



Daily Press Briefing
Adam Ereli, Deputy Spokesman
 Washington, DC
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TRANSCRIPT:

1:10 p.m. EST

MR. ERELI: Greetings, all. Welcome to our briefing today. We can begin with your questions, since I have no announcements.

QUESTION: What does the North Korean statement do to U.S. expectations of resuming negotiations, six-party talks?

MR. ERELI: Well, we continue to believe that -- we and our partners in the six-party talks continue to believe that this is the best, most effective way to achieve a mutual goal of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. We will be consulting with our partners in the North Korea -- I'm sorry -- in the six-party talks about the latest statement and about ways that we can work together to achieve a resumption of the talks, which I think remains our goals, as the best and most effective means to reach our common purpose.

I would also point out that, as the Secretary said, the effectiveness of this statement, or the effectiveness of the suspension is less on the six-party talks than on the isolation of North Korea, and it serves to really work against what we're all trying to achieve which is a Korean Peninsula which is denuclearized and a Korean -- North Korean state which can be a fuller, more welcome member of the international community.

QUESTION: You would give equal weight? I mean, the U.S. is eager, aching to see North Korea become a member of the international community, or are you mostly interested in halting a very dangerous nuclear weapons program?

MR. ERELI: The goal --

QUESTION: And if you did, the byproduct would be they would get some acceptance but --

MR. ERELI: I think the goal of all of us is to deal with the danger that nuclear weapons on the North -- on the Korean Peninsula pose, and the way forward in that is a six-party process and a verifiable dismantlement of North Korea's programs which could have a number of benefits, not only the denuclearization of the Peninsula, but also allowing North Korea to spend scarce resources on its people and providing possible future benefits for the North Koreans.

QUESTION: Two quick things: There have been similar statements in the past. Do you think this one's different, more ominous? And the other would be: Is this a wake-up call to take another look at the way you've dealt with North Korea, what you've put on the table or refused to put on the table?

MR. ERELI: I'm not going to editorialize on the statement. I think you can all look at it and draw your own conclusions. As far as -- I'm sorry -- can you remind me what the second part of your question was?

QUESTION: Does this cause -- does this cause -- does their statement cause the Administration to have another look at what it has been -- without getting into the fact that some of your partners don't agree with you 100 percent, even though you present the United Front -- do you think the U.S. ought to take another look at the position it's taken, so far as the negotiations and what ought to be on the table?

MR. ERELI: Our position is consistent and we don't see a need to review it. For your benefit, our position is that we will continue to seek a peaceful, diplomatic solution --

resolution of this issue. The six-party talks through a multilateral framework remain, in our view, and I think in our partner's view, the best, the most effective way to do this, and the means that I think promise the best result for everybody.

Yes.

QUESTION: Does -- can you tell us where Mr. DeTrani is right now? And in light of the North Koreans' announcement, does Dr. Rice plan to ask him to return to the region, assuming he's here? Does she plan to ask him to return to the region to maybe talk to either the Chinese or the Japanese to sort of see what the next step should be?

MR. ERELI: Ambassador DeTrani is here in Washington. As far as his future plans and what the Secretary may or may not ask him to do, I don't know. I think those -- that hasn't been worked out yet.

QUESTION: One question on --

MR. ERELI: Arshad, please.

QUESTION: -- still on North Korea. The President's inaugural speech, in which he talked about it being a fundamental goal of U.S. foreign policy to spread democracy and freedom and liberty abroad, that speech in no way -- you'd be perfectly happy to see North Korea under its current leadership play a -- be a fuller, more integrated part of the wider world if it gave up its nuclear weapons? You know, the current repressive regime is fine with you, it's fine to integrate them more, if they give up their nuclear weapons?

MR. ERELI: Let me put it this way. First, President Bush and every senior member of his Administration who has spoken on this issue has made it clear that the United States has no hostile intent towards North Korea and that we have no intention of invading or attacking North Korea. We've also made it clear that we would be prepared to participate in security assurances on a multilateral basis in the context of dismantlement of its nuclear programs.

And I think with regard to engagement with North Korea, we've also made it clear that the United States and the other members of the six-party process that we are prepared to work with the North Koreans to achieve a peaceful, diplomatic solution of this problem and to contribute to improvement in the life of the North Korean people, but that we can only fully take these steps once these programs have been completely dismantled.

