

fixable, and it's in everyone's best interest to work together to fix it.

I'll do everything in my power to make sure nothing like this happens again: by holding the responsible parties accountable; by putting in place new checks and new safeguards; and going forward, by making sure that the law is applied as it should be, in a fair and impartial way. And we're going to have to make sure that the laws are clear so that we can have confidence that they are enforced in a fair and impartial way and that there's not too much ambiguity surrounding these laws.

So that's what I expect. That's what the American people deserve. And that's what we're going to do.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:21 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration J. Russell George; and Steven T. Miller, former Deputy Commissioner for Services and Enforcement, Internal Revenue Service.

## The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey

May 16, 2013

*President Obama.* Please be seated, everybody. Good afternoon.

It is a great pleasure to welcome my friend, Prime Minister Erdogan, back to the White House. This visit is also another opportunity for me to return the extraordinary hospitality that the Prime Minister and the Turkish people showed me on my visit to Turkey 4 years ago. And that included my visit to the Prime Minister's beautiful hometown of Istanbul.

This visit reflects the importance that the United States places on our relationship with our ally, Turkey, and I value so much the partnership that I've been able to develop with Prime Minister Erdogan.

Today we discussed the many areas in which our countries cooperate, including Afghanistan, where our troops serve bravely together; the G-20, where we promote our shared prosperity; and Iran, where we agree it is critical that we do not see that country acquire a nuclear weapon and potentially trigger an arms race throughout the region.

Given our shared interest in peace, I want to note the Prime Minister's efforts to normalize relations with Israel. This will benefit both the Turkish and Israeli people and can also help us make progress on a two-state solution, including an independent Palestinian state.

Today we focused on three areas that I want to highlight. First, we agreed to keep expanding trade and investment. Over the past 4 years, our trade has surged, and U.S. exports to Turkey have more than doubled. As the United States pursues a new trade and investment partnership with the EU, I want to make sure that we also keep deepening our economic ties with Turkey. So we're creating a new high-level committee that will focus on increasing trade and investment between our two countries and will help fuel Turkish innovation. And the progress that Turkey's economy has made over the last several years, I think, has been remarkable, and the Prime Minister deserves much credit for some of the reforms that are already taking place.

Second, as NATO allies we're reaffirming our solemn commitment to our mutual security. Now, Mr. Prime Minister, on behalf of the American people, I want to express our condolences to the Turkish people and the victims of the outrageous bombings that took place in Reyhanli. As always, the United States stands with you as you defend your nation against terrorism. We want to thank you for the cooperation that you provided us in threats against the United States.

And I want to take this opportunity to commend you and the Turkish people for your

courage in seeking an historic and peaceful resolution of the PKK violence that has plagued Turkey for so long. And just as the United States has stood with you in your long search for security, we will support efforts in Turkey to uphold the rule of law and good governance and human rights for all.

Finally, we spent a great deal of time on an issue that has wracked the region, the issue of Syria. Under the Prime Minister's leadership, the Turkish people have shown extraordinary generosity to the Syrians who have found refuge in Turkey. And I know this is a heavy burden. I've made it clear again today that the United States is going to keep on helping countries in the region, including Turkey, shoulder this burden, doing our part as a major donor of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, including those refugees in Turkey. And we're going to keep working with our Turkish partners to deliver the food, shelter, and medicine that's needed to save lives.

At the same time, we're going to keep increasing the pressure on the Asad regime and working with the Syrian opposition. The Prime Minister has been at the forefront of the international effort to push for a transition to a democratic Syria without Bashar Asad. And Turkey is going to play an important role as we bring representatives of the regime and opposition together in the coming weeks.

We both agree that Asad needs to go. He needs to transfer power to a transitional body. That is the only way that we're going to resolve this crisis. And we're going to keep working for a Syria that is free from Asad's tyranny, that is intact and inclusive of all ethnic and religious groups, and that's a source of stability, not extremism, because it's in the profound interest of all our nations, especially Turkey.

So again, Mr. Prime Minister, I want to thank you for being here and for being such a strong ally and partner in the region and around the world. I know that Michelle appreciates the opportunity to host Mrs. Erdogan and your two wonderful daughters this morning. I'm looking forward to our dinner tonight. And as always, among the topics where I appreciate your advice is close to our hearts, and

that's how to raise our daughters well. You're a little ahead of me in terms of their ages.

