

SEPTEMBER 05, 2024

On-the-Record Press Gaggle by White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby

10:35 A.M. EDT

MODERATOR: Hey, everyone. Thanks for bearing with us for the last couple minutes. Kirby has a few words here at the top, and then we'll go into questions, as always.

MR. KIRBY: Hey, good morning. Thank you for joining us here again, but there are a few things that we do want to announce.

First, in the Western Hemisphere. As I think you may have seen, in partnership with partners in the Western Hemisphere, early this morning, the United States government secured the release of 135 Nicaraguan political prisoners, including Catholic lay people, human rights defenders, students, and others who the government of Nicaragua consider a threat to their authoritarian rule.

In coordination with President Arévalo of Guatemala and his democratically elected government, the United States helped facilitate the transport of all 135 Nicaraguans to Guatemala, and they should be arriving there as we speak.

To our partners in Guatemala, we will help provide them with medical and trauma care, a place to stay, clothing and hygiene kits, along with other immediate support. And I think it's important that we don't forget these are people who have been unjustly detained for months, some of them for years, without access to basic needs.

Thanks to President Biden's Safe Mobility Offices initiative, one of which is located in Guatemala, these Nicaraguan citizens will be able to seek lawful

pathways to migrate to a new country, and they'll — and to rebuild their lives. So it's a real tangible example of what democracies can do working together to help people.

Turning to Gaza, if I might: Last Sunday, with strong support from the United States, the United Nations, led by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, began a campaign to vaccinate more than half a million children against polio. The first reports of a polio outbreak in Gaza emerged in late July. Immediately thereafter, the President directed his team to support WHO and UNICEF's efforts and to help develop a comprehensive and efficient vaccination plan, recognizing that children under 10 were the most at risk.

We've worked closely with the government of Israel to facilitate the necessary access and safety of the vaccination campaign, including securing pauses in military operations and a commitment to timely deconfliction mechanisms. And we've underscored the importance of reaching a critical threshold among children under 10 years old to help prevent the disease from spreading within Gaza and, quite frankly, across the region.

We are grateful for this cooperation and for the U.N. and other humanitarian workers who are doing this lifesaving work under extremely difficult and dangerous conditions.

So far, with just three days into the campaign, the estimate is that 189,000 children in Gaza have been vaccinated, and we look forward to continuing to do more over coming days.

The strong turnout that we have seen we believe is a testament to the superb planning that went into this campaign; the strong coordination between us, Israeli authorities, and the U.N.; as well as, quite frankly, the commitment of Palestinian families who don't — like all families, they want to protect their kids.

In the coming days, this campaign must continue unimpeded throughout Gaza, and we are committed to that. I want to be crystal clear, though, on one thing: The single most effective way to address this particular urgent challenge of polio and all the humanitarian challenges in Gaza is to reach an

immediate ceasefire, enabling the release of all the hostages but also creating the conditions for additional lifesaving assistance to reach Palestinian civilians who are so much in need. Their suffering simply must stop.

And as we've seen certainly in many other ways, but including the threat of polio: Real lives — and, in this case, in polio, real young lives — are hanging in the balance.

Finally, if I can — turning to Africa.

Yesterday, Prosper Africa, which is a presidential-level national security initiative, released data that highlighted the Biden-Harris's — the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to promoting sustainable commercial partnerships and shared prosperity between the United States and the continent.

Since January of 2021, we have closed 1,695 private sector deals valued at 63 and a half billion dollars in some 41 African countries, all of them designed to help improve transparent and credible investment opportunities.

The number of U.S. government-supported deals increased from 262 in 2021 to 401 in just the first six months of this year. And the estimated value of these deals increased dramatically from 3.1 billion in 2021 to 32 and a half billion dollars.

We're also responding, of course, to the crisis in Sudan, where hundreds of thousands of Sudanese people live in famine conditions, 25 million of them are facing acute hunger, and more than 10 million have been forced to flee their homes. That work includes pushing for ceasefire talks between the RSF and the SAF; securing humanitarian commitments from the warring parties to allow safe, unhindered humanitarian access; and reopening the Adré border crossing from Chad, through which some humanitarian supplies have now crossed.

Now, much more needs to be done, of course; we're mindful of that. And the RSF and the SAF need to uphold their commitments and expand. We are doing everything we can to secure humanitarian access and to save lives and to help bring an end to the fighting.

And with that, I'll take some questions.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Our first question will go to Steve with Reuters.

Q Hey, John. You know, Jon Finer was in Ukraine yesterday getting briefed on various things. Do you now have a better understanding of the peace plan that Zelenskyy is talking about proposing, I think it's later this month?

