be in leading by example when you take – you accuse numerous – there – a lot of countries of, say, assaults on press freedom when here, in this country, we have a President who routinely excoriates the press, calling individual media outlets – and individual reporters sometimes – fake news. I'm wondering how you can criticize countries for discrimination against LGBT people when this administration's stated policy is to exclude transgender people from serving in the military. I'm wondering about discrimination of – criticism of other countries for discriminating against religious minorities when courts and a lot of critics see the travel ban as, in fact, a ban on one particular religion. And lastly, you criticize countries for the mistreatment and refoulement of refugees, which I suppose this administration is not in that great of a position to do because it doesn't accept hardly any refugees, or at least far fewer than it ever did before.

So how is this not – how do you not open yourself up to charges of hypocrisy, and how effective do you think you can be at leading by example? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Okay, let's see if I can remember each one of those. But I think as you go through the report, you'll see the countries that we criticize for limiting press freedom, it's for things like having criminal libel laws where you can be put in jail for what you say. It's for things like yanking the licenses of media outlets you don't like or, in many cases, killing the journalists. So I think we make quite a distinction between political leaders being able to speak out and say that that story was not accurate or using even stronger words sometimes, and using state power to prevent the journalists from continuing to do their work. So I think there's an example there, and we've used that with many of our colleagues.

The other end of your stream was refoulement, which is a legal term. It's sending somebody back to a place where they are – where you know they're going to be persecuted or where they have a well-founded fear of persecution without going through due process to assess the risk to them. And of course, our law provides that people have rights of appeal through the immigration courts system and into the federal courts if they think they're going to be. So it doesn't go to the quantity of refugees; it goes to whether you're –

QUESTION: Right, I understand. But you're not in a position if you even wanted to refoule a refugee, you don't have many to do it to. But it's also mistreatment of refugees. It's not just that. So –

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yeah, and that usually involves, as you'll find documented in many countries in the report, physical mistreatment of refugees and that kind of thing. Your –

QUESTION: LGBT.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: LGBT. As we are very clear in the reports, and this has been U.S. policy for some time, the things we're focused on are is: Has the government in question criminalized same-sex sexual activity, and that's highlighted now right up front in the reports; have they failed to prevent violence against people because of their LGBT status, or the same applies to ethnic groups and religious and so on; and then, third, discrimination in housing, employment, and government services. Usually, military and police are a slightly different form of government employment. So you can have a debate about that one, but most of the other countries where we're criticizing them, I think we would be very happy if they were following the procedures we are.

There are a lot of policy decisions in these areas that governments make that aren't internationally recognized human rights, so that's where we try to distinguish. And that's not – that's nothing new. That's been the case in the last couple of administrations as well.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Michelle from CNN.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yeah.

QUESTION: I'd like to know if you think that such statements in the United

States weaken the impact of this report, because the American President has called the press an enemy of the people. And I think at one point he called for a closer look at libel laws or something like that. Do you think in the eyes of people that are looking at this report, as an example and as a resource, do statements like that currently weaken its impact?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, I think the report is very clear about the kinds of things that we consider to be inappropriate restrictions on freedom of the media – as I mentioned, using the legal system to go after members of the press, using physical force and so on. It doesn't go to the nature of discourse in a country. And you can have your own judgments as to how – how strong a statement might or might not be, but I don't – I don't think we have a hard time explaining that in a lot of places. When you talk to some of my friends in Cuba, for example, who try to be independent journalists there and are routinely slapped around, they also get called names, but they – I think if it were limited to that they'd be pretty happy as compared to the situation now. So –

QUESTION: And when the State Department is talking about this represents our values as Americans, the removal of sections on women's reproductive rights – why is that not included in values as Americans?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: There's still a long section on women. And by the way, if you look elsewhere in the report, I mean, women are also activists, are also journalists. There are – yeah, now –

QUESTION: Understood. But it's so conspicuous that it's removed.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Let me – now, it was – I'm going to explain why it was removed. It was introduced six years ago into the report. It hadn't been there before. The – it's one of the few terms that are used in the report that isn't derived from an international treaty that has a definition or derived from U.S. law, where there's a clear definition to the term.

