

From: White House Press Office
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Press Release: Nominations Sent to the Senate
To: Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)
Sent: January 31, 2022 4:41 PM (UTC-05:00)



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 31, 2022

NOMINATIONS SENT TO THE SENATE:

Vanessa Roberts Avery, of Connecticut, to be United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut for the term of four years, vice John H. Durham, resigned.

Deborah R. Coen, of Connecticut, to be a Member of the National Council on the Humanities for a term expiring January 26, 2028, vice Jean M. Yarbrough, term expired.

Trina A. Higgins, of Utah, to be United States Attorney for the District of Utah for the term of four years, vice John W. Huber, resigned.

Christine M. Kim, of Colorado, to be a Member of the National Council on the Humanities for a term expiring January 26, 2026, vice David Armand DeKeyser, term expired.

Jesse A. Maslovich, of Montana, to be United States Attorney for the District of Montana for the term of four years, vice Kurt G. Alme, resigned.

Chris Saunders, of Vermont, to be Federal Cochairperson of the Northern Border Regional Commission, vice Harold B. Parker.

Karen Ann Stout, of Pennsylvania, to be a Member of the National Council on the Humanities for a term expiring January 26, 2026, vice William Schneider, Jr., term expired.

aWanda Amaker Toney, of Maryland, to be Assistant Secretary for Communications and Outreach, Department of Education, vice Peter Cunningham.

S. ane Tucker, of Alaska, to be United States Attorney for the District of Alaska for the term of four years, vice Bryan D. Schroder, resigned.

Alexander M.M. Uballez, of New Mexico, to be United States Attorney for the District of New Mexico for the term of four years, vice John C. Anderson, resigned.

Beth Ann Williams, of New Jersey, to be a Member of the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board for a term expiring January 29, 2026, vice Aditya Bamzai, term expired.

Jane E. Young, of New Hampshire, to be United States Attorney for the District of New Hampshire for the term of four years, vice Scott W. Murray, resigned.

W THDRAWA SENT TO THE SENATE:

Beth Ann Williams, of New Jersey, to be a Member of the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board for the remainder of the term expiring January 29, 2023, vice Jane Nitze, resigned, which was sent to the Senate on November 15, 2021.

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From: White House Press Office
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, February 14, 2022
To: Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)
Sent: February 14, 2022 6:52 PM (UTC-05:00)



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 14, 2022

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

3:34 P.M. EST

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Hey. Good afternoon, all.

Q Hello.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Happy Valentine's Day or Galentine's Day -- whatever you celebrate. Hope everyone had a restful -- a restful time after a big game last night. I can attest, here from the podium, there were some very disappointed Bengals fans here last night. But we definitely wish and congratulate the Rams all the best from the city of -- and the city of LA, for sure.

Okay.

So, this is something that just went out, so just in case you guys all -- you all didn't get it yet: So, President Biden spoke today with Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom. The leaders discussed their recent diplomatic engagements with Ukraine and Russia. They also reviewed ongoing diplomatic and deterrence efforts in response to Russia's continued military buildup on Ukraine's borders and reaffirmed their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

They discussed efforts to reinforce the defensive posture on NATO's eastern flank and underlined the continued, close coordination among Allies and partners, including on readiness to impose severe consequences on Russia should it choose

further military escalation.

So I have a few more things for all of you at the top.

Today marks four years since the Parkland shooting. As the President said this morning in a statement that I'm sure all of you have seen, "We can never bring back those we've lost. But we can come together to fulfill the first responsibility of our government and our democracy: to keep each other safe. For Parkland, for all those we've lost, and for all those left behind, it is time to uphold that solemn obligation."

Since his first day in office, the President has worked to uphold that obligation and to save lives by preventing gun violence. He again called on Congress this morning to act, including to expand background checks to keep criminals from getting guns and to ban the sort of high-capacity magazines that were used to kill two NYPD officers.

And the President called again on Congress to fulfill his budget request for another half billion dollars to fight gun violence.

But if Congress won't act, the President is not going to just wait and sit back. He's already done more than any other president in their first year in history to advance commonsense gun violence prevention measures, and he built on that just earlier this month with new measures he announced in New York City.

Last June, he laid out a comprehensive strategy to address gun violence from every angle, and the White House is working closely with agencies across the administration to deliver on that and save lives. The plan is comprehensive, addressing both the supply and demand side contributors of -- to gun violence; pursuing prevention, intervention, and accountability; using every tool in the toolkit -- regulation, enforcement, budget, the bully pulpit, and legislation; and pulling together the federal agencies for a whole-of-government effort to reduce gun violence.

Specifically, we're addressing the root causes of gun violence by expanding educational and economic opportunities.

We're going after especially dangerous firearms with new proposed regulations on ghost guns and stabilizing braces that turned pistols into rifles.

We're stepping up federal law enforcement efforts against illegal gun trafficking, including through strike forces in major cities, and establishing a zero-tolerance policy for gun dealers who willfully sell guns illegally.

And we're providing cities and states with unprecedented amounts of money, including through the Rescue Plan, to invest in community policing and effective community violence, intervention -- intervention programs, and ATF [ATF].

During an event at the White House today, Vice President Kamala Harris announced, alongside FCC Chairwoman Ros -- Ros -- Rosenworcel and Senior Advisor Mitch Landrieu, that more than 10 million households are enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program, the nation's largest-ever broadband affordability program created through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The Affordability Connectivity Program enables low-income households to apply for discounts towards monthly Internet service and a one-time discount on tech equipment such as laptops or computers.

This is one of the many ways that the Biden-Harris administration is ensuring every American has access to reliable, affordable high-speed Internet.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law delivers and a historic -- an historic \$65 billion to ensure that every American has access to reliable high-speed Internet through a -- through an historic investment in broadband infrastructure development, that inten- -- that Internet service is affordable by lowering costs, increasing competition, and creating price transparency.

With that, please go ahead, Darlene.

Q Thank you. A couple of questions on Ukraine and then one on another topic. What is the reaction here to the Kremlin signaling that it's ready to continue dialogue over Ukraine? And does the White House see that as sincere on the part of the Russians? How do you interpret it?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So -- yeah. Thank you for the question. We are actively working to reach a diplomatic solution to de-escalate the crisis. Over the weekend, as you all know, the President spoke with President Putin, and we remain engaged with the Russian government in full coordination with our Allies and partners. The path for diplomacy remains available if Russia chooses to engage constructively.

However, we are clear-eyed about the prospects of that, given the steps Russia is taking on the ground, in plain sight. This is something that the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, talked about right here on Friday -- right before eyes, what we're seeing with Russia: A new Russian -- we're seeing new Russian forces have been arriving at the Ukrainian border every day.

As we have said before, we are in the window when an invasion could begin at any time. We will not comment on any details of our intelligence information except that -- except to say that it could begin this week, despite a lot of speculation that it would happen after the Olympics -- again, something that Jake Sullivan said right here on Friday.

It remains unclear which path Russia will choose to take. The U.S. is ready for any situation. You know, President Biden has made it very clear on his call with Putin this weekend that if Russia undertakes a further invasion of Ukraine, the United States, together with our Allies and partners, will respond decisively and impose swift and severe costs on Russia.

President Biden reiterated that a further Russian invasion of Ukraine would produce widespread human suffering and diminish Russia's standing.

So we are continuing to coordinate closely with our Allies and partners. President Biden spoke with President Zelenskyy yesterday and Prime Minister Boris Johnson -- as I just read out to you, that call -- this afternoon. And we are in close contact with our Allies, again, and partners, again, across all levels of government.

Our partnership with our European and NATO Allies have never been stronger and purposeful as we work collectively to de-escalate the tensions at the Ukraine-Russia border.

If Russia should choose to invade, the severe economic consequences and irrevocable -- irrevocable reputational damage caused by taking innocent lives for a bloody war will only weaken the country, not strengthen it.

Q And in that close coordination with Allies and partners, is the view that Russia's willingness -- what they say today about wanting to continue the dialogue -- do you -- is there a consensus that is -- that that is sincere? I mean, how do all of you interpret what's coming out of the Kremlin today?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So we've been very clear about this. There is only one country who is currently building up their forces at the Ukraine border, and that's Russia.

And as we have stated, as Jake Sullivan has stated, that we -- in the past 10 days or so, we only continue to see a buildup, not a de-escalation.

So we are open to diplomacy. That door to diplomacy is open, as we have said. And -- and so, that is what we're -- that's what we want to be headed towards.

And, you know, if -- we will -- we will be ready for whichever decision that President Putin decides. But clearly, we would -- we would prefer the path of diplomacy.

I also want to just say one more thing really quickly. This is something that my colleague, Kirby, said -- John Kirby said at

the Department of Defense just now -- that Secretary Austin is going to travel to Belgium, Poland, and Lithuania. So that you all have this. The Secretary is going to meet with Allied defense ministers and NATO leadership to discuss Russia's military buildup in and around Ukraine, reiterate the U.S. commitment to Article 5, and continue the Alliance's progress on deterrence and defense while ensuring the Alliance is prepared to face tomorrow's challenges.

Q And one last question. In two weeks, the President is going to go up to the Capitol to deliver his first State of the Union message. Can you give us a status report on preparations for that? Has he been able to meet with his advisors on it, given everything that's going on, or edit speech drafts, or just you have some sort of idea where that process stands?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, as you know, this is a President who was Vice President for 8 years, and he was senator for 36 years and has spent a lot of time listening to State of the Union speeches. So he understands the importance of delivering such a -- a President delivering such a impactful speech and the -- the purpose of talking about their successes -- his success, in particular, this past year -- and how he's going to build on that success.

I don't have anything more to share. But this is something that's important to him. And he's working towards delivering his speech not just to -- not just to Congress, but also to the American public.

Go ahead.

Q Hey, Karine. I want to follow up on Darlene's question and ask it in a different way, though.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah.

Q Russia's foreign minister is advising Putin today that Russia keep pursuing diplomatic negotiations. This is a yes-or-no question: Does this administration view that as a sign of de-escalation?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, what I was saying -- and just to be even clearer -- is that in the past 10 days or so, when you look at what is happening at the border of Ukraine, there -- we are seeing more than 100,000 troops there. And it's just been an -- every day, more and more troops, as I just read out at the top.

So we are certainly open to having conversations and seeing a de-escalation. But right now, this is -- that door is open for diplomacy, and this is up to President Putin. He has to make that decision. It is his decision to make on which direction he wants to take this.

Q So, in terms of the troop buildup there, there's reporting today that a U- -- citing a U.S. official that Russian units near Ukraine moved into attack positions. Is that the understanding of this administration, what you're seeing there?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, I'm not going to go into any intelligence information. We're not -- clearly, we're not going to share that.

But what we have seen -- and, you know, the National Security Advisor said this himself -- we have seen an increase of forces at the border, not a decrease. And -- and so, what we are saying to President Putin, with our European allies and partners -- we've been working in coordination, in lockstep for these past several weeks, several months -- is that that door to diplomacy is open and having that diplomatic conversation is a path that we would like to take.

Q And finally, lastly, Jake Sullivan came out here and certainly got the attention of the entire world with the urgency of the briefing that he gave on Friday. In terms of the current state right now, is the situation as imminent today, right now, as it was on Friday?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: You know, Jake Sullivan was also on the Sunday shows yesterday. And, you know, again, we are in the window when an invasion could begin at any time.

You know, we re -- again, I m not going to comment on the intelligence information except to say that it could begin this week, despite a lot of speculation that it would only happen after the Olympics.

Q Thanks, Karine. Just to follow up on that, I understand you re saying that you ve only seen a troop buildup, but Russia has claimed today that it is winding down a number of military drills and exercises that have caused concern. Are you in a position to confirm if those claims are accurate or if they re not?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I m not in a position to confirm that, but I do know John Kirby spoke to that just moments ago, so I would refer you to his comments and the Department of Defense.

Q Okay. And specifically about, you know, Ukraine and the Vatican, we have some reporting coming from there saying Ukraine has welcomed Vatican mediation of its conflict with Russia, and they ve invited the Pope to visit the country as soon as possible. Is the President aware of that? Does he support such efforts?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I mean, I have not spoken to the President about that, so I can t -- I can t confirm if he s aware or not.

Q Okay. Will the administration support such efforts?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I -- this is the first time I m hearing about it, so I just need to talk to our team.

Q Okay. And one more on the \$1 billion loan guarantee that the U.S. has agreed to make available to support the Ukrainian economy. Our reporting shows that the U.S. will need about \$200 million to guarantee that loan.

Do you -- does the administration need to make more appropriat- -- appropriations available to, sort of, you know, make sure that loan guarantee program works?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I don t have the specifics on that piece, but I can confirm that it is something we are considering as part of the additional macroeconomic support we are exploring to help Ukraine s economy amidst pressure resulting from Russia s military buildup. But I don t have any specifics on the appropriation and what that would take -- the process.

