

White House press briefing
08/24/21
3:45:41 p.m.
2 minutes and 30 seconds

AAMER MADHANI: First, on — a Taliban spokesman said today that the group would bar Afghans from accessing the roads leading to the airport to allow foreigners to pass. So, I guess, for evacuations efforts, what does this mean for Afghans who assisted and can't get through now? What are you going to be — does this effectively cut off those Afghans from being evacuated?

PSAKI: No, that is not how you should read it. One, I should note we've been in direct contact, not just with American citizens, but with SIV applicants — Special Immigrant Visa applicants and Afghans whose departure we are facilitating about how and when to come to the airport. And our expectation, which we have also conveyed to the Taliban, is that they should be able to get to the airport. It is also true and I know this may be some of the confusion out there, that there are a number of Afghans who may not — we — they may not qualify for these programs. And we've seen over the past several — over the past nine days a rush of people attempting to come to the airport. We certainly understand that, but that also creates security risks and one that we have great concern about. So, to be clear, individuals who are eligible for Special Immigrant Visas or others who we are helping facilitate their evacuation and departure, we are in touch with them or working to get in touch with them about coming to the airport as well as American citizens, as you well know, and we expect that they will be able to reach the airport.

MADHANI: Sorry, just to follow up, the Afghan — the Taliban are saying that they don't want Afghans to leave, that now, they want these Afghans to stay, that they're needed to rebuild the country.

PSAKI: Again, our expectation and what we will continue to convey directly through a range of channels we have is that the individuals, the Special Immigrant Visas applicants, those eligible, those who we are facilitating their departure will reach the airport.

MADHANI: And on your statement that you just put out about a half an hour ago, the August 31 deadline and sticking to it, the President has — from allies, both here at home and abroad have wanted him to push the deadline back some and also critics of the President are speaking out very strongly on his decision. What do you say to those that are criticizing the President, by sticking to this deadline, it amounts to him to capitulating to the Taliban?

(...)

3:49:55 p.m.
1 minute and 3 seconds

STEVE HOLLAND: If you do have to adjust the timeline, how long are you talking about?

PSAKI: I'm not going to get ahead of any contingency plans that are drawn up by the state

department and defense department. As you all know, the President has been meeting and attended and participated in briefings with his national security team once a day, sometimes twice a day, is constant and regular contact and I expect we'll get some updates in short order.

HOLLAND: And when do you need to start pulling troops out of the kabul airport to make — to meet the August 31 timeline?

PSAKI: It's a great question, Steve. I just don't want to get into operational details under the purview of the department of defense. Go ahead.

KAITLAN COLLINS: So —

PSAKI [TO HOLLAND]: But you are correct. I would know there would have to be time in advance of the 31st or time in advance of whatever the date is in order to do that, but they can give you the operational details. Go ahead.

COLLINS: So, does that mean the evacuations will stop before the actual 31st, so then there is time to get the troops and their machinery and weaponry out of there?

PSAKI: That would be correct, yes, that there would need to be time to wind down the presence.

(...)

3:51:30 p.m.
50 seconds

COLLINS: And so, what I read from this statement is he has not ruled out extending the deadline. Is that right?

PSAKI: Well, he asked for contingency plans but believes we continue to be on track to accomplish our mission.

COLLINS: And one more question, Jen. Sorry, I know it's tight. Does this mean if he stands by the August 31 deadline that every single U.S. troop will be out of Afghanistan by August 31?

PSAKI: Again, I will leave to it the Department of defense to get into operational details. As you know, and as I've noted, he is meeting with his national security team every single day, often more than once a day to continue to discussion and, as I noted also in this statement, he's asked for contingency plans. Go ahead.

NANCY CORDES: Thanks, Jen. Just to follow-up on Aamer questions, so are you saying that, despite this threat by the Taliban to stop Afghans from boarding planes, that you're not seeing slowdown in Afghans being able to get to the airport if they need to?

