

White House press briefing
07/12/21
12:58:35 p.m.
4 minutes and 27 seconds

JONATHAN LEMIRE: And the other matter for me — on Cuba, the President — we saw the President's statement today about the demonstrations there on the island yesterday, two questions on that. But why hasn't President Biden taken steps to undo some of the things that his predecessor, Donald Trump, did to overturn the overtures made by President Obama? And then secondly, we heard there's obviously great cry yesterday during these protests for vaccines. Is Cuba on the list to get vaccines the United States?

JEN PSAKI: Well, first, let me say that we have actually provided, over the course of the last several months, a great deal of assistance to Cuba. I just want to note this because I think it's important for people to understand. Since FY — since 2009, which is quite some time ago, Congress has directed \$20 million in democracy assistance annually. But even if you look at last year — last year alone, the U.S. exported \$176 million of goods to Cuba. In the first six months of 2021, Cuba, imported \$123 million worth of chicken from the United States, just as an example. Obviously, one of the issues that — the — protesters are justifiably out there in the streets protesting about is hunger, is lack of access to vaccines, et cetera. But we are continuing to provide a range of assistance, which we will continue to do. I will say on vaccines, one of the challenges Jonathan, which you may be familiar with, is that. Cuba has not joined COVAX and has indicated they intend to vaccinate their population using the Abdullah vaccine, which they're — the Pan American Health Organization has been out there, urging Cuban scientists to publish their results in the peer reviewed literature on this vaccine, So in terms of COVAX, would be a mechanism that we have provided, as you all know, vaccines to a range of countries in the world. We certainly recognize and understand that access to vaccines is one of the issues that a number of individuals in the streets is voicing concern about, but we have to determine what the mechanism would be to work with the Cuban people to get vaccines to them. That's something we're working through. Go ahead, Jeff.

JEFF MASON: Jen, I've been just to follow up on Cuba, can you give us a sense of where the President's policy review like Cuba is right now? Do you anticipate making any changes, as Jonathan asked? And where do you see it going from here?

PSAKI: Well, I will say first, and I meant to say this in response to Jonathan, but there's every indication that yesterday's protests were spontaneous expressions of people who are exhausted with the Cuban government's economic mismanagement and repression and those — these are protests inspired by the harsh reality of everyday life in Cuba, not people in another country. I'm saying that because I think there have been a range of accusations out there, as you well know, Jeff. In terms of our assessment of a future, our our — current — our policy, I should say, it continues to be — our approach continues to be governed by two principles: First, support for democracy and human rights, which is going to continue to be at the core of our efforts through empowering the Cuban people to determine their own future. Second, Americans, especially Cuban Americans are the best ambassadors for freedom and prosperity in Cuba. I don't have

anything to predict for you in terms of any policy shift. Obviously, given the protests were happening over the last 24 to 48 hours, we're assessing how it can be helpful directly to the people of Cuba in these circumstances.

MASON: You hinted at this, but the president of Cuba did directly accuse the United States of basically fomenting these protests because of the embargo and that leading to a lack of medicine and — the other things. Do you have a specific response to him?

PSAKI: Well, I would say that the U.S. embargo allows humanitarian goods to reach Cuba. We expedite — expedite any request to export humanitarian or medical supplies to Cuba. That continues to be the case. And the United States regularly authorizes the export of agricultural products, medicine, medical equipment, and humanitarian goods to Cuba. And since 1992, has authorized the export of billions of dollars of those goods to Cuba, so that's simply inaccurate in terms of the facts that are stated. But again, I would restate what I said a little bit earlier in response, which is that there's every indication that yesterday's protests were reactions of the people in Cuba to exhaustion of the governance of the — of the leaders in the state, the economic mismanagement and the repression that we're seeing a, uh, take place against the people of the country.

(....)

1:10:15 p.m.

3 minutes and 48 seconds

PETER DOOCY: Does President Biden agree with Dr Fauci that, at the local level, there should be more vaccine mandates.