Q Would the U.S. support some statement from the Ukrainians that they re no longer actively pursuing NATO membership or that they d be willing to stall their pursuit of NATO membership as part of ongoing negotiations?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: As you know, NATO membership -- NATO has an open-door policy. That is not something -- that is something that Ukraine will have to decide on its own. That is not something that we are in consultation with or make, you know -- or even decide on. That is something that NATO has to decide on and Ukraine. That s up to them and their leadership on how they want to move forward.

Q Jake yesterday said that the two leaders, Presidents Putin and Biden, tasked their teams with continuing to talk or discuss, kind of, the state of play.

Do you have any idea, kind of, the construct of those discussions or what they d entail, and if any have occurred since the discussion on Saturday?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I do believe Jake Sullivan had a conversation this morning with -- with one of our -- one of our European partners and allies --

Q But I m saying between the Russians and the -- U.S. and Russia, directly, bilaterally.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, I see. I see. Oh. I don t have anything to -- I don t have anything to read out or predict.

And do you mean on the -- on the staff level? Or do you mean like --

Q Yeah. Just under the principal level.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, under the principal -- I don't have anything to read out. As you know, our staff here has been in constant contact with Russia, with Ukraine, and our NATO Allies as well.

Q And then, one last one. There's concern in terms of -- obviously, in the European economic side of things, if Russia continues to escalate, if there's an invasion.

On the domestic side of things, is the White House economic team looking at anything that the President may need to pursue if an invasion comes to pass about what it could do? Obviously, oil markets being one, but I think just general instability in markets.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, I don't have anything specific to read out to you -- for you at this moment. As we talk about energy -- I'm assuming that's one of the things that you're -- you're asking about, Phil -- is, like, we are working with countries and companies around the world to ensure the security of supply and to mitigate against price shocks affecting the American people, Europe, and the global economy.

We are continuing our discussions with major producers around -- around the globe to supply -- so supply meets demand. All tools are on the table.

A disruption in physical energy supplies trans- -- transiting Ukraine would most acutely affect natural gas markets in Europe. And so, we are engaging our European allies to coordinate response planning, including how to deploy their existing energy stockpiles.

We have been working to identify additional volumes of non-Russian natural gas from North Africa and the Middle East to Asia and the U.S.

We -- we thank -- we think -- we thank recent [recent] comments by Japan about supporting Europe's energy security through LNG shipments to the region. We are in discussion with major natural gas producers around the globe to understand their capacity and willingness to temporarily surge natural gas output and to allocate these volumes in European buyers.

We are also engaging with major buyers and suppliers of LNG to ensure flexibility in existing contracts and storage is managed and enables a diver- -- diversion to Europe.

(Inaudible).

Q Great, Karine. How are you? Thank you for doing this.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Sure.

Q There's a reporting quoting Ukraine officials as saying that President Zelenskyy's statement today that an invasion is imminent on February 16 was, in fact, sarcastic or ironic and more of a commentary on this idea that there are countries or entities that know of a date certain. Is that sarcasm or irony the read of the NSC and the White House?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I don't have a read on that. Here's what I can tell you about -- about that. I heard -- I heard the statement, but I haven't actually heard it in its full context, so the irony of all of it, I have -- I couldn't speak to.

But I'll say this: While I'm not going to speak to intelligence matters, as I've said multiple- -- multiple times already, our intelligence or intelligence-sharing with the Ukrainians -- Ukrainians -- as we said before, we are in the window when an invasion could begin at any time.

It remains unclear which path Russia will choose to take, because we do not know; it is his decision to make. We remain engaged with the Russian government in full coordination with our Allies and partners. The path for diplomacy remains available if Russia chooses to engage, again, constructively.

But we are clear-eyed about the prospects on the ground and are ready to impose severe costs on Russia, in coordination with our Allies and partners, if they attack Ukraine.

Q All right. And two other unrelated matters. Supreme Court: Is it still the expectation that the President will interview nominees this week? And do those that are under consideration know for certain that they're on the shortlist of people being considered?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, you know, I appreciate the interest here. Look, you know, after having a series of conversations and good discussions with lawmakers from both sides of the party, legal experts, scholars last week, the President continued to review materials as he considers deeply, deeply qualified candidates, as we have said, with strong experience, character, integrity, dedication to the Constitution and the rule of law.

I don't have anything else to share on any interviews or who he has interviewed. But, you know, we don't have anything else to share for today or for this week.

Q What's that?

Q Has he interviewed someone, then? The way you just phrased that --

Q You just -- you said "interviewed." Yeah, that's --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, I'm sorry. I meant to be -- he has not interviewed potential nominees, to be clear. Sorry.

Q Thank you.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: But to just answer your last question is -- we are on track, he is on track to select a SCOTUS nominee by the end of this month.

Q Okay. And then just real quick -- Robert Califf is still awaiting confirmation in the Senate to be FDA commissioner. It looks like that may happen tomorrow. Is the White House confident he's got the votes? Have you lined up all the Democratic votes you might need for this?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, I'll say this: We are confident Dr. Califf will be confirmed with bipartisan support and urge the Senate to confirm him tomorrow, as you just stated, Ed. It is critically important to have confirmed leadership at the FDA in the midst of a pandemic, as we all know.

He had a strong bipartisan showing coming out of committee, including from Ranking Member Burr. It's important to remember he was confirmed 89 to 4 in 2016. Many folks who supported him then are still in the Senate.

We are in -- we are in a daily contact with HHS, who is leading the effort to get him confirmed. HHS and the White House officials are making a lot of calls to the Hill, figuring out which members need what information -- which members need what information.

Secretary Becerra, our OLA team, and Steve Ricchetti are all making calls in support of Califf to a bipartisan group of Senate offices.

Dr. Califf himself has met -- has met or is scheduled to meet with 47 senators, and that number continues to increase. It's also one of the highest number of meetings of any nominees that have been done thus far.

Go ahead.

Q In his conversation with President Putin, did President Biden give him any signal for how he could de-escalate? Would it have to be something visible, like moving forces somewhere? Could it be something in the realm of what's verbal, like what we saw from Lavrov today? Is there anything that the President set out as a cue that could try to tamp things down?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, the call between the two presidents was professional and substantive. So, it lasted a bit over an hour, as you all know, from the readout this past weekend. The two presidents agreed that our teams would stay engaged in the days ahead, but there was no fundamental change in the dynamic.

Q And just to close the loop on the Supreme Court: So, you're not saying that the President has done --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: No.

Q -- any interviews --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: No, I'm not.

Q -- at this point?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I'm not. Just to be clear.

Q Okay.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I was -- I meant potential interviews.

Q Okay. The President has some travel scheduled this week. Given the volatility of world events, do you anticipate that if things were -- and I know this is hypothetical, but often when there are unpredictable events, there can be changes to the schedule. Are you in a posture where you think that could be a situation where the President would remain at the White House or anything like that if things were to change?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, as you said, it is hard to read, Kelly O., a hypothetical or to give an answer to a hypothetical.

As you know, the President deals with multiple things at once, and that's what this President is prepared to do.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Karine. On the, sort of, ripple effects of a potential invasion, is the administration prepared to block Russian oil imports to the U.S. if Russia invades, given that the imports have reached their highest prices in 11 years (inaudible)?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I mean, I just laid out what we're doing. We're talking to countries and companies around the world, engaging with them on all of the different potential conse- -- potential outcomes if this were to happen.

I don't have any more specifics than that -- than what I just laid out for you.

And so, one of the things that we have said over and over again, and the President has made this very clear to Vladimir Putin, is if Russia chooses to invade, there will be swift and severe economic consequences.

Q Wouldn't it be difficult, though, for the U.S. to continue to import Russian oil after all of the rhetoric that we've put forward about Russia needing to not invade Ukraine and pressuring Germany to, you know, come out strongly on Nord Stream and possible sanctions for Russia if they were to take this step? Wouldn't it be tough for the U.S. to continue

Stream 2 and possible punishments for Russia if they were to take this step? wouldn't it be tough for the U.S. to continue, in that event, to import Russian gas?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, again, it's a hypothetical. I'm just telling you what we have been very, very clear, the President has been clear, our national security advisor has been clear -- we all have been clear, either from this podium or direct communication with Russia, whether it's with the President or its leadership, that if they were to invade -- and in coordination, in lockstep with our European Allies and partners, that's how we're moving forward here -- that there would be there would be severe, decisive economic consequences. I cannot speak more to -- more to that.

Q Okay. And then the sanctions package that's being worked out on Capitol Hill -- I understand that the White House is involved in those discussions now. And congressional sources have told me that the White House has insisted on a waiver for North Stream 2, even after an invasion.

Can you confirm if that is true? And if so, why would the White House want a provision like that in a sanctions package coming out of Congress?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, look, when it comes to Nord Stream 2, we've been pretty clear about this. The President has said that -- he said this during his press conference last week with the German Chancellor -- if Russia further invades Ukraine, there will be -- no longer be a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it. And at this moment, Nord Stream 2 is not even operational.

Q But is the White House directing Congress to put a waiver from Nord Stream 2 in a --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: That is the first I'm hearing of that. I cannot speak to that. I'm just telling you where we have been, in a very strong and definitive way, on Nord Stream 2.

Q Okay. And then, on a second topic, this news about the Durham investigation: Does the President have any concerns about a candidate for president using computer experts to infiltrate computer systems of competing candidates, or even the president-elect to -- for the goal of creating a narrative? Is that something that --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: That's something I can't speak to from this podium, so I refer you to the Department of Justice.

Q Is what being described in that report -- monitoring Internet traffic -- is that spying?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Again, I can't speak to that report. I refer you to the Department of Justice.

Q Generally speaking though, would monitoring Internet traffic be --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Jacqui, my answer is not going to change. I refer you to the Department of Justice.

Q Okay.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I can't speak to that from here.

Go ahead.

Q Karine, thanks. What message does it send today to the Ukrainian government to be closing the embassy in Kyiv?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: The embassy in Kyiv?

Q Yeah.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I have something on here. I know the -- I know the State Department made announcement on

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I have something on here. I know the -- I know the State Department made announcement on this earlier.

So, the State Department announced today that they are temporary -- temporarily relocating our embassy operations in Ukraine from our embassy in Kyiv to Lviv due to the dramatic acceleration in the buildup of Russian forces. A core team of embassy staff is remaining in Ukraine to engage with the Ukrainian government, coordinating diplomatic efforts and diplomacy to de-escalate the crisis -- if the crisis continues.

So, I just wanted to also say this as well, because the State Department put out a statement on this. So, the State Department has no higher priority than the safety and security of Americans around the world. And that, of course, includes our colleagues serving at posts overseas.

So, these prudent precautions in no way undermine our support for our commitment to Ukraine. Our commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering. We also continue our sincere efforts to reach a diplomatic solution. And we remain engaged with the Russian government following President Biden's call with Putin -- with President Putin and the Secretary's discussion with Foreign Minister Lavrov.

The path for diplomacy remains available if Russia chooses to engage in good faith. We look forward to returning our staff to the embassy as soon as conditions permit.

In the meantime, we have made this very clear; the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, has made this clear; the President himself has made this clear: that these measures, for one reason, the safety of our staff, as I mentioned. We strongly urge any remaining U.S. citizens in Ukraine to leave the country immediately.

That has been our message for the past several days and, honestly, the past several weeks.

Q And does the White House have any comment on this Russian figure skater who's allowed to maybe compete, as a doping investigation continues?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I --

Q Is this the right call?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: That's not a comment that I'm -- I'm not going to comment from here about that. I'd refer you to the committee -- the Olympic Committee.

Q And really quickly: D.C.'s mayor today announced a vacc- -- the vaccination requirement for some businesses will be dropped tomorrow and a mask mandate will be dropped by the end of the month. Does the White House support this? Will the President and the First Lady continue to visit businesses and restaurants as these rules change?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, let me just lay some stuff out for you here, because I know this has been a question that many have had. A number of governors have announced changes based on conditions in their particular states. That -- that's not new. That isn't new.

And so, what I can say from here, as Dr. Fauci has said: As a country, we are making strong progress toward moving to a time when COVID is no longer a crisis. And Dr. Walensky has clearly said CDC is looking at all of their guidance, including mask guidance, in light of declining cases and hospitalizations.

I think that may be getting lost in some of the reporting that we're seeing. The CDC made clear they're looking at their guidance, so just want to make that very clear.

But to put a finer point on this, CDC has to move carefully and deliberately to make sure these good trends are confirmed across the nation. CDC has a responsibility to make guidance for the entire country and everyone. They must consider its

across the nation. CDC has a responsibility to make guidance for the entire country and everyone. They must consider the impact on a variety of constituencies, including people who are disabled, immunocompromised, and most vulnerable.

