Department Press Briefing – October 22, 2021

NED PRICE, DEPARTMENT SPOKESPERSON
WASHINGTON, D.C.
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**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon, everyone. I apologize for starting a few minutes late. Thank you for bearing with us. A couple things at the top, and then I look forward to taking your questions.

Earlier today, President Biden authorized more than $976 million from the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance, or ERMA, funds to continue to support this fiscal year Operation Allies Welcome and related efforts by the Department of State. And that includes relocations of individuals at risk as a result of the situation in Afghanistan and related expenses. This is in addition to the 600 million in ERMA funds previously authorized by the President in Fiscal Year 2021 to address those requirements related to the effort through the end of this fiscal year, September 2021.

The United States also remains the largest single humanitarian donor to the Afghanistan response, providing nearly $330 million in humanitarian assistance in this fiscal year alone. We continue to monitor the situation and the growing humanitarian needs in Afghanistan and the region, and we are actively assessing our continued level of support.

Finally, we commend the hundreds of thousands of Sudanese who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of assembly yesterday and made their voices heard in the spirit of the 2019 revolution. The Sudanese people's continued commitment to engage in nonviolent political expression is a symbol of hope for the region and for the world. The task is now for the members of the transitional government to heed the expressed desires of the Sudanese people to adhere to the provisions of the constitutional declaration and the Juba peace agreement and move forward in a spirit of dialogue and partnership to build on the momentum of yesterday's demonstrations. We urge progress on key transitional benchmarks necessary to stabilize the transition and resolve political differences, solidifying Sudan's historic democratic transition.

And with that, Operator, if you want to repeat the instructions for asking questions, we'll move to questions.

**OPERATOR:** Ladies and gentlemen, as a reminder, if you'd like to ask a question, you may press 1 then 0 at this time.

**MR PRICE:** Okay, we will start with the line of Matt Lee.

**OPERATOR:** Mr. Lee, your line is now open.
QUESTION: Hello? Hello?

MR PRICE: Yes, we can hear you, Matt.

QUESTION: Okay. Welcome back. Three real quick ones.

One, do you have anything to say about Rob Malley’s meetings with the E3 in Paris today, how they went, if you guys are getting closer to some kind of common position on the way forward with Vienna?

Secondly, do you have any comment on the Israeli decision to label these six Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organizations?

And then lastly, and if you could take this because it’s a little bit off the beaten track, are you guys in Geneva opposing negotiations to develop a human rights treaty on business and human rights, or are you weighing in on this in any way to try to discourage others from doing so? And so if you don’t have an answer to that off the top, it would be great if you could send something out.

Thank you.

MR PRICE: Thanks, Matt. I very much appreciate the invitation to take the question, and I will gladly take you up on that.

To your other two questions, yes, Special Envoy for Iran Rob Malley is currently in France. He – this is the conclusion of a visit that also took him to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. He’ll return to Washington in just a couple days.

In the Gulf, Special Envoy Malley met and discussed with our partners a range of concerns with Iran, including its activities in the region and our attempt to negotiate a mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Following those consultations, the special envoy traveled to Paris. He met with his E3 counterparts there. He also met with his GCC counterparts.

I don’t want to get into the details of diplomatic discussions, but suffice to say that the United
States, the E3, the broader P5+1, is united in the belief that diplomacy continues to provide the most effective pathway to verifiably and permanently prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and we are united in the belief that negotiations should resume in Vienna as soon as possible and that they should resume precisely where they left off after the sixth round.

To your second question on Israel, what I can say is that we believe respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and a strong civil society are critically important to responsible and responsive governance. We’ll be engaging our Israeli partners for more information regarding the basis for these designations. The Israeli Government did not give the U.S. advance warning that they would be designated. Beyond that, we’d refer you to the Government of Israel for an explanation of their rationale for making these designations.

We’ll go to Jenny Hansler.

OPERATOR: Ms. Hansler, your line is now open.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. Ned, can you confirm how many Americans the State Department is in touch with in Afghanistan, and how many are seeking to leave the country with U.S. help?

And then separately, do you have any comment on the ongoing air strikes in Tigray by the Ethiopian Government? Thank you.

