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## Press Briefing by Dana Perino

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MS. PERINO: Good afternoon. You heard from the President just about an hour ago. The President and his national security team are obviously very concerned about the state of Georgia and have been working intensively with our international allies to secure a cease-fire and to provide humanitarian aid to those in need.

The first of the C-17 planes that the President mentioned in his statement has now arrived in Tbilisi and will be providing humanitarian aid and medical supplies. And another C-17 will arrive in Tbilisi tomorrow with additional supplies.

The President has asked Secretary Rice to travel to Tbilisi, Georgia. She will leave this evening. She will first travel to France for meetings there, before traveling on to Georgia.

And a scheduling update for you: President Bush was scheduled to leave tomorrow for Crawford, but he is going to delay his departure for a day or two. And I will update you on the new departure time once that's nailed down.

Q Is there uncertainty about what's -- what Russia is doing in Georgia? Four times in his statement the President referred to, there are reports that Russia is doing this or doing that. Don't we know what's happening?

MS. PERINO: I think if you even look at your own reporting from your journalists that are on the ground from the various places that there are confused reports and varying reports that are coming in. We're doing our best to keep up with them and to best understand the situation.

We do have credible reports that Russia has taken actions that violate the cease-fire agreement. And that's what the President was referring to. I can't get into specifics, but we do have those reports and we're concerned about them and we are working to get concrete information. It's not the easiest thing in the world, given the geography and the cutoff of information.

Q But, then, in other words, the United States is accusing Russia of violating the cease-fire?

MS. PERINO: I think if you look at the President's statement, we have credible -- we have had credible reports that Russia is violating the cease-fire agreement, including, as he mentioned, the bombing of vessels and the blocking of the port, which we're very concerned about. In addition to that, the East-West Highway is a critical highway for the country. And so those actions, amongst others, are -- is what the President was referring to.

Q Could you say what the consequences will be? The President talks about Russia's aspirations to join international institutions. Can you be more definitive about the consequences of Russia's --

MS. PERINO: Not at this time. We are focused on trying to get the bombing stopped, to get the cease-fire cemented so that the status quo ante of August 6th can be restored. And from there we'll see where it goes. Secretary Rice will brief her press corps at 3:00 p.m. today, and I'd imagine she'd get more of this -- more of these types of question and I'll refer you to her briefing.

Q Dana, in the President's statement he mentioned communication with the President of Georgia and also with Sarkozy. Can you just tell us what kind of communication there is between the President and Russian officials? I know there's been discussion with Medvedev and I know he's talked to Putin. But recently, what the -- can you characterize sort of the tone and what these communications are like?

MS. PERINO: Well, I would tell you that the administration at all levels has been in contact with counterparts in Georgia and Russia, including Secretary Rice and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. So we have ongoing conversations. I'm not at liberty to describe them, but the President -- what I can tell you is President Bush has worked very hard over the years to develop good relationships with other leaders in which he can have frank and candid discussions and be very blunt about our concerns.

Q But how does that play out -- the infrastructure, if you will, that he's built, how is that playing out now? Because he comes out in the Rose Garden and it is a strong statement of support for Georgia and some condemnation of what Russia is doing. And so did he -- did the Russians know this was coming?

MS. PERINO: The public statements reflect the private conversations.

Q Is there any signal that the President is trying to send Russia on the military front by dispatching U.S. military planes and ships to take the humanitarian aid --

MS. PERINO: The U.S. military was the most -- had the most capacity to be able to quickly get humanitarian aid into the area, and that's why he asked Secretary Gates to head up that operation.

Q But there is no other signal that he's sending? Because you will now have U.S. military presence --

MS. PERINO: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q -- in the area?

MS. PERINO: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Dana, how do you respond to The Wall Street Journal conservative editorial page today saying, "So far the administration has been missing in action, to put it mildly." Do you have any regrets about the administration appearing to be sort of slow to really push back against Russia here?

MS. PERINO: I don't have regrets, because I know what the actions actually are. And I would point you back to your own reporting, your network's own reporting and your colleagues here. Let me remind you that it's -- this conflict, this frozen conflict, has existed since the early '90s. Increasingly over the past couple of years, there have been increased tensions and provocations. I would say that -- you might not remember, but Secretary Rice was just in the region not too long ago -- I think it was early July that she was there -- talking to both the Russians and to the Georgians about making sure that they don't provoke one another.