MR. KIRBY: Hey, Steve. I'll certainly let President Zelenskyy speak to this peace initiative that he's been talking about.

As you know, we have helped the Ukrainians to move his just peace proposal forward internationally, and it has garnered quite a bit of international support. And as we have long maintained, if this war is going to end through some sort of negotiation, we want to make sure that President Zelenskyy is in the best possible position to make decisions about what that negotiation looks like, and that's what we're focused on right now.

We are absolutely focused on making sure Ukraine has what it needs to defend itself and to put them in that position of strength should, if, and when a negotiation occurs. And I would add that that includes this week, as the Secretary of Defense is heading over to Ramstein, Germany, to host yet another contact group meeting where our coalition partners will again revisit ways they can continue to support Ukraine.

Q And if I could add, on Gaza: We had a briefing yesterday, and it described the latest update on where things stand. When do you expect to present this next ceasefire proposal?

MR. KIRBY: Well, all the parties are in communication right now, Steve. I don't have a meeting, necessarily, in the region that I can point to at this particular point in time, like we had last week in Cairo and Doha. But Brett McGurk, our Middle East Coordinator, is actively engaging his counterparts in Qatar, Egypt, Israel to see what we can do to try to move this forward.

I want to be clear that just because I'm not announcing, you know, another meeting, it doesn't mean that there won't be one, but it also doesn't mean

that there actually will be one or that there needs to be one. That'll be something that, you know, Brett and his interlocutors will try to figure out.

But, again, we believe that these differences can be resolved. And what the next step looks like in terms of resolving them, I think we just don't know right now.

Q Thanks, John.

MR. KIRBY: Yes, sir.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Our next question will go to Zeke with the AP.

Q Thanks, John, for doing this. I was hoping that you could speak to how the execution of the hostages last week has complicated the prisoner swap part of the phase one agreement with fewer hostages who would meet that initial release date. Is there — has there been any indication that Hamas is dropping the number of prisoners it wants to see released by Israel as part of phase one of that deal? Or is that — how big of a sticking point is that?

MR. KIRBY: Well, I mean, obviously it's — it was just a horrific slaughter and shocking to everybody. But we don't believe that it necessarily — let me say it a different way. We believe that the discussions to try to get to a ceasefire deal can and should continue. And as I think you heard from an administration official last night, we're very much focused on doing exactly that.

I can't speak to the motivation to murder those hostages, but we still believe that as tragic as that was, and it certainly was tragic, that the ceasefire negotiations can and should continue. I think that's the best way I could put it.

Q Thanks. And then just separately, I was hoping you might be able to take a swing at Putin's comments, I guess late last night or early this morning our time, reportedly saying he's shown a preference for the outcome of the presidential race for the Vice President. Is there anything you can say on that? Thank you.

MR. KIRBY: Mr. Putin ought to stop talking about our elections, period. He shouldn't be favoring anybody one way or another. The only people who should get to determine who the next president of the United States is is the American people. And we would greatly appreciate it if Mr. Putin would, A, stop talking about our election and, B, stop interfering in it.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Our next question will go to Andrea Mitchell with NBC.

Q Hi. Thank you so much, John and everyone. So, following up, I know you can't discuss the negotiations, but it's unclear what the U.S. role would be, if any, if there were a way to work with Egypt, on the Egypt side, to somehow secure that border, but how that could be done without Israeli cooperation if the talks are continuing without Israel.

So could you try to explain how the talks could possibly continue if the Prime Minister is, as certainly has been widely reported, is absolutely dead set against yielding on some of the key issues?

Obviously, there can be no release of Palestinian prisoners that Hamas would want, but is there a smaller group of American and other endangered — they're all endangered, but critically endangered hostages that could be released, and doing it with the other partners and securing that border area? And how would that involve negotiating with Hamas?

If you could, you know, clarify that at all, I'd really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

MR. KIRBY: Yeah, let me back up just a second and make clear what's happening versus what's not happening.

What's not happening is, you know, formal, set peace negotiations and mediation, like we saw in the last couple of weeks in Doha and Cairo. So there's no formal negotiation going on at this time.

What is going on is communication, sort of point-to-point communication between us and our counterparts in Qatar and Egypt and, of course, Israel to

try to still see if we can move this thing forward.

And I've heard what the Prime Minister said. I'm not going to get into a back-and-forth with him here in a public setting. He can speak for his comments, and he can speak for where he is.