MR PRICE: Thanks, Jenny. So let me start with Afghanistan. And every time we get a question about numbers or tallies, it’s important to remind everyone that these figures are far from static. They are constantly changing. Any figure – any precise figure is nothing more than a momentary snapshot in time. Let me give you just one example of that.

Over the course of this week, there have been several flights with – departing Kabul International Airport with American citizens and LPRs on board. Last night we updated the number of U.S. citizens and LPRs whose departure the U.S. Government has facilitated since August 31st. With that update last night, we noted that we had facilitated the departure of 234 U.S. citizens and 144 lawful permanent residents, which – for those of you watching closely – entailed a significant jump from our last update of Americans we had – whose departure from Afghanistan we had successfully facilitated.

Now, that tally doesn’t include another flight that landed in Doha overnight, nor, of course, does
it include Americans who have left without direct U.S. Government assistance. When we have another updated tally in terms of Americans whose departure we have facilitated, we will provide that. Our consular team on the ground in Doha is meeting with the passengers and confirming the manifest at the moment.

Now, the same is true of Americans in Afghanistan who wish to leave and who are ready to do so. That number is always changing. To give you an example, at one point that number was below 100. Right now the number of Americans in that category is between approximately 100 to 200. That figure has risen in recent days as more Americans in Afghanistan have decided to depart in light of our successful facilitation of dozens of departures in recent weeks.

Again, our goal in all of this is to make flights out of Kabul more routine so that we are able to facilitate even more departures of Americans, of lawful permanent residents, of others to whom we have a special commitment in the coming days and the coming weeks. And we are committed to doing so.

We’ve also consistently said there’s a slightly larger universe of Americans with whom we’re in touch and who are not yet ready, for whatever reason, to leave. That number is also far from immutable as Americans reach out to us, and given the dynamic – the very dynamic nature of human decision-making. So we are continuing to be in touch with them. If their plans do change, we will be glad to help facilitate their departure from Afghanistan should they choose to leave.

In terms of Ethiopia, we – I issued a tweet on this recently. But let me just reiterate that we do remain gravely concerned by the escalating violence, by the expansion of fighting in northern Ethiopia and in regions throughout the country – and given the growing risk to the unity and the integrity of the Ethiopian state. Escalating fighting is so concerning in large part because it undermines efforts that are critical to keep civilians safe and to deliver humanitarian relief to those Ethiopians in dire need.

That’s why we have urged all parties to end hostilities immediately, and for the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF to enter into negotiations without preconditions toward a sustainable ceasefire. A ceasefire will help establish conditions for inclusive and credible dialogue to find a political settlement to longstanding grievances that, in many ways, have led to this conflict.

Let’s go to Nick Wadhams, please. Do we have Nick?
OPERATOR: Nick, your line is now open.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. And Ned, Happy Friday.

MR PRICE: That’s right.

QUESTION: Can you respond to the news in the last day or so, the Haitian gang leaders threatening to kill American hostages there – are you in any contact with these gangs? And what is the U.S. currently doing to try to get them out? Thanks.

MR PRICE: Thanks, Nick. So we’ve had occasion before to speak to the efforts on the part of the Department of State and our interagency partners that have been tireless since these reports first emerged more than – almost a week ago. We have said that the Department of State has sent additional personnel and resources to support efforts to get these U.S. citizens to safety. Our embassy team is in frequent contact with Haitian authorities at the highest levels. That includes those in the Haitian Government, the Haitian National Police. We’re in touch with Christian aid ministries, the Canadian Government, as well as the family members of the victims, and we’ll continue to work with them. We’ll continue to work with our interagency partners on what is very much an ongoing matter and an ongoing investigation.

When it does come to these matters generally, it is best that we not detail the steps we’re taking. Our focus, our sole focus right now is on bringing these individuals to safety. And we’ll continue to work towards that.

We’ll go to Simon Lewis, please.

OPERATOR: Mr. Lewis, your line is now open.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. Thanks, Ned. I wanted to ask about President Biden’s comments that he made during the CNN Town Hall last night. What is the State Department’s understanding of President Biden’s remarks when he said that the U.S. has a commitment to defend Taiwan if it’s attacked? What specifically is that commitment? And do the President’s words now mean that strategic ambiguity is over in relation to the to the Strait of Taiwan, over what the U.S. response might be in the event of an attack, and that you’ve now moved to something more like strategic clarity? Yeah, it would be good to get some clarity on that from State. Thank you.

