

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

The President's News Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
November 22, 2015

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. Let me begin by once again thanking the Government and the people of Malaysia for hosting us at the U.S.-ASEAN and East Asia Summits. These gatherings are enormous undertakings, but thanks to Malaysia's leadership and incredible hospitality, they have been a great success.

Earlier this week, as I headed to this region, there was a headline in one of our publications back home that asked: "Obama's Asian Distraction?"—question mark. And the premise seemed to be that this region was somehow disconnected from pressing global events. I could not disagree more. This region is not a distraction from the world's central challenges, like terrorism. The Asia-Pacific is absolutely critical to promoting security, prosperity, and human dignity around the world. That's why I've devoted so much of my foreign policy to deepening America's engagement with this region. And I'm pleased that on this trip we made progress across the board.

With my fellow leaders from Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, I reaffirmed that our treaty alliances remain the foundation of regional security. The United States is boosting our support for the Philippines' maritime capabilities and those of our regional partners. At the U.S.-ASEAN and East Asia Summits, a key topic was the South China Sea, and many leaders spoke about the need to uphold international principles, including the freedom of navigation and overflight and the peaceful resolution of disputes. And to make sure we keep deepening our partnership here in Southeast Asia, I invited all 10 ASEAN leaders to the United States next year. I'm pleased they accepted, and I look forward to continuing our work.

On the economic front, we worked with our APEC partners to advance a regional economic order where all nations play by the same set of rules. Based on my meeting with our Trans-Pacific Partnership countries, I am optimistic that our 12 nations will approve this pact and that we can increasingly focus on implementing it.

APEC joined the G-20 in sending an unequivocal message that we need to reach an ambitious climate change agreement in Paris. I also want to note the landmark step we took this week with more than 30 other nations at the OECD to dramatically reduce subsidies for coal-fired power plants around the world, which is an important way to advance the fight against climate change.

Of course, given the events of this week, much of my work here in Asia focused on the urgent threat of terrorism. Today, families in too many nations are grieving the senseless loss of their loved ones in the attacks in France and in Mali. As Americans, we remember Nohemi Gonzalez, who was just 23 years old, a design major from California State University. She was in Paris to pursue her dream of designing innovations that would improve the lives of people around the world. And we remember Anita Datar of Maryland. She's a veteran of the Peace Corps, a mother to her young son, who devoted her life to helping the world's poor, including women and girls in Mali, and lift themselves up with health and education.

Nohemi and Anita embodied the values of service and compassion that no terrorist can extinguish. Their legacy will endure in the family and friends who carry on their work. They remind me of my daughters or my mother, who, on the one hand, had their whole life ahead of them, and on the other hand, had devoted their lives to helping other people. And it is worth us remembering when we look at the statistics that there are beautiful, wonderful lives behind the terrible death tolls that we see in these places.

Now, over the years, our friends here in Asia have been victims of terrorism, and many of them are close counterterrorism partners with us. So my time here has also been an opportunity to work with many of our partners in the Asia-Pacific that are members of our coalition against ISIL: Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Which brings me to the point I want to emphasize today. For more than a year, the United States has built and led a broad coalition against ISIL of some 65 nations. Given the frequent focus on America's leadership of this campaign, sometimes, the contributions of our partners are overlooked. In fact, since the G-20, a number of our coalition members have stepped up with new commitments. So today I want to take a moment to recognize how our allies and partners help advance every element of our strategy.

Nearly two dozen nations—among them Turkey and our Arab partners—contribute in some way to the military campaign, which has taken more than 8,000 strikes against ISIL so far. And as I've said, we're ready to welcome or cooperate with other countries that are determined to truly fight ISIL as well. Fifteen countries have deployed personnel to train and support local forces in Iraq. The United Arab Emirates and Germany are organizing 25 coalition partners in helping to stabilize areas in Iraq liberated from ISIL. Italy is coordinating the multinational effort to train Iraqi police.

On the political front, U.S. leadership brought all the key countries together in Vienna to discuss a common understanding on the principles for ending the Syrian civil war. On the humanitarian front, the United States is helping to lead the effort to mobilize more aid for the Syrian people, including refugees.