But what I can assure you is our communication with our Israeli counterparts continue. And we still believe that though this is incredibly difficult, that we can, in fact — if there's compromise, if there's leadership, that we can still get there, we can still get this deal. And that's what we're focused on right now, is trying to hammer out the differences that still exist between what Hamas says it wants and what Israel says it needs.

So we're still working our way through that, but we're doing that, Andrea, right now in a more informal way. And I think — you know, you were asking about presence on the border and all that, and I think that gets into the details of the horse trading here that I just am not comfortable engaging in a public conversation on, because those are exactly the kinds of issues that we're speaking to the Israelis about and our Qatari and Egyptian friends too.

Q Well, but I know you can't speak for Israel, and I'm not asking you to, when you speak of the Prime Minister, but given the months and months of investment of time, effort, energy, and the risk to the hostages that has gone on, with nine trips by the Secretary of State and countless others by the DCI and other White House officials, can you speak to the feeling in the administration about the unyielding public statements of the Prime Minister and how much of an obstacle that is to the welfare of the hostages who were so close to being released and were brutally killed, murdered by Hamas, which could have (inaudible)?

MR. KIRBY: I certainly understand the — I certainly understand the intent of the question. Let me tackle it this way, if I might. And if I am unsatisfying, I'm sure you'll let me know.

Number one, the biggest obstacle to getting a ceasefire deal is Hamas. No question about it. They took the damn hostages in the first place, and they violated a ceasefire.

Q I'm not questioning that.

MR. KIRBY: No, no — no, no, just let me get there. Let me get there, please. There was a ceasefire in place on the 6th of October, which Mr. Sinwar decided to break. The hostages should be released now. There should be no reason for them to be held in the first place.

With each passing day, as sadly we have seen over the course of last weekend, the danger to their lives increase. And that's why we're working with such a great sense of urgency here.

On the larger point of what you're asking about, I won't get into — I'm just not going to get into a public back-and-forth, through all of you in the press, with Prime Minister Netanyahu.

I will just say that this process has at times been cumbersome. We have faced setbacks and setbacks and more setbacks. And without question, we here in the administration are frustrated that we still haven't been able to conclude this deal. And there's lots of reasons for that. But I'm not going to lie to you and say that we haven't been frustrated. Of course we have. We want to see the hostages home as soon as possible.

But I would also say that as frustrating as it has been at times, and as unhelpful as not just public comments, but even private machinations in the negotiation process have been to closure of the deal, it has not dimmed one bit President Biden's commitment to trying to see this through. And that is why, as I said earlier, Brett McGurk, Jake Sullivan, Tony Blinken, the entire national security team remains committed to seeing if we can't move this forward and get it to closure.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Our next question will go to Alex with CNN.

Q Thanks, guys. John, I appreciate you not wanting to get into a back-and-forth, but it really does sound like you and the Israelis are not at all on the same page. We just heard an interview with Netanyahu this morning on another network, and he said very clearly, "There is not a deal in the making. Unfortunately, it's not close." He was asked about your colleague's estimation yesterday that the deal is 90 percent done. He said, "It's exactly

inaccurate.”

The President, on Sunday, said that we’re on the “verge of... an agreement.” That was after the bodies had been found.

So what do you make of the Prime Minister’s rejection, not just of your characterization of the deal being 90 percent done, but saying, point blank, there is not a deal in the making?

MR. KIRBY: Yeah, I think — first of all, my colleague that you’re referring to also was very clear that while much of the text has been agreed to, the exchange of prisoners has not been agreed to. And that really comes — that’s the heart of this deal, is the exchange. And it’s not been agreed to. As we talked about before, it’s the implementation of the framework. The framework itself has been agreed to. And, of course, Hamas executed hostages over the weekend and also, in fact, changed some of the terms of the exchange.

So, as I said earlier, while that execution absolutely, certainly dramatically — I shouldn’t say “dramatically” — certainly changed the pool of hostages that could be available, and absolutely created a sense of even greater urgency to get the deal, it also underscores how difficult it is to negotiate with a guy like Mr. Sinwar.

And I think I want to come back to what I’ve said before. When we talk about obstacles to the deal here, it’s Mr. Sinwar. But my colleague was not overly rosy or optimistic. We still believe that it can be done. We’re not Pollyannaish about the difficulty in getting there.

Q No, I understand, John. But 90 percent sounds pretty optimistic. And the President himself saying “on the verge of... an agreement” is certainly optimistic. So is it on the verge of an agreement, or is it not close, as the Prime Minister said?

MR. KIRBY: Well, I just —

Q Is there a deal on the table or not? Because he’s saying there’s no deal in the making, and you guys have persistently said there is a deal to be had.

