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Statement by the President on the U.S. Government's Hostage Policy Review

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT
ON THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S HOSTAGE POLICY REVIEW

Roosevelt Room

12:30 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon. Since 9/11, more than 80 Americans have been taken hostage by murderous groups engaged in terrorism or piracy. For these innocent men and women -- tourists, journalists, humanitarians -- it's a horror, and cruelty, beyond description. For their families and for their friends, it's an unrelenting nightmare that the rest of us cannot even begin to imagine.

As a government, we should always do everything in our power to bring these Americans home safe and to support their families. Dedicated public servants across our government work tirelessly to do so. Our military personnel risk their lives in dangerous missions, such as the operation I authorized last year that attempted to rescue Americans held in Syria and Yemen. And there have been successes, such as the rescue of Captain Richard Phillips, held by Somali pirates, and Jessica Buchanan, rescued from Somalia.

Of these more than 80 Americans taken hostage since 9/11, more than half have ultimately come home,

some after many years. Tragically, too many others have not. And at this very moment, Americans continue to be held by terrorist groups or detained unjustly by foreign governments. For them, the nightmare goes on -- and so does our work, day and night, to reunite them with their loved ones.

As I've said before, the terrorist threat is evolving. The world has been appalled by ISIL's barbaric murder of innocent hostages, including Americans. Moreover, the families of hostages have told us -- and they've told me directly

-- about their frequent frustrations in dealing with their own government: How different departments and agencies aren't always coordinated. How there's been confusion and conflicting information about what the government is prepared to do to help. How they've often felt lost in the bureaucracy. And how, in some cases, families feel that they've been threatened for exploring certain options to bring their loved ones home.

That's totally unacceptable. As I've gotten to know some of these families and heard some of these stories, it has been my solemn commitment to make sure that they feel fully supported in their efforts to get their families home, and that there is a syncing-up of what I know to be sincere, relentless efforts within government and the families who obviously have one priority and one priority only, and that's getting their loved ones back.

These families have already suffered enough, and they should never feel ignored or victimized by their own government. Diane Foley, whose son Jim was killed by ISIL last year, said, "As Americans, we can do better." I totally agree. We must do better. And that's why I ordered a comprehensive review of our hostage policy.

I want to thank everybody who contributed to this review -- inside and outside of government, some of whom are here today. I especially want to thank the former hostages and families who contributed. I've come to know some of these families, often under the most heartbreaking of circumstances. When her son, Peter -- also known as Abdul-Rahman -- was being held in Syria, his mother Paula Kassig wrote me a letter. And in it, she described how on clear nights she and her husband would look up at the stars and the moon and wonder if, perhaps, their son might be able to see them, too -- a reminder of the bond they might still share.

I've called these families to offer our condolences after they've received gut-wrenching news no parents ever want to hear. I've visited with them. I've hugged them. I've grieved with them. I just spent time with some of the families, as well as some former hostages here at the White House. And needless to say, it was a very emotional meeting. Some are still grieving.

I thanked them for sharing their experiences and their ideas with our review team. In fact, many of the changes we're announcing today are a direct result of their recommendations. I acknowledged to them in private what I want to say publicly -- that it is true that there have been times where our government, regardless of good intentions, has let them down. I promised them that we can do better. Here's how.

Today, I'm formally issuing a new presidential policy directive to improve how we work to bring home American hostages and how we support their families. I've signed a new executive order to ensure our government is organized to do so. And we're releasing the final report of our review, which describes the two dozen specific steps that we're taking. Broadly speaking, they fall into three areas.

First, I'm updating our hostage policy. I'm making it clear that our top priority is the safe and rapid recovery of American hostages. And to do so, we will use all elements of our national power. I am reaffirming that the United States government will not make concessions, such as paying ransom, to terrorist groups holding American hostages. And I know this can be a subject of significant public debate. It's a difficult and emotional issue, especially for the families. As I said to the families who are gathered here today, and as I've said to families in the past, I look at this not just as a President, but also as a husband and a father. And if my family were at risk, obviously I would move heaven and earth to get those loved ones back.

