

Africa Regional Media Hub
Press Briefing with Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of African Affairs, Tibor P. Nagy, Jr. via
Teleconference, Kigali, Rwanda
March 12, 2019

MODERATOR: Good morning to everyone from the U.S. Department of State's Africa Regional Media Hub. I'd like to welcome our participants dialing in from across the African continent and thank you all for joining the discussion. Today, we're very pleased to be joined from Kigali, Rwanda by the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of African Affairs, Tibor Nagy.

Assistant Secretary Nagy will preview Deputy Secretary of State Sullivan's upcoming travel to South Africa and Angola. This visit will focus on promoting U.S. trade and investment, advancing peace and security, including with respect to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, as well as engaging with youth and civil society. We ask during the question and answer portion of today's call that you focus your questions on Deputy Secretary Sullivan's travel.

We will start with opening remarks by Assistant Secretary Nagy and then will turn to your questions. We will get to as many of your questions on the call with the time that we have today. On Twitter, we're using the hashtag #AFHubPress and you can follow us @africamediahub.

As a reminder, today's call is on the record, and with that, I will turn it over to Assistant Secretary Tibor Nagy. Go ahead, sir.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Good morning. Thanks a lot. As was announced, I'm talking to you this morning from Kigali, Rwanda. We had just toured the genocide memorial, which was extremely, extremely impactful. But I do have good news for you guys this morning, and I wanted to highlight that our Deputy Secretary of State, John Sullivan—Deputy Secretary being the second highest ranking person in the State Department—will be traveling to South Africa and Angola from March 12th to the 18th.

In South Africa, the Deputy Secretary will visit Pretoria and Johannesburg, and in addition to meeting with officials, obviously, from the South African government to discuss our bilateral ties, he'll also be meeting with a number of groups, such --example young leaders, beneficiaries of President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief, business representatives, and also he'll be discussing with experts such fairly hot button issues as land reform, the upcoming elections, and some of the others.

Then the Deputy Secretary will be going to Luanda, Angola, where we have confirmed that he will be meeting with President Lourenço to discuss, again, a number of our bilateral issues, including some security issues, and also he'll be co-chairing the session of the U.S.-Angola Strategic Dialogue with Foreign Minister Augusto, and also it's interesting that there he will also be focusing on some very, very critical environmental issues related to the Okavango Delta, which Angola and a number of other countries in southern Africa are quite concerned about.

This trip fits in with our United States Africa strategy; we are delighted that a number of high-ranking U.S. officials have recently been visiting Africa in addition to the Deputy Secretary. The Undersecretary for Political Affairs was there over the last several months, visiting a totally different part of the continent. I'm making my third trip since assuming my duties about seven months ago. This time I'm visiting the central Africa region, and I very much hope to get back in a couple months to finish up by

visiting the southern African region, and hopefully during this year we will have some other high-ranking U.S. government officials come to the continent.

So with that, I don't want to take up this time. I want to open it up to those that are out there. And I would like to add more thing: from our heart, our condolences on the loss of Ethiopian Airlines.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much, Assistant Secretary Nagy. We'll turn to the question and answer portion of today's call. I know we have several of you on the line.

I see that we have our friend Peter Fabricius on the line; go ahead and introduce yourself and ask your question, Peter.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Brian. Thank you, Assistant Secretary. Peter Fabricius here from the Daily Maverick, an online journal in South Africa. I wanted to ask you how you see the Deputy Secretary's discussions going with the South African government on a number of issues. You mentioned land reform, where there have been some differences in the past about the interpretation of that. There are also some issues about imports on steel and aluminum into the U.S., where tariffs are imposed and not in not all cases removed. And also, I guess, on an extra-continental issue, some quite sharp differences of opinion on the handling of the Venezuela crisis now, and if you could clarify the nature of relations and discussions on those points. Thank you.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Sure. You hit all the issues, didn't you? Thanks so much. Let's start with Venezuela. As you know, it's no secret that we often vote differently, the South Africans and us. I think their coincidence voting record since 2017 was like 18%, between the United States and South Africa, which puts South Africa in the lower 10% of countries with coincidence of our positions.

And Venezuela was especially disappointing; the only disappointing thing from a bilateral point of view or a U.S. policy point of view is—it was very disappointing to me—was South Africa was one of three countries that voted against our resolution. Only African country to vote against our resolution.

And, you know, you start with the bottom line. States are sovereign. States make decisions on things like steel quotas or imports or those types of things, and that's absolutely on UN issues. But South Africa, given its history, its suffering, and to see what the Venezuelan people are going through. And I also know, in the past, South Africa does have very strong party-to-party relationships with certain parties around the world, but what Maduro is doing to Venezuela is—I mean, in my view, it's literally a crime. And interim President Guaido is offering a solution; he's been empowered by the National Assembly, and why countries cannot come together to see that, for me that is in effect very puzzling, and I am absolutely certain that that will be a topic of discussion.

