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Briefing by Senior Administration Officials to Update Recent Events in Libya

Special Briefing
Office of the Spokesperson
Via Teleconference
Washington, DC
September 12, 2012

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Thank you, Operator, and thanks to all of our journalists for joining us on this very, very difficult day. We thought it was important to give you a little bit more information about what we knew when we knew it to help shape your understanding of the tragic events in Benghazi. Here with me I will hereafter be Senior Administration Official Number One. That's [title withheld]. I also have with me [Senior Administration Official Two], hereafter Senior Administration Official Number Two. And we also have [Senior Administration Official Three], hereafter Senior Administration Official Number Three.

Let me just give you some framing points. First of all, we want to make clear that we are still here today operating within the confusion of first reports. Many details of what happened in Benghazi are still unknown or unclear. The account we're going to give you endeavors to reconstruct the events of last night to the best of our ability now. And again, this reflects our current accounting of events. These are first reports, and so the facts could very well change as we get a better understanding.

Let me also give you a little better understanding about our office conditions in Benghazi. The facility that we are working in is an interim one. We originally acquired the property before the fall of Qadhafi. It includes a main building and several ancillary buildings, and then there was also an annex a little bit further away.

So let me give you a little bit of the chronology to the best of our knowledge. Again, the times are likely to change as it becomes a little bit more precise, but this is how we've been able to reconstruct what we have from yesterday.

At approximately 4 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time yesterday, which was about 10 p.m. in Libya, the compound where our office is in Benghazi began taking fire from unidentified Libyan extremists. By about 4:15, the attackers gained access to the compound and began firing into the main building, setting it on fire. The Libyan guard force and our mission security personnel responded. At that time, there were three people inside the building: Ambassador Stevens, one of our regional security officers, and Information Management Officer Sean Smith. They became separated from each other due to the heavy, dark smoke while they were trying to evacuate the burning building. The Regional Security Officer made it outside, and then he and other security personnel returned into the burning building in an attempt to rescue Chris and Sean. At that time,

they found Sean. He was already dead, and they pulled him from the building. They were unable, however, to locate Chris before they were driven from the building due to the heavy fire and smoke and the continuing small arms fire.

At about 4:45 our time here in Washington, U.S. security personnel assigned to the mission annex tried to regain the main building, but that group also took heavy fire and had to return to the mission annex. At about 5:20, U.S. and Libyan security personnel made another attempt and at that time were able to regain the main building and they were able to secure it. Then, due to continued small arms fire, they evacuated the rest of the personnel and safe havened them in the nearby annex.

The mission annex then came under fire itself at around 6 o'clock in the evening our time, and that continued for about two hours. It was during that time that two additional U.S. personnel were killed and two more were wounded during that ongoing attack.

At about 8:30 p.m. our time here in Washington, so now 2 o'clock in the morning in Libya, Libyan security forces were able to assist us in regaining control of the situation. At some point in all of this – and frankly, we do not know when – we believe that Ambassador Stevens got out of the building and was taken to a hospital in Benghazi. We do not have any information what his condition was at that time. His body was later returned to U.S. personnel at the Benghazi airport.

Later that evening, we were able to bring our chartered aircraft from Tripoli into Benghazi to evacuate all of our Benghazi personnel back to Tripoli. This evacuation, which had to occur in a couple of planeloads, included all of our American Benghazi personnel, including the three wounded, and the remains of our fallen colleagues. They are now in the process – that same staff – of being evacuated to Germany. The staff that is well is going to stay in Europe on standby for a while while we assess the security situation in the coming period. The wounded will be treated in Germany, and the remains will come home, and we'll advise you of when that will be as soon as we know.

In the meantime, we have taken our Embassy in Tripoli down to emergency staffing levels. We have reduced the staff down to what we call emergency staffing levels. And we have requested increased support from the Libyans while we assess the security situation.