More than 40 countries have now passed or strengthened laws to prevent the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, and 34 nations, including the United States, have arrested foreign terrorist fighters. Saudi Arabia is helping to coordinate the crackdown on ISIL financing. The United Arab Emirates' new messaging center is working to discredit ISIL's propaganda, and Malaysia just announced the creation of its own center to do the same. And by joining our summit at the United Nations that we organized this fall, more than 100 nations, more than 20 multilateral institutions, and some 120 civil society groups—including many leaders from Muslim communities around the world—have become part of a global movement against ISIL and its twisted ideology.

All of which is to say that our coalition will not relent. We will not accept the idea that terrorist assaults on restaurants and theaters and hotels are the new normal or that we are powerless to stop them. After all, that's precisely what terrorists like ISIL want, because, ultimately, that's the only way that they can win. That's the nature of terrorism: They can't beat us on the battlefield, so they try to terrorize us into being afraid, into changing our patterns of behavior, into panicking, into abandoning our allies and partners, into retreating from the world. And as President, I will not let that happen.

In our diverse societies, everybody can do their part. And we will not give in to fear or start turning on each other or treating some people differently because of religion or race or background. That wouldn't just be a betrayal of our values, it would also feed ISIL's propaganda: their assertion—which is absolutely false, that we must absolutely reject—that we are somehow at war with an entire religion. The United States could never be at war with any religion because America is made up of multiple religions. We're strengthened by people from every religion, including Muslim Americans.

So I want to be as clear as I can on this: Prejudice and discrimination helps ISIL and undermines our national security. And so, even as we destroy ISIL on the battlefield—and we will destroy them—we will take back land that they are currently in. We will cut off their financing. We will hunt down their leadership. We will dismantle their networks and their supply

lines, and we will ultimately destroy them. Even as we are in the process of doing that, we want to make sure that we don't lose our own values and our own principles. And we can all do our part by upholding the values of tolerance and diversity and equality that help keep America strong.

The United States will continue to lead this global coalition. We are intensifying our strategy on all fronts, with local partners on the ground. We are going to keep on rolling back ISIL in Iraq and in Syria and take out more of their leaders and commanders so that they do not threaten us. And we will destroy this terrorist organization.

And we'll keep working with our allies and partners for the opportunity and justice that helps defeat violent extremism. We'll keep standing up for the human rights and dignity of all people, because that is contrary to what these terrorists believe. That's part of how we defeat them. And I'm confident we will succeed. The hateful vision of an organization like ISIL is no match for the strength of nations and people around the world who are united to live in security and peace and in harmony.

So with that, I'm going to take a couple of questions. We'll start with Angela Greiling-Keane of Bloomberg. Yes.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization/Russia/Syria

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You're scheduled to meet this week with President Hollande in Washington to talk about stepping up efforts against ISIL even further. Given that Russia would be part of the coalition that France proposes, have you seen any signs in the past couple days of Russia redirecting its military efforts in Syria to actually focus on ISIL? Are you—are there any circumstances that you could see President Asad remaining in power, even if only temporarily, if that's what it took to effectively have a broad alliance directed at ISIL?

And finally, as you've said, the U.S. won't work with Russia if their goal is to keep Asad in power. If that's the case, is defeating ISIL or destroying ISIL a realistic goal?

The President. Well, first of all, destroying ISIL is not only a realistic goal, we're going to get it done, and we're going to pursue it with every aspect of American power and with all the coalition partners that we've assembled. It's going to get done.

It will be helpful if Russia directs its focus on ISIL, and I do think that as a consequence of ISIL claiming responsibility for bringing down their plane, there is an increasing awareness on the part of President Putin that ISIL poses a greater threat to them than anything else in the region. The question at this point is whether they can make the strategic adjustment that allows them to be effective partners with us and the other 65 countries who are already part of the counter-ISIL campaign. And we don't know that yet.

