

Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley Media Availability

March 12, 2020

Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper; Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Mark Milley

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DR. MARK T. ESPER: So good morning, everyone. I'd like to begin today by extending my deepest condolences to the families of the two United States Marines killed by ISIS earlier this week. And as some of you may know, we -- we welcomed them home last night to Dover.

And of the two American service members and the British national who were killed yesterday during an attack on Camp Taji in Iraq, for all those wounded in both attacks, we also wish them a speedy recovery.

Yesterday's attack by Iranian-backed Shia militia groups consisted of multiple indirect fires that originated from a stationary platform and was clearly targeting coalition and partner forces on Camp Taji. Chairman Miller will provide more details on the situation during his remarks.

But let me be clear, the United States will not tolerate attacks against our people, our interests or our allies. All options are on the table as we work with our partners to bring the perpetrators to justice and maintain deterrence. As we have demonstrated in recent months, we will take any action necessary to protect our forces in Iraq and the region.

And now, with regard to Afghanistan, I am in constant contact with Gen. Miller, who's keeping me updated on the situation in the country. We've made it clear to the Taliban that violence levels must be reduced in order to get on the path for peace consistent with the recent agreement.

The statement -- the State Department, DOD and Intelligence Community are working together to monitor compliance with the peace framework. There have been signs of progress over the past few days and we hope to see more steps taken to advance intra-Afghan negotiations.

Turning to coronavirus, I want to update you on the Department's ongoing efforts to fulfill my top three priorities, which are protecting our service members and their families; number two, safeguarding our national security missions and capabilities; and number three, supporting the interagency for a whole of government approach to combating the virus.

The Department of Defense has led a proactive response from the beginning with daily working group meetings across the Joint Staff, the services, combatant commands and OSD. These meetings have resulted in several memorandums to our force and important actions by commanders to protect their troops.

Today I'd like to share our newest guidance, which was the outcome of a number of meetings within the DOD over -- over many days and with the White House and the interagency. Tomorrow, March 13th, we will begin a 60-day freeze on all official travel of DOD personnel and family members to, from or through locations designated by the CDC as level three.

This restriction applies to temporary duty and permanent change of station for all personnel. For those in uniform, it also covers personal leave. At the same time, we are restricting the travel of family members to CDC level two designated locations and will postpone the hiring of non-essential civilian employees relocating to level two and level three areas.

Our combatant commanders, service secretaries and the chief management officer are authorized to grant exceptions on a case-by-case basis, and our commanders, of course, have the authority to provide direction and guidance to their troops every step of the way.

The department remains committed to doing our part in the administration's comprehensive fight against the coronavirus by enhancing the safety of our personnel, helping them stay healthy, and making sure they are able to continue executing their mission.

With that, I will turn it over to Chairman Milley.

GENERAL MARK MILLEY: Thank you, Secretary. Alright, I'll talk a little bit about some of the operational things. First is -- it almost goes without saying, is condolences to two great Americans and a British troop who was killed in action at Taji yesterday, and then the two Marine Raiders who were killed up by Kirkuk the day before. As the Secretary mentioned, we brought them home last night to Dover, the two Marine Raiders.

So, the situation in Iraq. As you know, at about 1930ish or so yesterday, last night Iraq time, Taji Air Base, many of you have been there before, came under a 107 rocket attack from Shia militia groups. We have pretty good confidence we know who did this.

We were able to capture the truck -- that was a modified truck with tubes -- rocket tubes on the back. Iraqi Security Forces did a good job in helping to secure that truck. We have good indication based on forensics of where it was fired from, who did the firing and so on and so forth.

We've been in consultation with the Iraqi government and other allies and partners in the region, and the groups that were responsible will be held accountable appropriately. And -- and there were 30 rockets fired, more or less, and we think that somewhere between a dozen or so, maybe as high as 18, impacted into Taji, resulting in the deaths of two Americans, one Brit and the wounding of 14 others, five of which were urgent.

So a serious attack; it was a significant attack and it resulted in the death and wounding of American soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, sort of thing.