You know, fundamentally, on trade and AGOA, again, we do have some differences, especially related to these aluminum and steel tariffs. I mean, United States of America, the President of the United States properly decided that imports of steel and aluminum threaten our national security, so he has taken aggressive action to address the concerns, and to be fair, the Department of Commerce does consider requests for, I think they call it "product-specific exemptions" to the tariffs, and has approved such exemptions to many importers of South Africa products in the past.

So there are mechanisms around this, but as I said, countries are sovereign. Countries make decisions on what is truly important to them, and South Africa will continue to do that and the United States of America will continue to do that.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Assistant Secretary Nagy. We'll turn to a listening party hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa. If you could please have your journalist introduce themselves and their outlet and try to stick to one question, please.

QUESTION: Hello, ambassador. Thank you for your time. My name is [INAUDIBLE] from the U.S. embassy. I'm a journalist here. My question is, with the new administration here in Ethiopia, a few months ago we did talk a lot with the same press briefing, and we were hopeful that hope was on the horizon and we did talk a lot about it, and now the government is trying to bring about democracy here in Ethiopia, but at the same time, the government wants to stay in power. So what is your stance on this issue here in Ethiopia, where the government is trying to bring about democracy, but at the same time it has to stay in power because the two things are not going to go together. So we...

MODERATOR: I think—let me let the Assistant Secretary answer that question. Thanks for your question.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Yeah, thanks a lot for the question. Even though it's not South Africa or Angola, I will definitely answer. As you know there in Ethiopia, the United States of America is trying to do everything possible to support the initiatives of Prime Minister Abiy, both externally in the region and internally as far as democratization, opening of political space goes in Ethiopia.

Elections are always a tricky issue; timing of elections is a tricky issue. We would be quite happy if, you know, the Prime Minister, EPRDF, negotiates with the opposition parties, whatever calendar they come up with. Because, you know, the Prime Minister was put in an extremely precarious position with all of the dynamics going on there, and, you know, it is often just as harmful to try to hold elections too early as it is to hold them too late. I mean, it's very difficult, but there is what we could call a "Goldilocks period" in those situations for holding elections.

So we often obviously will continue our consultations back and forth; we have an extremely open, honest, frank exchange with the Ethiopian government and we will continue to do that. But again, we wish you all in Ethiopia the very best with moving forward, given the history that you've had to go through. Over.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Assistant Secretary. We did receive questions from a journalist in Angola in advance. I'll ask one of those on behalf of Domingo Joao Antonio with Balamuka. He's a reporter at Radio Nacional of Angola, and he asks: How does the United States look at the ongoing reforms in Angola, meant to fight corruption, nepotism, and impunity?

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Well, that's again another good news story in the entire world. You know, we talked about Ethiopia just a minute ago. Now, as I tell people, the current good, good news stories on our continent, one is definitely what's going on in the Horn of Africa but the other one is what's going on in Angola. I think all observers have been absolutely pleasantly, delightfully surprised by what President Lourenço and his government have been doing. We absolutely support his efforts to fight corruption. We know that there's a long way to go, because that has been one of the perennial complaints from American investors.

And as you know, one of our top-line goals in Africa is to increase American trade and investment so that there's not just a few investors going there, so we are absolutely delighted. We will work with the Angolan government. We will be as supportive as possible, and we will do our best to bring even more trade and investment to Angola. We will be undertaking one of the things the, as I said, the Deputy Secretary will be doing: he will be co-chairing a session of the U.S.-Angola Strategic Dialogue, which is quite significant when we have a strategic dialogue with an African country. You know, that basically means that the United States—not that we don't take our relations with everybody seriously, ok, let's put that on the record—but that this signifies really kind of—I don't want to use the word “upgrade” either—but it's a heightened state of relations where we are very, very seriously laser-focused on several aspects of our relationship, and we look forward to doing that with Angola. So overall, very positive. We're very grateful for the steps being taken. We are all for reforms. Over.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Assistant Secretary. While we're on Angola, we did have one additional question from Antonio Chocolate Mangovo, also with Radio Nacional de Angola, asking about the Trump administration decision to return U.S. correspondent banks to resume operation with Angolan counterpart banks. Is there any development on this issue? Is this something that the Deputy Secretary may discuss in Angola?

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Okay, that -- there has not yet been taken a final decision. There is an ongoing consultation on that, so I think it would be incorrect to characterize it that there's a final decision.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. We're going to turn now to a question from Le Monde. If you could introduce yourself and ask your question. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, my name is Cyril Bensimon from the French newspaper Le Monde. Mr. Tibor Nagy, you will be at the end of the week in Cameroon, where there is a political crisis, where the main opponents were [INAUDIBLE] in jail, and there is also a more global crisis in the Anglophone region. What will be the message that you will give to the authorities in Yaoundé about that, and if you don't see any willingness of going further, is there individual sanctions which are possible from the U.S. government?

