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Press Availability by Secretary Mattis

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JIM MATTIS: Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. I jotted down some notes. I'd like to share a few thoughts here in Djibouti. I came here to meet with President Guelleh and to spend time with General Waldhauser, our theater commander for all of Africa, here at our only enduring location in Africa.

President Guelleh and I just had a very good meeting. It was -- it went right to the heart of the partnership, which is very, very strong, and actually strengthening, from his perspective, and I agree with him.

I expressed my thanks here in the fortieth year of the independence of the modern state of Djibouti for everything that they have done, and you'll remember, those who go back to those hectic days after 9/11, this was a country that stepped forward at the end of 2001, early 2002, and said, we're with you, and they've been with us every day, and every month and every year since.

And this very strong partnership shows very, very clearly here, where they host our American troops for these past over dozens years.

I emphasized with the president that we stand by Djibouti and its commitment. It has made its own commitment to fighting terrorists. It's got two battalions with the AMISOM force. That's the Africa force stabilizing Somalia by fighting against the Al-Shabaab terrorists, and the -- that mission, international mission, by African troops there, supported by the United States, is actually commanded by a Djiboutian general officer.

I underscored that our presence in Djibouti respects their sovereignty, their national sovereignty, and it contributes to the Djiboutian people.

We are the third largest employer in Djibouti with Camp Lemonnier. We have awarded hundreds of contracts to local businesses, and that, too, is part of the partnership.

In a few minutes I'm going to meet with French troops who are stationed here. We're all keenly aware of the terrorist attack that France just suffered in Paris and others. And the French are great partners in the fight against terrorism. They've engaged vigorously against terrorist in this region, and they're proving stalwart in every fight against the enemy. They

always move aggressively against the enemy every time they fight them.

On a final note, I would mention that Japan has its only overseas base here in Djibouti, which shows how multiple nations can work together here at this crossroads, this important geographic crossroads. The Bab-el-Mandeb is right out that back door there.

And there's a common goal here of ensuring regional security, but with each of the nations that's here actually respecting Djiboutian sovereignty, and their own sovereign decisions just the way we do when we deal with other nations.

And I would just tell you that international law is critical to keeping the waterways open, and it's very important we maintain the same degree of cooperation in that regard in the future, as other countries come in.

I would let it -- right now turn it over to General Waldhauser, ladies and gentleman, to say a few words, and then we'll take a question.

GENERAL THOMAS WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Mr. Secretary, I'd like to really thank you on behalf of AFRICOM for you and your team coming to Djibouti today to pay the visit. This only underscores the importance of the relationship that we have with the country of Djibouti, because this particular piece of geography is very, very important to our strategic interests, especially in this area.

So thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. We really appreciate you coming here today.

STAFF: Sir, our first question is Corey from Stars and Stripes.

Q: Ah yes, General Waldhauser, (inaudible), thank you for doing this today.

We understand that the piracy in the region has been essentially curbed for the last five or so years, but there's been around six or so piracy incidents in the last couple of months.

So, General Waldhauser, you know, what has caused, you know, this sudden uptick, or re-emergence of the issue?

And then for both of you, how concerned are you about it? And what might the U.S. military's role be in responding?

GEN. WALDHAUSER: Thank you.

You're correct, there have in the last month been four or five, maybe six piracy attacks here in the region. Some of the reasons we see for that have to do with the drought and the famine, because some of the vessels that have been taken under hijacking have had some food and some oil on them. Moreover, these particular ships have been very small in stature and really a lucrative target for pirates.

And the final thing I would say is I think we've been working to ensure with Central Command -- we both share this trans-regional issue here -- working with Central Command to ensure that the civilian shipping lines have not laxed their security to the point where some of the reasons why piracy went down to really zero here was because of security measures the shipping industry has taken. And we want to make sure that the shipping industry continues to not become lax in that.

And the bottom line is there have been half a dozen or so. We're not ready to say there's a trend there yet, but we'll continue to watch it.