MR. KIRBY: So, first of all, “90 percent,” “verge of a deal” — you call that optimistic, I call that accurate. That’s how close we believe we are. That’s where we have gotten to. The basic framework of the deal has been agreed to. What we’re talking about now is the implementing details and, specifically, the exchange of prisoners. And now that calculus is different because of what happened over the weekend. It’s not guaranteed that Mr. Sinwar is ever going to accept the deal. We’ve all said that.

So I’m just going to take issue with the premise of the question and the way it was characterized on television, that it was overly optimistic or rosy. We have been nothing but pragmatic about talking about this.

Now, have we been hopeful? Yeah, you bet. And as I said yesterday, no apologies for that. Not one bit. We’d rather get caught trying than not try at all. And we’re trying.

So I’m just going to take issue with the idea that we’re somehow pulling the wool over your guys’ eyes or being overly optimistic. We’re being pragmatic about it, and we do believe that we have made an immense amount of progress in the last few months in terms of getting the structure of the deal in place.

But nothing is negotiated until everything is negotiated. And the things that are still in play right now are very, very detailed, data-driven issues, and that’s when things get difficult. That’s when it gets hard.

MODERATOR: Thank you. For our next question we’ll go to Alex with the Wall Street Journal.

Q Thanks. Very quick, a quick follow-up on the Finer meeting. Is there — obviously, Finer went there with a — thinking about the agenda of energy security. I mean, did he come away with any sort of assurances that the Ukrainians will be able to protect their energy grid over this coming winter? And if there are any sort of specifics on this military planning, did he get an update on Kursk or anything like that?

And then, on Gaza, I guess I just want to be clear also about one thing. We do

have — you guys keep saying that, you know, the Philadelphi Corridor, it's about the densely populated areas, but then at the same time noting, well, that's actually more of an issue for phase two, in which case I'm wondering why Philadelphi is one of the complications to this deal when it's a phase two issue, not really a phase one issue. Thank you.

MR. KIRBY: Look, I'm not going to get into negotiating here in public with you guys on all the details. I addressed this the other day. Phase one requires them to leave densely populated areas. There are parts of the Philadelphi Corridor that don't qualify for that because they're not densely populated areas. And so, I've already addressed this.

The Israelis said that they needed locations among Philadelphi Corridor. That's not — you know, that is not a — that is not, nor should it be or needs to be, some sort of a deal closer.

I'm sorry, and I lost my train of thought. What was your other question?

Q Just a little bit more on Finer's meeting in Ukraine.

MR. KIRBY: Oh, Finer's visit. Sorry. Sorry.

Yeah, look, Jon was grateful for the time that Ukrainian officials, including President Zelenskyy, afforded him while he was there. He had a chance to hear directly from the president and from his staff about their view of the battlefield and what's going on in the northeast part of the country and, frankly, yes, what's going on in their Kursk operations. I'm not going to publicly disclose the details of those conversations, but he did get an update on what they're doing.

They absolutely had a chance to talk about the energy grid and the threat that that grid continues to come under from Russian air attacks. And Jon made clear to President Zelenskyy how committed the United States is to not only improving their air defense capabilities to protect that grid, but also to continuing to provide infrastructure support, to repair and to make that grid a little bit more resilient. And the United States is leading the way on that, and Jon made clear that we'll continue to do that.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Our next question will go to Zolan with the New York Times.

Q Hey there. Thanks so much for doing this and for taking my question. I wanted to turn back to Nicaragua just quickly. Could you just outline for me, John, a bit more about the administration's involvement in securing this release of folks on humanitarian grounds, and then specifically, also, the Vice President's involvement too? This would seem to be kind of in her, sort of, portfolio of dealing with, sort of, democracy issues in Central America. So if you could just describe her involvement. And also, if she wasn't involved, why? Given this is an assignment in her portfolio. Thanks.

MR. KIRBY: This was an administration-wide effort to work with partners, as I said in my opening statement, obviously in the region and specifically with Guatemala. But, you know, this was an effort by both the President and the Vice President to work through the appropriate channels to help secure the release of these individuals. And as I said, we also help facilitate their transport through charter aircraft coming from the United States to get them to Guatemala.

And we are working, again, across the administration, with our partners, to make sure that as they arrive in Guatemala, they have a place to stay, they've got food, they've got medical care, and if they need it, they have clothing, as well as now an opportunity to pursue legal pathways to migration to another country.

So this is very much in keeping with the efforts that the Vice President started on root causes. I mean, this idea of this initiative for legal pathways is very much all about giving people, who are living in places where there are real threats to their existence, opportunities to migrate to other countries. So, again, all that stemmed right from the work that the Vice President did on root causes.