We are spending significant time and energy on the path forward, working with experts and leaders within and -- within and outside the government. And if this -- if this progress continues, we expect updates in the weeks ahead. This is a huge, huge responsibility that we do not take lightly [lightly], one that we take very seriously, and we want to make sure that we get this right.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Karine. During their conversation on Sunday, the President of Ukraine purportedly invited President Biden to visit Ukraine in the coming days. And the Ukrainian President's office said that a visit by the U.S. President would "be a powerful signal" and could "contribute to [the] de-escalation" of this crisis. What is the White House's response to that invitation?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I don't have any travel plans to announce or preview at this time. I'll say this: You know, as you all know, President Biden spoke with Zelenskyy -- as you just mentioned -- this weekend. Secretary Blinken spoke with the Foreign Minister this morning. And we are in regular contact with the Ukrainian government throughout the administration, including here at the White House, at the State Department, at the Defense Department. I just laid out travel that the Secretary from Defense is going to be making, at the Treasury Department, and elsewhere.

So, the President has also dispatched a number of senior administration officials to visit Ukraine in recent months, including Secretary Blinken who was just there recently, and -- last month for meetings with Ukraine's leader.

Our North Star has been "nothing about --" -- "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine." You've heard us say this over and over again. And we will continue to coordinate closely with Ukraine as we try to reach a diplomatic solution to the end of this crisis.

Go ahead.

Q Could I bring you back to the gun issue that --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, sure.

Q -- you talked about in the beginning? A bunch of years ago, a large number of people in the Bi- -- in the Obama administration, including the current President, fought fiercely for closing the gun show loophole and described it as "the least that could be done," and were very angry and upset when it didn't pass, pushing -- pushing also, at various times, for even more -- you know, a ban on assault weapons and the like. You didn't mention any of that.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah.

Q The President's message today that he put out earlier didn't mention any of that. Is it fair to assume that either they no longer -- this President no longer thinks those things are needed or has simply abandoned any hope of getting them passed?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I wouldn't assume that. I -- one of the things I did say is we are encouraging Congress to act as well. There's a legislation -- legislative component to this, as you just laid out, so that is important as well.

But I do want to read a couple of quotes from -- about the President's exa- -- executing on his historic comprehensive gun violence reduction strategy. So, there is support there for it. I know you're talking about a specific thing, but I want to not just take our word for this.

So, Brady has called the President's plan "historic" and said "President Biden and his administration are truly taking

comprehensive action to address violence in our country.”

Giffords commented the Biden-Harris administration -- commended -- pardon me -- the Biden administration "for announcing a comprehensive strategy to prevent gun violence and protect public safety. . . . Gun violence is a complex problem" -- as you can imagine, and as she stated -- "that requires an array of solutions. President Biden and Vice President Harris understand[s] [that]." This is a quote from -- from Giffords.

Everytown for Gun Safety said "President Biden is taking the comprehensive approach we need to address this crisis."

And so, is there more work to do? Absolutely. That's why we're encouraging and urging Congress to act as well. But the President is going to do everything that he can from his perch to get this done.

Q But he would be satisfied that if -- if the things that he's pushing that are on that list and that you have talked about and that he talked about, that would be good enough?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: We're not calling it "good enough." He is doing everything that he can from his perch -- from the White House, from the federal government -- and using every tool at our tool -- on a toolbelt that we've talked about. We -- that's what we tried to do to make sure that we're -- we're addressing a real problem, which is gun violence.

So, what -- the other part of that is urging Congress to act as well, which we have been doing. But he's not going to sit back. You heard me say that. He's not going to sit back and wait; he's going to act. But there --

Q But he's also not going to spend a whole lot of time or energy pushing for a ban on assault weapons or closing the gun show loophole that, just a bunch of years ago, he and others described as "vital."

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, I'll say this: We are constantly in conversation with folks in Congress -- with leadership, with congressional members, with senators -- that is an array of issues.

The President is going to continue to fight to make sure that we get these guns off the street and we truly deal with gun violence. He is doing his part from the White House, and he's going to continue to work towards that effort.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Karine. A few questions. First on Afghanistan: The Biden administration appears to have been downplaying some accounts from ground commanders involved in the evacuation of Afghanistan. Over the past week, we heard a State Department spokesperson say that their criticism was "cherry-picked" from a larger report. We've heard President Biden himself reject those accounts. Jen, last week I believe, said that there was no after-action report.

So, two questions I wanted to ask you to clarify the White House position. One, does the White House agree that the evacuation should have become or should have been started earlier, which is what some senior military officials have asserted?

And secondly, did Jen misspeak last week when she said there was no after-action report? There's been some reporting from a colleague of mine, over the weekend, that indicated there was indeed an after-action report that was reviewed.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, to your last question: No, Jen did not misspeak last week. This Abbey Gate report is not the Pentagon's boarder [sic] action -- boarder [sic] ap -- broader after-action review on Afghanistan. That report will examine the final months of America's longest war and cover from February 2020 through the end of the evacuation. So, no, she did not misspeak.

But let me just say something that I think it's really important. I'm just going to quote John Kirby, who was -- who did a Sunday show yesterday. I believe this was Fox News Sunday show. And I'll quote him here. He said: "I would also add...

here in Washington, we have been planning for evacuation as far back as April. And there was no effort by Washington, certainly not by the National Security Council specifically, to slow down that planning, to slow down those pre-positioning of forces that we did in the summer, to slow down the actual execution of the evacuation.”

So, again -- this is John Kirby, spokesperson for the Department of Defense: “So, again, these were documents that assert impressions and perspectives which are very important down at the tactical level, in real-time. We need to conduct a larger, more strategic level after-action review to get the whole sense of this. And we re doing that.”

The Abbey report, again, is one important review of what occurred that day, but it should not be mistaken for a full follow-up on the last months of the war in Afghanistan.

Q Okay. And on a different topic --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, sure.

Q -- to follow up on the earlier questions about the Supreme Court. I know you said that the President has not conducted any interviews with candidates yet, but does the White House -- will the White House disclose which candidates the President does interviews with as he goes through this process?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: What I can promise you right now is that the pro- -- the President is going to make his selection for the Supreme Court justice by the end of this month. That s what we know. That s what he stated. And that s what we will do.

Q And last question. Vice President Harris is headed abroad to the Munich Security Conference this week. Can you talk a little bit about what the White House hopes she will accomplish there? And is she going to be sort of the sole representative of the administration in some of these meetings with counterparts? Are there going to be other administration officials as well? Can you sort of give us a sense of what the expectation is?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I don t have any specifics, but I can say that we are very proud to have the Vice President lead the delegation to Munich this week.

I don t have any specific details. I m happy to talk to the team to see exactly what her schedule is going to look like. But we re -- we are -- the President is proud that she s going to be representing the United States.

Go ahead.

Q I have just a couple of quick ones. Following up on this Zelenskyy question, can you confirm whether President Zelenskyy asked President Biden to come to Ukraine this week, and whether the administration considered it at all? I know you don t have travel to announce but --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I -- all I can tell you is what I just said. We don t have travel to confirm right now. That is what the President’s schedule looks like. And the -- it s certainly not confirming to go to visit Ukraine. And that s what now -- our focus right now is to continue to have the conversations on the staff level to continue to make sure that we are -- we keep that door to diplomacy open. There s too much at stake. There are human lives at stake, which is what the President told President Putin. And that is our focus: How do we stop a war? That s our focus.

Q And Pfizer withdrew, late last week, its application for the vaccine for young kids. Is that a disappointment to the White House?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, I have something on that. So, FDA is committed to acting urgently to save lives amidst the pandemic, and they continue to work with Pfizer to review additional data on its vaccine for kids under five.

In recent days, new data -- as you know, Tam -- emerged regarding Pfizer's submission to the FDA for its vaccine for kids under five years old. Based on FDA's assessment of that new data, the agency concluded that additional information regarding a third dose should be considered as part of any authorization.

The initial data has been helpful to the process, but FDA believes more information, including the impact of a third dose, is important to the evaluation. So, that is the process -- that is the process right now, currently, that's working. And that should give parents everywhere confidence in the process -- right? -- because we want to make sure that the process is working.

FDA is in the middle of a thorough, independent regulatory process to review this vaccine. And if a vaccine is authorized, it will have met FDA's rigorous standards. So, that is what the parents -- as a parent myself, and I know you're a parent -- should be very [sic] -- very proud of that the FDA is doing this.

Q And on the D.C. mask mandate, do you expect that mask mandate coming down to affect policy here on campus at the White House?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, as always, we say this: Local communities will make their own decisions as they have throughout the pandemic, and we'll -- what we're going to do is we're going to abide by the CDC guidance. So that is local communities make that decision and that is what they choose to do.

Q So, the White House is not following the local guidelines here for your --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: We're following --

Q -- here for this place that is in the city.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: To be clear, we are going to follow the CDC guidance. That's what we're going to do.

Go ahead, Jen.

Q Back to the VP's trip to Germany, is there discussion in the White House about whether she should go no matter what is happening in Ukraine, or has there been discussions about what might trigger her to cancel?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: You know, I don't have any -- any insight on that. That's another hypothetical that I can't answer. But what I can say is that we are proud that she's going to be leading the U.S. delegation to Munich, and that is on -- on schedule to happen.

Q On the embassy in Kyiv, do you know if all of the classified information has now been stripped from that building?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I -- I do not have that information for you.

Yeah, go ahead.

Q Thank you. I wanted to ask you a quick question on the Quad and Russia. Do you think Quad countries are unanimous on the issue of Russia?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Can you say -- can you say that one more time, Lalit?

Q Do you think the Quad countries -- U.S., Japan, India, and Australia -- they had a meeting in Australia recently. Do you think these countries are unanimous on the -- on the Russian --

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: On the Russia -- the Russian issue in particular?

So, as you know, Secretary Blinken was just in the region, where he met with the Quad. It was an opportunity to discuss Russia's ongoing threat to Ukraine. They discussed the threat that Russia's aggression poses not only to Ukraine but to the entire international rules-based order, which has provided a foundation for decades of shared security and prosperity for the region and around the globe.

Throughout his meetings with the Quad partners, Secretary Blinken discussed the challenges Russia poses to the rules-based -- based on international order and our readiness to support our European allies.

Q I'm going to -- I'm asking this question because you know that India's foreign min- -- External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar said that India only follows multilateral sanctions, not country-specific sanctions. And as you're looking towards country-specific sanctions from the U.S., because the U.N. Security Council is unlikely to vote for those sanctions because of the vetoes Russia and China have, are you in conversations with India that they should follow the U.S. sanctions as well?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, you know, we're not going to get into specifics. We've been really clear about our discussions, so I'm not going into details on that but -- beyond what we've read out from the Secretary's meeting in Melbourne last week. But we're working closely with a range of allies and partners, including India.

Q One final question.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Sure.

Q What role President Biden expects India to play in the Quad?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, we will continue to build a strategic partnership in which the United States and India work together to promote stability in South Asia; collaborate in new domains such as health, space, cyberspace -- which is important; deepen our economic and technology cooperation; and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

We recognize that India is a likeminded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, active in and connected to the Southeast Asia, a driving force of the Quad, and an engine for regional growth and development.

Q Thanks, Karine.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: No problem. Oh, thank you.

Thanks, everybody. Don't forget to get those flowers and those candy. (Laughter.)

4:20 P.M. EST

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 16, 2022

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, February 16, 2022

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:09 P.M. EST

MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. Good afternoon. Okay, a couple of items for you at the top.

Today, we learned that retail sales increased by 3.8 percent in January, exceeding expectations. This strong, inflation-adjusted increase reflects the resilience of the economy, even in the face of Omicron.

Compared to this time last year, sales at grocery stores, restaurants, and clothing stores, among others, increased, underscoring the strength of the American economy as we recovered from the pandemic.

This data builds on the historic economic progress we've seen over the last year and an extremely strong jobs report last month despite Omicron, which was well above expectations.

In 2021, the economy created 6.7 million jobs -- the strongest year of job growth on record. The unemployment rate declined more than any year on record. And we achieved a 4 percent unemployment rate years earlier than previously projected thanks to the American Rescue Plan.

Small-business applications and inflation-adjusted household income are both up, and child poverty and hunger are down.

We're obviously going to continue to build on this progress.

Second, today we're marking 60 days of action strengthening America's trucking workforce. This is not just about recruitment but also retaining truckers to ensure we can move more goods around the country and lower costs for the American people.

Over 70 percent of all goods in America are shipped by truck, and America's trucking workforce plays a critical role in the supply chain and the broader economy.

But outdated infrastructure, the pandemic, and a historic volume of goods moving through our economy have strained capacity across the supply chain, including in trucking.

Two months ago, the President launched a multi-agency effort to support and expand access to quality truck driving jobs now and in the year ahead -- and in the years ahead.

While more work remains, we have made remarkable progress in the last 60 days. We have expanded Registered Apprenticeship Programs. We've launched the Safe Driver Apprenticeship Pilot to connect American adults under 21 to good-paying jobs in the trucking industry. We've cut red tape so it's easier for drivers to get commercial driver licenses.