With the Prime Minister's permission, I want to make one other point. There's been intense discussion in Congress lately around the attacks in Benghazi. We lost four brave Americans, patriots who accepted the risks that come with service because they know that their contributions are vital to our national interests and national security.

I am intent on making sure that we do everything we can to prevent another tragedy like this from happening. But that means we owe it to them and all who serve to do everything in our power to protect our personnel serving overseas. That's why, at my direction, we've been taking a series of steps that were recommended by the review board after the incident. We're continuing to review our security at high-threat diplomatic posts, including the size and nature of our presence; improving training for those headed to dangerous posts; increasing intelligence and warning capabilities. And I've directed the Defense Department to ensure that our military can respond lightning quick in times of crisis.

But we're not going to be able to do this alone. We're going to need Congress as a partner. So I've been in discussions, and my team has been in discussions, with both Democrats and Republicans, and I'm calling on Congress to work with us to support and fully fund our budget request to improve the security of our Embassies around the world. We also need Congress to work with us to provide the resources and new authorities so we can fully implement all of the recommendations of the Accountability Review Board. And we're going to need Congress's help in terms of increasing the number of our Marine Corps Guard who protect our Embassies.

So I want to say to Members of Congress in both parties, we need to come together and truly honor the sacrifice of those four courageous Americans and better secure our diplomatic posts around the world. And I should add, by the way, that we're getting some help from the Turkish Government on some of these issues. That's how we learn the lessons of

Benghazi. That's how we keep faith with the men and women who we send overseas to represent America. And that's what I will stay focused on as Commander in Chief.

So with that, Mr. Prime Minister, welcome to the United States. I'm sorry the weather is not fully cooperating with our lovely Rose Garden press conference, but I think we'll be okay.

*Prime Minister Erdogan.* Thank you.

Mr. President, distinguished members of the press, ladies and gentlemen. My dear friend, President of the United States, a friend and ally, I'm here to—I'm once again very pleased to be here in Washington to have meetings with the President. I would like to express my thanks for the hospitality that has been shown to us on occasion—on this occasion on behalf of myself and my delegation.

In the President's person, I would like to express our condolences for the terror attack that took place in Boston. I—we express our condolences to the American people. We are a country which has been fighting against terrorism for many years. We've lost many lives in that fight against terrorism, and so we very well understand the feelings and sentiments of the American people in face of such an event. As Turkey and the United States, we are both determined to continue to fight jointly against terrorism.

My dear friends, Turkey and the United States have many issues that cover the Middle East to the Balkans to Central Asia to other areas, including issues such as energy, security of supply, and many other issues. And in all these areas and on all these issues, we display a very strong cooperation.

And in our meetings with President Obama today, we talked about relations between Turkey and the United States and also about some topical issues which remain on both of our agenda. We had an opportunity to exchange views on regional and the global issues, and our exchange of views and opinions will continue throughout the day with other meetings that will take place during the rest of the day.

I am here with close to a hundred business-people, and they are holding meetings with their counterparts in the United States, and

they will continue to talk and meet with their counterparts this afternoon as well.

Bilateral economic relations between Turkey and the United States have to be improved, and we both have this aim. Ten years ago, our trade stood at \$8 billion; at the moment, trade stands at \$20 billion. But this amount is still not sufficient. We have to increase the amount of trade between our two countries.

Bilateral economic and trade relations between Turkey and the United States will continue to develop. And as we carry forward with these efforts, we need to strengthen this relationship with free trade agreements and other agreements. And I can tell you that as leaders of our nations, we have the will to continue to develop our economic relations.

In our discussions that pertain to regional issues, Syria was at the top of our agenda. While Syria—while we discussed Syria, we talked about what has happened so far, and we talked about what can be done in the future. And we have views that overlap, as the President has just said. We will continue to discuss this issue in greater detail in our meeting this evening. But let me tell you that ending this bloody process in Syria and meeting the legitimate demands of the people by establishing a new government are two areas where we are in full agreement with the United States.

Supporting the opposition and Asad leaving are important issues. We also agree that we have to prevent Syria from becoming an area for terrorist organizations. We also agree that chemical weapons should not be used and all minorities and their rights should be secured. These are all priority areas for all of us. And we discussed what needs to be done on these issues with the President. And this evening we will continue to talk about these in greater detail.

Iraq was also another area of discussion for us on regional issues. Transparent elections in Iraq and the participation of—and ensuring the participation of all political groups in the elections are both very important in Iraq. With everyone's participation, we would like to see a

peaceful period in Iraq. And this is what both we and United States would like to see.