So far, over the last several weeks, when they started taking strikes in Syria, their principal targets have been the moderate opposition that they felt threatened Asad. Their principal goal appeared to be—if you follow the strikes that they took—to fortify the position of the Asad regime. And that does not add to our efforts against ISIL. In some ways, it strengthens it, because ISIL is also fighting many of those groups that the Russians were hitting.

When we were in Turkey, I discussed with President Putin, in a brief pull-aside, his need to recognize that he needs to go after the people who killed Russian citizens. And those aren't the groups that they were currently hitting with strikes. So they're going to have to make an adjustment in terms of what they're prioritizing.

More broadly—I've said this before; I said it to President Putin 5 years ago, and I repeated it to him just a few days ago—the issue with Asad is not simply the way that he has treated his

people. It's not just a human rights issue. It's not just a question of supporting somebody who has been ruthlessly dropping bombs on his own civilian populations. As a practical matter, it is not conceivable that Mr. Asad can regain legitimacy in a country in which a large majority of that country despises Asad and will not stop fighting so long as he's in power, which means that the civil war perpetuates itself.

And so the goal in Vienna is to see if—with all the countries around the table, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey and Iran and Russia, as well as the United States and other countries that have concerns about this—whether we can arrive at a political transition process that recognizes the need for a new government and can quell the fighting, bring about a cease-fire, and allows all of us to refocus our attention on this barbaric organization that is killing so many people.

Russia has not officially committed to a transition of Asad moving out, but they did agree to the political transition process. And I think we'll find out over the next several weeks whether or not we can bring about that change of perspective with the Russians.

Keep in mind that we all have an interest in maintaining a Syrian state, because we don't want complete chaos. I mean, and there are problems that we've seen in, for example, Lebanon, when the machinery of state entirely breaks down. So there—there's going to be a need for the international community and the United Nations to work in order to maintain a Syria—maintaining a Syrian state and be able to move forward with a political transition that's orderly. And that's going to be difficult, but that's what we have to focus on.

In terms of the position of the United States and the other 65 members of the coalition, my view on Asad is, it will not work to keep him in power. We can't stop the fighting. Even if I were to cynically say that my priority is ISIL and not removing Asad regardless of the terrible things that he's done to his people, the United States could not stop the fighting in Syria by those who are opposed to Asad's rule. And so this is a practical issue, not just a matter of conscience. And I think that there are a large number of members of this coalition, including President Hollande, who agree with me on that. Okay?

Michael Shear [New York Times].

Department of Defense Intelligence on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization/U.N. Climate Change Conference/Terrorism

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. On a different topic, when you go to Paris next week for the climate talks, you do so in the shadow of what happened in that city a week ago. Could you talk a little bit about how you think those terror attacks might affect the talks? And substantively, on the talks, can you talk a little bit about concerns that the United States might not have the ability to convince poor countries that they will—that the nations will help them pay for what they need to do to achieve the climate talks, given especially the Republican opposition back home?

And on one separate matter, could you comment on the investigations that we reported about in our paper this morning into whether or not intelligence officials are altering the assessments of the ISIL campaign to make them seem more rosy?

The President. Okay. I'll take the last question first. One of the things I insisted on the day I walked into the Oval Office was that I don't want intelligence shaded by politics. I don't want it shaded by the desire to tell a feel-good story. We can't make good policy unless we've got good, accurate, hard-headed, clear-eyed intelligence. I believe that the Department of Defense and all those who head up our intelligence agencies understand that and that I have made it repeatedly clear to all my top national security advisers that I never want them to hold back, even if the

intelligence or their opinions about the intelligence, their analysis or interpretations of the data, contradict current policy. So that's a message that we've been adamant about from the start.

I don't know what we'll discover with respect to what was going on at CENTCOM. I think that's something that's best left to the IG and the processes. I have communicated once again to both the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs as well as Secretary Carter that I expect that we get to the bottom of whether or not what you describe has been happening.

