

White House press briefing [via Newsmax]

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1:28:38 p.m.

13 minutes and 31 seconds

KAROLINE LEAVITT: With that, I'll take your questions. Eric, why don't you kick us off today? Thank you for being here.

ERICK STAKELBECK: Karoline, thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here. And, as you mentioned, Iran's regime, its leadership has largely been decimated. Do we have a sense right now of who is actually calling the shots in Iran? And we're also hearing reports that the supreme leader's son may be named his successor. Do you have any more information about that? I just had a quick follow up as well.

LEAVITT: Sure. We've seen those reports as well, of course. And this is something that our intelligence agencies are closely monitoring and looking at. We — the truth is we'll have to wait and see. The President has said repeatedly that the objectives of Operation Epic Fury are the four military objectives that I laid out for you previously: to destroy Iran's navy, to destroy their ballistic missile capacity, to ensure their proxies in the region can no longer harm Americans, and to also ensure that they can never obtain a nuclear weapon. As for what comes next for Iran, the President has said, of course, it's a good thing for the United States to want freedom for the Iranian people, and ultimately we hope that freedom rests in their hands."

STAKELBECK: Karoline, we've seen the Arab and Muslim nations coming under fire as well. President Trump's vision for the region has been to bring the Arab and Muslim nations to the table together, Abraham Accords, obviously, with Israel. If this regime topples, could we see a new day in the region and really a new Middle East come out of this when the dust settles?

LEAVITT: Well, though, the greatest deterrent to true and long lasting peace in the Middle East has always been the rogue Iranian terrorist regime. I know our Arab and Gulf partners and the nations admit that as well as, of course, our close friend and ally, Israel. We have seen all of the Arab partners in the region come together during this time on the phone with President Trump, many of them commending him for this bold and brave action to protect American troops and our bases in the region that are housed in many of these Arab Gulf states. And I know that many of these regional partners are contributing their air defense capabilities as well. Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and the President continually continues to be engaged with all of them. [TO HAAKE] Garrett.

GARRETT HAAKE: Also two, if you'll humor me. Axios, I think, was the first to report this morning, this phone call between the President and Prime Minister Netanyahu saying that Netanyahu had given us this information about where the ayatollah would be and that he'd be with these deputies on Saturday. How important was that information in the president making the decision to strike where and when he did?

LEAVITT: I think it was important with respect to the timeline. But I think the President prior to

that phone call, had a good feeling that the Iranian regime was going to strike the United States assets and our personnel in the region. And the President was faced with a choice. Does the United States of America use our military and our capabilities to strike first, to take out this threat that has been threatening our country and our people for 47 years? Or is he going to, as commander in chief, sit back and watch as the rogue Iranian regime attacks our people in the region? That's obviously an unacceptable decision — for the second choice there is unacceptable to the President, which is why he made this decision. As for where the Ayatollah was going to be, that obviously had an impact on the timeline of the operation, but not quite the President's decision in its entirety.

HAAKE: On the way the public is viewing this, we were sitting here last week. I asked you if the President was going to make this big part of the state of the Union, if he felt like he had to sell the possibility that he'd do strikes like this. We're now five days on. He hasn't done kind of the traditional speech to the nation. Part of it. Does the president believe the country supports the actions that he's taken so far in Iran?

LEAVITT: I think he does, and I think the President knows the country is smart enough to read past many of the fake news headlines produced by people in this room, that this action was unjustifiable. Again, this is a rogue terrorist regime that has been threatening the United States, our allies and our people for 47 years, and the American people are smart enough to know that. And they've also been smart enough to listen to the President himself, not just over the past year in this second term, but during his first term as President, and also for the past 40 years of his life. This is a President who has been remarkably consistent on this issue, that Iran can never obtain a nuclear weapon. And the President tried peace through diplomacy exhaustively and extensively. He and his team gave it their best go, and the President ultimately came to the termination of that peace was not a path. The Iranian regime — they want death. They want destruction. They want to kill Americans. And that's unacceptable to this president. It's intolerable to him as commander in chief. [TO HEINRICH] Jacqui?

JACQUI HEINRICH: Thank you, Karoline. Obviously, seeing the update from the State Department on the 17,500 Americans that have already come back, including some 8,000 just yesterday, there are still 6,000 that are looking to get out, as I understand it. And just in the context of what you just told Garrett about the President's decision on a timeline, if he had decided to do this strike before receiving the specific intelligence about the meeting on Saturday, should there have been more done in advance of the strikes to try to get those Americans in the region resources and information to get home before day three of the war?