So, where do we go from here? As you would expect, options are on the table, and we're looking at everything, and we'll await final options and decisions from the president. And I'll stop there.

SEC. ESPER: Okay, good. Alyssa? Yes.

Q: Can you bring us up to date on the injuries at -- out of the Taji attack? What are the numbers right now that -- that you're aware of, of both injured and killed? And also, do you expect, considering what happened previously this year, are there precautions for TBI that are being taken? And then more broadly, this -- clearly, Shia militia groups did this, but do you believe there was any order or direction from Iran?

GEN. MILLEY: For the casualties, three killed -- two Americans, one from Britain -- 14 wounded. Of the 14 wounded, five were urgent, and the nationalities of the 14 wounded -- and these are blood wounded. These are injuries, wounded from shrapnel and that sort of thing -- they are a mix of U.S., British, Polish and contractors, and there may be others in there, but I'm not aware of it. That's --

that's the mix that I'm aware of at this point.

As far as intelligence indicators of what you were asking, links and all that kind of stuff, I'm not going to answer that right now.

SEC. ESPER: We -- we -- we do know that they are backed by Iran. We know that much, for sure.

Q: What TBI?

GEN. MILLEY: TBI, we don't know. I would expect, just like there is in any type of explosion with overpressure, et cetera. Now, these -- these are 107 rockets, so they're not theater ballistic missiles like what you saw in the beginning of January. But any type of explosion, no matter how big, creates overpressure and -- and you run the risk of having TBI. So I would expect that there'll be some -- I don't know how many -- TBI injuries as a result of this, but that's too early to tell right now.

STAFF: Tara?

Q: Thank you. Brazil's president Bolsonaro is being tested for coronavirus and his press aid has tested presumptive positive. At this point, has -- have they reached out to DOD? As you know, they were recently at SOUTHCOM and at Mar-a-Lago, and then SOUTHCOM was here. So do you have any concerns that there might have been contacts or exposure here?

SEC. ESPER: I -- I have not heard that, and I don't have anything to report on that. We can -- we can run that down and get you an answer, though.

Q: Thank you. General, can you tell us more about the damage that's been done? You told us about the casualties, the injuries, but what more can you tell us about the base? And you -- you said, "We think we know who did it," and you said that they were Iranian-backed. Can you name the tie of Hezbollah and any other groups that were involved?

SEC. ESPER: We'll keep -- we'll keep -- that's an operational intelligence matter that's (inaudible) --
(CROSSTALK)

SEC. ESPER: We're not going to talk about this at this time.

GEN. MILLEY: (inaudible). I mean, we -- we know with -- with a high degree of certainty, but we're not going to mention that publicly right now.

Q: Okay, so then, about the damage. And then what do you say to the Americans and the Iranians that are worried that we're going towards war again?

SEC. ESPER: Well, look, it's -- we're going to take this one step at a time, but we -- that'll hold the perpetrators accountable. You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it. So we've been very clear about this for -- certainly, since -- since December and before then, that we will hold perpetrators accountable, and that's what we intend to do.

GEN. MILLEY: And it was structural damage, to answer your question. There wasn't structural damage to buildings.

Q: To what? To what?

GEN. MILLEY: The buildings, some of the buildings.

SEC. ESPER: The buildings ...

GEN. MILLEY: structural damage, to facilities.

Q: Facilities?

GEN. MILLEY: Facilities.

Q: Thank you. How do you explain that this attack occurred now? Why -- what triggered it, to your knowledge?

SEC. ESPER: Well, we've been -- we've been -- there've been attacks on various facilities since, you know, since January; rocket attacks here and there, you know, indirect fire attacks. We can't explain at -- today what the volume is and -- and -- and why, and probably if we knew, we probably couldn't share it or wouldn't share it, so I don't have an immediate answer for you. But this is not -- we've been experiencing indirect fire attacks here and there for the last couple months.

Q: But Gen. McKenzie this morning was saying that maybe it could be linked to the coronavirus and the fact that they are weak, and so they attack to...because they have to ...

SEC. ESPER: I -- I think that's --

Q: -- find an enemy.