And we've met with veterans service organizations representing nearly 4 million veterans to discuss ways the administration and industry can attract, train, place, and retain veterans in trucking jobs.

And we will announce the results of the Labor Department's 90-day apprenticeship program, of course, over the next -- after the next 30 days.

This week, Secretary Buttigieg will also sign the charter document for the Women of Trucking Advisory Board, which will provide recommendations to address challenges facing women in trucking, such as barriers to entry, on-the-job safety risks, workplace harassment, mentorship, and more.

Finally, a very quick preview for the President's trip to Ohio tomorrow.

It's been just 90 days since -- time flies -- with the President -- since the President signed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

And tomorrow, he will travel to Lorain, Ohio, and deliver remarks on how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law delivers for the American people by investing in clean-up and restoration efforts in the Great Lakes region and surrounding waterways.

These investments will allow for a major acceleration of progress that will deliver significant environmental, economic, health, and recreational benefits for communities throughout the region, including helping people in the community access clean water.

So, those of you going to Ohio, now you have a little more detail.

Go ahead, Darlene.

Q Thank you. One, are there any plans being made for the President to meet with Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee as a group, the same way he met with Democrats on the committee last week?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. So, he's continuing to engage with Democrats and Republicans about his Supreme Court process. I don't have anything to preview or predict in terms of a meeting with the Senate Judiciary Republicans.

Q Okay. Second question. Is there a date for when the President will send his FY23 budget proposal to the Hill?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have a date, either, for you at this point in time. I think Shalonda Young has conveyed it was expected to be after the State of the Union.

Q Okay. And then the last question is: With the Vice President getting ready to go to Germany for the Munich Security Conference, can you talk a little bit about what her marching orders from the President are? And will she be going with any deliverables or any concrete proposals, specifically to help Europe deal with its energy and natural gas needs?

MS. PSAKI: Well, she will be traveling, as many of you have been following this know, to Munich, Germany, to attend the February 18th to 20th Munich Security Conference. She will build on the President's and the national security team's intensive engagement with European allies and partners, and emphasize -- and continue to emphasize with our partners our ironclad commitment to our NATO Allies, underscore our commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and reaffirm our shared interest in upholding the principles that have underpinned European peace and security.

She'll be participating in the formal conference -- formal program of the conference, as well as engaging with allies and partners and meeting with leaders on the margins.

I know her team is planning for a preview call for all of you, I believe later this evening, to give you more details of those bilateral meetings.

But I would say, in terms of her engagements and what the President expects, he expects and knows, given she is the first in the room and the last in the room, that she will continue to convey to the rest of the world, again, our ironclad commitment to our NATO Allies, our commitment to defending the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, and our commitment to putting in place severe economic consequences should Russia invade.

Q Thank you.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thank you. Can you comment on Russia's investigation into claims of alleged mass graves of civilians supposedly killed by Ukrainian forces in the Russian-controlled regions in eastern Ukraine? Do you believe this is part of the false-flag operations that you've been warning of?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. Well, let me start by saying, as you heard the President say yesterday and Secretary Blinken earlier today: We're in the window where we believe an attack could come at any time, and that would be preceded by a fabricated pretext that the Russians use as an excuse to launch an invasion.

And we've seen -- and we've talked about this a bit in here -- we've seen these tactics used in the past. So those could include, but not be limited to, the report you just referenced, claims of provocation in Donbas, false state media reports -- which I think you should all -- everybody should keep their eyes open and aware of that potential -- fake videos, false accusations about chemical weapons or accounts of attacks on Russian soldiers that have not actually occurred.

So there could be a range of false flags and pretexts that we would expect would precede an invasion. And, again, we remain in that window.

Q And can you provide any update on the intelligence assessment of who was behind the cyberattacks of Ukraine's Ministry of Defense and certain banks yesterday? Can U.S. officials say that Russia was behind the attacks?

MS. PSAKI: We don't have any new details on an attribution. Cyber attribution takes time, in part because adversaries usually try to hide their tracks and it takes time to gather and analyze relevant information. And these can be -- these types of incidents -- DDoS incidents can be particularly hard -- harder to trace.

But we have also been in close touch with our Ukrainian counterparts to offer support in the investigation and response to these incidents. You may have seen the statement from the Ukraine Ministry of Defense that the United States and other partners immediately reached out with support and that some sites are coming back online.

And I would note, again, as I said yesterday, we've been warning for months, both publicly and privately, in our engagements with the Ukrainians and the Europeans that the potential for Russia to conduct cyber operations in Ukraine is part of their playbook as well.

So we're particularly concerned, but we don't have anything new in terms of specific attribution.

Q Jen?

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Are you done, Mary?

Q Yes, go ahead.

Q Okay. (Laughs.) Didn't mean to interrupt.

MS. PSAKI: So polite. Go ahead.

Q Secretary of State Blinken today said that he has seen evidence that Vladimir Putin is actually moving critical military assets toward the border with Ukraine and not away from the border as Putin has claimed. So does the administration believe that Putin is actually escalating this crisis in real time?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think, as Secretary Blinken also said, the Russian troops remain massed in a very threatening way at the border. And he was responding, I believe, to a question -- a good question about whether they were delivering on what they had promised yesterday. And the answer was no; there's, you know, what Russia says and there's what Russia does. And we're watching very closely what steps they're taking. But they remain amassed in a threatening way at the border.

Q There has not yet been, to our awareness, an actual invasion. This date had been circled on the calendar as one that this administration, that other governments worldwide were watching very closely. What do you make of the fact that at this point -- it is now darkness in that region -- there hasn't been a military invasion?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Kristen, without getting into any intelligence or conversations we would have with Allies or partners, what we had conveyed last week, and you heard Jake Sullivan convey very clearly, is that we were in the window. We remain in the window.

Q And is there still as much hope for diplomacy today? Is there more hope? Where does that thinking stand?

MS. PSAKI: We -- of course, the door continues to be open to diplomacy. Secretary Blinken spoke with Foreign Minister Lavrov yesterday. Jake Sullivan speaks with his Ukrainian counterpart nearly every day, if not every day. We remain -- the President, of course, is going to speak with Chancellor Scholz later this afternoon. So there are -- it is moving forward -- diplomatic conversations on many channels.

Q One quick follow-up to a question you got yesterday about a potential gas tax holiday.

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

Q You said all options were on the table. Can you go a little further? Are there actually discussions going on between the White House and Democrats on Capitol Hill about moving forward with a gas tax holiday?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I also said yesterday no decisions have been made, and that remains the case. So we always have an

open dialogue with members of Congress, and all options remain on the table.

Go ahead.

Q One housekeeping thing first. Speaking of Secretary Blinken, he was at an event earlier today here in town and said he was cutting his time short there in order to have a meeting with the boss -- the President. Was something added to the schedule this afternoon, or is there something forthcoming?

MS. PSAKI: Without knowing the details of the Secretary's schedule, I think the President had the PDB this morning, so it may have been that. I can check if there's anything different than that.

Q Beyond that, Foreign Minister Lavrov told Secretary Blinken yesterday that Russia's written response to the U.S.-NATO proposals would be transmitted, quote, "in the coming days." Has it been received, or is this potentially productive, or seen as a possible delay tactic?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we look forward to receiving it, as Secretary Blinken has conveyed. As of my knowledge before I came out for this briefing, I think we're still waiting for that.

Q Is there any update on the U.S. assessment of the video released by Russia claiming to show some tanks ending military drills near Ukraine? I know there was a lot of concern about whether this was legit. Has there been any determination that it is?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any new assessment of that, Ed. I think what we are watching very closely is not just what they say but what they do. I understand you're referencing a video, but we've also seen, as the Secretary confirmed this morning, continued problematic, troubling buildup of troops at the border and surrounding Ukraine.

Q I'm not going to ask you if the President is meeting today or soon with Supreme Court nominees because --

MS. PSAKI: What if I ans- -- what if I was prepared to answer it today? (Laughter.)

Q Well, are you?

MS. PSAKI: You're missing out.

Q Are you? Have there been any meetings?

MS. PSAKI: I am not going to provide a -- (laughter) -- day-by-day update, Ed. I just had to mess with you there a little bit. (Laughs.)

Q Just for the record, I wasn't going to ask. But I am curious -- I am curious: This is a President who's been a participant in this for decades.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q He knows that in the run-up to a decision there is a public campaign, there's sort of a backroom lobbying effort by people close to nominees. There's been some of that going on in this case. What does he make -- I'm not commenting specifically on anyone's story or letters sent or anything, but what does he make of that attempt to influence an administration as they make a decision? And does he welcome it, or does he see it -- if it gets a little too personal, perhaps, or petty -- as detrimental to the process?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think because of the President's long history and long background you referenced as the former chairman of the Judiciary Committee, as the former Vice President, I believe he's probably overseen or been engaged with

more Supreme Court nominee processes than anyone in history. He is not going to be swayed by public campaigns or public sniping or lobbying efforts. He is going to pick an eminently qualified Black woman to nominate to the Supreme Court, and he has a number of potential choices that he's very excited about.

Q Just real quick on this: The Club for Growth is now running ads in English and in Spanish targeting Latino audiences and suggesting that the President's focus on nominating a Black woman to the Court versus qualified Latino judges -- and they list a few in their ad -- is racist. What do you make of that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the Supreme Court has been around for 230 years; there's never been a Black woman who served on the Supreme Court. The President believes that's a problem with past processes and not a lack of qualified Black women to serve on the Supreme Court.

There are also opportunities -- perhaps in the future, we'll see -- to nominate others; we don't know at this point in time. But the President is proud of the range of credible, qualified candidates he's looking at and looking forward to making an announcement soon.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you. A quick follow-up on the cyber stuff. Would the U.S. consider a disruptive attack against Russia, similar to the DDoS one right now being waged against Ukraine?

MS. PSAKI: Say that one more time. What --

Q I'm sorry. If the U.S. would consider, like, a distributed denial-of-service attack. Like, we just talked about potential --

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q -- cyber responses. Is that one of the potential options? Like --

MS. PSAKI: In terms of what we would do in response?

Q Yes.

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to outline or detail what options the President would have at his disposal. Again, he can take any step, seen and unseen. He has the right to do that. But we have not even made an attribution at this point in time.

Q Fair enough. Russia's lower house of parliament voted on Tuesday to ask Putin to recognize the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Blinken said today that that move "would necessitate a swift and firm response from the United States in full coordination with...Allies and partners." What might such a response look like? Sanctions, export controls? What kind of --

MS. PSAKI: There's a range of options we have at our disposal. I'm not going to outline those from here. But I would also just reiterate a couple of points that Secretary Blinken made in his statement, which includes the fact that the Kremlin's support of this amounts to the "Russian government's wholesale rejection of its commitments" -- its own commitments -- "under the Minsk agreement[s]," which is certainly the reason to have such a strong reaction to it from the Secretary of State. And "[e]nactment...further undermine[s] Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," constituting a "gross violation of international law."

So, hence we have -- as you said, he conveyed in his statement that "necessitates a swift and firm response from the United States in full coordination with our Allies and partners." But I don't have anything to preview at this point in time.

Q Quick follow-up on oil. CNN is reporting that NSC Middle East Coordinator, Brett McGurk, and State Department

Energy Envoy Amos Hochstein are in Riyadh today.

MS. PSAKI: Hochstein (inaudible) --

Q Thank you for that.

MS. PSAKI: -- in case you have to restate his name on television.

Q Amos -- are in Riyadh today to press the Saudis to pump more oil. And I wondered if you could confirm that.

MS. PSAKI: I can confirm they re on a trip. There are a range of range of topics to discuss, including Yemen. And as you know, we -- engaging with our partners around the world about ensuring supply meets demand is part of our objective from here as well.

Q Okay. And that s one of the objectives of the meeting as well?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have more details on the meeting at this point in time.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. The Secretary of State said today that they have not seen "meaningful pullback" by Russia when it comes to the forces that they've put on Ukraine s border. What would meaningful pullback look like to the United States?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I m not going to define that by troop numbers. I think we will know it when we see it, which is a verifiable reduction of troops at the border of Ukraine.

Q But you re not looking at a certain metric or anything like that?

MS. PSAKI: Nothing that I m going to outline from here.

Q The President updated the number yesterday, changing it from about 130,000 that we believed that Russia had amassed on the border to closer to 150,000. How long does the United States believe Russia can maintain that kind of a force posture?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he also said including in Belarus and encircling Ukraine --

Q Right.

MS. PSAKI: -- as well, to be clear. In terms of their ability to maintain that, I m not going to get into intelligence from here.

Q But there s no judgment on --

MS. PSAKI: Nothing I m going to outline from here.

Q Okay. My last question: On the CIA station that is being relocated closer to the border of Poland, outside of Kyiv, does the U.S. have concerns that that will affect their ability to be able to track Russia s movements from Ukraine?