There are always going to be some disputes with respect to how to interpret facts on the ground. I get intelligence briefings every single day, and there are times where they're making their best judgments. They're—they'll say, with moderate confidence or low confidence or high confidence, this is what we think is happening. There may be times where there are disputes internally among various intelligence agencies about that. But I don't know the details of this. What I do know is my expectation, which is the highest fidelity to facts, data, the truth.

And if there are disagreements in terms of how folks are interpreting the facts, then that should be reflected in the reports that we receive: that some folks think this is going on; other folks thinks that's going on. And that's part of what I weigh in terms of making decisions.

One last thing I'll say though: As a consumer of this intelligence, it's not as if I've been receiving wonderfully rosy, glowing portraits of what's been happening in Iraq and Syria over the last year and a half. So to the extent that it's been shaded—again, I don't know the details of what's—the IG may discover—but it feels to me like, at my level at least, we've had a pretty clear-eyed, sober assessment of where we've made real progress and where we have not.

On Paris, a lot of the discussion out here both at the G-20, APEC, and finally here at ASEAN, has been that we've got to get a strong Paris deal. And I'm optimistic that we can. A hundred and sixty countries have now put forward their national targets for how they can reduce emissions; that accounts for about 90 percent of the world's emitters.

And the key to a strong agreement is going to be that, although there's going to be differentiation between countries—the United States doesn't expect that our obligations are identical to Laos, for example, given our levels of development, how much carbon we emit compared to theirs—that everybody does have a plan, that everybody is accountable to a single set of reporting requirements, that there's transparency about what each country is doing, that once we've set that architecture in place, in 5 years' time, we can review what we've done, turn up the dials in light of additional information and additional technology. In some cases, we may make progress faster than we expected, and we can increase our targets. So the key is to make sure that everybody is doing their part.

You raise one important issue, and that is climate finance. There are going to be a number of countries who recognize the threat of climate change, want to do something about it, but they also have large populations suffering from extreme poverty, who don't have electricity, who don't have the ability to feed their families. And any leader of those countries has to ask themselves, am I going to be sacrificing development and poverty alleviation in order to deal with climate change, particularly since a lot of more developed countries are responsible for at least the current carbon emissions that are causing climate change?

And so the answer to that, we all—we've all agreed, is a finance mechanism to help these countries adapt—in some cases, leapfrog old technologies so that instead of building old, dirty power plants, here are some smart, clean energy plants. And we'll help you through technology transfer and financing so that you can achieve your development goals, but not add to the carbon problem.

So far, with a target of \$100 billion, we've reached between private and public sources \$62 billion, and that target did not need to be met until 2020, based on our original commitments. So we're all on—we're well on our way to meeting these commitments. And it's a smart investment for us to make.

Sometimes, back home, critics will argue, there's no point in us doing something about getting our house in order when it comes to climate change because other countries won't do anything and it will just mean that we're in a less competitive position. Well, when I met with President Xi and China signed on to an aggressive commitment, that took a major argument away from those critics. We now have the two largest emitters signed on. And it makes sense for us and the Chinese and the Europeans and others to help these countries, because, ultimately, if a country like India, for example, with over a billion people, is a major polluter, that's going to affect all of us. If on the other hand, they're developing and growing in a clean way, that's going to be good for all of us. All right?

I guess you wanted to know how the atmosphere, as a consequence of the attack in Paris, would affect it. Look, I think it is absolutely vital for every country, every leader to send a signal that the viciousness of a handful of killers does not stop the world from doing vital business, and that Paris—one of the most beautiful, enticing cities in the world—is not going to be covered by the violent, demented actions of a few.

And that—that's part of the overall message that I want to very clearly send the American people. We do not succumb to fear. That's the primary power that these terrorists have over us. They cannot strike a mortal blow against the United States or against France or against a country like Malaysia. But they can make people fearful. And that's understandable, because that could have been us, that could have been our families, that could have been our children in these places. And our hearts are broken when we see these images.