QUESTION: So you can partially take those steps before the programs have been completely dismantled?

MR. ERELI: I would say the full benefits of engagement and the full benefits of this policy can only be realized with complete dismantlement.

QUESTION: So some benefits can accrue from the United States even before full dismantlement?

MR. ERELI: I don't want to parse it further.

QUESTION: But you said that you and your partners -- and you said the United States and our partners have made it clear to them -- and then you went on to say that, you know, you can only fully take these steps once they've completely --

MR. ERELI: Yeah.

QUESTION: It seems to me like you're opening the door to the possibility of the United States providing benefits absent full denuclearization, which I thought was not your policy.

MR. ERELI: Yeah, I would -- these kinds of issues are -- frankly, we believe, the place to deal with those kinds of issues and those kinds of questions is in the talks. We've got a proposal on the table. We think it's a good proposal. We think it goes in a positive direction in addressing mutual concerns. We'd like to see a response to that proposal. We'd like to engage in a discussion about that proposal. But in order to do that, we've got to get back to talks. That's where our diplomacy, that's where our efforts, are going to be directed.

QUESTION: Listen, that's not out of line -- that question -- and it's not irrelevant. The podium has been used to promote diplomacy on the issue and to state positions. And it used to be said from this podium that the goodies, the benefits, could not go to North Korea until they agreed to eliminate -- to make -- eliminate their nuclear program. Now you've stopped saying that. So the question, I think, is valid: Are you prepared for a step-by-step approach, which you use all over the world? You use it in the Middle East. You're giving the Palestinians a little of this, a little of that. All over the world you try to encourage people toward your goal by giving them a little something along the way.

So could you try to answer the question whether some benefits could be accorded to North Korea if it started down the road to your goal?

MR. ERELI: No, I'm not going to -- I'm just, I'm not going to get into that kind of discussion. I think we need to take a step back and deal with the situation that we're in now, which is a desire on the part of five of the parties to the six-party talks to resume those talks in order to address the issues that we are discussing here. That's the appropriate place to discuss those issues.

We all have a common goal, which is the dismantlement -- or common goal -- which is the nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, which would involve the full dismantlement of nuclear programs, nuclear activity. That's what we're working toward. The way we get there is something that we're going to be discussing with our partners. It's not something I really can lay out for you now.

Yes.

QUESTION: One more on this, if I may. Did you -- I don't think you used the phrase, although maybe I missed it, in which case I apologize, "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement." Did you use that phrase?

MR. ERELI: I have not, but our position on that has not changed.

QUESTION: So your position is still complete, irreversible, verifiable dismantlement?

MR. ERELI: Yes, mm-hmm.

QUESTION: But you don't use that language any more, right, unless asked? (Laughter.)

MR. ERELI: Oh, this is getting to the level of scripting that is not indicative of anything.

QUESTION: Well, were you trying to open it with that, with the statement that you made about the full benefits cannot accrue until, were you trying to open the door to some benefits from the United States accruing to North Korea --

MR. ERELI: That was not my intent.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you.

QUESTION: Can I just ask about a seeming difference in attitude towards North Korea, which as a nuclear weapon, and Iran, which may be or may not be trying to pursue having a nuclear weapon? I mean, you're engaged -- or you want to get engaged in talks with North Korea. No sign that you're going to take part in talks with Iran.

MR. ERELI: I'll make a couple of points. Number one, the two cases are different. To state the obvious, in one case there is a -- they have reached a level of nuclear capability quite distinct, quite different, from the other. There are also international mechanisms and international institutions and procedures that apply to one that don't apply to the other. There are different regional dynamics at play.

So I would just caution -- as we say in dealing with a lot of different issues in foreign affairs, I would caution you from -- we certainly don't -- taking a cookie-cutter approach. At the same time, clearly, there's a common concern here, and that is the concern of development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the danger that presents to the international community, and -- I think it's important to say -- the ill effects of those programs on the people of those countries.

