

Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on Cuba

JULY 30, 2021

PRESS BRIEFINGS

Via Teleconference

2:32 P.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks so much, and good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us this afternoon. And welcome to an on-background conference call where we'll be — we'll be discussing Cuba.

For your reference, today we are joined by [senior administration official]. And from this point on, we'll be referring to them as a "senior administration official," per the ground rules of the call.

We'll start with some quick remarks, and then we'll open it up for question-and-answer. The contents of today's briefing will be embargoed until 3:45 p.m. this afternoon. And as always, if you have follow-up questions, feel free to email me or the NSC press team distro at DL.NSC.Press@NSC.eop.gov.

And with that, I'll turn the floor over to [a senior administration official].

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you, [senior administration official]. It's been a busy week at the White House and the administration in general on Latin America.

You all saw on Monday that Secretary Blinken — the State Department released a joint statement with 20 countries condemning the crackdown on peaceful protesters in — that came out into the streets all over Cuba on July 11th. We also rolled out this week, as you saw, the Central America collaborative migration and root causes strategy.

On Thursday, we met with the Mexican delegation to think really strategically about how we can look at migration management beyond the bilateral relationship and looking at a, kind of, hemispheric approach to migration management.

You saw that we put up the Federal Register notice on Haiti temporary protected status and it marked the date to — you know, to reflect since the assassination of President Jovenel Moise. And we have rolled out the President's intention to nominate a well-respected academic and former policymaker at the Defense Department, Frank Mora, as the U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States.

What the President is doing today is — is part of what has been a very active period of engagement in response to the July 11th protests. And he is doing — he's going to take the time to meet with members of the Cuban American community, as well as Senator Robert Menendez, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Greg Meeks, the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

And basically, the President wants to hear directly from the community on not just the goings on and — but, frankly, what the President has said, which is how to hold the Cuban regime accountable for its violations of human rights, but also, at the same time, focusing on responding to the needs of the Cuban people.

So, what we are — in addition to that conversation, we have Treasury Department, the Office of Foreign Assets Control, is going to have sanctions that are going to be coming out today. I can't get into specifics except to say that— except that one entity and two Cuban individuals are going to be designated pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act for their role in human rights abuses.

You know, I already mentioned Frank Mora, that we are in talks with private sector providers about the possibility of providing wireless LTE communications to the Cuban people, which we consider to be a right. We're including all options, but we're also looking at other ways to make sure that the Cuban people have the right to information, the right to communicate with each other, and the international community can really see the abuses that are taking place.

We are also going to be talking about humanitarian support for the Cuban people. And we're going to have a few points to mention with regard to explaining the way forward for the remittance working group and just plans for the embassy staffing going forward.

So, but again, really the focus here is to hear from members of Congress that have been active on this issue from — from members of the Cuban American community. And it follows on engagements by Congressman Cedric Richmond, senior advisor to the President, meeting with a much larger group of members of the community, but also meetings that I have had, at the request of Senator Menendez, with the Cuban American National Foundation, but also Cuba Decide, to hear all points of views on Cuba and really to try to do what's best to provide the President and the Secretary of State with our best objective analysis and recommendations on the way forward following the July 11th protests in Cuba.

So, I'll leave it there. I'm happy to enter into any — answer any questions.

Q Thank you. And thank you, [senior administration official], for doing this. And thank you, [senior administration official]. One question regarding to the team at the State Department that is studying the possibilities and measures in order to help Cubans with the remittances and Internet without helping or providing support, if I can say that in that way, to the regime: Is there any specific measure that you can advance or tell us about these two possibilities?

I mean, sending remittances without using the Cuban bank system is quite difficult. There is no other bank system in Cuba that is not controlled by the regime. And providing Internet, it seems that it would be a kind of activity that the — it would violate the Cuban sovereignty of the territory, and it could create maybe a counterproductive situation.

I mean, what are the real options besides just repeating that you are studying that and you're studying and trying to identify technical solutions? Is there anything concrete that you can tell us today?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, thanks. I'm not going to get out ahead of the President. I think anything that's discussed at the meeting will — will be rolled out afterward. But, you know, you hit two very — two, you know, very real challenges when it comes to Internet connectivity, but also the issue of remittances.

On the latter, look, I'll say that technology is advancing every day. And in the example of

Venezuela, for example, we've actually been able to roll out licenses that have allowed, you know, the interim government to send money directly to people in Venezuela.