MR PRICE: Okay. Thanks, Simon. I trust you’ve heard this from the White House, but – as they
have said, the President was not announcing any change in our policy, and there is no change in our policy. The U.S. defense relationship with Taiwan is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act. We will uphold our commitments under the act, we will continue to support Taiwan self-defense, and we'll continue to oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo. We remain committed to our “one China” policy, which is itself guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances.

When it comes to the Taiwan Relations Act, President Biden is deeply committed to it. In fact, he voted for the Taiwan Relations Act as a senator. And a principle of that act, the Taiwan Relations Act, is that the United States will continue to assist Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability. Another principle is that the United States would regard any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means as a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific and of grave concern to United States. That has been our approach since 1979, with the Taiwan Relations Act, and there's been no change to that.

We'll go to Shaun Tandon, please. Do we have Shaun Tandon?

OPERATOR: One moment, please. I do not see him in queue.

MR PRICE: Okay. Let's go – well, he might be back in queue. It looks like he just popped back in.

OPERATOR: Okay. And Mr. Tandon, your line is now open.

QUESTION: Hey there. Sorry about that, Ned. The – can I just follow up on a couple of my colleagues’ questions? Further to Matt's question on Rob Malley's meetings, he also met with a senior South Korean official, Mr. Choi. I was wondering if you have anything to say about that. Is there any – are we any closer to a resolution on what Iran wants with the unfreezing of assets there?

And further to Simon's question on Taiwan, in addition to what you said, I was wondering if you had any response more specifically to China's reaction to this, China saying that the United States needs to speak more cautiously about Taiwan. Do you have any response to the Chinese in terms of how you see the United States going forward in Taiwan beyond what you said? Thanks.

MR PRICE: Thanks, Shaun. So as you know, Special Envoy Malley routinely meets with our allies and partners around the world as we have sought to test the proposition that we can affect the
mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. As part of that, he has met on a number of occasions with his South Korean counterpart. Our South Korean allies are important across a range of fronts, and that includes with Iran. That includes with the enforcement of the sanctions regime that continues to be in place and will continue to be in place on Iran unless and until there is a negotiated return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. So his discussion with his South Korean counterpart is just the latest in a series of engagements that Special Envoy Malley has held on Iran with our South Korean allies.

When it comes to Taiwan, I don't have a response to what we have heard from the PRC. We have been nothing but clear when it comes to where we stand, and that is very simple: We remain committed to our “one China” policy, which itself, as I said before, is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances.

And with that, let's go to Nahal Toosi.

OPERATOR: Nahal Toosi, your line is now open.

QUESTION: Hi. Yes, thanks, Ned. Senator Ben Sasse released a statement today saying that the Biden administration has shamelessly and repeatedly lied about the number of Americans trapped behind Taliban lines, and it's – the allegation is basically that you guys were purposefully underplaying the number of Americans who are in Afghanistan. And I just want to know what your reaction to that is and if you could shed a little bit more light on exactly how you guys come up with the numbers, even though I understand they're not static? Thank you.

MR PRICE: Sure, thanks for the question, Halley. Let's get back to the issue I was discussing before, and there are really two separate issues here. One is the number of Americans whose departure we have facilitated from Afghanistan, and the second universe of Americans who remain in Afghanistan.

I think the – let me just reiterate what I said before. Last night we updated the number of Americans whose departure we had facilitated from Afghanistan since August 31st. In doing so, because there have been recent charter flights, because there have been recent instances of overland crossing, that number of American citizens, of U.S. citizens, whose departure we had facilitate jumped by more than a hundred. It went up by almost – it not quite doubled, but it was a substantial increase in that figure.
This is reflective of the fact that whether we are talking about Americans whose departure we are facilitating or Americans who remain in Afghanistan with whom we are continuing to work, that these numbers are not static. The – we will continue to facilitate the departure of additional Americans who wish to leave, just as we will continue to be in touch with Americans who remain in Afghanistan.