And in this case, the previous administration intended it to mean look at the availability of contraception, at the – whether the government tried to impose or coerce people in making decisions about reproduction. In the statements that were made – this was derived from the Beijing Declaration that was done in the '90s.

At that time, it was very clear and our delegation made a very clear statement that this has nothing to do with abortion, it doesn't mean abortion, it doesn't mean abortion. Unfortunately, over the last few years, groups on both sides of that issue domestically have started to use the term, and both seem to think it does include abortion and then argue about it.

So our thought was let's just not use a term that has the opposite meaning from the one we intend. We went back to the term that's used in the U.S. statute that requires the Human Rights Report, which is coerced family planning, namely coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

I might mention too, because I went back and looked at last year's report,

the question being asked was, "Were there obstacles opposed to getting contraception information and means?" The answer in virtually every country was no, there were no obstacles other than, in almost every country, including our own, the availability in rural areas is less than it is in urban areas. But we were taking a lot of space to explain that.

So what we've done, we've kept that information in there. We've done it now by a hyperlink. We used to take that information from the WHO report and put it in. We said let's just use a hyperlink, and then there's actually more information available that way.

So that's the rationale behind that. It's not a diminishment of women's rights or a desire to get away from it; it was to stop using a term that has several different meanings that are not all the ones we intend.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Dave Clark from AFP.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you very much. When countries around the world are looking at the U.S. for leadership on human rights, should they be looking at this report, or should they be looking at President Trump's embrace of Rodrigo Duterte, of meeting with Sisi, and with the very warm relations with Mohammed bin Salman, who runs a country where women have no rights at all? Is – what sends the stronger signal, the President's close personal friendship with Xi Jinping and his golf tours at Mar-a-Lago or you at that podium decrying human rights abuses?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, this is an official report, and by the way, I think it's one of the most widely read U.S. Government documents in the world when we do the hit counts on the internet. It's put out in the name of the Secretary of State, who was just here to deliver it, and he certainly is reflecting the President in this.

I think this is showing what we assess to be the human rights situation in all of the countries you've just mentioned, including – now even more so – the responsibility of the government for the abuses that are occurring there. They're not – we're not just saying there are these societal problems in the country; we're saying the government either has done these bad deeds or not. And I'll give you some examples.

In Russia we highlighted the fact – their response to an increase in domestic violence there – and they have a terrible problem, I mean tens of thousands of deaths of women being killed in domestic disputes every year. But since it went up, the government spokesman who went into the State Duma said, "Well, we have to decriminalize this, because it's better that our women be beaten than that our men be humiliated by their behavior." So – and this was Putin's party, they decriminalized spousal beating. So not a very good thing.

Now, does that mean that the President should never speak to these people? This is what – we're trying to keep the report as the factual baseline for what we're going to do in policy terms or sanctions as the secretary was mentioning. So we can learn a lot from this, and we can use it to formulate a policy. But usually part of your policy is engaging with the people whose

behavior you're trying to change at some level. And I don't think those two things are in distinction. The fact is, these other governments and their populations do read the report, and I don't think they discount it because the President speaks with their leader or otherwise. And when the President speaks to their leader, often he's talking about these issues, so it's – it's complementary, it's not a – two things that are in conflict

QUESTION: Since we're citing examples, what does Saudi law say about spousal abuse?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Saudi law is very, very restrictive on women. We've tried to encourage changes in that, we've seen the minor changes that are reflected in the report, that they've started to say they're going to allow women to drive cars and so on. That isn't very much, but it is a baby step in the right direction, and we're trying to encourage more of that kind of reform at the same time that we're calling out the areas in which they're deficient, which are many.

MS NAUERT: All right, Rich Hudson from Fox News.

QUESTION: Thanks, Heather. Ambassador, I want to follow up a little bit on Saudi Arabia, the conversation you were just having with Dave. You note in the report – and a lot has happened on the government level in Saudi Arabia in just the past year, and you note in the report the jailing or hoteling of 200 officials there.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yep. Hoteling, that's a good – (laughter).