And so, what I think is really important here is we have looked at recommendations that even came out under the previous administration. They put together a Internet communications working group that issued a series of recommendations. We looked at those. But then, what we want to do is, we put together a U.S. government group together. They're going to consult with, you know, members of Congress, with the experts, and try to make some recommendations on how — on what's the best way to go forward.

The point here is — again, is maximizing the benefit to the Cuban people, and that really has to be the focus of everything that we do in this situation.

With regard to Internet connectivity, there are no silver bullets. If it's something that could be done easily, it would have been done already in places like Iran and in other closed regimes. You know, but — we see the access to — we see the censorship of information as a violation of human rights. And so we're going to explore every option possible to be able to guarantee that access to that information.

But also, in a — you know, in a transparent manner, what our Cuban democracy programs and our Google programs do is — is actually support, you know, civil society, artists, musicians to be able to do what they do without any sort of ideological objective, but just to do — practice their craft and — but that also includes access to information, the ability to communicate with each other, but also the importance of making sure that that the international community is not blind to the abuses and the crackdown that's being perpetrated by the Cuban regime.

Q Hello. Thank you for taking my question. Here at the White House, we've seen massive protests lately that included thousands of Cuban Americans who are asking for more action from this administration — that includes Republican legislators, as well.

I have two questions. The first one is: Is this administration — or the President, for that matter — meeting with any Republican legislators — not necessarily today, but maybe in the following days or in the previous days?

And also, can you give us full — not a full, but maybe like some — a list of the participants that are going to be taking part in this meeting with the President later on today?

And is the administration — has the administration a set plan towards Cuba? Or is it open to new ideas that might come out either from the participants today or from legislators in Congress?

Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, thanks for the question. So, look, we've been — we've been listening to the protesters, you know, when — I'm here on the weekends. And, you know, we've been listening to them and we've been talking to members of the community. And I will say that, when I say "we," I mean the administration.

The State Department has been regularly briefing members of Congress from the House and the Senate. And, of course, we — I think the dialogues that Congressman Richmond, that I have engaged in, but also at the State Department and others have been engaging in are to he — are to listen to Cuban Americans.

It's important to really listen to their voices and what they're calling for, and — but also to —

really to make sure that we keep the focus not on the United States or the conflict with the United States and Cuba, but rather on the Cuban people and the rights that they're demanding. And the focus the international community needs to be to stand up for them, to stand up for their rights, and to make sure that we're doing everything to support them, including, by any means, to prov- — you know, provide — efforts to provide humanitarian assistance.

As you know, those who are political dissidents are be — are abandoned by the government. They don't have access to basic necessities. They don't have access to hospital services. They're cut off — they and their families are cut off. And so, I think it's important for the international community to stand up for these people.

So, I mean, I guess — you asked if the President had already made up his mind on Cuba policy or if he's willing to hear more from the community. My response to that is that that's why he's holding these meetings, but also why he's receiving daily updates on the situation and why the State Department primarily has been engaging regularly with members of Congress to hear their views.

And that's why, for example, the remittance working group is one that is going to be engaging with members of Congress to try to get, you know, as much guidance as possible. I mean, I don't know — I think that answers your question.

Q Hi, good afternoon. Thanks for doing this call. Just to clarify, should we expect an announcement today on Internet access or on remittances or not?

And secondly, on the sanctions, I know you don't want to give information in advance of the OFAC release, but just a general question: How effective do you think that these sanctions on Cuban officials can be, since 50 years of embargo and sanctions have not succeeded in changing their (inaudible) behavior?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, no, on the second question, that's an important question. Look, what we're doing through these individual sanctions, as the President has said, is that we are focusing on individuals and entities that are involved in the crackdown and the violation of human rights by the regime. Part of it is to layer on sanctions, but the other one is to make sure that we are keeping these individuals in the spotlight not just on the international community, but that the Cuban people know that the United States is supporting them and is trying to defend them.

So, we're going to — as the President said, the sanctions are rolled out that — last week were just the beginning. And we're going to try to keep — we're going to do everything we can to keep Cuba on the front burner so that they can talk about — keep the conversation on the — on the rights of the Cuban people and their — and their right to manifest peacefully.

And so the other — sorry, what was the other question you had? I didn't get the first question.

Q Can you hear me?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, we can hear you. Sorry about that. Go ahead.

Q Oh, okay. Sorry. My question was whether we can expect an announcement today on —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q — (inaudible) remittances.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, thank you. So, look, we are going to be — we're going to be announcing a series of things. And, you know, those include efforts to improve Internet connectivity and other means to make sure that we are supporting the ability of the Cuban people to communicate with each other. And we see information as something that should be treated as a human right.