(...)

3:52:49 p.m.

6 minutes and 19 seconds

CORDES: So, I'm just trying to figure out if the Taliban has made good on this threat yet. It sounds like you're saying they haven't.

PSAKI: I don't have an update on that. I'm just conveying to you what our expectation and what we're communicating directly.

CORDES: And then is the CIA director now the chief negotiator for the U.S. in Kabul and how long does he plan to stay there?

PSAKI: I certainly understand your question. I'd refer you to the CIA about any specific questions about his location or specific role.

PETER ALEXANDER: For a little bit of clarity cause minutes and hours matter here —

PSAKI: Sure.

ALEXANDER: — when we talk about August 31, is the understanding between the U.S. and Taliban that that ends at midnight the end of August 31 Afghan time, American time? Is it the end of the 30th, heading into the 31st? When exactly is the deadline as it currently exists?

PSAKI: It's a really great question. And I want to give you a very clear and articulate answer from the team on the ground, so I'll have to get back to you on that to make sure we give you accurate information.

ALEXANDER: So, what is — what is the last — I know that you're continuing to do this actively —

PSAKI: Yeah.

ALEXANDER: — as you indicated to one of my colleagues a moment ago. Obviously, there's time needed to get out the American troops and others who are helping facilitate this process. What is the last call for Americans on the ground there to come to the airport at Kabul?

PSAKI: We are in touch with Americans directly and we have contact with and I can give you an overarching — overall assessment where we stand with that but I'm not going to give you more of an articulation of that from here.

ALEXANDER: Are there any active threats? You talked about in that statement the threats that's posed by ISIS-K. But are there any active threats to Kabul — to HKA right now?

PSAKI: I'm not going to give you an intelligence assessment from here either, but I can convey to you that we have increasing concerns about the threats and that is certainly a part of the

President's assessment and decision making. Go ahead.

PETER DOOCY: Thank you, Jen. Is there any concern that maybe trying to reach this deadline and get everybody out, mistakes are being made, now that there is a report that at least one of the Afghan evacuated to Qatar has suspected ISIS ties?

PSAKI: Well, first, I'd say we have a stringent vetting process which includes background checks before any individual comes to the United States, so I can't speak to one individual. But I can tell you and confirm for you we take the vetting of any individual who comes to the United States and comes out incredibly seriously. And it's an extensive process. I would say that this is now on-track, Peter, to be the largest airlift in U.S. history. So, and that is bringing American citizens out, it is bringing our Afghan partners out, it is bringing allies, so I would not say that is anything but a success.

DOOCY: Okay and I know that you said yesterday it's irresponsible to say that Americans are stranded in Afghanistan right now. What do you say to the American citizens in Kabul that Fox spoke to this morning? Her name is Fa — she's going by Fatima. She says she are stranded at home: "For four days, three days, we didn't hear anything from anywhere and they're saying to go to the airport but we're not being given clear guidance. Our e-mails are getting ignored."

PSAKI: Well, why don't I convey to you exactly what we are doing and I think what's important to note that I also said yesterday in the full context of my answer which I put out today was that we are committed to bringing Americans home who want to leave and that is the President's commitment. We are — so, let me explain to you how our process works. And there have been some very good questions, including from you and others about this. One, as we said, this is a dynamic number. We're working hour by hour to refine and make it precise. Understand your desire and interest in having exact number of American citizens on the ground and the State Department, I expect, will have an exact update on that tomorrow. Just to remind you, the U.S. government does not track our citizens when they travel around the world. We rely on self-reporting. Not just in Afghanistan, anywhere in the world. People have to decide to register or not. It's up to them — individuals whether they decide to register or not, wherever they may be. And if you register when you're in a country like Afghanistan, you aren't required to deregister. The State Department also issues alerts. They have publicized phone number, email to contact if you're in Afghanistan and you want assistance to leave. And for months, the department has been telling Americans to leave Afghanistan for their own safety. It's our responsibility and our role to work with and help American citizens that want to leave. Let me finish I'm almost done and then you can ask a follow up question. In recent days, they have reached out to every American citizen registered in Afghanistan directly multiple times, this is a 24/7 operation. Embassies all over the world are supporting phone banking, text banking, and e-mail efforts. If we're not in touch with this individual, give me your contact information and we'll get in touch with them. If any of you are hearing from American citizens who can't reach us, give me their contact information and we will get in contact with them. Our estimate of the overall number of American citizens who are can increase because folks are just now responding to outreach that may not have registered, it can also decrease because people leave, they don't tell us they leave or individuals who may reach out and convey they — they have the documentation

