

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
(Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago)

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**BACKGROUND BRIEFING
BY SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS
ON THE PRESIDENT'S MEETINGS WITH
PRESIDENT PREVAL OF HAITI AND PRESIDENT BACHELET OF CHILE**

Diplomatic Center
Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

9:52 A.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good morning, everyone. We're going to do a short readout of the meetings the President had yesterday at dinner with Haitian President Preval and President Bachelet, and then this morning with the Central Americans. This will be a briefing on background, as senior administration officials.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hey, good morning, everybody. The President enjoyed the dinner last night. We just talked with him a little bit on the way over here to get a readout from him because it was, obviously, just heads of state.

And he enjoyed it very much. He made particular note of the elaborate cultural ceremony and expressed his appreciation for that and appreciation for the many, many people of Trinidad who participated in it.

He mentioned that he had an opportunity to -- since we talked to you yesterday he switched tables. He was invited to sit at the head table with Prime Minister Manning, which he was happy to accept such a gracious invitation. He also sat at that table with Prime Minister Preval -- sorry, with President Preval and President Bachelet. He noted in particular that he had a long chat with President Bachelet, expressing his deep appreciation for all she did to make the atmosphere down here very conducive and very collaborative and cooperative.

That's what I got.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good morning. Earlier this morning the President had the opportunity to meet with the heads of state from SICA, which is the Central American Immigration System, plus its associate member, which is the Dominican Republic. So all of the leaders from Central America and the DR were present at the meeting.

It was a good, constructive conversation focused particularly on those issues that are most relevant to Central America today and to the U.S. relationship with the countries of Central

America, which are the impacts of the economic crisis, questions around immigration; there was some discussion of trade; and security issues were very high on the agenda.

The President made clear his desire to continue working in partnership, building off the positive atmosphere that has been here at the summit, to work to make sure that the follow through is concrete; noted that he was accompanied by -- met with senior members of his administration who will continue the work to follow up from the summit to make sure that we are doing what we can in partnership with the countries of Central America to address issues of mutual interest and mutual concern.

And the President-elect of El Salvador, Mauricio Funes, was also in attendance, so the Salvadorans had two seats at the table as they've had throughout the summit. The President once again congratulated President-elect Funes on his election and President Saca for the manner in which the two of them have been handling this historic transition in El Salvador.

Q A question about something that happened yesterday. Evo Morales charged that Americans were behind the assassination plot against him and that he would only restore diplomatic relations with the U.S. when the President publicly repudiated that attempt. Do you guys have a comment on that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not aware of the comment that you attribute to President Morales. I can try to get smart on that. I can tell you that I think it's President Obama's view that we do not engage in activities of the sort that are alleged in what you just read to me. But I'll try to get -- I'll take a look at what the assertion is.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Just based on the meeting that he had with UNASUR when this was raised, the President made clear exactly what the other senior administration official just said directly to President Morales.

Q I'm sorry, could you say that again -- I didn't quite catch it.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That in yesterday's UNASUR meeting when this issue was raised in broad terms, the President made clear his administration's policy of not supporting any such activity -- even without knowing the details.

Q Can you talk a little bit about any conversations between the President and Nicaragua's leader at this past meeting?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The meeting -- because the rotating chairmanship of SICA is held by Nicaragua today, President Ortega was the lead-off speaker on behalf the Central Americans and presented kind of the consensus view from the leaders in Central America of the issues that are important to them. And his comments were largely confined to that consensus view. He spoke briefly at the top, and other than exchanging pleasantries at the beginning of the meeting and perhaps at the end, I don't think there was any in-depth exchange directly between the President and President Ortega.

Q Did he reiterate any of the same criticisms of U.S. policy that he did Friday night?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: As I said, he spoke to the consensus views in Central America on the issues of central importance to them, being the issues that I talked about earlier, as the ones that the meeting was focused upon.

Q You said he spoke briefly? (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Quite briefly.

