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Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland on the Situation in Niger

SPECIAL BRIEFING

AMBASSADOR VICTORIA NULAND, ACTING DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE AND UNDER SECRETARY FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

VIA TELECONFERENCE

AUGUST 7, 2023

MR PATEL: Hey, everybody. Good afternoon and thank you so much for joining us today, especially last minute. Laying out some ground rules real quick, this call will be on the record. It will be embargoed until the call's conclusion. Joining us today is Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland. I will turn the call over to her momentarily, after which we will have some time for brief Q&A. But the deputy secretary does need to head to the airport, so we're going to keep this call very tight.

Deputy Secretary, over to you.

UNDER SECRETARY NULAND: Thank you, Vedant. Hello, everybody, from Niamey. As some of you may know, this is my third visit to Niger in the two years that I have been under secretary for Political Affairs and now acting deputy, and the Secretary was here in March. That level of attention reflects the value that we place in this bilateral relationship and the huge amount of work we do together to support and strengthen the economy, prosperity, hopes, security, and the work we do together in counterterrorism.

And all of this has been rooted in our shared values, including the sense of democracy, which was why it was so difficult, and remains difficult, to see the current challenge to the democratic order which began on July 26. The Secretary, as you have seen, has made repeated calls of support to the elected president of Niger, President Bazoum, to check on his welfare and to talk about the road ahead. He's also been in regular touch with President Tinubu of Nigeria, who is currently head of ECOWAS, with AU Chairperson Faki, and with a number of European allies with whom we work in Niger, particularly on counterterrorism. And Assistant Secretary Phee has also worked tirelessly along with our chargé and our team here in Niamey.

The Secretary asked me to make this trip – as you may know, I was in the neighborhood last week and then in Jeddah – because we wanted to speak frankly to the people responsible to this challenge to the democratic order to see if we could try to resolve these issues diplomatically, if we could get some negotiations going, and also to make absolutely clear what is at stake in our relationship and the economic and other kinds of support that we will legally have to cut off if democracy is not restored. You have probably seen we have already had to pause our assistance.

So today we had a chance first to sit with a broad cross-section of Nigerien civil society. These are long-time friends of the United States. They are journalists. They are democratic activists. They are human rights activists. A number of them I had met on previous trips, as had the Secretary. And so we had a frank exchange about the situation here.

And then we met with the self-proclaimed chief of defense of this operation, General Barmou, and three of the colonels supporting him. I will say that these conversations were extremely frank and at times quite difficult because, again, we were pushing for a

negotiated solution. It was not easy to get traction there. They are quite firm in their view on how they want to proceed, and it does not comport with the constitution of Niger. So again, we were very frank about what's at stake. We kept open the door to continue talking. But again, it was difficult today, and I will be straight up about that.

Also, we asked before we arrived and throughout the day for an opportunity to meet with President Bazoum to get his perspective directly – we've talked to him on the phone, but we haven't seen him – and that was never granted. We also asked for some gestures of health and welfare; he is in a very difficult situation under virtual house arrest, along with his son and his wife. I hope, over the coming period, the people responsible for the current situation will come back to those requests. We also were not granted an opportunity to see the self-proclaimed president, Mr. Tiani. So we were left to have to depend on Mr. Barmou to make clear, again, what is at stake.

So a difficult mission, but a necessary one from the perspective of American interest in trying to see if this very difficult situation can be solved diplomatically. Let me pause there.

MR PATEL: Thank you so much, Deputy Secretary. Operator, can you please remind us of instructions for how to enter the question queue?

OPERATOR: Thank you. To enter the question queue, it is 1 and then 0.

MR PATEL: Okay. Let's first go to the line of Shaun Tandon with AFP.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks, Toria, for doing this call. Could I ask you if there was any commitment at all for further talks or if you see any opportunity there, if you see any headway in that? And could you see the – could you say the overall tone in terms of what they – what the junta leaders were looking for in terms of relations with the U.S., whether they're receptive, and also if you touched at all on relations with Russia, if any? Thanks.

UNDER SECRETARY NULAND: Look, the overall tone, Shaun, was workmanlike. We rolled up our sleeves. I can't remember exactly, but I believe we were in the room with General Barmou and his people for more than two hours, and then there was some side conversations. After that, I hope they will keep the door open to diplomacy. We made that proposal. We'll see. As I said, they have their own ideas about how this goes forward. They do not – their ideas do not comport with the constitution, and that will be difficult in terms of our relationship if that's the path they take. But we gave them a number of options to keep talking and we hope they take us up on it.

Of course I raised the – Wagner and its threat to those countries where it is present, reminding them that security gets worse, that human rights get worse when Wagner enters. I would not say that we learned much more about their thinking on that front.

MR PATEL: Let's next go to the line of —

UNDER SECRETARY NULAND: (Inaudible.)

MR PATEL: Oh, go ahead. Go ahead.

UNDER SECRETARY NULAND: Sorry, Vedant. With regard to the – to us, interestingly, General Barmou, former Colonel Barmou, is somebody who has worked very closely with U.S. Special Forces over many, many years. So we were able to go through in considerable detail the risks to aspects of our cooperation that he has historically cared about a lot. So we are hopeful that that will sink in.

MR PATEL: Let's next go to the line of Andrea Mitchell.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for doing this, and thank you for your mission. I don't know whether you feel that a formal mediator role would be appropriate at this stage or if that is what you are doing in fact or in essence, and if that could be constructive, what next steps you think might have to be taken. Do you think now, after your conversations, that it is a de facto coup and the U.S.

wants to take the next steps to formally halt aid, presuming that you warned them of that possibility? But would that legally be required?

And beyond Wagner, have you seen any other efforts diplomatically from Russia to try to get a wedge in into Niger? Thank you very much.

UNDER SECRETARY NULAND: Well, I think that was three questions, Andrea, but we'll go with it. On the first, this was a first conversation in which the United States was offering its good offices. If there is a desire on the part of the people who are responsible for this to return to constitutional order, we are prepared to help with that. We are prepared to help address concerns on all sides. I would not say that we were in any way taken up on that offer, but I hope that they will think about it.

Obviously, we are at the stage where our assistance is paused. There are – there is still a lot of motion here on many sides with regard to where the governance situation will go. **So we will be watching that closely and there are a number of regional meetings coming up and consultations with allies and partners that we need to make. So we'll be watching the situation, but we understand our legal responsibilities and I explained those very clearly to the guys who were responsible for this and that it is not our desire to go there, but they may push us to that point, and we asked them to be prudent in that regard and to hear our offer to try to work with them to solve this diplomatically and return to constitutional order.** That's all I can say at this point.

With regard to Wagner, you will have seen some boasting by Prigozhin in St. Petersburg. I will say that I got the sense in my meetings today that the people who have taken this action here understand very well the risks to their sovereignty when Wagner is invited in.

Vedant, I've got to go catch a plane. Thank you for doing this.

MR PATEL: Yes, ma'am. Thank you, everybody, for joining. As the deputy secretary said, she's got to run. As a reminder, this call was on the record and the embargo is now lifted. We'll talk to you all again very soon.

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