With respect to the Middle East peace process, we discussed with the President this important issue, which is very important for regional peace. In the attack against *Mavi Marmara*, which was taking humanitarian aid to Gaza, Turkish citizens and one Turkish American citizen were killed. And as you know, we are working with the Israeli Government for compensation for those who lost their lives. And the visit that I will pay to Gaza will contribute to the peace in Gaza and to unity in Palestine, in my opinion.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is always in favor of—and in Cyprus we believe that there is a lot of opportunity to reach an agreement on the Cyprus issue, and this is an area which we continue to focus on. We've also discussed Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and all these issues. And we have also briefly touched upon some developments in Africa and also about Myanmar.

Our joint fight against terrorism will continue to be the case, as I said before. And we also touched upon issues related to the defense industry. And I can say that this has been a historic day, a historic turning point in the context of Turkish-American relations.

On regional and global issues, the partnership between Turkey and the United States serves peace, security, and stability and will continue to do so even more in the future.

I will cut my remarks shortly, not because I am trying to flee from the rain; rain is considered to be a great source of abundance. But I will stop here to say that I hope our discussions will be beneficial for our future relations.

Thank you.

*President Obama.* Well, before we get started let me just make sure that I'm a good host. Mr. Prime Minister, do you want an umbrella? [*Laughter*] Because we can arrange it if you need it. You're okay? All right. This will be incentive for the press to ask concise questions and us to give concise answers.

I'm going to start with Julianna Goldman of Bloomberg.

*Internal Revenue Service*

Q. Unfortunately, we all forgot umbrellas.

*President Obama.* Yes.

Q. Mr. President, I want to ask you about the IRS. Can you assure the American people that nobody in the White House knew about the agency's actions before your Counsel's Office found out on April 22? And when they did find out, do you think that you should have learned about it before you learned about it from news reports as you said last Friday? And also, are you opposed to there being a special counsel appointed to lead the Justice Department investigation?

And also, Mr. Prime Minister, what is the status on efforts to normalize relations with Israel? And do you still plan to go to Gaza in the coming weeks? Thanks.

*President Obama.* Well, with respect to the IRS, I spoke to this yesterday. My main concern is fixing a problem, and we began that process yesterday by asking and accepting the resignation of the Acting Director there. We will be putting in new leadership that will be able to make sure that—following up on the IG audit—that we gather up all the facts, that we hold accountable those who have taken these outrageous actions. As I said last night, it is just simply unacceptable for there to even be a hint of partisanship or ideology when it comes to the application of our tax laws.

I am going to go ahead and ask folks—why don't you—why don't we get a couple of marines; they're going to look good next to us—[*laughter*]*—just because—[laughter].* I've got a change of suits, but I don't know about our Prime Minister. [*Laughter*]

[*At this point, two Marine Corps sentries arrived to hold umbrellas for President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan.*]

*President Obama.* There we go. That's good. You guys I'm sorry about. [*Laughter*]

[*Prime Minister Erdogan spoke in Turkish, and no translation was provided. President Obama then continued his remarks as follows.*]

But let me make sure that I answer your specific question. I can assure you that I certainly did not know anything about the IG report before the IG report had been leaked through press—through the press. Typically, the IG reports are not supposed to be widely distributed or shared. They tend to be a process that everybody is trying to protect the integrity of. But what I'm absolutely certain of is that the actions that were described in that IG report are unacceptable.

So in addition to making sure that we've got a new Acting Director there, we're also going to make sure that we gather up the facts and hold accountable and responsible anybody who was involved in this. We're going to make sure that we identify any structural or management issues to prevent something like this from happening again. We're going to make sure that we are accepting all of the recommendations that the IG has in the report.

And I'm looking forward to working with Congress to fully investigate what happened, make sure that it doesn't happen again, and also look at some of the laws that create a bunch of ambiguity in which the IRS may not have enough guidance and not be clear about what exactly they need to be doing and doing it right so that the American people have confidence that the tax laws are being applied fairly and evenly.

So in terms of the White House and reporting, I think that you've gotten that information from Mr. Carney and others. I promise you this, that the minute I found out about it, then my main focus is making sure we get the thing fixed. I think that it's going to be sufficient for us to be working with Congress. They've got a whole bunch of committees. We've got IGs already there.

The IG has done an audit; it's now my understanding they're going to be recommending an investigation. And Attorney General Holder also announced a criminal investigation of what happened. Between those investigations, I think we're going to be able to figure out exactly what happened, who was involved, what went wrong, and we're going to be able to implement steps to fix it.