PSAKI: Well, I don't have the full context of Dr Fauci's comments in front of me. But I will say that —

DOOCY: I do have those.

PSAKI: — oh, go ahead, let's hear it.

DOOCY: He said: "I've been on this opinion and I remain of that opinion that I do believe at the local level, Jake, there should be more mandates. There really should be. We're talking about a life and death situation. We've lost 600,000 Americans already and we're still losing more people."

PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, from the federal government, if I remember the context of the question, it was about federal mandates — I believe, correct me if I'm wrong — that's not a decision that we are making. That's not a that is not our intention from the federal government. There will be decisions made by private sector entities, by universities, by educational institutions, and even perhaps by local, uh, local leaders, should they decide that is how to keep their communities safe if they decide to make that decision. We certainly support them in that

step.

DOOCY: The President said on March 11th my message to you is this. Listen to Dr Fauci. Is he now saying Don't listen to Dr Fauci? He doesn't agree?

PSAKI: Welcome back.

DOOCY: Thank you.

PSAK: I would say that, uh, what the — what Dr Fauci was conveying is that there will be decisions made by local leaders, just like there will be decisions made by business leaders, by institutional leaders on how they can keep their communities safe, and we support their right to make those decisions.

DOOCY: Thank you. And then on Cuba, you're talking today about how some of these protests are inspired by people exhausted with the government. Why is it that yesterday the State Department was saying that this was all happening out of concern about rising COVID cases.

PSAKI: Well, I would say first that the protests were just happening yesterday. We're still assessing what is motivating and, of course, in driving all of the individuals who came to the streets, but we know that when I — we say exhaustion, the — the — the — the manner by which the people of Cuba are governed, that can cover a range of issues, whether it's economics suppression, media suppression, lack of access to health and medical supplies, including vaccines. There are a range of reasons and voices we're hearing from people on the ground who are protesting.

DOOCY: So when these protesters are yelling, freedom and enough, there are people within the administration who think they are saying freedom from rising COVID cases?

PSAKI: Again, I would say that when people are out there in the streets protesting and complaining about the lack of access to, uh, economic prosperity to the medical supplies they need to, a life they deserve to live that can take on a range of meetings. There's a global pandemic right now. Most people in that country don't have access to vaccines. That's certainly something we'd love to help with. Go ahead.

KELLY O'DONNELL: A few months ago, when asked about Cuba policy, You said it was not a priority for the presidential review U.S. policy toward Cuba. Do the events of this weekend change that?

PSAKI: Well, I would say, Kelly that, um, we, of course, are monitoring closely. You saw that — the statement — the President — we put out in the President's name this morning up front — uh, in his voice, of course, conveying his support for the people of Cuba, making clear that he doesn't support the approach of the — the government of Cuba, which he's — he has never held — he has never held — held back on. In terms of where it ranks in a priority order, I'm not in a position to offer that, but I can tell you that we will be closely engaged. We will be looking to provide

support to the people of Cuba. We certainly, um, you know, support the freedom of speech, the freedom of press, the freedom of when we believe they deserve to have access to the economic support and medical support health supplies that many of them are asking for.

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1:20:07 p.m.

1 minute and 8 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: And on Cuba, in this White House statement today, you note the “tragic grip of the pandemic,” but under current U.S. sanctions that were put in place by the last administration, but have not been changed by this administration, Cuban exiles cannot send remittances to their family that lives in Cuba. So, why is the Biden administration continuing that policy?

PSAKI: Well I would say again, even under the embargo, there are a number of exemptions, I should say. Humanitarian assistance, medical supplies that we've continued to provide assistance to the people of Cuba, even with that in place, but I have nothing to preview for you in terms of a change of policy.

COLLINS: But even though the President said he was going to reverse the policy, you can't say when he plans to reverse the policy?

PSAKI: Again, these protests happened yesterday, I think — or over the last two days.

COLLINS: But he made the promise in September.

PSAKI: I — I certainly understand, Caitlin. But there's nothing I can preview for you. But to be accurate, There are exemptions that we can send — had — medical supplies. We can send humanitarian supplies. That's something we've been doing for some time from the U.S. government. Go ahead. Go ahead, Shelby.