I would also like to advise you that last night, all of our diplomatic posts around the world were ordered to review their security posture and to take all necessary steps to enhance it if those were deemed necessary. I'd like to now turn it over to Senior Administration Official Number Three for some remarks on what his agency has been up to.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Thank you, [Senior Administration Official One]. Along with President Obama and Secretary Clinton, Secretary Panetta condemns the attack on the U.S. diplomatic facility in Benghazi in the strongest possible terms. The Secretary also extends his deepest sympathies to the families of the victims and to the entire State Department family.

General Carter Ham, Commander, U.S. Africa Command, briefed the Secretary on the situation last night, and the Secretary has received regular updates since then. DOD is working closely with the White House and State Department to provide all necessary resources to support the security of U.S. personnel in Libya. This support includes a Marine Corps fleet antiterrorism security team based out of Europe. The mission of this team is to secure the diplomatic facility in Tripoli, our Embassy, and protect U.S. citizens as needed.

DOD is also providing support to evacuate American personnel and casualties out of Libya. Those individuals and the remains of our fallen colleagues will arrive, if they haven't already done so, at Ramstein Landstuhl in Germany.

In closing, let me just say that the Department of Defense is ready to respond with additional military measures as directed by the President. Back to you, [Senior Administration Official One].

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Thanks very much, [Senior Administration Official Three]. We have, unfortunately, lost [Senior Administration Official Two]. He had to go off to another meeting. You can imagine how busy he has been. So why don't we go right to your questions. Operator, please take the first one.

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to ask a question, please press * then 1 on your touchtone phone. You will hear a tone indicating you have been placed in queue. You may remove yourself from queue at any time by pressing the # key. If you are using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, if you would like to ask a question, please press * then 1 at this time.

And the first question is from Elise Labott with CNN. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Well, I have a couple of questions, if you would. And again, all of our condolences on what happened today. I was wondering if you can talk about now how – I know Secretary Clinton said that this would not affect how the U.S. dealt with the Libyans, and that you would move forward. But certainly, it must make you start to think about any precipitous rush to support groups in any other countries such as Syria or the like because of the uncertainty of who is on the ground.

And then I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about Chris Stevens' personal security and how his personal detail could have been separated from him. I mean, his personal detail's number one responsibility is to protect their package, and so it just seemed – I just would like more clarity on how he got out of the building and then went back to find him. Why didn't he just keep staying in the building looking for him? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Let me start with the last question first, Elise. I think you can understand that I'm not going to go into detail about how his security detail was organized. I think in the accounting that I gave, I made clear that security personnel were endeavoring to get him out of the building when they got separated by the incredibly thick smoke and fire – if you've seen the pictures from the building you can have some sense of how awful

the conditions were – and that they then turned right back around, got more help, and went back in to look for him. So this was really a quite – a heroic effort.

With regard to your larger question, as the Secretary said very clearly today, we are as committed today as we have ever been to a free and stable Libya. That is still in America's interest. And we are going to continue to work very strongly to help them have the future that they want and they deserve. I would simply note how quickly and how strongly senior members of the Libyan government came forward to condemn this attack, to offer all support to us.

I'd also like to underscore that it was Libyan security forces that stood with ours in defending our buildings. We also had some – one of the local militias who is friendly to the Embassy came to assist as well. And I think that really speaks to the relationship that we've built with Libya. Thank you.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Arshad Mohammed with Reuters. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Can you explain to us whether you know whether Ambassador Stevens was alive when he was removed and taken to the Libyan hospital or not? And secondly, there are suggestions that he died as a result of smoke inhalation. Do you know if that is indeed what was his proximate cause of death?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Well, thank you, Arshad. Frankly, we are not clear on the circumstances between the time that he got separated from his – from the rest of the group inside the burning building, to the time that we were notified that he was in a Benghazi hospital. And again, we were not able to see him until his body was returned to us at the airport.

You can imagine that we will not be able to say anything about the cause of death until we've had a chance to perform an autopsy.

OPERATOR: Andrea Mitchell with NBC News is next. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing this and especially at such a terrible time for all of you. Can you expand on the regular security for the Ambassador? I know you don't usually talk about security, but you can imagine how people want these details now in terms of, was it diplomatic security? Were they all RSOs? How long had he been in Benghazi? Give us a little bit more of his movements that day.