SEC. ESPER: Who -- who -- who knows? I -- I just --

GEN. MILLEY: It could be a lot of reasons. It could be coronavirus. It could be rogue Shia militia groups. It could be Soleimani's birthday. It could be a lot of things. Don't know. All we do know for certain is 12-18 107 rockets impacted on a base occupied by U.S. forces and two Americans are dead, and one Brit's dead. And we have good indications of who did it.

STAFF: Phil Stewart.

Q: You -- you had indicated that options were on the table, and the president would make decisions. Can you give us a sense of, like, you know, whether he's -- whether the -- the president's already present -- presented with options, and what -- what -- what kind of -- do you expect some sort of reaction? You said it's coming. Should we expect it in the coming hours or days?

SEC. ESPER: I'm -- I'm not going to give -- talk to timing. I have spoken with the president. He's -- he's given me the authority to -- to do what we need to do, consistent with his guidance, and you know, if that becomes the -- the case. So I'll just say that right now, but the president is -- he and I had a good conversation yesterday.

Q: What -- what -- sorry, just to be clear, what do you mean by if that becomes the case?

SEC. ESPER: Well, I'm not going to talk about what, when, who, what, what we're doing or -- I'm -- I'm going to stick to what I've said, is we're going to hold those persons accountable, and I'm not taking any option off the table right now.

STAFF: Courtney.

Q: So just to be clear, that means that would include, potentially, strikes inside Iran?

SEC. ESPER: I'm not going to take any option off the table right now, but we are focused on the

group – groups, that -- that we believe perpetrated this in Iraq.

Q: And then, if I could ask a -- just, coronavirus question.

SEC. ESPER: As the immediate --

Q: Is -- is there any, there's been some, like, statements off the Hill today that there's concern about getting tests forward to troops, specifically in Afghanistan and Iraq. Can you update us on that at all? Are there --

SEC. ESPER: I -- I -- I get a daily report by -- from -- from my task force that meets daily. I get a daily report from the NORTHCOM commander. We hold constant meetings. Nothing has come up to me that says we are in urgent need of test kits or whatever. So I -- I don't know where that's coming from. We can pulse the system and check. But I have not --

Q: (inaudible) they are going forward to Afghanistan, to Iraq. (inaudible) numbers of --

(CROSSTALK)

SEC. ESPER: Well, again, I -- I don't -- I don't look at it that way. I look at, do you need testing kits? And that -- that may mean that they have it or they have -- they -- they know that it's coming, in route, at the time they need it, so -- we could have -- we'd have to pull the thread on that, but I -- nobody has said, "Oh my goodness, we don't have testing kits," or whatever. The system seems to be working fairly well at this point.

STAFF: (inaudible)

Q: Two questions, one on corona. Have you halted foreign leader visits to the building? And why has it been so slow to stop tours -- to limit contact within the building and to increase cleaning of the hallways, for instance, and the -- and the bathrooms et cetera?

SEC. ESPER: Well, we saw -- we -- we did all -- we began all that earlier this week. You -- I think as you all know, we put more dispensers out there. We did our own social spacing. We changed our own profile. The cleaning is -- all that has picked up. We are -- you know, we want to make sure we get the details right, but we're -- we're going to limit into the building persons who have traveled abroad, not necessarily foreign visitors, right? It'd be two different things. So we're going to look at limiting here pretty soon persons who have traveled abroad. We just need to get the details so it's clear and understandable as we -- as we implement something along those lines.

Q: What about foreign leader visits?

SEC. ESPER: Well, if they were abroad, if they were coming from abroad, we'd have to limit -- we'd look at limiting that.

Q: But have you cleared the schedule now, or are there still -- I mean, there's a foreign leader, for instance, at the White House today. Are -- are you -- have you halted that here at the Pentagon?

SEC. ESPER: I -- we have not made a formal action, but broad guidance has gone out anticipating a formal decision. I've -- I don't think I've probably changed my schedule so far, but that's -- that's where we're heading towards, as a matter of precaution, to protect the troops.

We can -- we can discuss issues by phone, by VTC. We have any number of ways to do it, and so we're looking at all those. But as you go through this, you've got to make sure that you get it right, you answer all the questions that likely come from people at the far end who have to implement it.

