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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 6/1/10
James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

MR. GIBBS: Mr. Feller.

Q Sir. Two topics I'd like to ask you about, Robert. On the Mideast, does President Obama condemn Israel's raid of the aid ship headed to Gaza?

MR. GIBBS: Well, Ben, let me simply restate what the international community and the United States supported early this morning at the U.N. Security Council through a presidential statement. The Security Council deeply regrets the loss of life and injuries resulting from the use of force during the Israeli military operation in international waters against the convoy sailing to Gaza. The Council in this context condemns those acts, which resulted in the loss of at least 10 civilians and many wounded, and expresses its condolences to their families. The Security Council requests the immediate release of the ships, as well as civilians held by Israel.

Q So that would seem to cover President Obama's personal feeling, while some of the allies are looking for a stronger statement from him directly.

MR. GIBBS: Again, this is supported not just by the United States but by the international community.

Q And does the President feel like he is still in a position of gathering facts about what happened or have you ascertained enough to --

MR. GIBBS: Well, the Security Council, the statement that I read, calls for an investigation that is prompt, impartial, credible and transparent, conforming to international standards of exactly what happened. And we're obviously supportive of that.

Q Okay, and in light of what happened with the Gaza aid flotilla, is the President considering at least backing international calls to lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip by Israeli forces?

MR. GIBBS: No. Well, look, obviously, as we have said before, we are concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza and continue to work with the Israelis and international partners in order to improve those conditions. And as the U.N. Security Council statement says, obviously it's an untenable situation.

Q Should the blockade be lifted?

MR. GIBBS: Again, we're working with those to improve the humanitarian conditions. I do think it's helpful to understand that this is a blockade of -- to not allow weapons to get into the hands of Hamas.

Q And humanitarian aid.

MR. GIBBS: And we have said that -- well, I'll just leave it at that.

Q And what are the President's concerns that the Gaza incident -- the flotilla incident might -- has poisoned the atmosphere to the extent that indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians won't go forward? Will there be delay of some sort here?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I would say, obviously we're -- the President spoke on three occasions yesterday with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and obviously we regret that but understand completely why he went back to Israel and had to cancel the meeting.

The schedule for Mr. Abbas coming is still the same. And we think more than ever we need a comprehensive Middle East peace plan.

Q Mitchell is back in the region tomorrow, I believe --

MR. GIBBS: He is.

Q -- for the Palestine Investment Conference. Will he be shuttling between Abbas and Netanyahu for talks?

MR. GIBBS: Let me get -- I don't off the top of my head know his schedule, but I'll -- let me see if I have anything additional to --

Q But you expect indirect talks will go forward?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Okay.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, sir.

Q Does President Obama believe the Israelis' version of events?

MR. GIBBS: I'm sorry?

Q Does President Obama believe -- does he believe the Israeli government's version of events?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, Jake, I'd refer you to the U.N. Security Council resolution calling for an investigation so that everybody knows exactly what happened.

Q Let's talk about that investigation. Is it important that it be run by the Israelis? Does the President want the international community to be involved in the investigation?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I would say that -- obviously what I said earlier, the resolution calls for a prompt and transparent investigation. Obviously we are open to ways to assure a credible investigation, including international participation.

Q And there were Americans on the flotilla. Has there been any -- do you have any information about whether any of them were hurt? There was an unconfirmed report that an American student lost an eye in the incident. Do you know anything?

MR. GIBBS: I think we're in contact with the Israelis in order to get an accounting as to whether any American citizens -- obviously American citizens were -- acting as private citizens -- were on some of these ships. We're working with the Israelis to determine if any of those individuals were injured, and as the resolution says, would call on the Israelis to release both the ships and any of those people.

Q Is the President concerned at all that after all his work to repair relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world that a situation like this destroys it overnight?

MR. GIBBS: The U.S. relationship with the Muslim --

Q The U.S. relationship with the Muslim world by standing so steadfastly with Israel?

MR. GIBBS: No, again -- again, I would point you to -- I think it was a pretty clear statement by the international community that the United States --

Q I wouldn't call it that -- I mean, it condemns acts that were taken that led to the loss of life, but it doesn't say whose acts. It could have been the flotilla's acts, or it could have been the IDF's acts. It's not clear from that statement.

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think our opinion is this is a pretty clear statement, and obviously --

Q Whose acts -- whose acts are you talking about in that statement? Is it the IDF or is it the --

MR. GIBBS: Again, we're talking about series of facts that will be determined by an appropriate investigation as I just said.

Q Okay, so there's no specificity as to whose acts it's condemning?

MR. GIBBS: Well, maybe you have information as to exactly how this went this down that the rest of the international community may not be completely clear on, Jake. But, again, I'm saying, and let me get --

Q Well, it looks like you don't even know what -- you don't know what happened.

MR. GIBBS: We can play circular ball all day long, Jake. Obviously we condemn the loss of life and we regret it deeply. I think that is knowable, correct?

Q That's correct.

MR. GIBBS: Okay, good. So I would simply say -- reiterate what is in the statement. In terms of our relationship with the Muslim world, I think the President has obviously spent a lot of time on improving our relationship with countries throughout the world, and special time and care on our relationship with the Muslim world. I do not think that this will have a great impact on that.

Q The -- our initial reaction to this flotilla massacre, deliberate massacre, an international crime, was pitiful. What do you mean you regret when something should be so strongly condemned? And if any other nation in the world had done it, we would have been up in arms. What is the sacrosanct, iron-clad relationship where a country that deliberately kills people and boycotts -- and we aid and abet the boycott?

MR. GIBBS: Look, I think the initial reaction regretted the loss of life as we tried and still continue to try to gather the relevant --

Q Regret won't bring them back.