So for a variety of reasons -- our own national security, regional stability and I think human -- humanitarian concern -- it is our goal, it is the goal of the United States, to work with the international community to help these countries take advantage of opportunities presented to them to take a different path, one away from confrontation, one away from conflict, and one away from the senseless diversion of resources away from the needs of the people and into capabilities that do not serve a productive and useful purpose.

And the example that we use of how such decisions can be made, how such paths can be taken is Libya, which looked at the situation, looked what they had, looked what they wanted, looked what it was costing them and made the strategic decision that it's not worth it, we're not getting where we want to go, and once we get there it's not going to get us what we want, and therefore -- and what we're losing is more than what we're gaining, and what we could gain if we took another path is greater than what we would ever get if we kept going the way we're going.

So what did they do? They said, hey, you know, we're going to work to join the international community, we're going to play by the rules, and we're going to try to go down a different path and reintegrate ourselves into the economic and political and other networks that comprise the international community. And so that's how I would say the two issues of Iran and North Korea relate more directly, and that's the way to look at it in a broader context.

QUESTION: So the bottom line is you think it's easier to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons than Iran?

MR. ERELI: I didn't say that. We are working in both cases to offer a wiser, more responsible alternative that we believe it's in the interests of everybody to choose.

QUESTION: Well, Adam, I have two questions. One is, I mean, but why are you willing to come to the table as part of the process with North Korea when you're not willing to come to the table with Iran as part of the EU-3 process?

MR. ERELI: As I said, there are two different circumstances, there are two different countries, there are two different dynamics at work. The six-party process --

QUESTION: Well, Adam, with Libya, it had some incentive to come to -- it had some incentive to come to this decision because it knew the U.S. was invested in the process.

MR. ERELI: Right. But with Libya, it was a completely different approach than we took with Iran, it was a completely different approach which we took with North Korea, which is the point I'm making: Each case is different; you cannot -- you know, you cannot do the same thing with every country and achieve the same result.

I don't -- in North Korea's case, you've got the neighbors of North Korea, which are concerned. You've got us as concerned. There's a logic to working together on this. And I think that logic is *sui generis*. In Iran, it's a different dynamic at work and I don't -- we don't see that that kind of comparison is useful.

QUESTION: I have one follow on this. This week, Secretary Rice said, or she indicated that perhaps the Europeans weren't giving a strong enough message to Iran in terms of the need to give up its nuclear program or face Council action. Do you think that in the case of North Korea that your other partners in the six-party process are giving a strong enough message, which is equal to your message, in terms of the need to end its nuclear program, the Chinese, for instance?

MR. ERELI: We believe that there is a close convergence of views among the five partners in the six-party talks about the need for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear programs and about the threat that these programs represent to the region. And I would also note that North Korea itself has accepted the goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. So, no, I would not subscribe to the notion that somehow there is less than enthusiastic endorsement of what's -- what we're trying to achieve.

QUESTION: I wasn't talking about (inaudible) of views. I know there's a close convergence of views. But is there a close convergence or unity of message in terms of the pressure that's being put on North Korea?

I mean, you're -- the words that are coming out of this podium and of the President, of the White House, are a lot stronger than they are coming from the Chinese or the Russians or the South Koreans. And they --

MR. ERELI: I don't know. I haven't done that kind of comparison and contrasting. I think that we believe that our common purpose and coordination in the six-party process is good, is productive, is effective, and we're, I think, comfortable with the dynamic at work among us.

QUESTION: Just to follow up on that. You have just said that the U.S. has no fight intention towards North Korea and that the U.S. has no intention to invade North Korea. Would you be ready to give the same assurances to the Iranians, no fight intentions and no intentions to invade?

MR. ERELI: We have said that force is not an option at the time, at the moment, and that we are committed to pursuing this solution diplomatically. That is our policy. That is our approach. In no case anywhere in the world, under any circumstances do we unilaterally take an option off the table. And that's -- that is a basic tenet of American policy, and it's no different in Iran or North Korea or any other case. But we are -- we have said very clearly that a peaceful, diplomatic solution is our preferred option, or our preferred course and the one to which we are working with full conviction.

Yes, sir.

QUESTION: I understand and you have said over and over that you are looking for the peaceful solution on this issue. So it makes sense. But as long as we read the statement of North Korea yesterday, they are not coming to come back to the six-party talk soon. So do you have any idea to set up the deadline of resumption of a six-party talk?