LEAVITT: There was many signs put out by the State Department, and I wish that everyone in this room would report on them. The Secretary of State issued level four travel advisories dating back to January, for many of these countries in the region. On January 14, the U.S. Mission to Saudi Arabia advised personnel and Americans to exercise increased caution and limit non-essential travel to any military installations. On February 11, the U.S. Department of State Consular Affairs shared a list of countries with level four do not travel advisories. You can't be much more clear than that. Do not travel to these following countries. On February 23, the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon ordered non-emergency government personnel and family members to leave

Lebanon due to safety risks, and we helped them do that. On March 2, the State Department urged U.S. citizens to depart Lebanon immediately and with respect to Iran. On February 27, the Secretary designated Iran as a state of sponsor of wrongful detention and stated, No American should travel to Iran for any reason. And again on February 27, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel warned Americans to leave Iran, and they provided travel advisory alerts through the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem. So, the State Department was all hands on deck on advising extreme caution and do not travel alert to Americans in the region. With respect to the Americans who are still in the region now, again, the State Department is asking that they register at the website so they can directly identify you. And we are actively and rapidly working to charter flights. There is some commercial flights that are taking off intermittently from these countries, and we plan to get Americans on board as quickly as possible, again, free of charge to them. And we have some additional measures that I think will be announced in the coming days. Again, I can also reiterate from the President's perspective, this is something he's brought up directly with our allies and partners in the region that we expect their help in getting Americans home, and we will do that, and we will not rest until every single American is returned home safely.

HEINRICH: Thank you. And then one follow up just on how people might be experiencing this at home with respect to the economy and the cost of oil spiking, is there a need to start those Navy escorts in the Strait of Hormuz now to sort of blunt the impact to people, and also because Spain is a member of the EU, does that at all put a wrinkle in the president's plan for a trade embargo with them.

LEAVITT: Oh, with respect to Spain, I think they heard the President's message yesterday loud and clear. And it's my understanding over the past several hours, they've agreed to cooperate with the U.S. military. And so I know that the U.S. military is coordinating with their counterparts in Spain. But the President expects all Europe, all of our European allies, of course, to cooperate in this long sought after mission, not just for the United States, but also for Europe to crush the rogue Iranian regime that, again, not only threatens America, but also threatens our European allies as well. With respect to oil prices and the economy here at home. Of course, this is something that Secretary Bessent, Secretary Wright, the National Economic Council of Energy that is led by Governor Secretary Burgum, excuse me, has been long working on in well in advance. Yesterday, President Trump announced the U.S. Development Finance Corporation will provide political risk insurance at a very reasonable price for crude carriers and cargo ships operating in and around the Gulf. And as you pointed out, Jacqui, the President said, if necessary and when appropriate, the U.S. Navy will begin escorting tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. I think it speaks to why this action was so necessary that ultimately, the energy industry is going to benefit from the president's actions with respect to Iran, because Iran will no longer be controlling the Strait of Hormuz and restricting the free flow of energy, which, as you all know, controls 20% of the world's global oil supply. [TO CORDES] Sure.

NANCY CORDES: Thanks, Karoline. The President said yesterday there wasn't time to make evacuation plans because this all happened so quickly, given how critical the President has been of the chaotic evacuation from Afghanistan by the last administration five years ago, why wasn't there more of a focus on evacuation plans from the Middle East that could have been at least put in place, ready to go before the strikes this weekend?

LEAVITT: Again, I just laid out for you that there have been plans in place and that the State Department has been very clear to the American people traveling within this region not to travel to these regions. We gave notices to leave immediately the countries where these Americans were within. And unlike the previous administration, we actually have a number. We actually have identified the number of people in the region who have requested help. We are in direct contact and engagement with them. And you have to keep in mind, there's a few thousand people who have requested assistance to come home in comparison to the millions who we understand are in the region. So, we will we will help every single American who wants to come home if they're making that request of the State Department.

CORDES: But Americans who called the State Department hotline as recently as last night were being told, we can't help you. You have to make your own plans.

LEAVITT: Well, the line was updated, and I expect every single person in this room to report on that accurately, so that information can be relayed appropriately to your audiences and to the American people. I think as journalists, you all have a responsibility to let them know that the line has been updated accordingly with the proper guidance, because I saw many people in this room very quick to do selfie videos with the line yesterday, but not so quick to report on the corrected message today. And so, that is something the administration quickly worked to address and we have fixed that problem. However, we're also pointing to people to the website again to register so that we know exactly where you are, so when there are commercial flights moving into that area, when there are chartered flights moving into that area, we can get Americans on planes as quickly as possible."