MS. PSAKI: You have a lot of intelligence questions today, which is absolutely fine, but there s nothing I can detail on that from here either.

Q But no concern that the- -- moving the CIA station out of the capital is going to affect that ability?

MS. PSAKI: I'm just not going to speak about our intelligence processes in Ukraine or in the surrounding area from here.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. Following up on Kristen's question. Obviously, the invasion didn't happen today. The Pentagon was eyeing today as a possible date that some -- we could see some sort of action, some sort of invasion. Does the White House think that Putin could be bluffing?

MS. PSAKI: About what?

Q About his intention to move forward.

MS. PSAKI: Not invade or to invade?

Q Well, either way.

MS. PSAKI: Well, President Putin has said he doesn't intend to invade. We've also said he's prepared -- he's prepared to do that and has lined up troops at the border to -- to invade. So, I don't think we're -- we are waiting for President Putin's comments to assess what is being prepared around the border.

Q Okay. Do you think that your efforts to put all this intelligence out about his -- you know, what might happen next might have deterred something that we could've seen in the last 24 hours?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that's part of our obj- -- has been part of our objective overall, Jacqui -- right? -- is to make it more difficult for the Russians, for President Putin to lay a predicate for war, to -- when our objective is to try to avoid war, prevent war.

Now, it's ultimately up to President Putin to decide what steps he's going to take, but putting out specific details about the types of false-flag operations, their efforts to push misinformation through Russian media -- the types of tactics they've used in the past -- that's all a part of our effort to make it more difficult for them to use these tactics and keep the eyes of the global community open.

Q And then has this whole standoff underscored the importance of NATO Allies spending 2 percent of their GDP towards defense? Is that something that the White House will be pressing in the future from our Allies?

MS. PSAKI: That's something that the Vi- -- President pressed for when he was Vice President.

Q And then can I ask about a second topic: the Durham investigation? Durham says there was an outside company with ties to the Clinton camp monitoring server data info on the Executive Office of the President through the Obama administration, possibly into the Trump administration. Do you know if there's still a system picking up server data on the EOP -- and if not, when it stopped?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I know you asked my colleague a few questions about this the other day, but I would point you -- any questions about this to the Department of Justice.

Q And then, is what was described in the filing there -- monitoring internet traffic -- is that -- generally speaking, would that be considered something along the lines of spying?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I would point you to the Department of Justice.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, thanks. Is that U.S. confident at this point that all intelligence and sensitive material has been removed and destroyed from the U.S. embassy in Kyiv?

MS. PSAKI: Look, there s obviously steps every embassy takes when they move or relocate, but I m not going to get into those details from here. I d point you to the State Department if there s more they d like to share.

Q And oil prices are nearing \$100 a barrel. That s a milestone that hasn t been reached since 2014. What steps is the administration taking at this point to deal with high oil prices? Have you been talking to allies about a coordinated global release of oil?

MS. PSAKI: We have been in touch with allies and partners, suppliers out there on the global stage for weeks now in preparation for a range of impacts of -- you know, in anticipation of an invasion or, actually, an impact of an invasion, both for natural gas and oil prices on the market.

We will continue those engagements, of course. As I ve said and I said yesterday: For the President, all options remain on the table. As you know, in the past or recent months, he tapped the Strategic Petroleum Reserve -- 50 million barrels. Those have been released over the course -- or 40 million of them, I think, to date have been released over the course of time.

We also remain, of course, engaged with Congress and countries around the world about how to meet the demands out there.

Q One more. The President urged Congress, this week, to act on gun control on the anniversary of Parkland shooting. It s been five months now since David Chipman s nomination was withdrawn. What s the current timetable for nominating an ATF director?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we certainly would love to have an ATF director in place for the first time in, I think, a decade -- someone confirmed. And unfortunately, I would say David Chipman was eminently qualified for the position and was not able to move forward. And the President would like to nominate someone to replace him, but I don t have anything on the timeline.

Go ahead.

Q In an effort to pry the window open a bit wider into the President s thinking on the Supreme Court --

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q -- what is the thinking here about some of the pushback that s been aired on the Left with respect to Judge Michelle Childs in South Carolina? Does the President reject that criticism that she hews to or has hewn -- hewed? -- too closely to corporate interests?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think -- some of the criticism I ve seen out there is related to her labor record. If you look at South Carolina, the AFL in South Carolina endorsed her and has been supportive of her.

I think the President -- in response -- or just to go back to Ed s question, which I think is similar -- the President is not interested in public griping or in lobbying campaigns or efforts to trash other candidates. He is going to keep his blinders on, look at the qualifications, the cases, the backgrounds, the credentials of these eminently qualified nominees. All of the ones he s considering would make excellent, qualified Supreme Court justices, and that s where his focus remains.

Q On background and qualifications, how important is it to the President that his choice have served as a public defender?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I m not going to get into any more specifics of the qualifications. You have a short window left before

MS. PSAKI: Again, I'm not going to get into any more specifics of the qualifications. You have a short window left before you will know, probably, who he has selected. And you will have more, I'm sure, analysis to do at that time.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. On the stalled Fed nominations to the Banking Committee. Chairman Brown said today that he's refusing to move the other picks separate from Sarah Bloom Raskin. He also said that he spoke to President Biden and that President Biden is standing by Senate Democrats on this. So, is the White House backing that strategy of holding all the nominees up and essentially waiting for Republicans to show up in the Banking Committee to vote?

MS. PSAKI: Absolutely. And I was in the Oval Office when the President spoke with Senator Brown, so I can confirm -- not that there was any doubt -- that he conveyed exactly that to the senator, that he agrees that Republicans are AWOL on the fight against inflation on this -- at this pivotal moment in our economy.

Everyone understands we need a full Federal Reserve Board -- the first one in nearly a decade -- to tackle inflation and bring prices down for American families.

So, no, we are not advocating for splitting the nominees. We support Chairman Brown's decision to keep all five on the Fed board, pushing them forward through the committee. And we believe Republicans need to do their jobs and show up to vote for these nominees.

Q You spoke about the urgency with inflation and other issues facing the Fed. But given that Republicans show no signs of bending and that the Senate is poised to go on recess by the end of the week, I mean, how likely or unlikely is it that we're going to see a vote before the end of the month on these nominees?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would point you to Chairman Brown for that. He is very committed, and I'm sure -- and then, I think, as you've seen him publicly, can be quite a bulldog when we want to get something done. So, we support his efforts to get these five nominees forward. There's a couple days left.

And all we're asking is for Republicans to show up and do their job. They can vote against people or -- but not showing up is not -- is not delivering on the commitment you made to the American people when they elected you.

Q Lastly, on that issue, Senator Toomey was at an event where he said he believed the Fed was basically able to perform at full strength, even without the confirmed nominees. Your reaction to that?

MS. PSAKI: I think there's no question that having a full Federal Board fighting inflation -- at a time where that is the stated number-one concern of many Republicans, many Democrats, and many in the American public -- would be the ideal scenario here.

Go ahead.

Q You said a couple times just now that the President is not going to be swayed by lobbying efforts. But I'm wondering: If that's the case, what does he make of Congressman Clyburn's pretty aggressive push for one specific judge, Judge Childs? Does that count as lobbying? Is the President listening to that? This is obviously someone he has in high esteem and is close with.

MS. PSAKI: Of course, he does. He has him in high esteem. He is close with him. But, again, the President -- who is someone who has been through a number of these processes before, who has overseen hearings, who has played a role as Vice President in helping select incredible nominees and now Supreme Court justices to serve -- he is going to consult broadly, and then he is going to look at their credentials, review cases, and make a decision about the right person to nominate for the Court.

Q And I think the only other angle left on the interviews that you have not been asked is: Will you tell us when the

Q I think the only other angle left on the interviews that you have not been asked is that you talk us through the interviews are complete?

MS. PSAKI: Unlikely. (Laughter.) I will tell you -- the President will tell you when there's a nominee.

The good news is March 1st is around the corner. So, you know, we remain on track, and you don't have too much longer to wait.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks. Last night, voters in San Francisco voted to recall three school board members. I'm wondering if the White House has any reaction to that result?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. We, of course, did see that. We don't have any reaction directly to the decision by the local school board.

But I would just reiterate that the President's objective has been keeping schools open, from the beginning. And now, at this point in time, 99 percent of schools are open, in large part because of the funding in the American Rescue Plan and efforts that he and his Secretary of Education undertook to ensure schools had the resources and the information needed to keep schools open.

We understand where parents are coming from when they want schools to be open as well. And the President recognizes the mental health impact it has on kids for them not to be open. So, we don't have any specific comment on the local school -- the local decision about the local school board leaders, but that remains the President's objective.

Q And on education more broadly, we saw that be an issue in the Virginia gubernatorial race; obviously, this is the issue here in San Francisco. I'm wondering what the White House or the President's message is to parents about -- you addressed school reopening, but, more broadly, some of the issues that we've seen play -- about equity, about curriculum -- play in some of these electoral races.

MS. PSAKI: Well, tell me more about specifically --

Q So, in San Francisco, specifically, there was controversy over the renaming of schools. There -- in Virginia, conversations about critical race theory. I'm wondering whether the White House or the President thinks that some of these school boards -- maybe in San Francisco and other places -- have moved too far to the left, adopted liberal policies beyond, you know, what voters seemingly approve of -- or just more generally, how the President thinks of education and some of these issues around equity and inclusion.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say first that the President is married to a teacher, so he certainly trusts in the role of teachers and educators across the country and the kind of curriculum that they are providing.

I'm not going to have any specific comment on any local school board or the politics of school boards, as it relates to any political race either, though.

Go ahead.

Q (Inaudible.)

MS. PSAKI: Okay, go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. Going back to the Senate Banking Committee, would the White House support a rule change to allow the Senate majority to discharge the nomination directly from committee, as they do with legislation?

MS. PSAKI: I believe that -- I would really point you to Chairman Brown's team and office. I think they have spoken to this and conveyed -- I don't think that there is a path forward for that, but I would point you to them for any comment.

Q And yesterday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that he was, quote, "troubled" by new charges that are being brought against Russian activist Alexei Navalny. Would the White House consider, in consultation with its allies, potentially, sanctions on individual leaders maybe in Putin's circle to stop this or other efforts that you all could do to help Navalny and the Russian opposition?

MS. PSAKI: There are a range of sanctions under consideration on his inner circle.

Q And then, finally, congressional Democrats, again, are talking about student loan cancellation. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez discussed this earlier this week, and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has also talked about the importance of canceling student loan debt. Why is this not an issue that -- with broad public support and support within his own party in Congress -- has the President not worked or pushed harder on to cancel the debt?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the President has conveyed he'd be happy to sign a bill into law that all of those members could work to get passed.

Q And then, finally, yesterday marks the 30th House Democrat to announce their retirement from Congress. Is the White House at all concerned that this is indicative of a political climate in the broader country, in his own party? And could, simply, the retirements of very senior Democrats on the Hill potentially have implications for the White House's domestic agenda?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, I have to be a little careful. I've learned -- I've learned my lesson the hard way about talking about politics from up here.

There are a range of retirements every cycle for a variety of reasons. And what we're focused on is working with members to deliver for the American people. And we expect that anyone who's going to be out there answering questions to people who may vote for them in the future, that they will hopefully talk about the work they've done with the President to create the greatest 12 months of job creation in our nation's history, the largest drop in unemployment rate on record, the largest reduction in childhood poverty ever, the strongest economic growth this country has seen in nearly 40 years.

So, there's a lot we're going to be focused on. The President himself has conveyed he's looking forward to being out there when it's time for political season. But beyond that, I'm a little limited in what I can convey from here.

Go ahead.

Q I actually do have something.

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Go ahead.

Q One thing. The -- I think -- circling back to something I think we asked Karine about a couple of days ago, but --

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q The mayor of the District of Columbia has announced that she's going to significantly reduce the restrictions -- the COVID restrictions. The indoor mask wearing, I think, comes off at the end of the month. The requirement to show proof of vaccination has ended, I think, as of yesterday.

The campus -- the White House campus is in Washington, D.C., obviously, like, affected by the metrics that are around, in terms of case counts and hospital counts and what have you.

You know, does -- does that -- are you guys going to follow some of the recommendations that the mayor has put out? Or are you going to wait for the CDC to make their recommendations before you change any of the activities on this campus?

MS. PSAKI: We'll wait for the CDC. And they've said -- and I know you had a COVID briefing a little bit earlier today -- that they're continuing to review mask guidelines and how different communities in the country should assess them, but we'll wait for the CDC to make any changes here.

Q And on the Supreme Court, I think I've thought of one more way, which is to --

MS. PSAKI: Okay, go ahead. Go ahead.

Q -- which is only to say that when the President said the other day that he was considering "about four" nominees, did he mean three? Did "about four" mean three? (Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: I think the President -- the President meant "about four," and I don't have anything further to add to that.

Go ahead.

Q Could it be five?