MR. GIBBS: Nothing can bring them back, Helen. We know that for sure because I think if you could, that wouldn't be up for debate. We are -- we believe that a credible and transparent investigation has to look into the facts. And as I said earlier, we're open to international participation in that investigation.

Q Why did you think of it so late?

MR. GIBBS: Why did we think of --

Q Why didn't you initially condemn it?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I think the statements that were released speak directly to that.

Q Recognizing you're in fact-ascertaining mode, let's take some facts not in dispute -- the ship was boarded in international waters. Do you think Israel violated international law in doing that? Does the administration think so?

MR. GIBBS: I have not asked -- I'm not an international law expert.

Q Correct. Does the administration have a position on that?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know the answer to that.

Q Was it appropriate, do you think -- does the administration think for a humanitarian ship to attempt to break a blockade?

MR. GIBBS: Look, I'm not going to get into the international law implications of all this, Savannah. I think the administration --

Q I'm just asking was it appropriate for a humanitarian ship --

MR. GIBBS: -- and international community has spoken on the actions and look forward to a full accounting of the facts.

Q So rather than the U.S. having an independent reaction, you're aligning yourself entirely with the U.N. Security Council's statement. Does that mean the U.S. ratifies and accepts everything coming out of the Security Council in this regard?

MR. GIBBS: Things we vote for, yes. I mean, we supported the -- what came out of the U.N. Security Council.

Q So verbiage about there being a humanitarian crisis in Gaza --

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q -- and the blockade needs to be looked into?

MR. GIBBS: There's not -- we didn't -- we don't always support the first several paragraphs. We supported and voted for the entire resolution, yes.

Q Would you concede that the notion of boarding a vessel in order to stop it from breaking the blockade was poorly conceived?

MR. GIBBS: Savannah, you're asking me to be a -- I am many things; I am not an international law expert and I am not a military tactician.

Q I'm just trying to get the administration's position.

MR. GIBBS: Again, I serve some roles but neither -- I've never been in a military where I've been asked my opinion on either international law --

Q Well, obviously I'm asking for the administration's position.

MR. GIBBS: I don't have anything to add.

Q Thank you. It's pretty obvious that there was tragic over-reaction on both sides, but could you please look into two competing conflicting reports -- one report says Hamas and some terrorist groups provided the financing for this flotilla; another report claims that Israel has actually been giving a lot of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. If you could look into both of those before --

MR. GIBBS: Let me see if there's any direction that we have on either one of those.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Did the U.S. know in advance about the Israel raid on the --

MR. GIBBS: No.

Q And part of the Indonesia trip is going to be about Muslim outreach. How will that be shaped given this latest news?

MR. GIBBS: Look, obviously Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. It is important to our efforts and we work in conjunction with them on counterterrorism and a whole host of issues of mutual concern. That trip -- I'm not aware of any change in the planning for what will be done on that trip as a result of this.

Q When President Obama spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu, did he just suggest the time has come to either change or alter the embargo --

MR. GIBBS: I can check on that. I don't know the answer to that off the top of my head.

Q And was the United States blind-sided by this incident? Certainly a lot of other countries including Turkey knew that this flotilla was headed --

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think the question that I took earlier, just to be clear, was, did we have knowledge of the military operation. And the answer to that was no. Obviously, this is not the first flotilla that has happened. So, again, my answer previously was based on previous knowledge of the military operation, which the President did not have.

Q And when do you think Prime Minister Netanyahu might come back? And what -- and how about President Abbas' visit next week?

MR. GIBBS: Well, that's on schedule I think the 9th of June, if I'm not mistaken.

Q There's no reason to cancel that?

MR. GIBBS: No, not at all. That schedule is moving forward. For the Israeli answer, obviously, he's got an open invitation. But I would direct the scheduling -- the particulars of that schedule to their government.

Q Egypt has apparently opened the -- one of the entrances to Gaza now in response to this to allow more traffic in and out. Does the United States think that's a good idea?

MR. GIBBS: Let me check with NSC. Again, I understand that we have -- we do have concerns about the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Q Can I follow on that?

MR. GIBBS: Sure.

Q The aid ship the Rachel Corrie is scheduled to arrive in Gazan waters tomorrow.

MR. GIBBS: I'm sorry --

Q The aid ship the Rachel Corrie is scheduled to arrive in Gazan waters tomorrow and the Israelis are planning to intercept it. Would you consider calling on them not to do that?

MR. GIBBS: Let me get some information on the extent of that --

Q Will you get back to us on that?

MR. GIBBS: Sure, I will find that answer out.

Q Does the President believe that Israel is becoming a burden politically to the United States --

MR. GIBBS: I'm sorry, what was the question?

Q Does the President believe that Israel is becoming a political burden to the United States?

MR. GIBBS: Based on? Based on? No. Let me be clear here. The United States and Israel -- as I have said on countless occasions, we have a trusted relationship. They are an important ally and we are greatly supportive of their security. That's not going to change.

Q How about the Palestinians' security?

Q A quick follow. Does the President believe that Mr. Netanyahu is in control of his government? And finally, what does this situation --

MR. GIBBS: That's not for me to talk about, Margaret. I'm happy to try to convey information but I don't have an answer to that.

Q Well, what does the situation do to U.S. relations with Turkey, specifically? Can you talk about that?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, the President spoke with Prime Minister Erdogan seven to 10 days ago. They had a good conversation about things like Iran. I anticipate that in the coming days the President and Prime Minister will talk again. Obviously they're an important friend in all this and a relationship that we value greatly.

Q They have not spoken in the wake of this?

MR. GIBBS: They have not spoken, no. I know that they have not.