And within the latter category, the Americans who remain in Afghanistan, there are Americans who remain who are ready and able to leave the country; there are Americans who remain who are not yet in a position or who do not yet have a desire to leave the country. It is true that in recent weeks we have heard from Americans who previously had not made themselves known to us, or we had heard from Americans with whom we’d previously been in touch who decided to leave the country, in many cases precisely because they saw our proven ability to facilitate the departure via charter flights and other means of American citizens, of lawful permanent residents, who wish to leave the country.

So, as with Americans who are not yet ready to leave, with Americans who are ready and able to leave, we will continue to work with both groups. With the latter, we expect to have the opportunity to place many of them on flights in the coming days and weeks. As I said before, our goal in all of this is to make flights out of Kabul International Airport with U.S. citizens, with lawful permanent residents, with others to whom we have a special commitment routine, to lend a degree of automaticity to these operations so that we can readily facilitate the departure of Americans.

When it comes to the former category, Americans and lawful permanent residents who for whatever reason are not yet ready to leave, we will continue to be in touch with them. As their decision making evolves, we know that these are sometimes very difficult decisions because in many cases, if not most cases, these are Americans, these are U.S. citizens, these are lawful permanent residents who have been in Afghanistan for decades, in some cases generations. And so to make the decision to leave a country that many of them know as home, it is a decision that they do not come to lightly. So as their decision making evolves, we will stand ready to assist them should they choose to depart the country.

Let's go to Cindy Spang.
QUESTION: Thank you so much, Ned. I have a couple of Afghanistan questions. First of all, can you provide us any figures on the number of Afghans who are still waiting to leave who have been approved, Afghans who helped the United States? And about the – you said there were two separate flights. But about the privately organized charter flight which flew about 230 people from Kabul, is it true that it was privately organized but paid for the State Department? And is this perhaps a model for the future? Thank you.

MR PRICE: Thanks, Cindy. So to your second question, these – most of these flights that have departed Kabul with Americans, with lawful permanent residents and others on board, these have been operated by our partners. And so Qatar has been an indispensable partner in this. Every time we are alerted to the fact that our Qatari partners are in a position to dispatch another plane to Kabul International Airport, we’re in close touch with them to see to it that as many Americans and lawful permanent residents as possible can secure a seat on those flights.

When it comes to SIVs in Afghanistan, what I can say is that we are continuing to be in touch with SIV holders who are past a certain stage in the process. We do have a special commitment to these individuals, and they are absolutely a priority for the U.S. Government should they choose to leave Afghanistan. There are SIV applicants at different stages of the process. There are many who have not yet completed the process. We are – thousands of them have communicated with the National Visa Center about their potential eligibility, or in some cases have submitted new applications for chief-of-mission approval in recent weeks. And we’re working diligently to process new applications, including new applications that we’ve received only recently.

We are – some of these SIV holders have already departed Afghanistan independent of our assistance. Some were evacuated during the period of the U.S. Government evacuation, and those individuals are in the United States while others have not responded to our attempts to contact them. Regardless, we do have a special commitment to those who have served the U.S. Government, the American people over the years, and we’ll remain faithful to that commitment.

Let’s go to Conor Finnegan.

QUESTION: Hey, I have just two follow-ups. First, on Nick’s question about Haiti. Just to zoom in a little bit, with the protests this week, the rise in gang control, and the police chief’s resignation...
little bit, with the protests this week, the rise in gang control, and the police chief's resignation yesterday, do you still have confidence in Prime Minister Henry's government to stabilize the situation?

And then on Jenny's question, we see now near-daily bombings of the capital in Tigray. Is it time for the administration to do more than threaten sanctions and issue statements? Do you have any comment on the UN humanitarian flight that was unable to land today in the capital? And is Special Envoy Feltman going to head to Addis given his recent travel to Sudan? Thanks.

MR PRICE: Thanks, Conor. So on Haiti, what we are backing are the country's institutions. What we know is that Haiti's civil society, its political stakeholders, its diaspora leaders, its religious leaders, the private sector, need to come together to identify a Haitian-led solution for a path to elections when the conditions on the ground allow. We are not in the business of backing individuals. We are in the business of backing the institutions that set out the rules of the road for Haiti's democracy, and that is what we are supporting. And ultimately we're supporting the Haitian people in doing so.