Q I'm sorry, I actually do have another way to --

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q -- to get at that.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q With the President traveling tomorrow, could we -- could you rule out that the announcement would come this week?

And would you flesh out more details on what you expect the announcement to look like? Sometimes we've seen them take place in primetime with events in the East Room. Is that what the President is looking out for his announcement?

MS. PSAKI: We don't have any details on that to preview at this point in time.

Q I had to try.

MS. PSAKI: I appreciate it.

Go ahead.

Q And on the State of California -- a couple of California-themed questions for you. So, the EPA is finalizing a rule that would give California a waiver to -- and the authority to set its own emission standards. Why does the administration think it's important for California to have the ability to set its own emission standards?

MS. PSAKI: This is a great question. I know I have something on this, but I don't have it in front of me. So let me get you -- it to you after the briefing.

Q Absolutely. And to follow up on that though: Even with the waiver, California is expected largely to stick to the Biden administration standards, but the President has indicated in the past that he does look to California on these issues. So, if California were to institute stricter standards -- say on either heavy-duty vehicles, for instance -- would that be something that the administration would seriously consider mirroring?

MS. PSAKI: It's a good question, but I don't have anything to predict or preview on that front. Obviously, the President's objective remains lowering emissions in the country and reaching his ambitious climate goals that he set. But in terms of what future steps look like, I don't have anything to predict at this point in time.

Q And one last one on California --

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q -- but not on emissions.

MS. PSAKI: Okay.

Q Okay. President Biden has been supportive of Governor Gavin Newsom in many instances. Does he support Governor Newsom's decisions to drop the universal mask mandate in California, even as masks continue to be required in California schools?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there are a number of states who have made decisions -- not just California -- and announcements. And what we've said and I can repeat is that we will continue to look for and abide by CDC guidance from the federal government. That's what we will follow. But different leaders will make decisions based on what they think is best for their communities.

Go ahead.

Q Great, thank you. One more on SCOTUS. Everyone is going to try.

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Go ahead.

Q This is a new tactical maneuver. Senator Grassley, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee, today told reporters on the Hill that he is under the impression that President Biden is doing interviews this week. Can you confirm or deny what Senator Grassley said?

MS. PSAKI: We said "as early as this week." That's all the detail I have for you.

Q Afghanistan: This week marked six months since the withdrawal from Afghanistan. From this podium, Jake Sullivan told us that the commitment to allies there is sacrosanct. The administration committed to doing everything it could to get our allies out, but tens of thousands of allies -- hundreds of thousands if you include families -- including the SIV people in the pipeline, are still there and struggling. What exactly is the administration doing to get them out? Because on the ground and from Congress, my sources say they think you're doing nothing.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say that we have successfully helped -- I can get you the specific number, but I believe it's hundreds depart from Afghanistan: partners, allies, people who have stood by our side since we withdrew from Afghanistan at the end of August.

We've worked in partnership with allies and partners in the region, including the Qataris, where we have our diplomatic presence. We are the largest contributor of humanitarian assistance of any country in the world, which we continue to provide through -- through proven third-party aid organizations as well. And flights just resumed, I think a couple of weeks ago, through Qatar Airways, and that will also play a role in helping.

But we remain committed to working with our partners in the region and to helping those who want to leave Afghanistan who have been serving by our side for 20 years to help do that.

Q And could you help me -- I can follow up -- get numbers on women in particular? And --

MS. PSAKI: I would point to the State Department, and they have -- they would have any details on specific numbers.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. The British Prime Minister said that Russia is sending signal -- or mixed signals or messages. They say they're open to -- for diplomacy and they keep on building the military back up on the border. Does the White House believe actually that the Russians are using deceitful tactics?

And can you update us on the talks in Vienna -- Iran talks? Do you think that we're closer to getting a deal? You, yourself, said that February is a vital month, that this is crunch time.

MS. PSAKI: So on the first question, you know, as Secretary Blinken said this morning, there is what Russia says and then there's what Russia does. And we certainly believe that they will continue to use false-flag operations, efforts to deceive -- lay a predicate for war, which is why we have been putting out as much information as we can on that front, so that the world is aware and knows what to look for and watch for. And we do that, of course, in partnership with our allies around the world.

As it relates to Iran, they -- I believe they're still in the eighth round of negotiations. You know, of course, as we've said in the past, you know, we would certainly support efforts or the opportunity to have direct engagement with the Iranians. We won't -- we've said that a deal -- our focus remains on a deal that addresses the core concerns of all sides.

And if it's not reached in the coming weeks -- as we've said before, but this remains the case -- Iran's ongoing nuclear advances will make it impossible for us to return to the JCPOA.

So, bottom line is: Under the JCPOA, Iran's program was tightly constrained and monitored by international inspectors. Since the previous administration ceased U.S. participation, Iran has rapidly accelerated and reduced cooperation. And that is, hence, why we are where we are.

But we -- they are continuing to engage -- of my last update on this. But, again, I'd reiterate that the President asked a team to present -- to put together a range of options in the event those need to be considered.

Go ahead.

Q Yeah, thanks, Jen. So, on Monday, it was the one-year anniversary of the phase one trade deal with China going into effect. Written into that deal is very specific enforcement language. So, when does the administration trigger that language against China because they haven't lived up to that agreement?

MS. PSAKI: Well, so, the phase one trade agreement that the President -- I think you're -- I think that's not exactly accurate, as my understanding of what the status of this is at this point -- or what anything that's triggered or not triggered. The --

Q It's not -- yeah, it's not an automatic trigger, but there is specific language in there as to what the enforcement is.

MS. PSAKI: Well, so, first, you know, when he was running for president, the President made clear that the phase one deal did not address the core problems with China's state-led economy and harmful economic practices.

USTR, since that period of time, has been making a concerted effort to see if China will show serious intent to make good on their purchase commitments. But the fact that they have not met those illustrates the limitations of the framework we inherited. They're still in discussions about them.

So, I don't have, kind of, an update on that. I would leave that to Katherine Tai, our ambassador.

Q Is there a sense of urgency now that China and Russia are moving closer together?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that has been the case for some time now. It also does not change the fact that if Russia were to invade, the size and seriousness of the economic consequences and package -- that's not something that China would have the ability to fill in the gaps on.

Q Thanks, Jen.

MS. PSAKI: Okay.

Oh -- oh, yes. I got to go. Aurelia, why don't you do the last one?

Q Thank you. Thank you, Jen. Climate change -- a complete change of topic. According to a report published yesterday, by 2050, the sea level on U.S. coasts would rise by one foot, which means 40 percent of American people who live in coastal areas would see more damaging floods. What is the administration doing about it? And does the President feel he is doing enough to fight climate change?

MS. PSAKI: Well, you've heard the President say, time and time again -- especially when he goes and visits communities that have been impacted by major weather events -- one in three Americans live in a county hit by a weather disaster this past year, which is a pretty startling statistic. And last year, extreme weather cost America \$99 billion.

So, we know -- we know climate change is real. Anyone who doubts it: That's further evidence climate change is real, and it's exacerbating the extreme weather conditions. And certainly, this report is further evidence of that.

What the President has done is, of course, work to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which -- a lot of people focus on roads, rails, and bridges -- important parts -- but it also has an enormous investment in strengthening our nation's resilience to extreme weather and climate change while reducing greenhouse gas emissions, replacing lead pipes so everyone has access to clean water. And we've also been mobilizing an all-of-government approach to deploy and implement critical clean energy projects.

But I would also note that this is one of the reasons the President is going to continue to press for key components of his agenda -- his Build Back Better agenda -- including a historic investment in addressing the climate crisis.

Thanks, everyone. See you tomorrow.

1:51 P.M. EST

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 9, 2022

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, March 9, 2022

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:13 P.M. EST

MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. Okay, so I have a couple of short items at the top. A lot of paper. A lot of things to talk about today.

Today, the President will host an event with business leaders and bipartisan governors, including Governor Whitmer and Governor Holcomb, to call on Congress to quickly pass competitiveness legislation like the Bipartisan Innovation Act.

During the event, the President, Secretary Raimondo, and the participants will focus in particular on why passing competitiveness legislation is critical for lowering prices for working families on essentials like cars and household appliances by addressing bottlenecks like semiconductor chips, manufacturing more in America, and strengthening our supply chains to make our economy more productive.

As we've seen over the past year, global events like the pandemic or Russia's unprovoked aggression in Ukraine can result in disruptions to global supply chains that lead to higher prices for American consumers, which further underscores the importance of strengthening our economy and making it more resilient to shocks like that in the future.

I also wanted to note that today the President signed an executive order outlining the first-ever whole-of-government approach to addressing the risks and harnessing the potential benefits of digital assets.

Previously, there has been -- never been an organized effort to bring together the expertise and authorities of the entire

U.S. government to inform a holistic approach to digital assets.

With this executive order, the President is calling on experts across the federal government to assess and develop policy recommendations that address the implications of growing digital asset sec- -- of the growing digital asset sector across consumer protection, financial stability, national security, and climate risk.

Let me finally say: I heard there was a little kerfuffle in here after the briefing the other day. I just want to say that what we re going to do today is we re going to try to start with the third and fourth row, and fifth and sixth row; get more people s questions answered. We are always happy to answer questions from here. I could go on for hours. Just sit in your seats.

But we also know you all have a lot on your plates. So what we try to do, for everybody s knowledge, is balance between all the things reporters and all of you have focused on and trying to be informative in this briefing room. But we also are here as people have follow-up questions.

So, with that, Josh, let me have you start. Kick us off.

Q Thanks, Jen. I know the pool is supposed to gather around 1:45 --

MS. PSAKI: Yes.

Q -- if that's still on.

So, one easy question: The U.S. declined to help facilitate the transfer of jets to Ukraine yesterday. Does the U.S. want the Ukraine to get jets? And how urgent a priority is that?

MS. PSAKI: So, let me give you an update on the status. As of now, the -- Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley, and members of our Defense Department are in touch with Ukrainian counterparts, NATO counterparts, discussing [sic] -- discussing what are clearly logistical challenges here.

And I would note, Josh, that in the statement put out by my colleague at the Pentagon yesterday, he made clear that obviously the proposal from yesterday that fighter jets manned by Americans departing a NATO base to fly into airspace contes- -- contested with Russia raises serious concerns for the United States and NATO.

So, the logistical questions here, just to put a little fine point on it, are things like how do you get planes into Ukraine in a way that is not escalatory, and what are the logistics and operational details of that.

Those are conversations that are happening between counterparts at the military level, and I would expect any update might come from them.

Okay, let s go around. Michael, why don t you kick us off?

Q Sure. Two questions on Venezuela.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q So, obviously, yesterday two Americans were freed and they are now home. Nicolás Maduro has agreed to re-engage in the Mexico City talks.

So, is the ball in the President s court at this point to continue the engagement? And what is the plan (inaudible)?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, the -- let me note that the return of two American citizens is certainly welcome news, exciting

news. And it would not have happened without the tireless work over the series -- a series of months by a number of our diplomats, including, of course, our Special Envoy for Hostage Affairs, Roger Carstens, who worked on this for months over the course of time.

You know, we are -- we'll continue to discuss a range of issues, including, first and foremost, Americans unjustly held. Unfortunately, they're not the only individuals held there -- the individuals who returned. So that will be something that we will look to have ongoing discussions about.

I'd also note that Maduro said he will resume talks with Venezuela's interim president in Mexico. So that is an encouraging sign.

So there were a range of issues discussed on this trip. There are a range of issues to discuss moving forward. But right now, we're just celebrating the return of two Americans.

Q Okay. And just to follow up: Are there concrete plans for continued engagement for another round of talks? And is there -- you know, you mentioned, I think on Monday, that energy security was part of the conversation. What can Venezuela contribute to energy security?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I don't have anything to preview for you in terms of additional talks or rounds of talks. But again, we are -- we are very pleased to have these two Americans returned home.

We -- if there are opportunities to continue to discuss that, that's something we are open to. There are obviously ongoing concerns about the health and wellbeing of anyone detained, whether it's there or in Venezuela or Russia or Afghanistan, Syria, China, Iran, and elsewhere. Those are conversations we are always going to want to engage in.

Obviously, it is facts -- factual -- you all know -- that Venezuela is a large producer of oil. But in terms of any decisions or discussions or where that may go from here, I have no -- nothing to preview or predict for you on that front.

Nadia, go ahead.

Q Thank you. Many American companies declared yesterday that they're shutting down in Russia, including Visa card, Masters, and McDonald's, et cetera.

The Russians say that they're going to confiscate their assets there. How would the White House react to that? I know they're all private companies, but basically declaring that they're going to nationalize these assets, according to the Russians.

And second -- not exactly related: Do you -- there are some reports indicating that Russia is delaying the signing of the Iran agreement and delaying the negotiation in Vienna from taking place for their own interests because they don't want, obviously, oil to be released to make up for the shortage.