Q: And, Gen. Milley, in terms of the two Marines who were killed in northern Iraq, there's some question that it was such a vertical situation. They were heading into a cave, I guess, when they were killed. Why was that mission necessary at that moment, given how difficult it was going to be if they did come up under fire? And we saw it took six hours to recover them.

It's hard to understand what was imminent that caused them to be in that very sort of remote location in a vertical kind of fighting environment.

GEN. MILLEY: Right. I'd have to refer you -- that's a tactical decision, I'd have to refer you to CENTCOM for that. But you're correct, it's in a cave complex they were clearing. It was part of an operation with Iraqi Special Operations Forces, and it was very, very complex terrain. It was a -- not a safe haven, but sort of a little base camp sort of thing, in caves, for the remnants of ISIS. And it's a continuation of the Defeat-ISIS campaign, both in Iraq and elsewhere, Syria as well.

So -- but the -- why that moment in time, why that specific date, time, group, et cetera, I'd have to refer you to CENTCOM. I don't have that level of detail.

STAFF: Barbara?

Q: General Milley, can you help us understand on this PCS, TDY change, so-called travel halt? How does this now affect U.S. military troops and families in Europe, specifically in Germany and in the areas where -- that are under other travel bans? How does this now impact families and troops in Europe?

And my second question is, do you see any kind of path, or are you thinking, any indication that this takes you to some increased use of National Guard capacity and capability, other than governor, state-activated?

GEN. MILLEY: The second question first. I would say no, not at this time. But if it comes to that, we'll obviously discuss with the Secretary, he's got the authority to do that. But right now, I don't see that need.

On the first question, though, what the Secretary has signed out is a policy that says that we are restricting travel for 60 days, two months, to protect the force. We think that rather than move them back and forth, that you're better off protecting in place.

The impact on families and troops -- PCS, emergency leave for example or any other kind of -- any movement whatsoever, if you're going to school, professional development school, all that, frozen, unless there's a reason to do otherwise, a specific reason in a specific case-by-case.

The Secretary has delegated that to the combatant -- respective combatant commander, who has the authority to delegate the lowest general officer in the chain of command, a one-star on the chain of command. So -- and the service chiefs, the service secretaries can -- can make exceptions to the rule. And the exceptions can be if there's some sort of humanitarian reason, if there's some sort of extreme duress for the family or cost or injury to the family sort of thing --

SEC. ESPER: (inaudible) it's mission-essential.

Q: What about troops in Germany?

GEN. MILLEY: It's all, it's everywhere.

SEC. ESPER: All the countries.

Q: All the countries mentioned by --

GEN. MILLEY: That's right.

Q: -- by the president?

GEN. MILLEY: If you're -- if you're a category C country -- or area, actually, it's doesn't even have to be a designated country, it could be a region or an area, which, right now -- or two or three. Or two -- category two or three, I think it is.

SEC. ESPER: Level three, level three.

GEN. MILLEY: Level three --

SEC. ESPER: Level three is for --

(CROSSTALK)

GEN. MILLEY: -- which is Japan, Korea, and -- and --

SEC. ESPER: Europe.

GEN. MILLEY: -- Europe, Germany.

Q: And the schengen area.

(CROSSTALK)

Q: Mr. Secretary, could I just ask you, your sense of the bottom line? Right now as you look at this, can you help people understand what you think, given the halt in travel, the halt in exercises, the growing concern you have to make sure you -- that everybody's got a handle on this? The impact on national security?

SEC. ESPER: I'm confident that we'll be able to -- do what we need to do to maintain the nation's security. We have a young, healthy, fit, robust demographic in the United States military. On top of that, the commanders are making prudent decisions with regard to day-to-day operations, with regard to exercises, so forth and so on.

And so I really don't have any concerns right now along those lines. I think between these other measures we're taking to mitigate spread, will be helpful. And what the doctors tend to tell you is, if this virus acts like other coronaviruses -- and I don't want to get outside my field -- is, there's a good chance this is seasonal and it will burn off in the next couple months.

