

Bomb threat: White House briefing room briefly evacuated

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Washington: Secret Service agents interrupted a live, televised White House press briefing Tuesday to evacuate journalists after a bomb threat was called in to police. No bomb was found, the Secret Service said.

President Barack Obama was in the Oval Office and remained there during the evacuation, which only affected the James S. Brady Briefing Room. White House press secretary Josh Earnest, who was briefing reporters at the time of the evacuation, said later that first lady Michelle Obama and daughters Sasha and Malia were in the White House residence and were not evacuated.

The incident came after a bomb threat related to the White House briefing room was phoned in to local Washington police, the Secret Service said. Roughly 20 minutes later, uniformed Secret Service officers on the scene said an all-clear had been issued, and journalists were later allowed back into the White House, where the daily press briefing resumed.

Evacuations at the White House are rare, but not unprecedented. Last year, journalists and officials were temporarily evacuated after a fence-jumper made it inside the White House.

Yet Tuesday's incident was made more dramatic by the fact that it took place on camera during a live press briefing - the first such instance since the White House started allowing live television coverage of full press briefings in the 1990s.

Secret Service spokesman Brian Leary said the decision to evacuate only the briefing room, while allowing White House officials to remain in other parts of the building, was "due to the specific nature of the threat," although he did not elaborate. He said the Secret Service commander on the scene decided to evacuate the briefing room "out of an abundance of caution."

Earnest said that the Secret Service had swept the briefing room with the help of bomb-sniffing dogs before allowing people to return. Associated Press journalists returning to their workspace in the White House after the all-clear found items displaced, ostensibly by Secret Service officers searching for potential security threats.

"The evacuation was conducted to protect the safety of all of us," Earnest said.

Many television networks have permanent cameras installed in the White House briefing room. Following the evacuation, the cameras were pointed up to the ceiling so that the briefing room was no longer visible, then covered completely. The Secret Service had no immediate comment on why the cameras were covered up.