MR. ERELI: We'd like them as soon as possible.

QUESTION: As soon as possible?

MR. ERELI: When that will be, I think, again, depends on North Korea. We and our partners are ready to come back. We believe it's in everybody's interest, and especially North Korea's interest, to come back. Because, again, a peaceful resolution of this issue will ultimately benefit the people of North Korea disproportionately, and for that reason we are going to continue to consult and try to find a way to get these talks restarted.

QUESTION: The United States has been making a lot of effort to make North Korea conduct the six-party talk, you know, since last year. The last session was --

MR. ERELI: June.

QUESTION: Yes, June, or last year, already eight months or so long. So nothing is going on at this period. So we don't know at this point when they come back. At the beginning of this year, we have like a strong hope they might come back to the six-party talks, but yesterday we are very disappointed. So -- I don't know -- also you said, you know, and you look for the peaceful solution. That's a good idea. But and how long could you wait?

MR. ERELI: We are working I think deliberately and consistently to keep this process moving forward. Frankly, you know, I think we've been very clear: the sooner the better. There are realities you have to deal with. I think we all share a common sense that the faster we can make this happen, the better. But there is no deadline. There is no time limit that we've put down on this. I think we have patience, but we also have determination.

QUESTION: Quick change of subject?

MR. ERELI: I don't think so. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: You just mentioned various ways of dealing with different countries in a different way. It is understandable. But as far as I know, no other country has declared that they possess nuclear weapons, but North Korea yesterday declared that they possess nuclear weapons. So isn't it a crisis and is the North Korea situation much more serious than the other countries?

MR. ERELI: Well, as I said there, it's different. I wouldn't use the word "crisis." The fact of the matter is that we, for a long time, have operated on the assumption that North Korea has a nuclear capability and it has been our longstanding intelligence community assessment that North Korea has produced one and possibly two nuclear weapons. So that assessment has guided our policy and our approach to this issue, and for that reason I would caution you or urge you to bear that in mind when analyzing current events.

Yes.

QUESTION: Have you been in touch with the Chinese or anyone else since the North Koreans put their message out?

MR. ERELI: I'm not sure if we have and at what level. I'd have to check.

Yes.

QUESTION: I have two questions. You just said that you always assumed that North Koreans had nuclear capability --

MR. ERELI: I said we have long assumed.

QUESTION: Long assumed. Long assumed. Do you think it's now a known fact that they have actually produced nuclear weapons?

MR. ERELI: I don't think anything in the last -- that's happened in the last 24 hours has contributed factually to our understanding of the situation. I would also point out that Korean media before have said on several occasions -- or have on several occasions referred to North Korea's nuclear capability. So, again, there's nothing new factually other than the existence of a statement to add to the mix.

QUESTION: Can you say anything on whether you think they have the delivery systems to launch a nuclear weapon?

MR. ERELI: They've tested delivery systems that have a range to reach Japan, which is, obviously, troublesome and destabilizing. I don't have a technical assessment prepared for you on what their delivery capabilities for a nuclear weapon are.

QUESTION: You don't know whether they have a warhead that could fit a nuclear weapon?

MR. ERELI: I don't have anything to share with you on that.

Let's -- yeah, go ahead.

QUESTION: This morning it is reported that some petitions, Democratic Party petitions, urged the government to have a direct dialogue with North Korea. Do you have any intention to do that?

MR. ERELI: I haven't seen those statements. The policy of the United States in that regard hasn't changed. We believe that the way to deal with this issue is through the multilateral framework of the six-party talks, and that's the way we're going to continue to address it.

Yes.

QUESTION: Yes, I understand that mutual visits by the officials among the six-party talk members are scheduled and the Chinese Communist Party high official will soon visit North Korea. He was to visit North Korea. Do you anticipate that these visits will go on as scheduled?

MR. ERELI: I can't speak to potential or possible Chinese travel to North Korea. For our part, we will -- as I said earlier, we will continue to have close consultations with our partners in the six-party process. The first one of those will be on -- well, this week when South Korean Foreign Minister Ban arrives in Washington. He'll be having meetings with State Department officials and be meeting with the Secretary on Monday. That was a previously scheduled visit, but it comes at a very, obviously, important time. And I would expect visits and meetings in the coming weeks with other partners in the process.