QUESTION: Are you – overall, in Saudi Arabia, are you encouraged by some of the things that are happening? Are you discouraged by what's happened over the last year? Where do you see the trend going in Saudi Arabia?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, of course it's always hard to predict trends, but I think – I'm always encouraged when you start to see things break out of a static holding pattern. When you see a little bit of change as we're seeing in Saudi Arabia, and the hoteling was connected to – ostensibly anyway – to more of concern about corruption, which is not – another one of our issues, insofar as corruption and human rights abuse seem to – tend to go together.

So we're trying to encourage that kind of movement on the part of the Saudis. At the same time, you can look at that and say, "Well, you didn't do this with sufficient due process," and I think that's also well spelled-out here. So it's trying to get that right balance of, hey here's where we think you're deficient, but we're seeing some movement and we're trying to encourage the movement in the positive direction and see more. But I'm usually more encouraged when I see some movement going on than when things are just stuck in the same rut for years and years and years. So in that sense, at least there's an opportunity there. We'll see if it comes to anything.

QUESTION: So is hoteling now going to be standard language in –

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: I think your colleague just came up with a new term with –

MS NAUERT: Cindy with Voice of America. We have a few minutes left.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. We were talking about press freedoms, and you're probably aware that in Nicaragua, the Ortega Government ordered at least five television stations off the air for their coverage of massive protests. What is the U.S. Government prepared to do to stem this new wave of repression?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, Nicaragua is – and I think if you looked at the report – is going to wrong direction on many fronts and that is one of them, of media freedom. But also on all the basics, I mean, it's a long litany of torture, extrajudicial killing, the elections were a sham. And so we've put more and more pressure on – I think you'll see some of the sanctions programs will start to affect some people in that country. But it's a tough one; the Ortega Government has basically shut down a lot of the opposition, a lot of the independent civil society organizations as well as the free media.

So I mean, in our policy everywhere, and certainly in Nicaragua, is to try to provide both moral – and to the extent we can support NGOs and so on that are working to keep – to help them keep working, help free media keep working, and bring about a change in that dimension. But it's – it's tough, but we can't do it ourselves. We have to be in a position of supporting the people in those countries that are trying to bring about change, and we try to do that through a variety of means.

The Secretary – I'm not sure he met with any Nicaraguans – but at the Summit of the Americas had meetings with civil society activists from Cuba, Venezuela – same camp as Nicaragua – and it was in part just to give them that – show that we stand with them and that we're trying to be supportive of what they're trying to do to bring about change in their own country.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question about Gaza and –

MS NAUERT: Janne. Janne, go right – excuse me, Janne, go right ahead.

QUESTION: On North Korean human rights issues, as the North Korean nuclear issue is an important issue and the North Korean human rights is also serious issues, unless the regime of the North Korean Kim Jong-un changes, the North Korean human rights abuse against the North Korean people will continue. What is the U.S. solutions on this?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Okay. We have – I mean, we are concerned about the nuclear issue in North Korea, but we're equally concerned about the human rights issues, and they both derive from the same problem. And I think you see in the report we've laid out pretty starkly the kinds of abuses, and over the last year or two, we've supported, like, a commission of inquiry on North Korea, we support NGOs that are working on North Korea and exposing the human rights abuses that occur in the camps there and so on. But some of the stories that are contained in the report are just overwhelming. There's one about 11 people who were arrested for supposedly making a pornographic film and they were executed by shooting anti-artillery weapons at them, and then they brought out tanks and ran over the bodies, and this is supposed to be a civilized country.

So I don't think you will see a diminishment in our concern about that issue even as we try to work the nuclear issue. It's not a trade-off. I think the President's laid out a vision there that North Korea can get on a much better path, but it needs to make progress across the board, not just on one issue.

QUESTION: Do you have any –

MS NAUERT: Michel.

QUESTION: Yeah, thank you. Sir, you – the report considers China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea forces of instability. What do you mean by that? And will there be any consequences?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, I don't know that we've called them as forces of instability in the report. Perhaps –

QUESTION: Yeah, in the –

QUESTION: In the preface.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: In the preface. Okay.

QUESTION: Yeah, exactly.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Well, I think that has to do with their international behavior as well as their internal behavior. I mean, sometimes, internal behavior – you can't really separate them because when you start oppressing your own people, you generate refugee flows, you generate humanitarian crises like you're seeing in Venezuela, for example. So – but there's not – saying something is a force of instability is saying or characterizing a set of facts. It doesn't necessarily have a prescribed policy flow. None of this does.