But in addition to hunting down terrorists, in addition to effective intelligence, and in addition to missile strikes, and in addition to cutting off financing and all the other things that we're doing, the most powerful tool we have to fight ISIL is to say that we're not afraid; to not elevate them, to somehow buy into their fantasy that they're doing something important. They're a bunch of killers. And there have been people throughout human history who can find an excuse to kill people because they don't think like them or look like them. And we fight them, and we beat them, and we don't change our institutions and our culture and our values because of them.

I want to be very clear about this. I am not afraid that ISIL will beat us because of their operations. When I see a headline that says this individual who designed this plot in Paris is a mastermind—he's not a mastermind, it's a—he found a few other vicious people, got hands on some fairly conventional weapons, and sadly, it turns out that if you're willing to die, you can kill a lot of people.

And so it is in our capacity to roll up those networks. Now, we've got to take precautions, we have to take it seriously, and we have to go at the heart of the problem that exists inside of Syria and Iraq right now. And we have to address the broader issues that exist in a tiny fraction of the Muslim community. But it is a real problem that leaders from Prime Minister Najib to the President of Indonesia and others who have large Muslim populations acknowledge. A country like Indonesia has 250 million people; if just a tiny fraction of those are in some ways attracted by a vicious ideology like ISIL's, then that's a real problem for us. And so tools like countering this narrative and Muslim clerics and political leaders and community leaders coming forward and making sure that our children are not being fed this kind of bile, that's critically important as well.

But in all of this, we cannot respond from fear. And the American people, in the past, have confronted some very real, enormous threats, and we beat them. We vanquished them. This will be no different.

Kevin Corke [FOX News].

U.S. Military's Rules of Engagement in Counter-ISIL Campaign/Immigration Reform/Sex Trafficking

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I wanted to ask you about what Secretary Carter said about expanding the rules of engagement versus ISIS. What was that conversation like? And what did he mean by that?

And I'd like to ask you also about immigration. The High Court is looking into executive action on immigration, as you know. And I understand the sensitivity of it; you don't want to be prejudicial. But I'm curious, are you where you thought you'd be in immigration reform? And what would you say to family members who say: "Listen, we did it the right way, we've waited our turn in line. How do these other guys get to skip the line, if you will?"

And lastly, the Attorney General announced eight indictments of individuals in the U.S. and Mexico on sex trafficking and related charges. Where is the fight against sex trafficking among the priorities for your administration? Are you where you thought you'd be on that?

Thank you, sir.

The President. Okay. Kevin, you asked all those questions so nicely, but if everybody is asking three questions, we're not going to get home. [Laughter] So let me see if I can go through these very quickly.

With respect to rules of engagement, we are in a constant conversation inside the Situation Room about how do we apply force most effectively to go after key ISIL targets, key ISIL leaders, strategic positions, their infrastructure, their supply lines, while minimizing civilian casualties. We do so for two reasons. One, because it's the right thing to do. There are people who are caught up in Mosul right now, for example, who despise ISIL, who are essentially captive to ISIL, are being brutalized by ISIL. And to the extent that we can avoid them being killed by those of us who are trying to defeat ISIL, that's a legitimate concern in any military campaign. Because if we're not careful about it—and this brings us to the practical element of it—then you can alienate the very populations that you need to win over, because ultimately, those are the folks who are going to have to drive ISIL out, stomp it out all the way.

The good news is, is the U.S. military has become very good at this. I think that there have been some circumstances where the military proceeds in steps and are continually reevaluating whether, well, maybe this is a situation where we can, in fact, take the strike without a lot of civilian casualties.

A good example with the recent trucks that were struck. There may be ways in which warnings can be given to the drivers—many of whom may not work for ISIL, they may just be for hire or being forced into it—so that they'd better abandon those trucks before we shoot them down, because we're shooting them down. So that's the kind of conversation, and that's been ongoing throughout the process.

With respect to immigration reform, I can't comment on the ins and outs of the legal case. I've said before, and I'll say again: I am confident that the rules and executive action that I put forward are squarely within the category of prosecutorial discretion that historically has been under a President's power. And you've got lower courts who have disagreed, but we think that past precedent is on our side.