GEN. MILLEY: I think we're fine, national security-wise. If I thought otherwise, military advice, I'd tell him and the president in a nanosecond. So we're in good shape, we're a fine healthy force, exercises -- not every exercise is getting canceled. We've got residual capabilities.

We're talking about doing a few things here for 60 days, kind of thing. But in the -- in the broader scheme, we're in good shape and our particular demographic is not -- right now, anyway -- getting massive amounts of infections and positives. There are some, but it's not massive.

STAFF: Lara Seligman.

Q: Thank you. So first of all, my understanding is that none of the incoming rockets were

intercepted by air defenses --

GEN. MILLEY: Sorry?

Q: None of the incoming rockets were intercepted by air defenses. So can you say whether or not we detected the attack ahead of time? And if not, what failed?

My second question is that there were reports last night of attacks on IRGC positions near Abu Kamal, I believe. Can you confirm that the U.S. government was not responsible for those attacks, and that we have not yet taken any response to the attack last night.

GEN. MILLEY: I'll let the Secretary deal with the second question.

SEC. ESPER: I'm not going to comment on -- on the operations that happened last night.

GEN. MILLEY: And on the first question, we get -- we have alert systems. You know this, you've been on all the bases, you have alert systems. Incoming missiles, alarms go off. So that's an immediate -- so that is there.

But on that base, with these type of rockets, no, they were not intercepted. It's not a function of failure, there's not a system there to defend against those type of rockets.

Q: There's no system at all to defend against --

GEN. MILLEY: Against those type of rockets.

STAFF: Then one more question. Nancy?

Q: On development, a couple things you said. You talked about plans and all options being on the table. Given that a British national was among those killed, is there consultation happening with the Brits in terms of any possible response?

And also, you mentioned, Mr. Secretary, that you talked to the president. Has there been discussions with, for example, Treasury about other responses that include things like sanctions?

And then to both, can we just get an update in terms of how many corona cases are in the U.S. Military as of now? How many confirmed cases, how many tests?

SEC. ESPER: Six confirmed for service members, seven for dependents. I have not had a broader discussion with other cabinet secretaries -- well, I've obviously talked to the Secretary of State -- but with the Treasury secretary about sanctions.

And what was your first question?

GEN. MILLEY: About the British.

Q: British, if you --

SEC. ESPER: Yeah, I've talked to my counterpart, my U.K. counterpart; we're discussing the way ahead. And the chairman has talked to his U.K. counterpart.

Q: So it's fair to say that the British will be involved in --

SEC. ESPER: I'm not going to comment. I'll let you call up, you know, London.

(CROSSTALK)

Q: On the travel policy, sir, for families who are overseas now in those countries, can they travel internally, or is this just a -- to or from the United States, travel?

SEC. ESPER: This is between level three places.

Q: But can they travel within level three places --

SEC. ESPER: See, this is where we start getting into the details that -- I haven't memorized the policy. What we plan on doing is, in the next 24 hours, is setting up a briefing for you all to kind of tease through these types of issues, because this starts getting, if this, if that, and if I do -- you know, and that's why we -- I wanted to make sure that I gave commanders waiver authority to make those localized decisions, right?

So, you know, I -- I served a tour in Italy so you -- the question would be well wait, I'm supposed to move from Vicenza to Verona, right, or from Vicenza to Naples -- is what you're going -- and -- and we're going to give commanders authority to do that; but I don't want to -- without reading through the policies -- let's set you up to do that and then we'll -- we'll get your briefings soon --

Q: And are you looking at internal, within the domestic United States, in terms of PCS moves between, like, Washington state and Georgia or something like that?

SEC. ESPER: We're going to take a look at all of those here in the coming days. We want to make sure, again, we're taking prudent measures to -- to -- again, I'm very confident in the health and fitness of our force, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't take prudent measures to kind of mitigate its spread and to mitigate, you know, folks who live on our bases who may be more vulnerable, right?

You know, moms and dads living with your service member, moms and dads living with you, they're a senior, right? That's vulnerable -- a vulnerable population that we want to be conscious of, okay?

Hey, thanks, everybody.