SHELBY TALCOTT: I just have two quick ones. So, first on Cuba. Recently, *The New York Times* described the American flag as “alienating the some,” but we've seen these Cuban protesters flying the American flag as a symbol for freedom. We saw it in Hong Kong as well. So, does the administration support international protesters flying the American flag? And what message do you have to Americans who are wary of flying it here in the U.S.?

PSAKI: Well I would say, first, the president certainly values and respects the — the symbol of the American flag. He's someone who, certainly, waves it outside of his house or does in Delaware and other places where he's lived throughout his time, But he also believes that people have the right to peaceful protests, and he thinks both can be true.

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1:24:34 p.m.

1 minute and 13 seconds

APRIL RYAN: Following on it and looking at it historically, you're talking about any army — pulling together an army, uh, in support of voting rights. Is this akin to what LBJ told Dr. King, "go make me do it" when he talked to him about voting rights, when they went to Selma. Is this an effort to get the coalitions to go out and force Republicans to change their minds? Is that what you're talking about?

PSAKI: Well as you will know and you alluded to, April, this is not a new struggle. It's a 60-year struggle, uh and the President has been at the forefront of this fight throughout his career from his work, leading the effort to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act to even the steps he's taken as president, so obviously, this is a new moment, um, that certainly builds on the challenges over the last six years with new challenges, including the swath of restrictive laws that — that many legislatures — Republican legislatures are attempting to put into law across the country. So, yes, he is going to be calling on Americans to, uh, make sure they are informed, make sure they are informing their neighbors and make sure they are fighting efforts to pass restrictive laws in their states.

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1:27:51 p.m.

2 minutes and 48 seconds

MATT VISER: Over the weekend, um, House Whip James Clyburn, an ally of the President's, uh, called for a filibuster exemption on voting rights as — as a potential pathway forward for the Senate to pass that legislation. Does the president agree?

PSAKI: Well, first I would say that Congressman Clyburn is a good friend of the President and certainly of the administration — an important partner as we work to get our agenda moving forward. I will say, though, in terms of how this works, um, the filibuster is a legislative process tool, an important one that warrants debate but determination about making changes will be made by members of the Senate, not by this President or any president, frankly, moving forward and it requires every single Democrat supporting changes. Now, I'm not here to provide a whip count for all of you, but that's not where support currently stands, so the President's view continues to be aligned with what he has said in the past, which — that he is not supported the elimination of the filibuster because it has been used as often the other way around. I understand you're asking me about an exemption. We don't have any new position on that either. I would note that there are a lot of issues out there, and I think activists and advocates will tell you this where you could argue that there should be an exemption and this is certainly one of them. But that is what a lot of advocates — there advocates for a range of issues, whether it's gun rights, climate who are out there advocating for this, so he's talked about his support for returning to the talking filibuster. He continues to support that, but he again believes that as somebody who was in the Senate for 36 years, we need to continue to work to find a path forward to do hard things, even when they seem challenging, and that's what he will do in this case.

VISER: But with no pathway really forward, the legislation languishing, is there a plan B. Is there, like, is he rallying — I mean, as he is tomorrow, public support to hopefully change the complexion of the Senate and then try and to pass the legislation? It just seems like there's no kind of obvious path forward for legislation that he says that he wants to pass if he's not going to change the filibuster rules or advocate for that.

PSAKI: Well, I think, you know, if you look at even the Supreme Court ruling just a few weeks ago, his view is that and he'll talk about this tomorrow, is that — that sends the focus back to Congress, and we don't accept the notion. He's an optimist by nature. Otherwise, he wouldn't be sitting in the Oval Office right now that it's dead. We don't accept that. We believe there needs to be a path forward. He's going to ask the Vice President to help play an important role in determining what that looks like, and we're going to continue to advocate to fight for moving forward on voting rights legislation, and he'll certainly elevate the need for the American people to be engaged in that effort moving forward.