SEC. MATTIS: I don't have anything to add to that. Obviously we'll watch it, and I think that best practices by the merchant marine, by the navy -- the civilian mariners would be sufficient if something's going wrong here, but I don't see a bit military role.

STAFF: Sir, the next question is from Carla Babb at Voice of America.

Q: Thank you.

General, the first question is going to you: What changes have you made as a result of the new authorities that you've received concerning Somalia?

And for both of you, on Libya, despite pushing Islamic State out, (inaudible) that, there's still a very tenuous situation. The political and the security situation is very fragile. Has the GNA asked the U.S. or NATO allies for boots on the ground to help with the security situation or with the peacekeeping mission?

SEC. MATTIS: Let me just talk Libya for a moment. The -- as you know, the U.N. has lacked a special envoy for Libya for some time. The international community is working hard on Libya, from the United Nations to the Mediterranean nations. And I believe that Ambassador Haley and others have found a suitable candidate to nominate as the special

envoy.

I think as the diplomatic framework is matured, then we can answer more of the questions you rightly raise here, because clearly we've got to get that right. We all are aware that there's disarray in the unity government, and until you straighten that out, there's going to be a lot of transient successes if you try and just do counterterrorism.

Does that address your question?

Q: It does.

Have they asked you for boots on the ground though, sir? You just met with Sarraj recently.

GEN. WALDHAUSER: The Government of National Accord has not asked for any boots on the ground. We continue to work with them in the counterterrorism fight. We've talked about ways to move forward, how we can do that better, and we're looking for ways to work that particular problem as effectively and efficiently as we can, but there has been no request for boots on the ground.

STAFF: Sir, last question...

Q: And on Somalia (off mic)?

GEN. WALDHAUSER: So on the Somalia question, we have been given authorities, enhanced authorities in the last several weeks, from the president through the secretary; we've had those now for several weeks. And it shouldn't have gone unnoticed that we have not exercised those yet.

And quite frankly, we continue to develop intelligence and develop targets. And when we have the opportunity, we will use those.

But it's very, very important that, especially with the situation on the ground in Somalia today, with the number of people who are moving as result of the drought, with the NGO organizations who are on the ground distributing food and the like, it's very, very important that we have a very strong sensing of the common operating picture on the battlefield, because one thing that I'll -- the point I really want to make with these enhanced authorities, we still have a very high bar for certainty, because when a missile may come off the rail of an airplane or a drone perhaps, we need to know what's underneath there.

So we're working very hard to develop the intelligence, and work with also the political framework that we now have in Somalia with the new president, which is what we did not have before. We have talked with him. We are working with him. He's supportive of our efforts. And we look forward to being able to use those authorities at the appropriate time.

STAFF: Sir, the last question is from AFP, Laurent.

Q: Yes, I would like to ask you if given the general election in France, the presidential election in France that is about to start, are you worried that French support in Western Africa might come down? What would be the effect of a drawdown of France in the fight in West Africa?

GEN. WALDHAUSER: I was looking at the secretary because the question had, like, "election" in it. That sounds very political to me. (Laughter.)

But the bottom line is we work very closely with the French in the Sahel. Task Force Sabre and Task Force Barkhane has been there now for quite some time.

We for quite a while have supplied things like aerial refueling, aerial resupply, and we trade intelligence as appropriate. So we're going to continue to do that, because we look for our partners in that part of the continent to really carry the fight there. And this gets to the by, with and through that we hear so much about now. We are working really to a certain degree by, with and through our French partners to get at the significant AQIM issues, primarily in Mali in that region.

SEC. MATTIS: I'd only add that the French have got some of the most profession and capable, fiercely capable, but very ethical in their use of violence as they go into these kinds of fights. They know the region well.

And I think whoever is elected in Paris, that's a sovereign decision for the French to make. But at the same time, they will act in their own best interests and keep faith with the international fight against terrorists. They've always proven they would stand up when it was time to stand against something like this.

I have no doubt that the French will continue to make their own decisions in their own best interests, and that the terrorists will not enjoy those decisions.

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