Just this past spring, President Saakashvili was here. President Bush has seen President Medvedev at least once now, as a member at the G8, and obviously had seen Putin before that. So leading up to it --

Q What would you say happened here --

MS. PERINO: -- absolutely we've been active in working to make sure that the provocations on both sides were tamped down. This is an area that is a hot zone; conflicts will flare up, and they have flared up almost every year since the early 1990s. The key is, how do you keep those flare-ups contained? What happened this time is an escalation, and we believe the Russian response was disproportionate.

President Bush first -- on the very first night that this occurred spoke to Prime Minister Putin. The next day he made a statement. Secretary Rice made a statement the day before that. Many different calls have gone back and forth between President Bush and leaders of both Russia and Georgia, but also in France and other places like with President -- Chancellor Merkel of Germany.

And the President, just upon returning from Asia, after giving two or three statements there -- at least -- well, two and then an interview -- arrives back, gets off the helicopter, heads to the Situation Room, finishes a meeting with the National Security Council, comes to the Rose Garden, provides another strong statement. So I would -- I'm very comfortable with President Bush's and his whole team's actions on this matter.

Q You're talking about meetings, you're talking about phone calls, you're talking about statements from the President. But you also talked about action. Can you give us specific actions the U.S. has taken? It looks like Russia is basically doing what they want while we're talking.

MS. PERINO: We rallied our international partners to help solve -- get the cease-fire in place. That was the most important thing to do so that we could help protect innocent life. And --

Q But the cease-fire is not holding.

MS. PERINO: Well, first of all, you had to get them to agree to it. It's been five days. We believe that the French were the right entity to move forward to try to craft the plan and to take it forward. And they had the united support of the international allies going forward. You just had yesterday the -- well, the Georgians, for two days, have said that they would accept a cease-fire. The Russians had not. It then took President Sarkozy to travel to Moscow to get that agreement from President Medvedev, and then he immediately left and he went to Tbilisi, and I think it was midnight their time last night when it all got finalized and agreed to.

When you have cease-fire agreements, as I understand it, it sometimes takes a while to make sure that they are cemented. We have reports today that the Russians have taken actions that violated the cease-fire agreement. And that's what the President was concerned about, and we have communicated that to the Russians. And we have also worked to make sure the Georgians know that America stands fully behind them.

Q Dana, you mentioned Secretary Rice's trip to the region in July. It's widely reported she advised the Georgians at that time not to go into South Ossetia. Can you confirm that?

MS. PERINO: Well, South Ossetia is part of Georgia, so I don't know -- I don't think that that sounds right.

Q Does that mean that --

MS. PERINO: Do you want to rephrase the question?

Q Does that mean that you can deny it, you can say it is not true? The reporting is that --

MS. PERINO: I deny that Georgians were not in -- shouldn't have been in South Ossetia because South Ossetia is part of Georgia. That's part of their territorial integrity.

Q The reason there were peacekeepers there is because of the conflict.

MS. PERINO: Right.

Q And the reporting is that the U.S. felt that sending Georgian -- more Georgian troops into that region would be a provocation, and that the U.S. advised the Georgians not to do so.

MS. PERINO: There were provocations on all sides. And it flares up every year. And one of the things that we were making sure that both the Russians and the Georgians were doing is not to react to those provocations, and certainly not to react in such a disproportionate way as the Russians did this time. So that's the message that she sent, yes.

Q On another matter, the President, four months ago, was strongly pushing Georgia to become a part

of NATO. Had that been the case, we could conceivably be in a situation where Georgia would invoke the treaty and we would be at war with Russia. Does the President still feel he wants that obligation?

MS. PERINO: Well, I actually think you can flip that around and that the opposite could be true, that had the MAP status for Georgia been established at that meeting, rather than waiting for this next December's meeting with the foreign ministers, we might not be in this situation at all. So you could look at it either way.

The President believes that these institutions, these democratic institutions, such as NATO, provide aspirations for countries in order -- provide aspirations for countries to help establish their democracy. It helps protect them from their -- any hostilities while they work out their issues with their past conflicts with ethnic minorities in their own countries. It helps them feel more secure as they move forward on economic reforms. And it helps them understand that they can be part of an international community which many of these countries have aspired to.