CORDES: Do you have any details on how many charter flights have been able to get out of the region so far with Americans on board?

LEAVITT: I don't have an exact count for you, but I know that we're working on chartering many flights as soon as we were doing it yesterday. We're doing it again today, and I don't you should not expect us to detail exactly when these flights are taking off. For obvious reasons, the Iranians have shown that they are not going to hesitate to target civilians in the region, which is completely intolerable. But for safety and security reasons, we're not going to be broadcasting when flights full of Americans are going to be taking off, obviously. [TO KEMP] Danny.

DANNY KEMP: At the top there, you said that the Iranian regime is being absolutely crushed. Can you explicitly say then whether or not regime change is a goal of President Trump's operation?

LEAVITT: The goals of this operation have been made very clear, Danny, and the President has said them in his speech when he launched this operation and released that video in the middle of the night, to all of you and to the world. The stated military objectives of Operation Epic Fury are as follows: eliminate Iran's ballistic missile threat, destroy their naval capability, disrupt missile and drone production infrastructure, sever their pathway, and end their pathway to nuclear weapons. And I can report, as you all saw from the Pentagon today that, thus far, this operation has been remarkably successful. Again, we're moving towards complete and total control of

Iranian airspace. We have continuous 24 over seven operation strike operations ongoing. We've had more than 2,000 targets that have been struck. Nearly 2,000 munitions have been employed. The first 24 hours of this campaign were described nearly as twice the scale of the 2003 Shock and Awe campaign, and we've seen that our — the — the enemy, the Iranian rogue regime, their retaliatory strikes against the United States and the threat reduction has reduced significantly. If you look at the Iranian ballistic missile launches, they're down 86% from day one levels. So, while the United States military continues to increase its complete dominance over this rogue regime, they are weakening day by day."

KEMP: Regime change is not a phrase that you would want to use?

LEAVITT: Again, Operation Epic Fury I just detailed the goals and objectives of this very quickly. But obviously, as the President has said numerous times, do we want to see Iran being led by a rogue terrorist regime? No, of course not. So, any day the United States of America is taking out a terrorist is a good day for our country and a good day for our people.

(...)

1:45:08 p.m.

3 minutes and 35 seconds

SHAWN MCCREESH: Did the United States airstrike a girls elementary school in kill 175 people?

LEAVITT: Not that we know of, Sean. And the Department of War is investigating this matter. And I would just tell you very strongly, the United States of America does not target civilians, unlike the rogue Iranian regime that targets civilians, that kills children, that has killed thousands of their own people in the past several weeks and uses propaganda quite effectively. And, unfortunately, many people in this room have fallen for that propaganda. So, I would caution you from pointing the finger at the United States of America when it comes to targeting civilians, because that's not something that these armed forces do. [TO REESE] Reagan.

REAGAN REESE: Thanks, Karoline. Prior to the Iran conflict, the SAVE Act was really the focus of the news cycle. Is the SAVE Act still a priority for the administration?

LEAVITT: Absolutely.

REESE: Will you just provide an update on the administration's talks with Congress to get the SAVE Act through?

LEAVITT: SAVE Act is absolutely still a priority for this President and the administration. The focus, of course, of much of the President's time right now is on ensuring the success of Operation Epic Fury. But the President can walk and chew gum at the same time, and he's very much continuing to focus on the issues that matter here at home for the American people, including the passage of the SAVE Act, including on bringing down the cost of living, which is

why you'll see the President in about an hour and a half at the Ratepayer Protection Pledge Roundtable, where he will be sitting with big tech companies, with AI companies who are building in communities across the country and have pledged to pick up the cost of the electricity tab in these small towns and communities across the country, which is a great thing for American consumers. So, you'll be hearing from the president directly on this very important domestic agenda item later this afternoon, and it's something that he mentioned in his state of the Union address, so check it off the list as another promise made and kept by this President. [TO STANAGE] Sure, go ahead.

NIAL STANAGE: Karoline, I just wanted to get back to Danny's question. So, those four objectives that you read out do not explicitly include regime change. If those objectives were achieved and the Islamic Republic still existed, would that be an acceptable outcome?

LEAVITT: That's a hypothetical question that I'm not going to engage in. Again, right now, the President and the commander in chief are focused on executing the success of Operation Epic Fury, which we are due — we are already doing so in a very tremendous and impressionable way. [TO NELSON] Steven.