And secondly, there's a lot of reporting now on this being linked to a terror attack, an organized terror attack – possibly al-Qaida sympathetic or al-Qaida linked. Can you speak to that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Operator, is the call ongoing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: I'm sorry, it looks like I had a – I was on mute there for a while. I was going on and on on mute. I apologize. So Andrea, to your first question: Frankly, we are not in a position to speak any further to the perpetrators of this attack. It was clearly a complex attack. We're going to have to do a full investigation. We are

committed to working with the Libyans both on the investigation and to ensure that we bring the perpetrators to justice. The FBI is already committed to assisting in that, but I just – we're – it's just too early to speak to who they were and if they might have been otherwise affiliated beyond Libya.

With regard to Chris's trip to Benghazi, as you know, he made regular and frequent trips to Benghazi so that he could check up on developments in the east. You know that he had been our representative – the Secretary's representative and the President's, to the Transitional National Council before the fall of Qadhafi and had spent a lot of time in Benghazi and built deep contacts there. So this was one of his regular visits that he made periodically.

With regard to the security arrangements, I think you will understand that we never talk in detail about how our security is arranged. And we particularly don't talk about security arrangements for – personal security arrangements for senior level personnel.

What I can tell you is that security in Benghazi included a local guard force outside of the compound on which we rely, which is similar to the way we are postured all over the world. We had a physical perimeter barrier, obviously. And then we had a robust American security presence inside the compound, including a strong component of regional security officers. But I'm not going to go any further than that on the specifics.

Next question, operator.

OPERATOR: Josh Rogin with Foreign Policy is next. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. First, just one point of clarification. Can you tell us what time in the timeline that Ambassador Stevens was delivered to you at the airport? But the larger question is, you didn't talk at all about the protests. You started your timeline with that the firing began. Can you talk about the timeline of when the protests started, how that fit in with it, and your sense of whether or not the protestors and the assailants were the same?

And a question for Senior Administration Official Number Three, I believe, who talked about the mission of the forces there: You said they were there to protect the Embassy. Does that mean that – are you saying clearly that they will not be involved in the search for the perpetrators? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: With regard to when we gained possession of Ambassador Stevens' body, it was extremely late our time. I think it was already dawn in Libya, but I just don't have a precise time for you, Josh.

With regard to the protests – I assume you're not talking about protests in Cairo, are you? You're talking about protests in Benghazi?

OPERATOR: He is back in the main conference.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Okay. We frankly don't have a full picture of what may have been going on outside of the compound walls before the firing began. So I really just don't have any specifics on that at the moment. I apologize.

Let's take the next one.

OPERATOR: Jill Dougherty with CNN is next. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. One – [Senior Administration Official One], one thing that is not completely clear, and I don't know whether you can answer it at this point, there is some confusion about whether he, the Ambassador, was directly targeted or whether he just happened to be there when this attack took place. Can you answer that?

And then also, just one more point about the lack of clarity about what happened after he became separated and then his body was at the hospital. Do you know how he was transported? I mean, I think the Secretary said Libyans took him to the hospital. Could you just try to clarify that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: On your first question, I really can't speak to it. We just are not in a position to say at the moment. Obviously, as we said, there's going to have to be a full investigation, and presumably some of these things will come to light.

There are reports out there that I cannot confirm that he was brought to the hospital by Libyans who found him. Obviously, he had to get there somehow. No Americans were responsible for that. But again, I'm not in the position to confirm because we frankly don't know how he got from where Americans last saw him. And again, we were told that he was at the hospital, but we didn't see him there ourselves. I'm sorry if it's frustrating.

[Senior Administration Official Three], was there something from Josh that went to you that we didn't answer?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Yes, just briefly. And Josh, thanks for the question. The fleet's antiterrorism security teams that we deploy when requested are responsible for the protection of Embassy personnel and property, and they also play a role in the evacuation of personnel, as required.

On the second part of your question, whether or not U.S. military personnel will be involved in future operations to track down the perpetrators of this attack, I'm simply not going to speculate on what may or may not be in the works in the future.