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Yeah. Before I respond to that question, which is very interesting, I do want to add one more thing to the question on the banks. Is that it's very, very important to note that banks are the ones that ultimately decide where to do business; it's not the United States of America. You know, certain countries can tell their businesses, "Oh, you go invest in the Gambia." "You go invest in Angola." Or "This bank goes to there." In the United States we don't do that; it's always up to the banks and where they see opportunities. Okay, over.

Now, to Cameroon. Thank you very much, Le Monde. Every time I speak on this issue I end up in more trouble with the Cameroonian government, so we'll see, but yes, I will be in Cameroon. And here's the situation with Cameroon: before we're starting on this trip, I had an opportunity to be in Paris and meet with my G7 colleagues; that is, we should say the directors for Africa of the G7, and I was absolutely delighted that we really do have commonality on Cameroon, and as I think you saw last week, the entire EU issued a statement on Cameroon. We are all extremely concerned because it is a very serious crisis; every day people are dying, every day people are suffering. You know, when there's a national crisis like that it's not always positive to arrest members of the opposition.

Again, I know that the Cameroon government has taken some steps, but you would not believe the number of messages I receive every day about Cameroon, and also in Washington the very, very high level of political interest in all branches of the United States government, including Congress, that are always getting in touch with me about Cameroon.

I served in Cameroon, so I say with all sincerity that my heart breaks for Cameroon. I know the areas very well; I know some of the people involved, and I just don't understand why this crisis goes on and on and on when there really needs to be absolute open, unlimited national dialogue to come to resolution, because those poor people in northwest and southwest—we can call them that, we can call them the people in the Anglophone region—are just suffering so, so much. So we need to be focused on that and maybe take it further to an international fora to look at. Over.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Assistant Secretary. We turn to Esther Rose next; if you could introduce yourself and your outlet, and if you could limit yourself to one question. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Okay, my name's Esther Rose. I'm from AllAfrica. Just one question: I find it interesting that you say South Africa will make decisions. How does that then tie in with the chicken farming in South Africa and the way that people are saying the U.S. forced South Africa to take their chickens? And South African farmers are crying out for assistance in the local markets; what do you say to local farmers?

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Well, what I say to local farmers is what I would say to American farmers, who are also, you know, could be unhappy, and that can affect every country in the world. I mean, the fact is that the establishment of the tariff rate quota was an agreement between the United States and South Africa poultry industries, and it was not a government-to-government agreement, so those kinds of deals happen also all the time. That's how the agreement was made, and you can undertake additional negotiations to take it forward, but right now that's where we stand, and I do know that the Deputy Secretary will be able to discuss that issue when he's there with his South African interlocutors. Over.

MODERATOR: Next we will turn to another friend, Brooks Spector at the Daily Maverick in South Africa. Go ahead and ask your question.

QUESTION: Good morning and thank you for taking my call. I want to turn to trade, but I want you to become forward-looking for us. As you know, as most of your listeners know, the current AGOA legislation expires in 2025, I believe. What's the state of play within your administration about an extension, a revision, or alternatively, individual free trade agreements? And will this question form any part of your Deputy Secretary's discussions in southern Africa later this week?

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Yeah, I love that question, so we'll put you on the list of permanent people to ask questions.

Yes, the Deputy Secretary will indeed be prepared to discuss that issue but not to undertake negotiations for the post-AGOA period, because as you can imagine, we're more than five years away from the time that the current AGOA expires, and the best word I could use to characterize the post-AGOA environment is "uncertainty." All of the things that you mentioned are possibilities, but the administration is very much focused on one of the items you mentioned, which is bilateral free trade agreements.

Okay, having said that, I also want to state for the record, the United States of America supports the continent-wide free trade agreement. So we're not trying to compete with that, but the administration very strongly supports bilateral free trade agreements for the United States of America, and right now we are actively searching for a country to serve as a model. The United States of America right now has only one free trade agreement—FTA—with an African country, and that is Morocco, so in effect we have none with sub-Saharan Africa.

And then, to be noted, of course, is our extensive commercial ties with South Africa. I think we have 600, and I was astounded to find out about the 600 U.S. companies in South Africa employing, I believe, more than 200,000 people responsible for 10% of South Africa's GDP. So it's a very important question, and it's one that we will all have to focus on going forward, because for us, South Africa is an essential commercial and trade partner in Africa. So we will obviously be very focused on that. Over.