But, again, it was across the administration, and we were proud to be able to help facilitate this and, quite frankly, very grateful to our international partners who helped make it happen.

Sorry about that.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Our next question will go to Asma with NPR.

Q Hi. Thanks for doing this. I just wanted to square some of the characterizations we've had of where we are again in the hostage space, John. I am confused. So, yesterday, we heard from a senior administration official. I believe their words were that the killing of the hostages has changed the character of that discussion. And what I'm trying to understand is: Has that character of the discussion become more urgent, as we heard earlier this week from the administration, or has it become more difficult? And could you help us understand where things are?

MR. KIRBY: Yeah, I think — I think both, Asma. And certainly it increased the sense of urgency; I talked about that the other day. And, yes, as my colleague indicated, it has made it more difficult.

But as I said earlier in this conversation, it doesn't lessen — in fact, quite the contrary — it increases our desire to move this forward and to try to get it to closure, which is why I didn't — maybe didn't do a great job with one of the previous answers about the effect here. But the point I was trying to make, and I'll make it again right now, is that the tragic murder and slaughter of those six hostages didn't wipe away, didn't eliminate or decrease our desire to see this ceasefire deal in place. And it didn't — it didn't make us believe that we couldn't still or shouldn't still have the conversations that we already were having.

But did it increase the sense of urgency? Yeah, of course it did. And has it made it — has it made it more difficult, as my colleague said? Yes, of course it has. But not impossible.

And I recognize that you all are seeing comments out there in the public. I recognize that, you know, we've suffered yet another huge setback here. But don't misconstrue our hopefulness for ignorance. We know what we're up against, and in Sinwar —

Q John, can I ask —

MR. KIRBY: In Sinwar, we know who we're up against. But that doesn't

mean we're not going to keep trying.

Q John, can I ask one related question — which is that earlier this week, you know, the President was asked about presenting a final hostage deal by the end of the week. We are here at Thursday. He said that we are very close to that. That doesn't sound — that doesn't sound likely, based on what you've been saying. I just want to confirm that.

MR. KIRBY: I go back to what I said before. We're still having active communications with all sides, and we have a sense of urgency, and we're acting on that sense of urgency.

MODERATOR: Thank you. And unfortunately, we only have time for one more quick question, which will go to Missy Ryan with the Washington Post.

Q Thank you. Hey, John. Just wanted to follow up on the Ukraine questions. Can you all hear me?

MR. KIRBY: Yes, ma'am.

Q Okay, great. And ask if you can comment at all, excuse me, on the request that the Ukrainians have been making for new longer-range weapons, for looser restrictions on the American-made weapons they currently have. Is it accurate to say that the U.S. is evaluating those requests? There are some reports out there that the U.S. is preparing to provide new capabilities that would allow them to strike deeper into Russian territory. Thanks.

MR. KIRBY: I would make two points, Missy. Number one, there's been no change in our policy with respect to long-range missile capabilities and where and what and how Ukraine can use those capabilities. No change in our policy to speak to today.

I would also tell you that we are, as we have been every day, including while Jon was in Kyiv, having a conversation with our Ukrainian counterparts about what they need, what's going on on the battlefield, and what support they require to continue to have success on the battlefield.

So those conversations are iterative, as they always have been, and, in fact,

will continue at a higher level at the end of this week when the Secretary of Defense holds his next iteration of the Ramstein group. So you'll see that for yourself in Germany here today and tomorrow.

But, again, no change to our policies one way or another to speak to.

MODERATOR: One more thing before we leave you all today.

MR. KIRBY: Today is a sad day at NSC, particularly in the — on the press team, as we say goodbye to Kate Waters, who's leaving us and heading off to new ventures in the private sector. Well deserved. And we're very proud of her and happy for her as she also gets ready to welcome her little one. And we're all going to miss her greatly.

She's been an incredible talent, a terrific teammate, a leader, a friend. And the hole that she's going to leave is going to be very, very deep. Very, very deep.

My grandfather used to say — when he found out I was joining the Navy, he said, "If you want to know how important anyone is to the United States Navy, put your fist in a bucket of water and pull it out, see what kind of hole you leave." Well, when Kate pulls her fist out of the bucket, maybe there won't be a hole, but the water is going to be a little bit colder. And we're going to miss you. So, thanks very much. Appreciate you, Kate.

That's it for me today, guys. Thanks.

MODERATOR: On that note, we're all crying.

But if you — we weren't able to get to your question, feel free to reach out and we'll get back to you as soon as we can. Thanks, everyone.

11:10 A.M. EDT