This report doesn't say countries that reach a certain level we're going to cut off aid or something like that. It's the factual predicate for making those decisions, but those are policy decisions where the President and his advisors will have to weigh a whole number of factors.

MS NAUERT: And our final question –

QUESTION: Can I ask – can I ask a question on the Gaza and the West Bank.

MS NAUERT: – Kylie from CBS News.

QUESTION: Because, I mean, he pointed to –

QUESTION: Can I just go back to the reproductive rights for a second? So you said there are no obstacles for women to get contraception in any country except for if there's a remote issue, right?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: I said with some exceptions, and the exceptions were and still are – and we've really gotten at it by flipping back to the original U.S. statutory language. It's in places like China, where in order to enforce

their two – now two-child policy, that there are reports of coerced abortion and involuntary sterilization. In North Korea, where the government also coerces or forces abortion – although sometimes that's for political punishment rather than family planning. And we uncovered it – so as we were digging through trying to reduce the bulk of some of this report, I found in the old country I served in, in Belarus, that it turns out that the doctors in the state hospitals, and particularly in the institutions there, if they have a woman who is pregnant and who is a woman with disabilities, the doctors insist on an abortion. Or if they believe the fetus has a disability, they'll insist on an abortion. So we've called that out too.

So it's not – those were the cases, though, in the – under the previous formula where you would say there was a restriction on family planning, freedom of family planning. For most countries, it said, there isn't any restriction except for the ones imposed by economics and rural-urban type thing. So –

QUESTION: So just to be clear just on that, so taking out the language about those cases therefore means that the U.S. doesn't believe that the inability for women to get an abortion physically or by law is an abuse of human rights?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: That – correct under the previous administration and this one and the one before that. We have never taken the position that abortion was a right under – a human right under international law. This is supposed to be internationally recognized human rights, and it's an issue on which – some countries prohibit abortion, some countries, like our own, pretty much no restriction on it, and we don't say one of those is right and one of those is wrong. We don't report on it because it's not a human right. It's an issue of great policy debate, you can have a good discussion, but there's no internationally recognized standard as to what's the right treatment.

But the other, yes. The – it is internationally recognized that somebody shouldn't coerce you to have an abortion or force you to be sterilized, so that's –

MS NAUERT: Thank you, sir.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question on the Palestinian –

MS NAUERT: We – the ambassador has to go. Thank you so much.

QUESTION: Yeah, one quick question on the Palestinian (inaudible).

MS NAUERT: We have to go. Sir, thank you. Thank you. We'll get you another time.

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Press Releases: Remarks on the Release of the 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

Remarks
John J. Sullivan

Acting Secretary of State
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Press Briefing Room
Washington, DC
April 20, 2018

MS NAUERT: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for coming, especially on a Friday. Today the State Department released the [2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#). Promoting freedom – promoting and defending human rights and fundamental freedoms are central to who we are as a country, and the United States will continue to support those around the world struggling for human dignity and liberty.

This is the 42nd annual Human Rights Report that the department has now released. We're delighted to have our Acting Secretary of State, John Sullivan, with us here today to say a few words about this report. After Acting Secretary Sullivan's remarks, we will invite Ambassador Michael Kozak to the podium to answer some of your questions. I will help facilitate, as we all know one another, and assist with that.

Ambassador Kozak is a senior bureau official with the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and he's looking forward to speaking with you shortly. He has served this department under Republican and Democrat administrations for 46 years, which is incredible. Sir, thank you for your service to the State Department.

And with that, I will hand over the podium to our Acting Secretary John Sullivan. Sir.

ACTING SECRETARY SULLIVAN: Thank you, Heather. Good afternoon, everyone. It's an honor to be here to formally release the [2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#). Now in their 42nd year, these reports are a natural outgrowth of our values as Americans. The founding documents of our country speak to unalienable rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law – revolutionary concepts at the time of our founding that are now woven into the fabric of America and its interests both at home and abroad.

Promoting human rights and the idea that every person has inherent dignity is a core element of this administration's foreign policy. It also strengthens U.S. national security by fostering greater peace, stability, and prosperity around the world. The Human Rights Reports are the most comprehensive and factual accounting of the global state of human rights. They help our government and others formulate policies and encourage both friends and foes to respect the dignity of all individuals without discrimination.