Q Thank you very much. To follow up on that: Are you going to be announcing anything on remittances? Are you going to be announcing anything on our diplomats going back to Havana and theirs coming back to Washington? And if the President wanted to hear from all points of view — at least you haven't mentioned any Republicans who are going to be present — is Senator Rubio or any other Republican members or senators going to be present?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great, thank you, Andrea.

So, he is going to be making — he is going to be making announcements on both. Either in the meeting or afterward, I think he's going to be — some of it he'll mention, you know, at the camera spray at the top. Some of it may come up at the meeting.

I think the focus is going to be on hearing from members of the community. And — but we do have plans to provide more information on the Remittance Working Group that he directed the U.S. government to form and plans for U.S. Embassy augmentation.

What I'll say is it that, look — given the protests of July 11th, it is important for U.S. diplomats to engage directly with the Cuban people. And if we can do that in a way that is — that ensures the safety of U.S. personnel, that is something that — that we will undertake. But we'll be able to say something more about that — the meeting.

So, what the focus of the meeting today — and the participants, and I can mention some of them — is — are members of the Cuban American community. They are going to be the ones that are going to be the main speakers here. And we invited the respective Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee to join the conversation as well.

But we're going to have individuals like Felice Gorordo, who is the CEO of eMerge Americas and has worked for Republican and Democratic administrations.

We're going to also be hearing from Yotuel Romero, who is the Grammy Award winning artist and activist that wrote the song "Patria y Vida."

We have, also, members of the religious community — Father Fernando Eduardo Heria, Director of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity of Cuba.

And actually, several other people have been — have been invited.

But again, in the conversations that we've been having, we've been meeting with people across the political spectrum and folks that have a range of views.

And so, I think it's going to be only the beginning of a regular engagement with the Cuban American community so that we can develop the right policies to support the Cuban people.

Thank you.

Q Hi. This is Anne Gearan with the Post. It — following on a couple of questions about the

Internet connectivity: I mean, can you give us some specifics here, please, about what might be possibilities?

I mean, one thing that's been reported is the potential to do balloons off the island. Other things that have been reported have been ways for the United States to direct Internet toward Cuba. Are those what's under discussion here? Can you help us out a little bit so that we have something that we can actually report at 3:45?

And secondly, on the Internet, is there anything that you all could do in terms of connectivity that could not be blocked by the regime? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, I can't offer you many details on what we're doing or what we're going to be announcing because I don't want to get ahead of the President. But what I'm saying is we've been — we heard, you know, the — Governor Ron DeSantis wrote a letter to the President. Senator Marco Rubio wrote a letter. We've been hearing also in our consultations with — the administration's consultations with members of Congress, and we've been exploring all those options.

So, the administration, (inaudible) the Department of Commerce, Department of Treasury, the FCC have been looking at what rulemaking authorizations, licenses we can provide that would allow any of those options to work. But we're looking at — when we're talking to private sector companies and looking at all the legal and technical restrictions to doing that, it's challenging because whether you're looking at satellite technology or balloons or anything, a lot of those signals are fairly easy to block. But we have to explore any and all options to — exhaust any and all options to provide Internet connectivity.

The other point I'll mention, just in terms of — and this is, obviously, open source information — is that the regime actually cut Internet for, I think, between 30 minutes and an hour, maybe a little bit more, and after that was involved in selective blocking of websites and areas where there were specific protests.

In that regard, there are tools and there's technology that civil society actors are able to use to circumvent censorship. There's been a dramatic increase in their use of VPN technology, (inaudible) proxies. And so all of those are — you know, it's all unclassified, it's all out there. And it's really about making sure that the Cuban American people have — or the Cuban people have the training and have the technical know-how and the tools to be able to do that.

And obviously, the goal is to support it so that the Cuban people can communicate with each other. And that information about the regime's abuses can make it out into the — and be seen by the international community.

So we have funds in the Open Technology Fund. There's work that we have with international partners. And so there are a lot of different options, and we're trying to exhaust all of them to make sure that we're doing everything possible to support those Cubans that are out in the streets — that were out in the streets demanding their rights.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And this is [senior administration official], and we're just about out of time. I just want to say thanks to everyone for joining, especially since I know we also have the briefing going on concurrently — the White House briefing.

As a reminder, this call is on background, attributable to "a senior administration official." The contents of the call are embargoed until 3:45. If you have any additional questions, feel free to reach out to me, and otherwise, have a great day.

2:56 P.M. EDT

Fuente: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/07/30/background-press-call-by-a-senior-administration-official-on-cuba/>