Substantively, I've got 11 million people in our countries, many of whom are working, paying taxes, our neighbors, coworkers, friends who have lived here for a very long—who have lived in the United States for a very long time. We're not going to deport them, despite what some political leaders may say. It would be contrary to who we are, would be too costly, is too impractical. What we want to do is allow them to get out of the shadows and to get right with the law, pay a fine, go to the back of the line, but hopefully, over time, be contributors to society.

Of course, none of this would be necessary if we just passed the legislation that was passed in the Senate with a bipartisan majority. And I continue to believe that the ultimate solution is going to be one that comes from Congress. And although, during this political season, it may be difficult for Republican leaders in either the House or in the Senate to resuscitate that legislation, my hope is, is that after the election, they will. And in the interim, I'm going to do everything I can to sensibly apply our immigration laws in a way that is reflective of the fact that we're a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants.

And just very briefly, with respect to sex trafficking: This is a critical problem; we take it very seriously. We have entire divisions in our law enforcement agencies that are dedicated to this. I've elevated this within the White House so that we have people focusing specifically on ending trafficking. And in our international discussions—most specifically, out here in Southeast Asia—we are working very closely to promote mechanisms that will end trafficking.

In fact, TPP, one of the central mechanisms in TPP, to ensure high labor standards and human rights and human dignity, are requirements among the members who are signatories to have in place real, serious, enforceable ways to prevent the kind of human trafficking that causes such hardship and brutality for so many people.

And those of you who were with me when I visited the refugee center yesterday will recall the lovely young 16-year-old who was sitting next to me. She's somebody who had been victim of trafficking. And it reminds you of the terrible toll that is often placed on children, people who are the most vulnerable, people who are least able to protect themselves. And every country has an obligation to put an end to it.

Dave Nakamura [Washington Post].

Terrorism

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You said moments ago that Americans should not give in to fear when it comes to these terrorist attacks. But you also said that the person who may have been the person behind thinking about the attacks is not a mastermind and that anybody who can get their hands on some conventional weapons can—and is willing to die can blow themselves up. How should Americans feel, then, if they shouldn't be scared?

And if I may, the Washington Post and ABC News just this week came out with a poll that said 83 percent of the voting public believes that an attack, a terrorist attack on—against the U.S. with mass casualties is likely to happen in the near future, and 40 percent say it's very likely. Does that in your mind—given the fact that you think the public should not be so fearful—mean that the terrorists are winning? And do you believe that this is sort of the new normal and Americans will have to live with this kind of fear?

The President. David, I think that the American people are in—are right to be concerned, and to expect that we in the Government and in law enforcement are doing everything we can to disrupt terrorist attacks, to intercept intelligence that may lead us to individuals who are willing to carry out these attacks, that we make sure that these terrorists are not gaining the kinds of weaponry that would make it easier for them to cause mass attacks. This is a serious problem. And as somebody who, more often than I would like, have met with or comforted families of

victims of terrorism, the losses are real, and they're devastating. So this is a serious problem. And we have to work collectively across the board, as we've been doing since I became President and since previous administrations identified the kinds of organized terrorist activity like Al Qaida that we've seen—we've got to do everything we can to stop it.

But there is a difference between being vigilant and being concerned and taking this seriously and taking precautions and, in some cases, changing our security arrangements, as we've done, for example, in aviation. There's a difference between smart applications of law enforcement and military and intelligence and succumbing to the kind of fear that leads us to abandon our values, to abandon how we live, to abandon—or change how we treat each other.

And the good news is, there, Americans actually have been resilient. They've been tested. We had a mass casualty attack on 9/11. And as I said before, I was very proud of the fact that the fundamental nature of America and how we treated each other did not change.

I think we made some bad decisions subsequent to that attack in part based on fear, and that's why we have to be cautious about it. We have to think things through. But overall, the American people went about their lives. Times Square is filled with people—rightly so. After the Boston bombing attack, folks went right back to the ballpark and sang, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." That's what they needed to do.