And that ultimately is the main priority that I have, but also, I think, the American people have. They understand that we've got an agency that has enormous potential power and is involved in everybody's lives. And that's part of the reason why it's been treated as a quasi-independent institution. But that's also why we've got to make sure that it is doing its job scrupulously and without even a hint of bias or a hint that somehow they're favoring one group over another.

And as I said yesterday, I'm outraged by this in part because, look, I'm a public figure; the—if a future administration is starting to use the tax laws to favor one party over another or one political view over another, obviously, we're all vulnerable. And that's why, as I've said, it doesn't matter whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, you should be equally outraged at even the prospect that the IRS might not be acting with the kind of complete neutrality that we expect.

And I think we're going to be able to fix it. We're going to be able to get there and get it done, and we've already begun that progress, and we're going to keep on going until it's finished. Okay? All right, guys, I think the—

*[The President motioned to relieve the Marine Corps sentries.]*

*Prime Minister Erdogan.* The question about Gaza: According to my plans, most probably, I would be visiting Gaza in June. But it will not be a visit only to Gaza, I will also go to the West Bank.

I place a lot of significance on this visit in terms of peace in the Middle East, and I—this visit in no way means favoring of one or the other. I'm hoping that that visit will contribute to unity in Palestine, first of all. This is something that I focus on very much. And I hope that my visit can contribute to that process. Thank you.

*Syria*

Q. Senturk from Haberturk. My first question to you, Prime Minister: You talked about chemical weapons, and we know that Turkey

has some evidence. Did you present those—that evidence to President Obama in today's meeting? And what does Turkey expect from the United States in this process?

Question to President Obama about Syria: You had said earlier that chemical weapons would be a red line in Syria. Do you believe that at this point in time Syria has overgone the red line? And you said that Asad should go. Will the U.S. take more initiative to see Asad go in the future?

*Prime Minister Erdogan.* Let me, first of all, say that chemical weapons and missiles, rockets, all that have been fired, all that information is shared between the relevant bodies within our administrations. And it's not just Turkey and United States. For example, United Kingdom and all others have that—those documents, that information, because we share information. And the U.N. Security Council, all the other relevant authorities will also receive that information in the proper time so that more information is provided to the public. So we will continue to work in this way.

*President Obama.* Well, as the Prime Minister indicated, our militaries, our intelligence and diplomatic personnel are constantly sharing information. And I've said in the past, we have seen evidence of the use of chemical weapons inside of Syria. It is important for us to make sure that we're able to get more specific information about what exactly is happening there.

But separate and apart from the chemical weapons, we know that tens of thousands of people are being killed with artillery and mortars and that the humanitarian crisis and the slaughter that's taking place by itself is sufficient to prompt strong international action.

And that's why the Prime Minister and I spoke extensively about the steps we're taking on humanitarian efforts; the steps that we're taking to strengthen the opposition politically so that it is inclusive and representative of all the people inside of Syria; the steps that we need to take to continue to strengthen the capacity of the Syrian opposition that are on the ground fighting to protect themselves from the Asad regime; and that we continue to try to

mobilize the entire international community to put more and more pressure on Asad so that he recognizes that he is no longer legitimate and that he needs to go, and that we are able to move to a political transition in which the institutions inside of Syria are still functioning, but we have a representative, multiethnic, multireligious body that can bring about democracy and peace inside of Syria.

With respect to what I've said in the past around red lines, what I've said is that the use of chemical weapons are something that the civilized world has recognized should be out of bounds. And as we gather more evidence and work together, my intention is to make sure that we're presenting everything that we know to the international community as an additional reason, an additional mechanism, for the international community to put all the pressure that they can on the Asad regime and to work with the opposition to bring about that political transition.

Now, there are a whole range of options that the United States is already engaged in, and I preserve the options of taking additional steps—both diplomatic and military—because those chemical weapons inside of Syria also threaten our security over the long term, as well as our allies and friends and neighbors.

But this is also an international problem. And it is very much my hope to continue to work with all the various parties involved, including Turkey, to find a solution that brings peace to Syria, stabilizes the region, stabilizes those chemical weapons. But it's not going to be something that the United States does by itself. And I don't think anybody in the region, including the Prime Minister, would think that U.S. unilateral actions in and of themselves would bring about a better outcome inside of Syria.

Jeff Mason [Reuters].