Yes.

QUESTION: I'm wondering whether the North Korean people notified in regarding with this statement in advance to the United States.

MR. ERELI: The North Korean people?

QUESTION: Yeah, right through the New York channel or so on.

MR. ERELI: No, we didn't get any such notification.

QUESTION: Basically, I want to know whether you are still optimistic of resumption of the six-party talk or you became very pessimistic in the resumption of the six-party talk.

MR. ERELI: I think I used the word "determined" and I'll stick with that.

Yes.

QUESTION: Two quickies, if you can answer them. Have you had any contacts with the North Koreans, for example, through the New York channel, since this statement was issued?

MR. ERELI: Not that I'm aware of.

QUESTION: And do you not take this statement somewhat more seriously than you do North Korean media reports because this is a statement issued in the name of the Foreign Ministry?

MR. ERELI: Obviously, it has a different -- it has a different weight. But the point, the important point here to make, is that it's -- with regard to its substance, it's something we've taken as a given anyway.

Yes. I'm sorry. George, did you have a question? You wanted to move, since we're going to something different?

QUESTION: Yeah, let's get some news here. (Laughter.)

Has the Administration lodged a protest with Russia for agreeing to provide Venezuela with more than 100,000 AK-47 rifles?

MR. ERELI: Let me check on that for you.

MR. CASEY: I'll get you. There is something out there.

MR. ERELI: I'll get you something on the record for you shortly.

QUESTION: Adam, can I follow up on that? Because I know -- I know you have guidance on that, but can you specifically --

MR. ERELI: Not in the book.

QUESTION: Yeah. Can you specifically look into the question of whether you made a demarche to the Russians in December about this?

MR. ERELI: Mm-hmm, sure.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Yeah.

QUESTION: Can I just ask you about lifting -- the European Union's plans to lift the arms embargo on China? We know that the Secretary of State has had talks with EU leaders, foreign ministers. I think Peter Mandelson, the European Union Trade Commissioner, is in town as well. Is there sort of any progress on that vis-à-vis your view and the Europeans' view, or are you still at odds on this?

MR. ERELI: Well, the Secretary spoke to it quite extensively in the last couple of days. We've had a very good exchange of views. I think we've had the opportunity to make our position on this known. We've had an opportunity to listen to the European views. And we -- I think the Secretary leaves European -- leaves Europe satisfied that our views will be taken into account and we will be able to work together on this issue to achieve something that's mutually agreeable.

QUESTION: So how can it be mutually agreeable when you seem completely ends -- at opposite ends of the spectrum?

MR. ERELI: I'm not predicting anything.

Yes.

QUESTION: Mr. Erel, it was reported today that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice invited the Greek Foreign Minister Petros Molyviatis to visit Washington. Do you have anything on that?

MR. ERELI: No.

QUESTION: Can you check for me, please?

MR. ERELI: I'll check, but I'm not sure I will have anything.

QUESTION: And one more question? Regarding George Anagnostopoulos case, who is writing propaganda-type stories in the Southeast European Times in a website controlled by the Department of Defense, according, however, to *Washington Post*, February 5th that DOD Chief Spokesman Lawrence DiRita said that this specific project is done in close coordination with the Department of State. May we please have your comment?

MR. ERELI: I hadn't seen Mr. DiRita's comments. I'll have to look at them and see what I have.

QUESTION: Can you take this question? Because it's a story. It's a big story.

QUESTION: Yeah, well, just -- I mean, just to follow up on that, there are several Penta -- there are several websites run by European Command and, as a general rule, the Pentagon has said that they are working in close coordination with the State Department.

MR. ERELI: I don't know the website in question and I haven't seen DiRita's remarks, so I don't want to speak to it until I've seen both.

QUESTION: Can you take this question?

MR. ERELI: I will look into it for you.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

MR. ERELI: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Can you comment on the development of the case against General Pinochet for the assassination of Chilean General Carlos Prats in Argentina? And, evidently, Manuel Contreras, who was convicted for the murder of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt right near us, is now saying he's a scapegoat --

MR. ERELI: Where is this case being prosecuted?

QUESTION: In Chile.