As President, I also have to consider our larger national security. I firmly believe that the United States government paying ransom to terrorists risks endangering more Americans and funding the very terrorism that we're trying to stop. And so I firmly believe that our policy ultimately puts fewer Americans at risk.

At the same time, we are clarifying that our policy does not prevent communication with hostage-takers -- by our government, the families of hostages, or third parties who help these families. And, when appropriate, our government may assist these families and private efforts in those communications -- in part, to ensure the safety of family members and to make sure that they're not defrauded. So my message to these families was simple: We're not going to abandon you. We will stand by you.

Second, we're making changes to ensure that our government is better organized around this mission. Every department that is involved in our national security apparatus cares deeply about these hostages, prioritizes them and works really hard. But they're not always as well coordinated as they need to be. Under the National Security Council here at the White House, we're setting up a new Hostage Response Group, comprised of senior officials from across our government who will be responsible for ensuring that our hostage policies are consistent and coordinated and implemented rapidly and effectively. And they will be accountable at the highest levels; they'll be accountable to me.

Soon I'll be designating, as well, a senior diplomat as my Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, who will be focused solely on leading our diplomatic efforts with other countries to bring our people home.

At the operational level, we're creating for the first time one central hub where experts from across government will work together, side-by-side, as one coordinated team to find American hostages and bring them home safely. In fact, this fusion cell, located at the FBI, is already up and running. And we're designating a new official in the intelligence community to be responsible for coordinating the collection, analysis and rapid dissemination of intelligence related to American hostages so we can act on that intelligence quickly.

Third -- and running through all these efforts -- we are fundamentally changing how our government works with families of hostages. Many of the families told us that they at times felt like an afterthought or a distraction; that, too often, the law enforcement, or military and intelligence officials they were interacting with were begrudging in giving them information. And that ends today. I'm making it clear that these families are to be treated like what they are -- our trusted partners and active partners in the recovery of their loved ones. We are all on the same team, and nobody cares more about bringing home these Americans than their own families, and we have to treat them as partners.

So, specifically, our new fusion cell will include a person dedicated to coordinating the support families get from the government. This coordinator will ensure that we communicate with families better, with one clear voice, and that families get information that is timely and accurate. Working with the intelligence community, we will be sharing

more intelligence with families.

And this coordinator will be the family's voice within government -- making sure that when decisions are made about their loved ones, their concerns are front and center. Everyone who deals with these families on a regular basis will be given additional training to ensure families are treated with the dignity and compassion that they deserve. In particular, I want to point out that no family of an American hostage has ever been prosecuted for paying a ransom for the return of their loved ones. The last thing that we should ever do is to add to a family's pain with threats like that.

So the bottom line is this: When it comes to how our government works to recover Americans held hostage and how we work with their families, we are changing how we do business. After everything they've endured, these families are right to be skeptical, and that's why it's so important -- as I told them today -- that we will be setting up mechanisms to ensure accountability and implementation. I've directed my national security team to report back to me, including getting feedback from the families to make sure that these reforms are being put in place and that they are working.

And in the course of our review, several families told us they wanted to spare other families the frustrations they endured. Some have even created new organizations to support families like theirs or to honor their loved ones, such as the memorial foundation for Steven Sotloff, who wrote, "Everyone has two lives. The second one begins when you realize you only have one." As a government, and as a nation, we can learn from the example and the strength of their lives -- the kind of strength we've seen in all these held hostages, including Kayla Mueller.

Kayla devoted her life to serving those in need around the world. To refugees in Syria who had lost everything, she was a source of comfort and hope. Before her tragic death, she was held by ISIL in Syria for a year and a half. And during her captivity, Kayla managed to smuggle a letter to her family. She said, "None of us could have known it would be this long but I know I am also fighting from my side in the ways that I am able, and I have a lot of fight left in me. I am not breaking down and I will not give in no matter how long it takes."

Today, my message to anyone who harms Americans is that we do not forget. Our reach is long. Justice will be done. My message to every American being held unjustly around the world who is fighting from the inside to survive another day, my message to their families who long to hold them once more, is that the United States of America will never stop working to reunite you with your family. We will not give up -- no matter how long it takes.

Thank you very much, everybody.

END

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