*Internal Revenue Service/U.S. Diplomatic Security/Balancing National Security and Freedom of the Press*

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you about the Justice Department. Do you believe that the seizure of phone records from

Associated Press journalists this week—or before that was announced recently this week was an overreach? And do you still have full confidence in your Attorney General? Should we interpret yesterday's renewed interest by the White House in a media shield law as a response to that? And more broadly, how do you feel about comparisons by some of your critics of this week's scandals to those that happened under the Nixon administration?

*President Obama.* Well, I'll let you guys engage in those comparisons, and you can go ahead and read the history, I think, and draw your own conclusions.

My concern is making sure that if there's a problem in the Government, that we fix it. That's my responsibility, and that's what we're going to do. That's true with respect to the IRS and making sure that they apply the laws the way they were intended. That's true with respect to the security of our diplomats, which is why we're going to need to work with Congress to make sure that there's adequate funding for what's necessary out there.

Now, with respect to the Department of Justice, I'm not going to comment on a specific and pending case. But I can talk broadly about the balance that we have to strike. Leaks related to national security can put people at risk. They can put men and women in uniform that I've sent into the battlefield at risk. They can put some of our intelligence officers, who are in various, dangerous situations that are easily compromised, at risk.

U.S. national security is dependent on those folks being able to operate with confidence that folks back home have their backs so they're not just left out there high and dry and potentially put in even more danger than they may already be. And so I make no apologies, and I don't think the American people would expect me as Commander in Chief not to be concerned about information that might compromise their missions or might get them killed.

Now, the flip side of it is, we also live in a democracy where a free press, free expression, and the open flow of information helps hold me accountable, helps hold our Government

accountable, and helps our democracy function. And the whole reason I got involved in politics is because I believe so deeply in that democracy and that process.

So the whole goal of this media shield law—that was worked on and largely endorsed by folks like the Washington Post editorial page and by prosecutors—was finding a way to strike that balance appropriately. And to the extent that this case—which we still don't know all the details of—to the extent that this case has prompted renewed interest about how do we strike that balance properly, then I think now is the time for us to go ahead and revisit that legislation. I think that's a worthy conversation to have, and I think that's important.

But I also think it's important to recognize that when we express concern about leaks at a time when I've still got 60,000-plus troops in Afghanistan and I've still got a whole bunch of intelligence officers around the world who are in risky situations—in outposts that, in some cases, are as dangerous as the outpost in Benghazi—that part of my job is to make sure that we're protecting what they do, while still accommodating for the need for information, so—or the need for the public to be informed and be able to hold my office accountable.

*Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr.*

*Q.* I asked about Holder as well.

And for the Prime Minister, I wanted to ask you, sir, if the United States does not step up its involvement in Syria, in your view, how will that affect the war? And what plans do you have to react to the bombing of the border town that the President mentioned of Reyhanli?

*President Obama.* Mr. Prime Minister, just excuse me, you're right, I have complete confidence in Eric Holder as Attorney General. He's an outstanding Attorney General and does his job with integrity, and I expect he will continue to do so. Okay?

*Prime Minister Erdogan.* You are talking about the part of the glass which is empty. I like to look at things with the glass half full instead of half empty. We are—what we would like to see is the sensitivity on the part of the international community with respect to what's

going on in Syria. And this is what we, as Turkey, are striving for, and I do believe that the United States is doing the same. And other countries, the United Nations Security Council, the Arab League. And other countries—though not part of these structures—are still sensitive to what is going on in Syria.

Our aim is to accelerate this process, and I will be visiting other countries—my Foreign Minister will be visiting other countries—just to see how we can speed things up in a way which will prevent the death of more people and in a way which will ensure a transition to a democratic system in Syria. Our goal is to see the tyranny, the dictatorship, go away in Syria and to be replaced with democracy. And I think this is a collective responsibility on the part of all countries that believe in democracy. And this is what we will all continue to do.

### *Syria*

*Q.* My name is—[inaudible]. I'm with Turkish NTV television. Mr. President, my first question is to you. You mentioned that Asad should go, and the question is how and when. Is there a rough timetable? And for instance, shall we be talking about the Syrian tragedy next year at this time? What's the idea?

[The reporter then asked a question in Turkish, which was translated by an interpreter as follows.]

And, Mr. Prime Minister, before your departure from Ankara, you stated that you had expectations from this visit and that you have some expectations. What is your general observation about this visit?