Q I had one other question, I guess for any of you gentlemen, big picture. Can you talk about how many of the leaders -- if you don't have a specific number, at least an idea -- how many of the leaders that President Obama has actually got to meet and maybe chat with? And how would you characterize their reaction to President Obama in meeting him for the first time?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You know, I couldn't put an exact number on it, Ben. I can say that the President has gone out of his way to introduce himself to a lot of the members -- a lot of the Presidents, heads of state here. I mean, you saw that in action the other night. But in terms of an exact number, I'm not able to do it.

I can tell you that the general atmosphere in the meetings, in the working sessions and in the -- working sessions of the entire summit and the side meetings and multilateral meetings, and then in the conversations the President has had, the pull-asides and so forth -- generally have been remarkable for both their candor and their collaborative demeanor and collaborative outlook.

So I'll leave it to you to determine how that compares to past summits. They have all indicated that this strikes them as a new tone.

Q So there's a lot to be said for the exchanging of pleasantries?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think there's a lot to be said to getting the heads of government and heads of state of 34 countries together. They all represent a lot of people who are suffering at the moment a particularly difficult situation as it relates to the economy. And I think -- at least I can say for President Obama, as he has said to you all many times, he gets up every day trying to figure out what he can do to help those people, to create jobs. And I think this weekend was a good opportunity to press on his colleagues on the same topics.

Q One last -- you said "remarkable" for their candor. Why is it remarkable? I mean, I guess what I'm wondering is wouldn't it be expected that a new U.S. President would be greeted that way, would have that kind of candor? Or is it the history of this region maybe that makes that remarkable?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Ben, I actually confess to be saying that it's remarkable because this is the first summit that I've been to with the President. (Laughter.)

Q Glad I asked. (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You know, as I said, I leave it to you guys to put this -- you all have been to these before. I leave it to you all to put this in the context of the other summits. I did note that it was relatively cooperative. We elucidated for you last night some of the disagreements, and there's going to be disagreements, and disagreements on some very important issues. But it doesn't mean that you can't disagree without being disagreeable.

Q Would you describe the summit in general as it comes to a close now as a success for the United States?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You know, I would, Jeff. And I think that we had a lot of reporting in the run-up about how there would be this big clash. We didn't see that. Saw a lot of run-up about how there will be a lot of fighting over Cuba. We didn't see that. Because frankly I think the President set a tone in making clear that there are certain things that all the people represented here today hold in common, and it's the one thing -- it's one of the things that Cuba doesn't have, namely, democracy, freedom of the press, freedom of association.

And so some of the worries that people set up didn't materialize. I think that's because the President came down with a very senior team -- not necessarily represented in this room. (Laughter.) He came down with a very robust agenda on issues that are of intense mutual interest: security, narcotics trafficking and energy and climate. So I think the President wanted to -- as he made clear in his opening statement -- look forward, not look back, not get dragged into these stale debates of the past that marked for him and for many of us social studies projects in high school, but now these are actually people's lives that are in the balance. And I think they had a very workmanlike, work-person-like summit.

Q Speaking of Cuba, was there any discussion today -- can you tell us if there was any discussion today in the SICA meeting?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The word was never uttered in the room.

Q Which word?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Cuba. It didn't come up in the SICA meeting at all.

Q Okay. The other question I have is, any readout of -- anything more than what the State Department put out last night about the Venezuela return -- and U.S. returning ambassadors to their respective posts?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q You mentioned that immigration was brought up. I was curious if you could expand on that a little bit -- what sort of issues specifically to do with immigration? What were they asking of the President?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Certainly. The issue of immigration is one that is important to the President. He has spoken on a number of occasions of his commitment to moving the debate forward on comprehensive immigration reform, first and foremost, to ensure that we have an immigration system that has a secure border, respects the laws of the United States and also respects our tradition as a nation of immigrants.

Obviously our immigration policy has a significant impact, particularly on the countries of Central America. The conversation was focused on -- and again, we don't read out what other Presidents said -- but they discussed as a general matter their interest that they follow this issue very closely, that it has significant implications for their own economies, in the form of remittances and other economic contacts between the United States and Central America.

It's an issue of central importance to these Presidents and they had a good conversation, where the President was able to lay out what he has laid out on a number of occasions in public about the work that he is doing to ensure that we have a 21st century immigration system in the United States.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, guys.

Q Thank you.

END 10:06 A.M. EDT