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Acting Deputy Department Spokesman

Daily Press Briefing

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TRANSCRIPT:

1:24 p.m. EDT

MR. TONER: Good afternoon. I just have one thing briefly to read to you at the top and then I will take your questions.

The United States remains concerned with the Iranian Government's continued persecution of Baha'is and other religious minority communities in Iran. We're deeply troubled about reports coming out of Iran that a 20-year sentence of the seven Baha'i leaders was reinstated on appeal by the prosecutor general, a man the United States recently imposed economic sanctions and a travel ban on for committing serious human rights violations. We condemn this unprecedented step as a violation of Iran's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

That's it. Go to your questions now.

QUESTION: What does the U.S. Government know about the circumstances surrounding the apparent defection of Musa Kusa?

MR. TONER: Well, I know that we were informed by the UK Government just prior to them going public about his departure. I can tell you that Assistant Secretary Jeff Feltman was not a part of the process to broker his departure, and the State Department played no role in these efforts.

QUESTION: Well, was there any – notwithstanding the State Department, was there any U.S. Government involvement?

MR. TONER: Not that I'm aware of.

QUESTION: And when was the last time that you are aware that a U.S. official had any contact with –

MR. TONER: Last weekend, I believe.

QUESTION: And that was who?

MR. TONER: Jeff Feltman.

QUESTION: Okay, and who did –

MR. TONER: If that's different, if there's anything, I'll update --

QUESTION: Okay. And then who –

MR. TONER: -- but I believe it was Assistant Secretary Feltman last week.

QUESTION: Who did the Brits inform?

MR. TONER: That's – just let me see if I have – that was Assistant Secretary Feltman.

QUESTION: While he was still in London?

MR. TONER: I believe so. He departed London last – yesterday, so, yeah, that would make sense.

QUESTION: Well, okay. So the – I was –

MR. TONER: He was informed of by the – he was informed of the news by his British counterpart.

QUESTION: Okay. I guess we can talk about the timing of that afterwards, because I thought he was on a plane last night.

MR. TONER: He was on a plane last night, and we will talk about – I don't know. I'm not very good when it comes to international datelines.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. TONER: Great. Sure.

QUESTION: Our correspondent in Libya says that there are confirmed reports that State Department officials are in Tobruk and Benghazi to negotiate with the opposition forces. Do you – can you confirm?

MR. TONER: They're reporting that State Department officials are there?

QUESTION: Yes. Correct.

MR. TONER: To my knowledge, there's no State Department officials in – you're talking about eastern Libya?

QUESTION: Tobruk and Benghazi.

MR. TONER: Tobruk and Benghazi. Not that I'm aware of, no. We've always – we've said in the last few days, and indeed the last weeks, that we're trying to get our envoy into eastern Libya, but that's still dependent on the security situation. As far as I'm aware, that has not changed, that status has not changed.

Yeah. Sure, David.

QUESTION: Not directly down your alley, but China has issued a white paper, policy statement, really about their strategic policy – no first use of nuclear weapons, pledging transparency, that sort of thing. Any response to that?

MR. TONER: Well, you're right; it's not entirely in our bailiwick, and I would refer you to the Department of

Defense if you want to drill down a bit more. But just speaking broadly, a healthy, stable, and reliable military-to-military relationship with China is an important component of the overall bilateral relationship. Goes without saying. And that's obviously been affirmed by both President Obama and Secretary Gates.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MR. TONER: Yeah. Sure, Kirit.

QUESTION: Just real quick?

MR. TONER: We can go back to Musa Kusa.

QUESTION: Have you spoken to him since he left the country?

MR. TONER: I don't believe so. I don't believe -- I know he's been -- I know he's been talking, obviously, to the Brits, but --

QUESTION: Do you have any plans to do so? Has anybody put in a request to meet with him?

MR. TONER: I would -- I can't predict that. I don't know.

QUESTION: What could be his --

QUESTION: Just to follow up on it, it came up in Steinberg's hearing this morning but he didn't really have an answer about whether the U.S. had planned to talk to him about Lockerbie and so forth.

MR. TONER: Well, what I can say about that is we're committed to seeing that justice is served concerning the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, and so we're coordinating closely with the Department of Justice as we move forward. And I would refer you to them, really, for more details. But if there's relevant information, if he has it, we'll certainly inquire about it.

QUESTION: And if Musa Kusa wanted to come to the United States, is that something you'd be open to?

MR. TONER: We've not been asked. We've not received any information that he's interested. So I don't have an answer for that.

QUESTION: Is he welcome?

MR. TONER: I think what's clear is that he is -- is that there's no -- as Secretary Hague -- UK Secretary Hague made clear that there's not being offered any kind of immunity from international justice. Where he eventually ends up, I have no idea.