Back to you, [Senior Administration Official One].

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Let's take the next one, Operator.

OPERATOR: Tom Bowman with National Public Radio is next. Please, go ahead, sir.

QUESTION: Thanks for doing this. Listen, there've been troubles in Benghazi for some time now. I understand the Consulate was attacked or bombed two, three months ago. The British have put out threat warnings about Benghazi. Was there any consideration before the attack yesterday of beefing up security there?

And the other thing is, the head of Diplomatic Security at the Consulate, as things started getting worse and worse there, the whole situation started going south, did he try to get a quick reaction force of some kind from the U.S.? Did he believe the Libyan forces were sufficient? Did he do anything to try to get more help?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Well, again, I'm not going to get into the specifics of how we were postured in terms of security at our mission in Benghazi beyond what I said. So – because we don't ever talk about the details of those kinds of things.

What I would say, though, is that we did, as we did in missions around the world, review the security there in the context of preparing for the anniversary of September 11th. And at that point, there was no information and there were no threat streams to indicate that we were insufficiently postured.

Let's take the next one, Operator.

OPERATOR: Justin Fishel with Fox News is next. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. I have two quick questions. Do you believe that this attack was in any way related to the incident in Cairo? You suggested this attack in Benghazi was more complex; so is it safe to rule out that this was a reaction to the inflammatory internet video?

And second, the initial statement put out yesterday by the Embassy in Cairo has become somewhat of a political issue, Romney accusing the Administration of sympathizing with the attackers. Whether or not that's true, can you please tell us when that statement was released exactly? Was it released before or after the protest started? Was it released to stop any of the protestors from getting more violent? Please give us a timeline on that. We've been asking about that a lot today.

Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Let me start with the last one first. With regard to the statement from Embassy Cairo, let me say unequivocally here that that statement was not coordinated with Washington and was therefore taken down. My understanding is that it was initially released at about noon Cairo time, which was before the protests in Cairo began.

More broadly, the Secretary spoke to our view on this issue yesterday. She did it again today. Even as we stay true to our core principles and our core values, we condemn these attacks on our diplomatic mission. There is never any justification for violent acts of this kind.

With regard to whether there is any connection between this internet activity and this extremist attack in Benghazi, frankly, we just don't know. We're not going to know until we have a chance to investigate. And I'm sorry that it is frustrating for you that so many of our answers are "We don't know," but they are truthful in that.

Let's continue, Operator.

OPERATOR: Steve Myers with *The New York Times*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks. I would add my condolences to everyone. Just a few follow-up questions: Do you know how many people – that is, American and Libyans – who were inside the compound when the attack began overall? And also, how many of them might have been wounded in addition to those who were killed? And you have not yet identified the two others, but you said one was – unless I misunderstood, a regional security officer. Are the other two State Department employees? Are they Marines? Anything more, even if you can't identify them at this stage, about the other two?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Steve, at the moment, I have reports of three additional wounded on top of the four total who were killed. That report could also change, frankly. I'm sorry about that. My understanding is that between the main compound and the annex, we had a total of about 25 to 30 people, but again, we never precisely size our diplomatic missions, as you know.

I can't recall if there was another piece of that question. Anyway, Operator, maybe you'll let him back if there was. Thanks.

OPERATOR: Julian Barnes with Dow Jones is next. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: A question for Official Number Three: Is there any discussion of sending a FAST team to Egypt? And are there any warships near Libya or being sent to Libya as part of security?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Thanks, Julian. As you are aware, we don't typically talk about the prospect of future military operations one way or the other, or about the movement of assets that may or may not be used in the future. That's where I'd leave it.

OPERATOR: Dina Temple with NPR is next. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Dina Temple-Raston with NPR. I'm wondering if you can tell us whether there was any specific recent intelligence indicating that there was going to be a threat against the consulate.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Dina, you won't be surprised if we decline to talk about intelligence. I did speak a little bit earlier about our review of our security posture in advance of September 11th.

Going back to Steve, I didn't, I think, fully answer your question. I missed a piece. The remaining two who also lost their lives, as the Secretary said, were State Department personnel, but we are still even now trying to work the next-of-kin notifications, so that's all I can give you at the moment.