And in the last 16 to 17 years, as we have built up NATO, I think that that has proven out. What we have now is a situation where a country that, by every definition, should get MAP status. They've done what they have needed to do in order to achieve that status. The President still strongly feels that they should be a part of NATO -- and as well as Ukraine and the other countries that have aspired and have done the work necessary to achieve that status.

Q In other words, had they been given MAP status, the Russians would not have dared the attack that they did?

MS. PERINO: What I'm saying is that you are -- you posed a hypothetical, and I just flipped it back on you, because I think that you can look at it either way.

Q Dana, can I just get -- something that seems to be crossing from Reuters, I just want to get some either confirmation or knock it down -- that President Saakashvili says that Bush -- President Bush's statement means Georgian ports, airports, will be placed under U.S. military control. Is that an accurate read of the statement? Is that an inflection --

MS. PERINO: No, not that I -- not how I read it, but I'll -- obviously that's happening right here. I don't even know if Saakashvili actually said that, so I'll take it back and check.

Q I mean, it's in --

MS. PERINO: That's okay, no, I'll take it back and check.

Q Dana, if the cease-fire violations continue, do you foresee any circumstance where the U.S. military would get involved in the situation?

MS. PERINO: I think that that's way premature and hypothetical and speculative and nothing that I would comment on.

Q Well, at this point, I mean, the President can only say that they should stop so much. At some point, doesn't something have to be done?

MS. PERINO: Well, I think let's try to get the cease-fire in place. And I just saw another report -- as I said there are conflicting reports coming out of the region -- a report that says that there -- that they have stopped in certain areas that we were concerned about earlier this morning. So the focus is to try to get the cease-fire cemented.

Q But you're not ruling that out?

MS. PERINO: I'm not ruling anything in or out.

Q Just to follow on a couple questions. Is the President not concerned that there could be a problem with sending U.S. troops into a theater where Russian troops are engaged in hostile activities?

MS. PERINO: Well, this is a humanitarian mission. We have informed the Russians that we are going to be sending in humanitarian aid. And we expect that they will be able to carry out their mission.

Q So he doesn't think it's dangerous for U.S. troops to be so close and in that area where there's potential for --

MS. PERINO: President Bush wants the humanitarian aid to be taken out. He thinks that the military, under Bob Gates's direction, is the best and most capable and has the most capacity at this time to be able to do that. The military will work very closely with USAID, as they have in other places. But the President is -- wants this mission to go forward, and Bob Gates is the right one to direct it.

Q Okay, now, just one other. On the Georgian President's original action, sending troops into Ossetia, is that -- does the President view that as a mistake or something that was irresponsible on his part?

MS. PERINO: I don't think that any of us have all of the details as to what happened on August 6th, and so I'm going to wait so that we can make sure we understand that. What we do know is that there were provocations on both sides and that reactions to those provocations resulted in a loss of life and violence that was absolutely unnecessary. We have proven that they could have direct dialogue and to contain these tensions in this area of conflict.

Q Okay, so, since the Georgian President obviously also, you're indicating, I think, couldn't resist responding to a provocation, is there any --

MS. PERINO: I'm not saying -- I didn't say that, Keith. Don't put words in my mouth.

Q Well, you had provocations on all sides and that -- you all but said that, didn't you?

MS. PERINO: No, I didn't say that, Keith.

Q Well, it sounded a lot like that, that there were provocations on all sides --

MS. PERINO: Why don't you re-ask your question?

Q -- Rice told him not to respond to provocations --

MS. PERINO: I said on all sides. I think that you need to remember --

Q On all sides, including the Georgian side.

MS. PERINO: -- this hasn't happened in just like the last eight weeks. This area has been a zone of conflict since the early 1990s.

Q What I'm trying to get to is Wendell's question -- is there any rethinking on the President's part about whether Georgia is -- and the Georgian leadership is responsible enough to be part of NATO and responsible enough to be people that won't trigger us into a broader war?