STEVEN NELSON: Thank you, Karoline. Two questions. The Trump administration reportedly — reportedly is considering arming Kurdish forces in the hopes of inspiring a popular uprising in Iran. Can you comment on that report?

LEAVITT: I can comment on the fact that the President has held many calls with partners, allies and leaders in the region in the Middle East. He did speak to Kurdish leaders with respect to our base that we have in northern Iraq. But as for any report suggesting that the President has agreed to any such plan is completely false and should not be written.

NELSON: Second question. President Trump was saying yesterday that he is okay with someone from within taking over in Iran. He spoke about how Venezuela he saw as a successful model, where Delcy Rodriguez took over and had a better relationship. Iran's president Pezeshkian, he took office in 2024 as a relative reformer. He's part of a three man council now replacing the supreme leader. Does President Trump see him as a potential successor who is more pliable?

LEAVITT: Again, that's another hypothetical. And I haven't spoken to the President about this specific individual, so I don't want to get ahead of him on any assessments that should be made.

(...)

1:51:32 p.m.

4 minutes and 27 seconds

ANDREW FEINBERG: At the top of the briefing, you listed a long list of grievances against the Iranian government, going back to the takeover of the embassy in 79, barracks bombing in the 80s, etc. But no one from the administration has laid out the imminent threat that was supposed to be taken care of by this, and the rationales offered by, say, Secretary Rubio, the President's

national security advisor, said that the threat was retaliation against American interests from Iran after an after Israeli strikes. The President says it's his — it was his own feeling that Iran was going to attack. Why is it that across the administration, you can't say what the imminent threat against the United States was that required us to launch this? And also, Prime Minister Starmer told Parliament today that his reason that he didn't allow the use of British bases was that he was not satisfied that there was a lawful basis and a viable thought through plan. Was there an attempt to provide the U.K. government with a legal basis for these strikes and a viable thought through plan?

LEAVITT: To the first question, I completely reject the premise of your question. You have had the President of the United States, the Secretary of War, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Vice President of the United States, the Secretary of State. And now, I am out here today to explain to you exactly what led the President to make the decision to launch Operation Epic Fury, and President Trump does not make these decisions in a vacuum. This decision to launch this operation was based on a cumulative effect of various direct threats that Iran posed to the United States of America, and the President's feeling, based on fact, that Iran does pose an imminent and direct threat to the United States of America, based on the fact that they are the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, based on the fact that they were rapidly and aggressively building up their ballistic missile program to give themselves immunity within their country alongside their navy, so that inside their country they could continue to create nuclear weapons and nuclear bombs, which would, of course, pose a risk to Americans in the region. And even Americans one day here at home. And then another point on this is the president found that through these extensive, exhaustive failed negotiations with Iran, that they were hell bent on death and destruction. So, again, the President was not going to be just another president on a very long list who sat back and stood by and passed the buck of this direct threat to the next administration. The President had a feeling, again, based on fact, that Iran was going to strike. The United States, was going to strike our assets in the region, and he made a determination to launch Operation Epic Fury based on all of those reasons, and I would like the media to actually report on all of them, rather than just picking soundbites from one person in this administration and saying, oh, they're contradicting the other person. No. Again, these decisions are not made in a vacuum. They are made by the President's feeling that Iran was going to strike the United States and our assets in the region, and he was not going to sit back and watch that happen. The determination was made that the president was going to strike first alongside Israel and that has obviously been proven to be the right decision and an effective one at that. [TO DEAN] Libby. Libby. Go ahead.

LIBBEY DEAN: Thank you, Karoline. A two part question for you here. First, has the President spoken with the family members of those U.S. service members that were killed? Second, given what you've outlined throughout this entire briefing, I mean, the United States has sunk a bunch of Navy ships. We've hit all of these targets. What can Americans expect the goal to be moving forward now that the U.S. has accomplished all of this? What is victory given we've even taken out Iran's supreme leader? That was an explicit goal.

LEAVITT: Again, victory will be determined by the commander in chief once the goals and the objectives that we have repeatedly laid out are fully realized. Again, we just in the next few hours

will be achieving that dominance over the skies, which means the United States military will be raining missiles and weapons down on Iran to hit these specific targets that have been identified as crucial to take out by the Department of War.

(...)

1:56:45 p.m.

4 minutes and 53 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: You just mentioned the President is going to attend the dignified transfer for these families. Given what Secretary Hegseth said this morning, is it the position of this administration that the press should not prominently cover the deaths of U.S. service members?