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me take the second one first. I would say that our team -- we're continuing to engage with Iran deal partners, including Russia, on Iran nuclear negotiations. We believe Russia shares a common interest in ensuring Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon.

In our view, there's nothing that should be required of or will be offered from the United States as it relates to Russia sanctions -- that is related to their invasion of Ukraine.

But again, we believe we share an objective here. Always in the final stages, there are details to be worked through, and we will continue to work through those.

In terms of your first question on the seizing -- I think it was on the potential seizing of private sector assets in Russia for

companies that have decided to pull back and pull out of the country -- obviously, we have not -- while we have applauded the actions of a number of companies, that is not something we have been pushing from behind the scenes, if that makes sense.

If they were to take those actions, I'm certain there would be steps we would take, but nothing has happened at this point in time. So let me talk to our economic team and see if there's anything more we can predict for you.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. I have two questions. First, about the Florida bill that just passed restricting the speaking about homosexuality and gender identity after third grade. And then I have a question about surveillance matters that have been in the news.

Regarding the Florida bill: In 1994, when many of us in this room were in school, President Biden actually voted for a much broader restriction that banned federal funds from being used for, quote, "the promotion of homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative."

Why did he do that? And can you describe how his thinking has evolved over the years?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think that you have seen the President speak passionately about his view that a bill like this -- a bill that would discriminate against families, against kids, put these kids in a position of not getting the support they need at a time where that's exactly what they need -- is discriminatory. It's a form of bullying. It is horrific. I mean, the President has spoken to that.

In terms of his views and comments from 25 years ago, I think the most important question now is: Why are Florida leaders deciding they need to discriminate against kids who are members of the LGBTQI community? What prompts them to do that? Is it meanness? Is it wanting to make kids have more difficult times in school, in their communities? I would pose that question to them, and we can talk about it more tomorrow if you get an answer.

Q Was there a reason he supported the same policy, though, in the 90s when we were all in school?

MS. PSAKI: I think what's important to note here is how outspoken the President has been against discrimination against kids, against members of the LGBTQI+ community. And what we're looking at here is a bill that would propagate misinformed, hateful policies and impact children...

So that's the question I hope -- maybe you can pose that to some of the leaders in Florida. Maybe they'll return your phone calls. And I'll look forward to having a conversation with you.

Q On this --

Q Can I follow up on that?

Q Well, perhaps Chris could follow up afterwards. But I'd like to ask about the surveillance matters as well.

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q Senators Wyden and Heinrich, who are Democrats, recently alleged that the CIA is conducting a mass surveillance program that implicates American data and that it's outside of the statutory bounds that people think it's within.

First, could you say anything about that to reassure Americans regarding their data?

And secondly, according to a recent court filing by Special Counsel Durham, there was a technology executive who was,

quote, "mining" the Executive Office of the President's DNS traffic and other data. CISA, the federal agency for cybersecurity, said in a 2020 document that DNS data can be sensitive and that's important to secure.

There are competing narratives, of course, about what data was actually implicated. So could you share with us what data was implicated in this and whether the White House has any security or privacy concerns regarding this alleged review?

MS. PSAKI: I have nothing further to comment on your questions. Obviously, this is an investigation. I point you to the Department of Justice, members of Congress. Obviously, we have serious respect for people's privacy in the country.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. A quick follow-up. You mentioned the logistical challenges about flying planes --

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q -- to Ukraine, through contested airspace. Why can't the United States put those planes on trains or automobiles? I guess, are we really to believe that when we're sending -- or preparing to send billions in aid, that, you know, this is the logistical bottleneck that is stopping us from getting them those planes?

MS. PSAKI: Well, it is a serious logistical bottleneck, right? Obviously -- there's obvious concerns that the Department of Defense has spoken to about flying planes from U.S. airbases -- right? -- that they spoke to yesterday.

These planes -- carting them down the street, I think, is not as easy as you may think it is. Planes -- if they have to be taken apart and put back together, you have to have people who are able to put those planes back together. You have to ensure that there's -- they can be safely moved through the course of a contested country, or not -- you know, a country where there is a war going on with the Russians, you know, who implemented that war.

So there are a range of logistical and operational challenges. Those are important conversations to happen between military experts and our Defense Department leaders and officials -- Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley, and their counterparts.

Q And then, should we expect that the U.S. Export-Import Bank is going to continue to underwrite loans that would support commerce with Russian companies and corporations, given the tranche of sanctions that we've seen against (inaudible)?

MS. PSAKI: I would have to check and see how these sanctions are implemented. Obviously, we're going to abide by all of our -- our own sanctions. And we've tried to implement them as quickly as possible, but I can see if there's any specific impact on them.

Go ahead.

Q So, John Kirby's line is that transferring the planes -- or the latest iteration -- was not "tenable." Can you say: Is what's not tenable the arming of the Ukrainians with jet fighters? Or is it merely the logistical things you're speaking to?

MS. PSAKI: I think the Defense Department spoke primarily to this, and they were very specific, Geoff. They said fighter jets manned by Americans departing a NATO base to fly into airspace contested with Russia raises serious concerns for the United States and for the NATO Alliance.

We have provided a billion dollars in military assistance. I would say the \$350 billion that was announced just -- less than two weeks ago, I believe the Defense Department has conveyed almost all of that has been delivered. We have not held back on providing weapons, anti-missile systems, tank systems at all at any point in this process.

But there are important operational, logistics concerns here and steps -- conversations that should happen between military experts. And that's exactly what's happening.

Q So, in principle, it's a policy that the White House would support or like to find a way to solve?

MS. PSAKI: Again, we're having discussions about it, but there are operational and logistical questions that are important ones that we will leave to our Defense Department colleagues.

Q Just a quick one. You know, there was another round of arrests in Russia -- it was, like, estimated at 5,000 -- over the weekend. Is the -- protesting the war. What is the assessment of the White House as far as how this has all affected regime stability over there?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say that -- you know, I don't think we assess that President Putin thought that there would be such an outpouring of objection in his own country. He would probably not have cut off access to media, access to social media, access to basic information for the people of his country if that were the case.

So, we have seen people across Russia bravely, courageously protest, speak out against a war that they believe is unjust, is unwarranted. And, you know, that is incredibly powerful.

Now, unfortunately, as you know and many of you know from working for these networks and news organizations, there have been tough decisions that news organizations have had to make, whether -- about whether they're going to keep a presence in Russia because of the restrictions. And it's not just -- you know, it's not just the speaking out of President Putin. It's about fines. It's about the threat of arrest. It's about safety and security that organizations have to consider.

So, in terms of stability, I don't have any assessment for that other than to tell you that it's pretty clear he didn't bet on the opposition from within his own country.

Shrisha, why don't you go in the back?

Q Thank you. One, if I could follow up on the earlier questions about the jet fighters. Is this a difference of kind or a difference of degree? I mean, is the objection that it's a -- it's an airplane, or because, as you point out, we're sending them things that destroy tanks, things that shoot down airplanes?

So, I mean, if it can be done without -- I mean, they would know where they came from and -- I don't even see if there's plausible deniability or anything like that. What is the hang-up exactly?

MS. PSAKI: I think it's pretty clear. It doesn't require a military expert to understand why having planes fly from a U.S. airbase into a contested part of a country where there is a war is not in our interest and not in NATO interests.

So, there are logistical and operational challenges to consider and discuss. It isn't that easy to move military planes around -- maybe not as easy as some of you may suspect it is. And those are conversations, again, that are happening between military experts. And I would point you to the Department of Defense for the status of that.

Q And more broadly, is there any concern that making the lives of average Russians miserable -- you know, with all these companies pulling out and things that are designed to hurt the economy, as opposed to Putin personally, as opposed to his oligarchs personally -- is there a worry that that's going to consolidate his support within the country rather than make him -- rather than diminishing?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say that our view and the view of our global partners is that when a president like President Putin, you know, launches a war of choice where he is brutally killing, injuring people in a sovereign country, there have to be consequences. Those consequences are economic and significant, no question about it.

Our target is not to hurt the Russian people; it is to squeeze President Putin and the leadership around him. But what the impact is, is certainly having a devastating impact on the Russian economy.

And our view is that over the over the medium and long term, that that is not going to be sustainable for President Putin and the team around him.

Go ahead, Ed.

Q So, I'm starting to hear the administration talk about gas prices -- as a way to speed up the lowering of gas prices, to speed up the transition to those clean energy.

Gas prices have risen month over month, every month since the President has been in office. So, is the feeling then from the President that the American people just have to wait until 2030 when the President set his goal for zero emissions -- or to have cars being sold with zero emissions --

MS. PSAKI: No.

Q -- (inaudible) higher gas prices.

MS. PSAKI: That's never been our theory or our belief.

I would say that since President Putin began his military buildup on Ukrainian borders, the price of gas at the pump in America has gone up 75 cents, which is significant, of course.

There is widespread consensus that the sharp runup of energy prices since January was called by -- caused by the building of Putin's troops at Ukraine's border. The reality, as we know, is that Russia is the world's third-largest oil producer. And energy supply disruptions and market volatility are a result of his aggression.

Don't -- you don't have to take my word for that. There have been a number of assessments. Back in January, Federal Chair -- Fed Chair Powell warned that there was a risk to our economy based on, quote, "what's going on in Eastern Europe."

In early February, JP Morgan analysts projected that disruptions of oil flows from Russia could push oil prices to \$120 per barrel, which is what has happened.

Our approach has always been twofold. One, we need to ensure the supply meets the demand out there in the marketplace. There's a couple of ways to do that. Obviously, we're engaging with big global oil producers around the world to meet that demand. But there are also, as we've talked about a few times in here, 9,000 unused oil leases that oil companies could certainly tap into, and we've encouraged them to do that. So that's certainly a way to address.

Q But the price of gas on February 14th was at a high -- highest level since 2014. So it was already at an elevated level.

I want to ask you --

MS. PSAKI: And the build-up of troops was even before that.

Q I want to ask you about tomorrow. We're going to get a CPI inflation number that's expected to be pretty big. It's supposed to rise from the 7.5 percent that it was month over month. So gas prices are part of that. I want to know what specifically the administration has done, they've been working on that has worked to bring down inflation.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say first because while we don't have the data at this point yet, but as we're looking ahead, we certainly assess that -- that we expect to see a high headline in -- headline inflation in tomorrow's February inflation data.

A key reason, as you touched on, are energy prices. We've seen the price of gas increase, as I noted, 75 cents since the beginning of the year as Putin built up his military near Ukraine and took increasingly aggressive measures that were felt in the markets.

We also expect some increases in pandemic-affected sectors given our strong recovery from Omicron in February. That's a positive sign for our economy and for Americans who are going out again, traveling, going to restaurants, and getting back to normal. And we also expect to see continued moderation in used car prices.

So that's what our prediction, our assessment is at this point in time.

In terms of steps we have taken to address inflation --

Q But what has worked?

MS. PSAKI: What has --

Q What has worked? So October 13th is when you announced the port initiative.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q What specifically can you point to that has worked to bring down inflation?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there are a number of steps we've taken. If you've seen -- if you compare a month-to-month, we've seen inflationary pressure -- or inflationary numbers go down month to month -- even as we looked at the year-to-year numbers go up, which we entirely predicted.

One, we've taken steps to address bottlenecks in the supply chain, to reduce those bottlenecks. Those are steps we've taken not just since October but since earlier this year. There's no question that we've seen impacts as it relates to getting goods and supplies out to the American public.

We've also taken steps to address what we see as shortages and issues in the semiconductor space.

We -- I just opened this briefing by pressing for the passing of the competitiveness legislation that the President would love to sign into law, because we know that one of the big pressures is, of course, from the car and manufacturing sector or the car sector.

And then, third, we know that because of the pressures on the energy sector that that has been an area where we've continued to see have an impact on inflationary pressure.

We believe in the last few months that has been because of President Putin's invasion of Ukraine. But as I've noted, there are a number of steps working to address that.

Why don't you go ahead in the yellow?

Q Thank you. Well, there's -- is there an assessment by the White House for the losses on the Russian side, like financial, economy losses? Because every time a new or fresh wave of sanctions is imposed, the response from Moscow would be, "It was expected." So, is there, like, an assessment of the losses as a result of all the sanctions that have been imposed?

And also another question on EU. As you know, President Zelenskyy asked for an accelerated path to join the EU. And

AND ALSO, ANOTHER QUESTION ON EU. AS YOU KNOW, PRESIDENT ZELENSKY ASKED FOR AN ACCELERATED PUSH TO JOIN THE EU. AND EU LEADERS OR, I THINK, REPRESENTATIVES ARE MEETING TODAY IN BRUSSELS. DOES THE WHITE HOUSE SUPPORT UKRAINE IN EU?

MS. PSAKI: On the last question, that's really up to the EU and Ukraine to determine together.