MS. PERINO: I absolutely -- this is a country that has worked so hard to establish its democracy. They fought a revolution to make sure that it could be established. They have established really good economic reforms. This is a country that was prospering right there in the Caucasus region and, yes, absolutely, they had done the work necessary to be able to achieve MAP status. It wasn't just the President of the United States who thought that they should be admitted into NATO. Many other nations agreed. And, in fact, that's why there was an agreement that this December the foreign ministers would get together, and we hope that is on the track to be able to give them that status.

Q I understand that there's democracy and that they're prosperous, although their democracy is relatively new. But they are also responsible enough to be a law-abiding member of --

MS. PERINO: I don't know what that question means. Yes, I absolutely think that the people are capable and responsible enough to self-govern.

Ann.

Q Often in the last seven years, the White House has said the President is able to handle crises and govern no matter where he is. What's his thinking about why he is now delaying his trip out of Washington --

MS. PERINO: He's just -- he had his team and -- all of the team members were here -- he had been in Asia -- and he was able to have a meeting with them. The capabilities of the President to communicate with his team exists wherever he goes, but there is a benefit to face-to-face communication. And so the President just wanted one more day to be with his team. Obviously Secretary Rice is leaving tonight at his direction to fly to France so --

Q And how long do you think the President might stay here in Washington?

MS. PERINO: As I said, probably just a day or two. He could leave Friday, instead of Thursday.

Mark.

Q Dana, the G8 is an organization of industrial democracies, industrialized democracies. You've long expressed doubts from this podium about the democracy that exists in Russia, but now -- your view is that Russia is now actively undermining a democracy that the United States wants to see in NATO. Has it sacrificed its membership to the G8?

MS. PERINO: Well, I think -- I'm not here to make any announcements or any -- or to even say that there are deliberations ongoing. Our focus is on the cease-fire and protecting human life and getting the humanitarian aid into the area. There will be time to discuss all those issues, and I'd refer you to Secretary Rice's briefing at 3:00 p.m. today.

Q Is not that what the President was hinting at when he said that Russian aspirations are in danger?

MS. PERINO: There certainly are Russian aspirations to these international institutions and they should really think twice about actions that they take that could jeopardize that, sure.

Q Including the G8?

MS. PERINO: There's a range of -- there's a range of organizations, including WTO and others, that they have aspired to.

One of the things that we have tried to do is encourage the aspirations of Russia, that they had hinted at, or even bluntly said that they wanted to join these institutions. We started the NATO-Russia Council, which was a way to let Russia know that NATO is not a threat to Russia, that NATO is a peaceful organization that can be called upon to defend one another if it's needed.

And when it comes, for example, to missile defense -- this is an issue that I've seen brought up where some might say that the United States provoked Russia with its missile defense. The missile defense system is just as important to Russia, from our perspective, as it is to the United States and our allies in Europe because we are concerned about rogue nations that would possibly have a missile that they could send across.

Now, Russia is much closer to that than the United States. But we wanted to help our allies. This was an international organization and we wanted to include Russia in a lot of these discussions. That's why we established the NATO-Russia Council. They had a meeting just in April, and I think there will be more coming up. So it is sad that they have taken so many steps backwards in the past few days.

Q Dana, one question on MAP and one other query. On MAP, doesn't the destruction, if reports are accurate, of a large part of Georgia's military arsenal, doesn't that complicate their aspirations to join



NATO, since I believe that's one of the requirements for membership?

MS. PERINO: Well, I don't know if we even know the extent to how badly the military was damaged. But we'll take a look at it and let me get back to you on it. I don't know yet.

Q And the second question -- was the Bush administration informed in advance of Georgia's intent to take military action in South Ossetia on Thursday?

MS. PERINO: On -- last week?

Q Last week --

MS. PERINO: Well, as I said, Secretary Rice had been in the region and encouraging both sides to stand down, and make sure that they continue to have direct dialogue, rather than fighting. I don't know the answer to any calls prior to any actions because I don't exactly know what happened on that day. So we'll sort that out and I'll try to get you more information as we move forward to try to understand what happened on that day.

Q Do you know who would have been informed, or -- would that have gone through State, do you think?

MS. PERINO: It's possible, but let us get back to you.

Q Dana, how would you characterize the U.S. relationship with Russia after all this?

MS. PERINO: Well, it's one -- as the President said, it's very complicated and complex, and that remains the case.