MODERATOR: We have our colleagues at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria hosting a listening party. If you could go ahead and introduce yourself and your outlet and ask one question, again, ideally speaking to the Deputy Secretary's trip to South Africa and Angola. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Good morning from Abuja, Ambassador Nagy. I am [INAUDIBLE] from [INAUDIBLE] newspaper. My question is I want to know if there are plans by the U.S. government to [INAUDIBLE] Nigerian government over the conduct of the 2019 general election.

Then, if you will also allow me, as the former ambassador to Ethiopia, visitors are now restricted to \$3,000, visitors traveling through Ethiopia. [INAUDIBLE] the general rule of \$10,000 that is international standard? How do you see this development, particularly as some travelers' money has been seized in that country? Thank you.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Okay, on the Ethiopia one, that one I cannot respond to, but on the Nigeria one—and also, greet all my good friends in Abuja for me, please.

You know, our Embassy, I mean you know being there in Abuja, how active Ambassador Symington and our embassy team have been in the pre-election period, in the election period, now in the post-election period. They are providing phenomenal guidance to Washington on how we should or should not respond to the election-related events. As you probably remember, I was there previous to the elections, meeting with a whole number of people, NGOs, electoral commissioner, so just rest assured that the United States of America Embassy and the Consulate in Lagos are very, very actively involved and are doing just an absolutely superb job with the entire team there to monitor the events, to report on the events, and to provide guidance on how Washington should react to whatever the events there are, with statements, with telephone calls. As you know, our Secretary did make a telephone call, so Nigeria, again, critically important country just like South Africa, just like Angola, so we are very involved there. Over.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Again, we have about five minutes left. The Assistant Secretary does have a very busy schedule; of course, he's traveling on the continent as we speak, as he speaks to us from Kigali. I want to turn now to Anita with Voice of America. If you could introduce yourself and ask your question. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. This is Anita Powell with Voice of America in Joburg. I've got two quick questions. I want to ask you about possible discussions with the South African government about the ex-Finance

Minister of Mozambique, Manuel Chang. Are you guys going to bring this up? Why do you believe that he should be extradited to the United States? Feel free to give us as many juicy details as possible about why you believe he should be [INAUDIBLE].

ASST. SEC. NAGY: [INAUDIBLE]

QUESTION: Also [INAUDIBLE]

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Let me respond to that first. Let me respond to that, and if there's time we'll get to the other one.

QUESTION: Okay, just one follow-up. Okay, go ahead.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Okay, go ahead. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Just one follow-up and then a cheeky second question. I just want to get your reaction to the news that the president of Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, is forming a coalition with Joseph Kabila. How do you guys feel about this? [INAUDIBLE]

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Okay, those are two very different [INAUDIBLE]...

QUESTION: Very different.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: Yeah, two very different questions. Okay. On the extradition request, as you know, we have an extradition treaty with South Africa. We are acting in accordance with that extradition treaty. We expect, you know, in such arrangements, that both parties will honor that treaty, so we are very much expecting that that will happen. At this point, no juicy details. The official thing I can tell you is that the U.S. fully expects the South African government to respond by extraditing Mr. Chang to the United States. And that's all I can say about that, no other juicy details.

On the Congo, I will be very clear because I know we're almost out of time. The Congo is very much of an evolving political dynamic; it's very important to see that as an unfolding process and not to just look at individual events. We have to put those events into the process; as we all know, there's all types of negotiations going on behind the scenes. There are coalitions being formed amongst the parties and the National Assembly. We know how the government is appointed; it's not appointed by the president, but the president basically has veto power, so this is going to be going forward. We will continue to have very frank, open, honest discussions with President Tshisekedi. We make our voice heard, and we will just see if hopefully in another year and a half we will be talking about the DRC in positive terms just like we're talking about Angola today. Over.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Assistant Secretary. We are just about out of time. If you have any closing remarks you'd like to offer to our participants.

ASST. SEC. NAGY: The highlight is that obviously we consider South Africa a very, very important partner in Africa. We believe that we have so many commonalities with it. I sometimes regret that the focus tends to be on areas where we may have disagreements. As I said, the U.S. business community is extremely positive about South Africa, we eagerly await political developments there going forward and we look for U.S. trade, investment, and engagement to grow even more. We are very happy with our partnership on PEPFAR.

And with Angola, the same thing. We're delighted with our partnership; we want to grow it, develop it, and we especially thank you, the journalists, very much for your engagement, your interest, and we know how difficult some of your jobs are. Over.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much for your time today, Assistant Secretary Nagy. That concludes today's call. I want to again thank the Assistant Secretary for joining us, again, in the middle of his trip. He's joining us from the U.S. Embassy in Kigali, Rwanda. Thank you to all of our callers and journalists for participating. If you have any questions or follow-ups for today's call, you can always contact the Africa Regional Media Hub at our email, afmediahub@state.gov. As always, we will make the transcript and audio files available as soon as possible. We'll send that information out by media advisory, as well as on Twitter. Thank you.