LEAVITT: No, it's the position of this administration that the press in this room and the press across the country should accurately report on the success of Operation Epic Fury and the damage it is doing to the rogue Iranian regime that has threatened the lives of every single American in this room. If the Iranian regime had their choice, they would kill every single person in this room. And so, we can all be very grateful that we have an administration, and that we have men and women in our armed forces who are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the rest of us in this room, and for every American across the country and for every troop that is based in the Middle East. That's what these —

COLLINS: But Secretary Hegseth was complaining that it was front page news about these six service members who were killed.

LEAVITT: That's not what the secretary said, Kaitlan. And that's not what the secretary meant.

COLLINS: I can you read you his quote.

LEAVITT: And you know it. You know, you're being disingenuous. There is not — we've never had a secretary of defense who cares more —

COLLINS: He said, 'when a few drones get through or tragic things happen, it's front page news. I get it. The press only wants to make the President look bad.

LEAVITT: — yeah, but the press does —

COLLINS: As you know, we cover the deaths of U.S. service members under every president.

LEAVITT: The press does only want to make the President look bad. That's a — that's a fact —

COLLINS: I've covered two presidents —

[REPORTERS SHOUTING]

LEAVITT: — especially you. No, listen to me, especially you and especially CNN and the secretary of defense cares deeply about our warfighters and our men and women in uniform. He travels all across this country to meet with them, to connect with them, and your network has hardly ever probably reported on that. You also had the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Chairman Caine, who's a brave patriot standing alongside the secretary at the Pentagon this morning, again expressing his condolences to these families. And I just told you that the President of the United States will be attending their dignified transfer.

COLLINS: But we're going to cover that dignified transfer.

LEAVITT: So please, so please —

COLLINS: That's not making the President look bad. That's showcasing that.

LEAVITT: — so — and we — we expect you to cover that as you should.

COLLINS: And we did it in his first term and under Biden.

LEAVITT: We expect you to cover that as you should, Kaitlan. But you and your network know that you take every single thing this administration says and tries to use it to make the President look bad. That is an objective fact.

COLLINS: I don't think covering troop deaths is trying to make the President look bad.

LEAVITT: If you're trying to — if you're trying to argue right now that CNN's overwhelming coverage is not negative of President Donald Trump, I think the American people would tend to agree —

COLLINS: I don't think covering troop deaths is [inaudible].

LEAVITT: — and your ratings would tend to disagree with that as well. [TO UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER] Go ahead.

REPORTER: Thank you so much. On the school — school strike — back to that for a minute — I understand that the U.S. does not target civilian infrastructure. That's what you said. Can you say that there is any evidence right now that it was not a U.S. strike? And then also you didn't mention Israel and that is there any assessment about Israel's potential likely, you know, role in that, if at all?

LEAVITT: Again, the Department of War is currently investigating this matter. But again, I will reaffirm that the Department of War and the United States Armed Forces do not target civilians, as does the Iranian regime who kill and execute their own people. [TO DATOC] Christian.

CHRISTIAN DATOC: Two on two separate issues. Karoline. First, what can you tell us about the military operation in Ecuador?

LEAVITT: Sure.

DATOC: And then secondly, is the President considering invoking the Defense Production Act to boost munitions stockpiles while we are in this conflict?

LEAVITT: It's not something I've heard the President consider, but as you know, the President has been in pretty direct correspondence and public correspondence with defense contractors, asking them to aggressively speed up their manufacturing of American made weapons, which, again, are the best in the world. With respect to Ecuador. I would point you back to the statement released by the U.S. Southern Command: "On March 3, Ecuadorian and U.S. military forces launched operations against designated terrorist organizations. These operations are a powerful example of the commitment of partners in Latin America and the Caribbean to combat the scourge of narco terrorism, and together we are taking decisive action to confront narco terrorists who have long inflicted terror, violence and corruption on citizens throughout the Hemisphere." And with on that, I would also add that this weekend I'm pleased to announce the President will welcome the heads of state from 12 nations across our Western Hemisphere in Miami, Florida, on Saturday. The point of this newfound Latin America summit is to promote freedom, security, and prosperity in our region. The following countries will be in attendance: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago, and maybe some others as well. And the President will be speaking with the leaders of this country [sic] who have really formed a historic coalition to work together to address criminal, narco, terrorist gangs and cartels and counter illegal and mass migration into not only the United States but the Western Hemisphere, which remains a key and top priority of this President. Thank you very much, everyone, and you'll see the President yourselves in an hour.