And so the message I have is that those of us who are charged with protecting the American people are going to do everything we can to destroy this particular network. Once this network is destroyed—and it will be—there may be others that pop up in different parts of the world, and so we're going to have to continue to take seriously how we maintain the infrastructure that we've built to prevent this. But it doesn't have to change the fundamental trajectory of the American people. And that we should feel confident about.

And the media needs to help in this. I mean, I just want to say, I—during the course of this week, a very difficult week, it is understandable that this has been a primary focus. But one of the things that has to happen is, how we report on this has to maintain perspective and not empower in any way these terrorist organizations or elevate them in ways that make it easier for them to recruit or make them stronger.

They're a bunch of killers with good social media. And they are dangerous, and they've caused great hardship to people. But the overwhelming majority of people who go about their business every day, the Americans who are building things and making things and teaching and saving lives as firefighters and as police officers and—they're stronger. Our way of life is stronger. We have more to offer. We represent 99.9 percent of humanity. And that's why we should be confident that we'll win.

Colleen McCain Nelson [Wall Street Journal].

U.S. Policy on Refugees/Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia/Transparency and Accountability in Government

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You've threatened to veto the bill the House passed that would tighten screening procedures for Syrian refugees, but you've left the door open to more—legislation that is more constructive in the White House's view.

The President. Yes.

Q. What specific changes to your refugee program would you support? And do you think that Democrats who are calling for a halt to your program are betraying our country's values, as you've suggested of some Republicans?

And one last thing—I'm sorry—separately. [*Laughter*] Not a four-part question.

The President. Just a two-parter.

Q. Right.

The President. Okay, go ahead.

Q. You met Friday with Prime Minister Najib, who is facing allegations of corruption and human rights violations. And you'd said at your town hall event that you would raise those issues with him when you spoke privately. What was your message to Najib about the investments funds scandal and also about the issue of jailing his political opponents?

The President. Okay. With respect to the refugee program, Paris just happened a week ago. News moves so fast these days that sometimes we just lose track. It's been so recent and so pervasive in the news, and people have, understandably, been so concerned given how similar Paris is to many American cities, that I get why legislation in the House moved forward quickly.

My hope, though, is, is that now that we've got some time to catch our breath and take a look at this carefully, people understand that refugees who end up in the United States are the most vetted, scrutinized, thoroughly investigated individuals that ever arrive on American shores; that the process that's been constructed over the course of several administrations on a bipartisan basis is extraordinarily thorough and currently takes between 18 to 24 months for somebody to be approved.

And so although, on its face, the House legislation simply says, well, we can just certify, and this isn't—not along the lines of some of the more radical proposals that we were hearing earlier in the week from some Presidential candidates—the fact of the matter is, is that if it gums up the works so much, then effectively, you don't end up seeing any refugees admitted. If you layer it with more and more bureaucracy that doesn't actually make us safer, because it doesn't do a better job of screening, but simply makes it almost impossible to process individuals who are coming in, then you're effectively ending the refugee program for people who desperately need it.

And when I referred to a betrayal of our values, I was being very specific about some of the commentary that was made that would suggest, for example, that we might let Christians in but not Muslims; that we—somehow we're so fearful that a 4-year-old orphan might not be let in. And those of you who joined me to the refugee center yesterday and you saw those kids, that's who we're talking about. If you are a parent and you saw those kids, and you thought about what they had gone through, the notion that we couldn't find a home for them anywhere in the United States of America, it—that is contrary to our values.

And the good news is, is that the overwhelming majority of the people who know that we are screening and all the precautions that are already taken, if they saw those kids, they'd say, yes, we need to do right by those children.

So with respect to Prime Minister Najib, I don't comment on investigations happening back in the United States; I certainly am not going to comment on any investigations or legal proceedings that may be taking place in a foreign country where I'm a visitor. But I did raise with Prime Minister Najib—as I have with many of the leaders here in Southeast Asia, but also many leaders in Africa and Latin America and everywhere we go—the importance of transparency, accountability, the importance of rooting out corruption, all of which are impediments to development, all of which hold countries back, all of which contribute to poverty and stunted growth.