MR. ERELI: Then I'd refer you to Chilean authorities.

QUESTION: But if their murders -- if Pinochet is implicated in the murder of an American and a Chilean on American soil --

MR. ERELI: Was it on American soil?

QUESTION: Well, the murder of Letelier occurred in Washington, and Ronni Moffitt as well.

MR. ERELI: Yeah. Honestly, I don't have anything new to add on this case for you.

Yes.

QUESTION: As you're well aware, Palestinian militants shelled Israeli settlements in Gaza and scheduled Israeli-Palestinian security talks were called off as a result and Palestinian President Abbas has fired some of his security forces because of this.

One, what's your comment on the shelling? Two, what's your comment on the cancellation of these planned talks? And three, you've talked from the podium in very proving tones in recent weeks about the Palestinian deployments in Gaza. Does the fact that they can't stop, or didn't in this instance stop the shelling, suggest that they are clearly not particularly effective?

MR. ERELI: With respect to the attacks, we view them with deep concern. They only serve to undermine the aspirations and hopes of the Palestinian people. President Abbas has made clear his commitment to end the violence, to end violence and terror, and to pursue a peaceful resolution to this conflict. We are strongly supporting his efforts. He has already taken decisive actions in a number of ways. The latest was the dismissal of top Gaza security commanders earlier today. I think this is a sign of his commitment and his determination to follow through on that commitment.

Although we would -- although everybody, obviously, would hope for a complete and total end to all violence, we all understand, as the Secretary made, that there are going to be difficulties, there are going to be those who are recalcitrant and not with the program. I would not conclude from the basis of this attack that there's any lack of will or lack of determination on President Abbas' part. It is clearly, as I said, an issue of concern to us. We will continue doing what we can to help the parties act decisively to prevent these kinds of incidences.

QUESTION: Given that you just said and the Secretary has said that there are going to be difficulties and acts like this are probably somewhat inevitable, would you encourage the Israelis to -- and Palestinians to hold those security talks?

MR. ERELI: I'm not sure that the talks have been suspended, actually. I've seen the reports but I'm not -- I'm not aware that all contacts have been broken off. I think that that may be an overstatement.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Yes, back to the North Korean declaration of possessing nuclear weapon, you said the U.S. will keep this process moving forward -- I mean, the talk. But what if the North Korea take another step to maybe nuclear test, like that?

MR. ERELI: We will deal with possible eventualities when they occur. But at this point, it's -- those kinds of suggestions are hypotheticals that I won't -- don't need to get into now.

Yes, sir.

QUESTION: While we're waiting for the information on the alleged note to the Russians -- you have it now -- but I would like to point out that in dealing with this, assuming it to be true, this outside introduction of arms into Latin America where you presumably you have a regional accord to prevent such things, in other words, a multilateral force in the OAS, you have not chosen or have not been able to apply that. Just that's the context. Now let's --

MR. ERELI: What's the question?

QUESTION: Well, the question -- within that framework, I'd like to hear your answer to the other question.

MR. ERELI: Let me -- I'll get back to the other question later. As I said, I do not have anything for you right now.

QUESTION: You don't have anything on the question?

MR. ERELI: No, I don't.

QUESTION: One quickie. As you're probably aware, a British journalist was murdered in Somalia. Do you have any comment on that? And do you regard it, as the Somali Government officials have said, as an attempt to scare off international efforts to rebuild the country?

MR. ERELI: I'd seen the reports of the murder yesterday or the day before, I believe. Obviously, it's horrific and it is to be condemned. I can't speak to the circumstances of the killing simply because I don't have those details and I wouldn't want to presume -- come to conclusions without knowing what the facts are.

Yes.

QUESTION: There's a report that Japanese Government is considering and making a presentation to reduce the host nation support to United States force in Japan. Do you have any comment on that?

MR. ERELI: I had not seen that proposal and so I don't have a comment on it. Thank you.

MR. ERELI: Let me give you something on the record on the demarche question.

Our concerns about Venezuela's arms sales and the potential destabilizing effect on the hemisphere are well known to all concerned. We've raised this issue with the Russians on a number of occasions.

QUESTION: That's it?

MR. ERELI: Yeah.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:50 p.m.)

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