*President Obama.* We would have preferred Asad go 2 years ago, last year, 6 months ago, 2 months ago. And there has been consistency on the part of my administration that Asad lost legitimacy when he started firing on his own people and killing his own people, who initially were protesting peacefully for a greater voice in their country's affairs. And obviously, that's escalated during the course of time. So the answer is, the sooner the better.

Now, in terms of the question how, I think we've already discussed that. There's no magic

formula for dealing with an extraordinarily violent and difficult situation like Syria's. If there was, I think the Prime Minister and I would have already acted on it and it would already be finished.

And instead, what we have to do is apply steady international pressure, strengthen the opposition. I do think that the prospect of talks in Geneva, involving the Russians and representatives, about a serious political transition that all the parties can buy into may yield results. But in the meantime, we're going to continue to make sure that we're helping the opposition and obviously dealing with the humanitarian situation. And we'll do so in close consultation with Turkey, which obviously is deeply invested in this and with whom we've got an outstanding relationship with.

*Prime Minister Erdogan.* Thank you very much. As you know, we will be meeting again this evening, so we'll have time to go in further detail. As I said before, our views do overlap, and with our discussions this evening, we will continue to explore what we can do together, what we can consider as parts of a roadmap looking at Geneva and beyond.

Russia and China being part of this process is very important, and this is important in the context of the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. Their participation in this process will certainly add greater impetus. The pressure of the international community continues to be a very important element, and when we look at the humanitarian support that we have provided so far, we see that support equaling to more than \$1½ billion.

And we continue to keep an open door policy, and we will continue to do this because we have a border which is 910 kilometers in length with Syria; we have—there are relatives across the border on each side. So we will continue these efforts.

These are all very important for regional peace, because, on the one hand, you have the steps that have been taken, efforts that are in place to normalize relations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. We don't need to have other problems, issues in the region. We had, as you know, taken steps to bring Syria and Israel

together to solve their problems. We had five rounds of discussions, but unfortunately, they came to an end. But I hope that all the steps that we take in the future with respect to regional peace will yield results and we can work together with the United States with determination to achieve peace in the region. Thank you.

We are discussing all these issues. The step to be taken by the U.N. Security Council and the Geneva process are important. We will continue to assess that between us.

Thank you.

*President Obama.* Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 12:48 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the

White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Ermine Erdogan, wife, and Esre and Sümeyye, daughters, of Prime Minister Erdogan; Steven T. Miller, former Deputy Commissioner for Services and Enforcement, and Daniel Werfel, Acting Commissioner, Internal Revenue Service; and Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration J. Russell George. He also referred to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgent group. Prime Minister Erdogan referred to Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey. Prime Minister Erdogan and some reporters spoke in Turkish, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

## Remarks Following a Meeting on Preventing Sexual Assault in the Armed Forces

May 16, 2013

Well, I appreciate all of you coming in just for a second. We have gathered here all the top people in not just our military, but our entire national security operation. And I want to start off by thanking all the people sitting around this table and in this room for the extraordinary service that they've rendered this country.

And I want to also remind everybody that we have folks active in theater right now—men and women in uniform—who are making heroic sacrifices on behalf of our security. And our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families, because they are dealing with a whole lot to make sure that we are safe.

We have focused this conversation, though, on something that is at the core of our effectiveness as a military. So I told all these people that one of the great honors of my life is serving as Commander in Chief to what I consider to be the best military in the history of the world. And I am in awe of the work that the vast majority of our men and women in uniform do.

But the reason we are so good is not because of the fancy equipment. It's not because of our incredible weapon systems and technology. It's because of our people. And the capacity for

our men and women in uniform to work as a team, a disciplined unit looking out for each other in the most severe of circumstances, is premised, as Ray Odierno said, on trust. It comes down to, do people trust each other and do they understand that they're all part of a single system that has to operate under whatever circumstances effectively?

The issue of sexual assault in our Armed Forces undermines that trust. So not only is it a crime, not only is it shameful and disgraceful, but it also is going to make and has made the military less effective than it can be. And as such, it is dangerous to our national security. So this is not a sideshow. This is not, sort of, a second-order problem that we're experiencing. This is—goes to the heart and the core of who we are and how effective we're going to be.

Now, the good news is, I am absolutely confident that everybody in this room and our leadership, starting with Chuck Hagel and Marty Dempsey and the Joint Chiefs, as well as our top enlisted men and women, they care about this. And they're angry about it. And I heard directly from all of them that they're ashamed by some of what's happened.