Q Strained? Adversarial? Do those words come to mind?

MS. PERINO: I would not put it as adversarial, no, but complex and complicated is the best way to describe it at the moment.

Q Is it your view that Prime Minister Putin is in charge in Russia?

MS. PERINO: President Bush has been speaking to President Medvedev, who is the President of the country. But he also saw Prime Minister Putin at the Olympics and took an opportunity to talk to him there, as well.

Q When is the last time he spoke to Medvedev?

MS. PERINO: Sunday -- Saturday or Sunday.

Q What's the highest level contact since then?

MS. PERINO: I think Secretary Rice and Steve Hadley have both been in contact with their counterparts.

Okay, sir, go ahead.

Q On the same issue, Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev wrote The Washington Post, "By declaring the Caucasus, a region that thousands of miles from the American continent, a sphere of its national interest, the United States made a serious blunder. But it's simply common sense to recognize that Russia is rooted there by common geography and centuries of history." How do you respond?

MS. PERINO: I'm not sure I understand the question. What's the question?

Q The question is that he made the statement, "By declaring the Caucasus, a region that's thousands of miles from the American continent, a sphere of its national interest, the United States made a serious blunder."

MS. PERINO: In supporting Georgia? That our blunder was in supporting Georgia?

Q That's correct.

MS. PERINO: The President is -- I'm not sure if that's exactly your question, but the President was very pleased to stand up for any democracy, including that of Georgia.

Q -- Mikhail Gorbachev wrote also, "What happened on the night of August 7th is beyond comprehension." What is your assessment for that specific night when Georgia military attacked the capital of South Ossetia and Russia responded by force?

MS. PERINO: Again, that's what I -- I don't know if anybody really knows exactly what happened on that day. So until we have more clarity I'll decline to comment.

Q A quick question. The aid that has arrived today and will arrive tomorrow on the C-17s, how is that going to be distributed? Is it going to be American forces distributing that aid?

MS. PERINO: I'll refer you to DOD for that information because I don't have it. I know that there is going to be medical supplies and beds and food and things like that that are necessary -- antibiotics. So I'll just refer you to DOD who is running that operation.

Q Just a follow to that, and perhaps I can go to DOD on this one, too, but do you anticipate that American forces would go beyond either the ports or the airports where the aid is being delivered?

MS. PERINO: Again, I'd refer you to DOD who will run that operation.

Q Can I just ask you a broad question? A lot of these stories that talk about this story step back to 2001 when President Bush first met then President Putin. And I just wanted to give you a chance to weigh in. There's been a lot of commentary the last few days that maybe President Bush misjudged this relationship. So I'll just give you a chance -- what is the President's thinking on that now, since there's been a lot of stories in the last couple of days saying what's really at work here? And, in fact, Senator McCain, in the last couple of days, has charged that the Russians want to remake a Russian empire. Does the President --

MS. PERINO: I was ready to answer your question, then you threw in the John McCain, and then you're trying to get me into --

Q Let's just step back and I'll strike the McCain -- what about --

MS. PERINO: Okay, first we'll strike the 2008 election. President Bush is very clear-eyed about his relationship with the Russian leaders, both President Putin and President Medvedev. He understands that this relationship is complex, it is complicated, and we have a lot of areas where we cooperate -- on issues of nuclear nonproliferation, on counter-terrorism. Increasingly, Russia sought to do more trade and economic activity with the international community, something that we supported as long as there were reforms.

But there has also been areas of strain, and this certainly is one of them. But President Bush has sought to be a personal diplomat in getting to know these leaders and having a basis -- basic level of trust and honesty so that he can have very frank and candid conversations with them when necessary, and to coordinate and cooperate whenever they possibly can on issues of importance to not just Russia and the United States but to the region and indeed to the whole world.

Q But has Putin taken advantage of that relationship?

MS. PERINO: No, I don't think so.

Last one.

Q What's the sense or consensus among the President's team about who's really calling the shots in Russia?

MS. PERINO: I think I was just asked that question. I said President Bush called President Medvedev, and he also had an opportunity to speak to Prime Minister Putin. But President Medvedev is the head of state, and that's who we believe is the head of state.

Q Thank you.

END 1:09 P.M. EDT

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