On the -- on the first question, I don't think that's what they're saying anymore. They have had -- their stock market has been closed for days. The ruble is worth a penny. They're headed toward what many outside economists have described as a recession. They have had a huge strain on their financial markets and systems. So, I don't think the facts bear out if that is the claim anyone is making, and I have not seen that claim be made, much less.

Okay, go ahead in the middle.

Q Thanks, Jen. Does the White House believe there's an opportunity to convince China to play an effective role in resolving the crisis in Ukraine?

MS. PSAKI: Well, here's what we've seen China do to date: We have seen them speak out at the Munich Security Conference or have a public comment, I should say, about the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. We've seen them abstain from U.N. Security Council votes. We've seen them largely abide by the sanctions that have been put in place.

I would note, though, that if any country tries to evade or work around our economic measures, they will experience the consequences of those actions.

So our assessment right now is that they're abiding by the requirements that have been put in place, but we would continue to encourage any country to think a lot about what place they want to -- what role they want to play in history as we all look back.

Okay. Let me go to the front. Go ahead.

Q Thank you. A couple questions on the future leadership of NATO. What is the White House thinking on Jens Stoltenberg stepping down in just a few months as the leader of the Alliance?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think that NATO has not been more united, in the last several months, in decades. And while no one wanted that to be prompted by the invasion of a dictator, like President Putin, into a foreign country, that unity among NATO partners and the strength of that unity is certainly something that has been a direct impact of his aggression.

In terms of future leadership, obviously, that would be for NATO partners to determine. But we certainly recognize and value the leadership that has been displayed by NATO -- NATO leaders and the Alliance over the course of the last few months.

Q Follow-up on that: Have you, as a NATO member, ruled out asking Stoltenberg to continue in this time of the biggest crisis since World War Two?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have anything to predict for you in terms of the future of NATO leadership from here.

Q Have you started the search for a new leader of NATO?

MS. PSAKI: Again, it's up to NATO leaders and partners to determine that. I don't -- I'm not a spokesperson for the NATO Alliance, so I would certainly point you to them to speak to that in any further detail.

Go ahead.

Q I want to go back to Venezuela, if we can

Q I want to go back to Venezuela, if we can.

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q There's a few here you're probably going to not be able or just not answer --

MS. PSAKI: Okay.

Q -- but we're going to ask them anyway.

MS. PSAKI: Go for it.

Q Gustavo Cárdenas and Jorge Alberto Fernández -- do we know why they were released?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any more details on that I can provide.

Q U.S. officials who were part of that delegation -- are they all back from Venezuela?

MS. PSAKI: I believe, yes.

Q Okay.

MS. PSAKI: I will confirm that for you, though.

Q Should we anticipate the imminent release of any other Americans who are being held there right now?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, as we are working on bringing any unjustly detained Americans home from any country in the world -- whether it's Venezuela, Russia, Afghanistan, Syria, China, Iran, and elsewhere -- we typically don't discuss that because it puts at risk the potential for bringing individuals home.

But yes, we would still -- we are still going to work on bringing others home who have -- who did not return on the plane last night.

Q A high-ranking member of Juan Guaidó's team told the Miami Herald this week, quote, "It is foolish to think that Maduro will quit Russia when a great deal of the corruption funds have been deposited in Russia and when Russia, furthermore is its greatest ally...This is a mistake. To buy oil from Maduro is the same as buying oil from Putin."

Two things. I think I know where you'll go on the first one, but I want to give you the opportunity to respond. If the United States --

MS. PSAKI: We spend so much time together, Ed. I appreciate it.

Q If the United States recognizes Guaidó as the leader of Venezuela, why did the U.S. feel it necessary to negotiate with the Maduro regime?

And was the Guaidó team made aware of the plans for U.S. officials to go to Venezuela to meet with the Maduro government before they went?

MS. PSAKI: On the last, I just don't have anything more to convey to you about private diplomatic conversations. I would note that one of the steps that was announced yesterday was Maduro saying he was willing to resume talks with Venezuela's interim president. Certainly, we would note that.

And obviously we -- part of our effort here, as you now know, was related to the health and wellbeing of American citizens

...and, obviously, the part of our effort here, as you know, has related to the health and wellbeing of American citizens detained in Venezuela, hence we had discussions with those who are detaining them.

Q Just one, because there were so many questions -- good ones -- about the planes --

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q -- going from Poland to Ukraine and whether we'd be the interlocutor.

On Sunday, when the Secretary of State was asked about this possibility of a plane swap, he said, quote, "That gets a green light," and we're working with Poland on possibly backfilling their military equipment. What changed between him saying that on Sunday and Tori Nuland and others yesterday at the Pentagon saying, "Actually, that's not tenable"?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I don't think that's exactly how I would see how the events transpired. I believe that Tony -- Secretary Blinken was asked about Poland's giving planes to the Ukrainians. That's certainly a choice they make as a sovereign country. We've never opposed that, never stood in the way of that; we still do not today.

What we're talking about here though is -- the proposal yesterday, as you know, was for these planes to fly from a U.S. air base in Germany. And we have understandable concerns about that.

So, what we're talking about now, through military channels, is the operational concerns: how this could work, the logistics of it. And those conversations are ongoing.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you. Why did you guys decide to rebrand the rise in gas prices as the "#PutinPriceHike"?

MS. PSAKI: I mean, if you want to use that on Fox, I welcome that. But --

Q Oh, I think it'll get a lot of airtime because we have heard the President warn for months that gas prices were rising because of the supply chain and because of post-pandemic demand. If you guys knew for months that this was going to be the #PutinPriceHike, why are we just hearing that now?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Peter, if we go back to six months ago, I don't think anybody was predicting we would be exactly where we are as it relates to Russia and Ukraine, as you know that events in the world, including the invasion by Russia of a foreign country, does prompt instability and volatility in the global oil markets. And there are all sorts of different issues that can impact that. That's what we're seeing now.

Outside economists and analysts have conveyed and said publicly that Russia's invasion, Russia's buildup of troops, President Putin's decision to do that very early this year led to a lot of the instability and volatility in the oil markets. You don't have to take my word for it.

So, therefore, if President Putin's buildup of military troops is leading to volatility and an increase in oil -- in prices, hence you have "Putin pump -- gas price pump --

Q Okay. You and the --

MS. PSAKI: -- rise." (Laughter.)

Q You and the President are both talk -- thank you.

MS. PSAKI: (Laughs.)

Q You and the President are both talking about --

MS. PSAKI: Spit that out.

Q You and the President are both talking about producing energy here, saying that oil and gas companies “have 9,000 permits to drill now. They could be drilling right now.” Would President Biden cut red tape to make that possible?

MS. PSAKI: What red tape needs to be cut when they have the permits, they have the capacity to do it? What’s holding them up?

Q Does President Biden think that each of these 9,000 leases that are available have oil or gas in them? Because industry experts are saying that “that accusation is a complete red herring”; “some permits are viable and some are not”; and that when you say that, “This represents a fundamental misunderstanding as to how this process works.”

MS. PSAKI: Well, first of all, the -- nearly 60 percent of leased acres remain non-producing -- that’s a lot -- in the range of 20 million acres. So there are 9,000 unused approved permits to drill in. They should not require -- that should not require us inviting them to do that. They should do that themselves.

Q But you said they can’t get the additional permits. So would the President --

MS. PSAKI: What additional permits do they need? There’s no -- they have -- the leases are there. The permits are there. I don’t think they need an embroidered invitation to drill. That is their oil companies. What is -- what is happening -

Q It’s not an embroidered invitation, it’s a federal permit.

MS. PSAKI: What is happening -- what is ha- -- but what was is -- the permits have been granted, Peter.

Q It’s not just one permit though. Would you --

MS. PSAKI: What is happening here is that we are seeing -- these are private sector companies. We recognize that. Many of them are making record profits. We see that that. That is all publicly available data. They have pressure to return cash to investors and their shareholders.

What we’re saying right now is: There is a war. We’re asking them to go use the approved permits, use the unused space, and go get more supply out of the ground in our own country.

Q Okay. And then just a quick yes-or-no, because there’s a lot of gray area here.

MS. PSAKI: Oh.

Q Is a restart of the Keystone XL construction completely off the table as long as Joe Biden is President?

MS. PSAKI: Well, why don’t you tell me what that would help address.

Q I’m asking you if it is an option. You guys say, “All options are on the table.” Is restarting Keystone construction one of them?

MS. PSAKI: If we’re trying to bring about more supply, that does not address any problem.

Q It’s supply from Canada, a friendly ally, instead of Saudi Arabia or Iran or Venezuela.

MS. PSAKI: That -- that's already -- we're already getting that oil, Peter. It's -- the pipeline is just the delivery mechanism. It is not an oil field. So it does not provide more supply into the system. It does not address --

Q Is it off the table? Is it possible that Joe Biden will ever say, "You guys can go ahead with construction of Keystone XL"?

MS. PSAKI: There's no plans for that, and it would not address any of the problems we're having currently.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, can you help us --

MS. PSAKI: And we're going to have to wrap up soon, but we'll try to get to MJ.

Go ahead.

Q Can you help us understand what exactly would have transpired for the Polish government to publicly propose this idea of getting the fighter jets to Ukraine that the U.S. would then publicly reject? Was there, at any point, a breakdown in communication between the two countries?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think as our Undersecretary of State, Tori Nuland, testified yesterday, we were not made aware of their plans to make that announcement yesterday. So I wouldn't call that a breakdown in -- I guess it's a temporary breakdown in communication, but we have a strong and abiding relationship with Poland.

The President spoke with President Duda just last Friday. Obviously, the Vice President is on her way there, not -- not related to this particular issue, which will be worked through military channels.

But it was more about the mechanism for how it would be delivered. And that is the issue that is operational, and we're still discussing.

Q Is it safe to say that the U.S. was caught off guard by the initial announcement from the Polish government?

MS. PSAKI: I think we said that yesterday.

Q On gas prices --

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q -- quickly. The President said yesterday, "I'm going to do everything I can to minimize Putin's price hike here at home." And then hours later as he was getting off the Air Force One, he said, I "can't do much about that right now." "Can't do much right now." That was the exact words from the President.

For anyone that might have been confused seeing the two statements from the President within a couple of hours, what would be your explanation? Does the President believe there is action that he can take to address gas prices, or does he believe there's not much that can be done?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say that the short gaggles when the President is getting off the plane and getting into a car are not always super comprehensive, as I think many of you have experienced. They're not always extensive.

But what the President said yesterday in his lengthy remarks before his trip and what we have said many times is that there are a range of steps that we will continue to take, including coordinating with the global community about ensuring the supply in the marketplace meets the demand. That includes the release from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve that he

announced a second one just a few weeks ago. That includes continuing to work and coordinate with global oil suppliers around the world, something that his national security team and he is engaged in, in a nearly daily basis. And that includes considering a range of domestic options.

But the oil markets -- oil markets are global. Right? And it is all about meeting the supply demands that are out there. And clearly, given the invasion and given the impact of that, we need to look at a range of options, but we've already taken a number of steps and we will continue to. And he said that all yesterday morning in the same day.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, to clarify --

MS. PSAKI: Okay, I got to -- this may have to be the last one. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Q -- to clarify on the military planes --

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q -- and the Vice President's trip. You said that what's going on now are discussions with military officials. So this issue is not a priority, is not going to be part of the Vice President's discussions with the Polish leader tomorrow?

MS. PSAKI: I would expect it's going to happen through military channels. Those conversations have on -- been ongoing, and I would expect they would continue to happen through those channels.

Q So, not -- not a priority? Not a central part of the Vice President's discussions tomorrow (inaudible)?

MS. PSAKI: I'm never going to say it's not a priority, but I would just say that the appropriate channels for it -- because they're about the operational movement of military equipment -- are through military channels.

Q A quick follow-up?

Q Just a clarification. Just a clarification on the --

MS. PSAKI: I know we're going to have to wrap up in a minute here because you guys have to go to the event.

Go ahead.

Q Just a quick reaction to the Russian airstrikes reportedly striking a children's hospital in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol?

MS. PSAKI: I have -- we have certainly seen those reports. And as a mother -- I know a number of you are mothers yourself -- it is horrifying to see the type of -- the barbaric use of military force to go after innocent civilians in a sovereign country.

And, you know, I know we've seen the reports on all -- that you have all been broadcasting over the last couple of hours. Unfortunately, I don't have more details than that at this point in time.

Q Just for clarification --

MS. PSAKI: You all have to go to an event with the President.

Q Just for clarification on the question --

MS. PSAKI: Yes, go ahead.

Q Does the U.S. recognize Juan Guaidó as the Interim President of Venezuela? Because I think that was a direct question from Ed.

MS. PSAKI: That we had -- that's how we've -- we have referred to him, yes.

Q No, no, but you didn't say. Does the U.S. recognize Juan Guaidó --

MS. PSAKI: That's how we refer to him.

Thanks, everyone, so much. Have a good rest of your day.

1:50 P.M. EST

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