This year, we have sharpened the focus of the report to be more responsive to statutory reporting requirements and more focused on government action or inaction with regard to the promotion and protection of human rights. For example, each executive summary includes a paragraph to note the most egregious abuses that occurred in a particular country, including those against women, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous persons, and members of religious minorities.

Before I turn the podium over to Mike, I'd like to discuss a few countries in particular, including some with the most egregious human rights records.

The entire world is aware of the horrendous human rights abuses in Syria, including barrel bombing of civilians, attacks on hospitals, widespread reports of rape and abuse by Syrian Government personnel. A week ago, the President took action, together with our French and British allies, to deter the use of chemical weapons and protect the human rights of Syrian civilians.

We condemn the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya in Burma and the atrocities committed against them, and we are working with partners to address that crisis. More than 670,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh in recent months. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been internally displaced. Those responsible for the violations, abuses, and attacks must be held accountable.

The DPRK is one of the most repressive and abusive regimes in the world. As the report makes clear, the Kim regime systematically neglects the well-being of its people to underwrite and fund its illicit weapons programs via forced labor, child labor, and the export of North Korean workers.

China continues to spread the worst features of its authoritarian system, including restrictions on activists, civil society, freedom of expression, and the use of arbitrary surveillance. The absence of an independent judiciary, the government's crackdown on independent lawyers, and tight controls on information undermine the rule of law. We're particularly concerned about the efforts of Chinese authorities to eliminate the religious, linguistic, and cultural identities of Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, as well as restrictions on the worship of Christians.

The Iranian people continue to suffer at the hands of their leaders. The right of peaceful assembly and freedoms of association and expression are the legitimate expectation of all individuals worldwide. Unfortunately for the Iranian people, these human rights are under attack almost daily.

In Turkey, the detention of tens of thousands of individuals, including journalists and academics, under an ongoing state of emergency has undermined

the rule of law there.

In Venezuela, the Maduro regime represses the human rights of its people and denies them the right to have a voice in their government. Thousands flee their homes daily in response to this growing humanitarian crisis. At the Summit of the Americas last week, Vice President Pence announced \$16 million in humanitarian aid from the United States to help those who have fled Venezuela, are in – and are in desperate need of food, water, and medical help. We stand by the Venezuelan people even as their leaders refuse to allow aid into the country.

Finally, the Russian Government continues to quash dissent and civil society, even while it invades its neighbors and undermines the sovereignty of Western nations. We once again urge Russia to end its brutal occupation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, to halt the abuses perpetrated by Russian-led forces in Ukraine's Donbas region, and to address impunity for the human rights violations and abuses in the Republic of Chechnya.

That's a brief overview of the factual reports on countries of most concern. I know that Ambassador Kozak will be happy to answer any questions you may have, but before I turn the podium over to him, let me note at least a few bright spots.

Uzbekistan – although there's still much progress to be made, the country has pursued a strategic reform agenda with positive effects on human rights, including the release of eight high-profile prisoners last year.

In Liberia, the recent presidential election represents a milestone marking the first peaceful transition from one democratically elected leader to another in more than 70 years.

And in Mexico, the general law on forced disappearances established criminal penalties for persons convicted of forced disappearance and a national framework to find victims.

These represent a few of the more positive examples noted in the reports which are released today. We hope to see many more positive accounts of countries taking serious action to improve the human rights record in the reports next year.

In conclusion, let me say America leads the way globally to promote human rights. We will also continue to impose consequences on those who abuse human rights. Over the past year, through the Russia Magnitsky and Global Magnitsky sanctions programs, we have undertaken some of our most aggressive measures yet. No human rights abuser, no matter where in the world, is out of our reach. The Human Rights Reports are a significant part of that overall effort. Creating them is an enormous undertaking and not for the fainthearted. I'm grateful to so many of my colleagues in the State Department, including those here in Washington and many others in embassies and consulates around the world, who've made these reports possible and contribute to America's longstanding leadership in promoting human rights.

So with that, I'd like to turn the podium over to Acting Under Secretary Nauert and to my friend and colleague, Ambassador Mike Kozak. Thank you.

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