As you know, Assistant Secretary Nichols has recently been in Haiti. Uzra Zeya, our under secretary here at the department, has also recently been there, as have other senior administration officials, to reinforce our support for Haiti's institutions, for Haiti's political processes, just as we have continued to take steps to attempt to reinforce Haiti's security sector, to reinforce the elements that will provide a greater degree of law and order in Haiti.

We do know that Haiti faces significant security challenges, and that is why our International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Bureau has continued to provide capacity-building assistance to the Haitian national police to support its development as a professional and accountable institution. We have provided hundreds of millions of dollars over the years. In recent weeks alone, we have allocated an additional $15 million to partnering with the Haitian National Police on top of existing efforts, and that includes $12 million specifically to strengthen the Haitian National Police's capacity to respond to gangs, including efforts with communities who resist gangs, additional anti-gang subject matter experts, and support to the Haitian National Police to establish an anti-gang task force. And we are looking at – we are determining the country's needs and looking at what more we might be in a position to do to support Haiti, to support the Haitian people going forward.
In terms of your question on Ethiopia, we are considering the full range of tools at our disposal to address the worsening crisis in northern Ethiopia, and that includes the use of financial sanctions. And I think you know, Conor, that last month we – the administration introduced an important new tool in the form of an executive order establishing a new sanctions regime that authorizes the Treasury Department – in consultation with us, the State Department – to impose sanctions in connection with the conflict, including on those in the Ethiopian Government, the Eritrean Government, the TPLF, the Amhara regional government, who are responsible for or complicit in prolonging the conflict, obstructing humanitarian access, or preventing a ceasefire. We are absolutely prepared to take action under this EO to impose targeted sanctions against those responsible for the ongoing crisis.

We are at the same time taking measures to mitigate any unintended effects of any sanctions imposed under this EO on the people of Ethiopia and the wider region. Even as we look at ways to potentially hold accountable the perpetrators of these acts, our cardinal rule is to do nothing that will – that would harm the people of Ethiopia. We also seek to ensure personal remittances to non-sanctioned persons, humanitarian assistance to at-risk populations, and longer-term assistance programs and commercial activities that address basic human needs continue to flow to Ethiopia and the greater Horn of Africa region through legitimate and transparent channels.

So we’re going to do – continue to do both things: to hold accountable those who are responsible for some of these atrocious acts, even as we continue to support the humanitarian needs and imperatives of the people of Ethiopia.

We’ll take a final question or two here. Let’s go to Barak Ravid.

OPERATOR: Barak, your line is now open.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) Yes, I – thank you. The Israeli Government announced earlier this week that it will approve soon the building and planning of 3,000 settlement units in the West Bank. Do you have any comment about that?

MR PRICE: Thanks, Barak. We are concerned about the announcement of a meeting next week to advance settlement units deep in the West Bank, and believe it is critical for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tension and undercut
efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution. This certainly includes settlement activity, as well as retroactive legalization of settlement outposts.

And let’s conclude with the line of Eunjong Cho.

**OPERATOR:** One moment, please. And your line is now open; thanks for your patience.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned, for taking my question. I have a question on North Korea. Earlier today at the UN General Assembly, Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea Tomás Quintana told a press conference that the UN Security Council should ease sanctions on North Korea as the country is facing food shortages. He said that sectoral sanctions on textiles and seafood should be eased, going beyond humanitarian exemptions currently in place. The U.S. is a P5 member. What is your reaction?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks for the question. Let me start by making the very simple point that when we think about and assess the humanitarian suffering of the people of the DPRK, the simple truth is that the DPRK regime itself is responsible for the humanitarian situation in the country. UN Security Council resolutions regarding the DPRK remain in effect and all UN member states are bound by their obligations under those resolutions.

Now, we are involved in efforts to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid to the neediest in the DPRK. This is evidenced in a number of areas, including in our ongoing work to expedite approvals in the UN’s 1718 committee for organizations from around the world to deliver lifesaving aid to the DPRK.

The bottom line is that even when we disagree with a government or a regime like the DPRK, we must work to the best of our ability to alleviate the suffering of that country’s people. That is why we continue to support international efforts aimed at the provision of critical humanitarian aid to the DPRK.

All right. With that, we will call it a day. Thank you all very much. I hope you have a nice weekend, and we’ll see some of you on Monday.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:57 p.m.)
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Independence Day

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