And if countries solve those problems, even if they are resource poor and landlocked, they will do better. And if they don't solve those problems, it doesn't matter how much they're blessed by natural resources or size or geography, they're going to fail.

And I also emphasized to Prime Minister Najib the importance of civil society and a free press in countries thriving. And every country here is at different levels and stages of development, both social and economic, and we don't expect that everybody follows the same path that the United States does. But I do think there are some basic principles that are important for us to uphold as friends and partners to the countries that we're talking to.

The good news is, is that—take a country like Myanmar that just went through a historic election after having been subject for 40 years to military rule. They're not going to immediately be Sweden in terms of their democratic practices, but there is a sea change taking place there, and we want to encourage that and engage it.

And a lot of the work that we do—the Open Government Partnership that we set up through the United Nations, the bilateral work we do in terms of improving transparency, the principles and rules that we've embedded in TPP—all those things are designed to raise the bar, to have people set sights that are a little bit higher. And some will go forward, some will slip back. Paces will vary, but the trajectory is the same, and that is a world where ordinary people are treated fairly, there's rule of law, there's transparency, governments are accountable, people's voices are heard, women are treated equally, minorities are not discriminated against.

Those are profoundly American values, but I also think they are universal values.

All right. Thank you, everybody. Let's go home.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 2:34 p.m. at the Ritz-Carlton, Kuala Lumpur hotel. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan; Prime Minister Malcolm B. Turnbull of Australia; Prime Minister Benigno S. Aquino III of the Philippines; Rohan Datar, son of Anita Ashok Datar, senior director for field programs, Palladium Group, who was killed in the terrorist attack at the Radisson Blu Bamako hotel in Bamako, Mali, on November 20; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; President François Hollande of France; Jon T. Rymer, Inspector General, Department of Defense; Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC, Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff; Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter; Abdelhamid Abaaoud, suspected organizer of the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris who was killed in a police raid in St.-Denis, France, on November 18; and President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo of Indonesia. He also referred to H.R. 4038. A reporter referred to Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : News conferences :: November 22.

Locations: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Names: Abaaoud, Abdelhamid; Abe, Shinzo; Aquino, Benigno S., III; Asad, Bashar al-; Carter, Ashton B.; Datar, Anita Ashok; Datar, Rohan; Dunford, Joseph F., Jr.; Gonzalez, Nohemi; Hollande, François; Najib Razak; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Rymer, Jon T.; Turnball, Malcom B.; Widodo, Joko "Jokowi"; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: Asia : Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Asia : East Asia Summit; Asia : South China Sea, maritime territorial disputes; Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); Australia : Prime Minister; Burma : Democracy efforts; China : Carbon emissions, reduction efforts; China : President; Civil rights : Minorities :: Minority rights and ethnic tolerance; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Commerce, international : Group of Twenty (G-20) nations; Communications : News media, Presidential interviews; Defense and national security : Intelligence; Defense, Department of : Inspector General; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Developing countries : Energy, alternative and renewable sources and technologies, financial assistance; Developing countries : Poverty; Egypt : Crash of Russian Metrojet Flight 9268; Energy : Carbon dioxide emissions,

reduction; Environment : Climate change; Environment : United Nations Climate Change Conference; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Foreign Policy, U.S. : Open government and transparency, promotion efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Trafficking in persons, efforts to combat; France : Paris :: Terrorist attacks; France : President; Francis : Paris :: Terrorist attacks; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Immigration and naturalization : Refugees; Indonesia : President; Iraq : Iraqi military and security forces; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Iraq : Political unrest and violence; Japan : Prime Minister; Legislation, proposed : American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act of 2015; Malaysia : President Obama's visit; Malaysia : Prime Minister; Mali : Terrorist attack in Bamako; Massachusetts : 2013 Boston Marathon bombing in Boston; Open Government Partnership; Philippines : President; Russia : Crash of Metrojet Flight 9268 over Egypt; Russia : President; Russia : Syria, role; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Syria : International diplomatic efforts; Syria : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Syria : President; Syria : Refugees, humanitarian situation; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist organization; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); United Nations : Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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