QUESTION: Mark, what is his --

QUESTION: I'm sorry, one last one.

MR. TONER: That's okay.

QUESTION: Sure.

QUESTION: I'm slow today.

MR. TONER: You sound like Colombo. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: One more thing. (Laughter.) There were some reports about maybe -- or the reason he left was due to health concerns. Did you have any insight into that at all?

MR. TONER: No, look, this is -- we believe is a significant development. It clearly shows that those around Qadhafi, even his most loyal followers and compatriots, are reassessing their situation, are looking at the pressure that's being applied and what their delegitimized leader is doing against his own civilians, and questioning whether they want to be a part of that.

QUESTION: But you have nothing on -- nothing on his health?

MR. TONER: Nothing on his health.

Jill.

QUESTION: What's his value, would you say, to the United States, to the coalition? What can he help with?

MR. TONER: Well, he's obviously been a part of the Qadhafi regime for many, many years. I obviously don't want to talk about what conversations we may be having with him and what kind of intelligence we may be able to gather from him, but he certainly has a wealth of information to share should he decide to.

Go ahead.

QUESTION: Do you believe that he was really part of Qadhafi's inner circle in the past few weeks, or was he being gradually pushed out?

MR. TONER: I truly don't know. I mean, we don't – again, we didn't have – we weren't in the room. We don't know what the situation is. I mean, those are probably relevant details that he can provide. But he's certainly a longtime member of the Qadhafi regime. That goes without saying.

QUESTION: Any other defections coming up that you want to --

MR. TONER: Not that I'm aware of.

QUESTION: Anything you're optimistic about?

MR. TONER: Not that I can confirm. But look, I mean, it sends – there's – as I just said to Kirit, it clearly indicates that people are thinking twice and even three times about their position.

QUESTION: Can you say just to close the loop on some of the reporting what the Secretary said about people in the regime reaching out? Now that he has left, can you confirm or say that he was one of the people that had had some conversation either with the U.S. or with other countries about finding a way out?

MR. TONER: I don't know about other countries. What I can say characterizing his conversations – and this is something that Assistant Secretary Feltman alluded to as well – is that he was in contact with us, but at no point were we sort of – did it come up that he was considering leaving the regime.

QUESTION: Well, can you tell us a little bit more about what you talked about?

QUESTION: Did you encourage – yeah, did you encourage him to –

MR. TONER: I think we made our viewpoint very clear to him. I believe Assistant Secretary Feltman was clear in our assessment of the situation and our desire to see Qadhafi go and that, in fact, that these people – these individuals, his regime would be held accountable for their – so, I mean, yes, in the sense that we made the argument that he was part of a regime that was going nowhere.

QUESTION: And can you take the extra step and say that you told him that he should –

MR. TONER: I don't know – I can't take that extra step because I don't know. I have not seen a transcript of the conversation, nor was I in the room.

QUESTION: So, Mark, just to make sure –

MR. TONER: Yeah.

QUESTION: When you say we made the argument, that argument to him directly?

MR. TONER: We conveyed our position, sure. I believe Assistant Secretary Feltman said that. He said he both listened to Musa Kusa when he called him and expressed our viewpoint, our position.

Go ahead, David.

QUESTION: Mark, just in the weeds a little bit –

MR. TONER: I count on you for that, David. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: The president of Armenia made a visit to Iran this past week and they signed some agreements, including energy cooperation deals. I was just wondering whether you had anything to say.

MR. TONER: Again, I'd have to look at those agreements and see what they were – entailed. I don't have details on it. Our position about doing business with Iran has been made many times, when Iran fails to come clean about its nuclear program, but I don't know what they – what transpired. I'll try to do some

research on that and get back to you.

Sure.

QUESTION: Will high officials like Musa Kusa who defect face the criminal court, for example?

MR. TONER: Well, maybe I didn't spell it out, but 1970 clearly defers the situation in Liberia – or in Libya, forgive me – to the ICC and the prosecutor's office there. So in that sense, yes, they'll have to answer whatever charges the ICC deems appropriate.

QUESTION: Even those who defect?

MR. TONER: I mean, there's no – Foreign Secretary Hague said that he's not being offered any immunity.

That it?

QUESTION: Any update on –

MR. TONER: So close. Sorry. What – update on?

QUESTION: Anything new on the continued violence in Syria?

MR. TONER: Nothing beyond my – or my – our assessment of Asad's speech yesterday, but we're obviously watching events closely. I know there's large demonstrations planned for tomorrow, and we would just reiterate our call that the Syrian Government allow peaceful demonstrations to take place.

Great.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. TONER: Thank you, everyone.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:34 p.m.)

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