Let's take about three more, and then we're going to have to hop here. Go ahead, Operator.

OPERATOR: Jim Michaels with *USA Today*. Please go ahead, sir.

QUESTION: Yeah, thanks for taking our calls. I just wanted to go back to an earlier question. Was – can you describe a little bit about the level of organization of this assault and how it was or was not related to an overall protest/riot occurring about the same time?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: I wish I could. Frankly, I've given you as much information as we are confident in at the moment. We will obviously know more in coming days and weeks as we secure our personnel, as we have a chance to talk to them, as we have a chance to interview Libyans who may have been witnesses. But frankly, that's as much as I've got at the moment. I'm sorry to frustrate you.

OPERATOR: Margaret Brennan with CBS News, please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. I would like to ask first, any information as to when the bodies will be arriving in Landstuhl? Also, if you can describe for us how the operation was directed overnight. Was that an interagency effort, out of State? How was that run?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: With regard to the remains coming home, our hope is to do that as soon as possible, but we have some processing that is required. We will obviously be informing all of you when we have precise details about their return. It was very much an interagency effort in the – while the violence was ongoing and in the aftermath and throughout the day today, led in the usual way by the National Security Council with the participation of all of us. Obviously, the State Department had a huge piece of that, but all agencies – all relevant agencies were involved.

OPERATOR: Jo Biddle with AFP is next. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for doing the call. I wondered if I could just confirm with you the number of injured. Was it three or was it four in the end? And also, I wondered if I could ask – we're hearing that the Pentagon might have been in touch with Pastor Jones, asking him if he could withdraw his support for this video. Could you talk to that? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: I only have confirmed three wounded at the moment, but again, that is a first set of reports. It may not be accurate. I don't think we have anything on Pastor Jones unless [Senior Administration Official Three] has something to add.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Thank you. I can confirm that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey, spoke by phone this morning with

Pastor Jones. This was a brief call in which General Dempsey expressed his concerns over the nature of the film, the tensions it could inflame, and the violence it could cause. And he asked Mr. Jones to consider withdrawing his support for the film.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Thank you. Let's take one last one and then we're going to have to run off. Operator.

OPERATOR: Karen DeYoung with *The Washington Post*. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Thank you. Just to clarify, as you described the compound and the auxiliary building, was that separate building outside of the perimeter of the compound? Or is it all inside that perimeter, that's secured – as you said – inside by U.S. officials?

And secondly, just to once more clarify – and sorry to be obtuse about this – you have no idea whether Ambassador Stevens was alive when he was taken from or otherwise exited the building and taken to the hospital?

And also, just to [Senior Administration Official Three], could you say how Pastor Jones responded?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: My understanding – and again, if this is not correct, we will correct the record – is that we have, as I said at the top, a main compound that includes the main building and several ancillary buildings, that there is also an annex further away, that both of those facilities had perimeters and had Libyan perimeter security.

And as I said with regard to Ambassador Chris Stevens, we just do not know. We have seen Libyan reports that when he was recovered and taken to the hospital, he was unconscious and he later passed, but we are not in a position to confirm those.

So with that, I'm going to thank you all for joining us. We will –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: [Senior Administration Official One], I think –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: I'm sorry, [Senior Administration Official Three], yeah, to you. I'm sorry.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Yeah, that's okay. No problem. Karen thanks.

The Chairman did have a brief call with Pastor Jones. The – Mr. Jones did hear the chairman's concerns, but he was noncommittal.

Back to you, [Senior Administration Official One].

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Okay. And sorry, [Senior Administration Official Three], I jumped on you again.

Thank you all for joining us this evening. We will commit ourselves to sharing what we can with you as more information develops in the coming days. I just want to again reiterate what I said at the top, that we are operating for the purposes of this backgrounder on first reports. We've all had the experience of first reports being inaccurate, so – but this information we have given today, we are giving to the best of our knowledge at this time.

Thank you all for joining us, and thank you to [Senior Administration Official Three], as well. Good night.

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