needed don't. So, there are a range of factors here and it our responsibility to give you accurate information.

DOOCY: But —

PSAKI: That's what our focus is on.

DOOCY: But You say no Americans are stranded. This is someone in Kabul who says I'm stranded. So, is there a better word for somebody that can't leave the house to get to the airport because Jake Sullivan says ISIS outside the airport? What — it sounds —

PSAKI: I would welcome you providing their phone number and we will reach out to them today —

DOOCY: — that can be arranged.

PSAKI: — and I can assure you of that.

DOOCY: The final question — if the Taliban said that staying past the 31st was going to provoke a reaction and then President Biden decides, “okay, we won't stay.” Do they have the same kind of influence over military planning as a commander-in-chief?

PSAKI: Well, first of all, Peter, the Taliban's deadline was May 1, struck on a deal with the prior administration. The President's timeline was August 31. That is the timeline he set in a period of time he needed in order to operationalize our departure from Afghanistan. I'd also note that as I said, as we conveyed in a statement, that our objective and our focus and the focus of the commander-in-chief is always going to be on the safety and security of the men and women serving our country and the military and that has to be a factor here and that certainly is a factor for him as he thinks about the timeline. Go ahead.

ALEX LEARY: Can President Biden assured that Afghan allies that helped the military will be able to get out? And will he extend the deadline to help those people get out?

(...)

3:59:45 p.m.
17 seconds

LEARY: And secondly, on — on the vetting question, we're seeing more debate in — across the country about — about — as the refugees coming here. What is the white house doing to convey the vetting standards and to assure any kind of state officials that people that may end up in their state are okay?

(...)

4:02:55 p.m.

3 minutes and 6 seconds

STEPHANIE RAMOS: And for Afghans who at risk in Afghanistan that won't be able to get out in time, how will the U.S. try to keep them safe after August 31?

PSAKI: Well, I think — as I said in response to, I think, Alex's question, there are individuals who will be eligible after — who we expect who certainly will be eligible after August 31 and we are determining how operationally we can deliver on that. It's a good question. I don't have an update right now. Go ahead.

ANNIE KARNI: I have a question about a report on the conditions in Doha reported by Axios today. A U.S. Central Command internal e-mail describes the housing for thousands of evacuees as “awash with loose feces and urine and a rat infestation and a life-threatening humanitarian disaster.” Is the President aware of these conditions and is there anything going to improve them?

PSAKI: Absolutely and I think the report is actually from a couple of — I understand it was in Axios this morning, but I believe that the conditions were a report from several days ago and certainly, the State Department and other officials that are working in close coordination with countries who are hosting individuals as they're passing through or maybe as they're landing there for a longer period of time have been working to improve the conditions.

KARNI: Is there anything specific you can say about how they've been improved over the past few days?

PSAKI: I'm happy to get you an update on that, but it is something that we're aware of. It's something we've worked to improve and certainly, we want the individuals being evacuated to be treated with respect. We also want them to safe, hence the speed necessity, but we worked to improve the conditions as soon as we learned. Go ahead.

SEAN SULLIVAN: Thanks, Jen. In a statement that you released, you said the President conveyed that our mission in Kabul and based on the achievements of our objectives. Can you be more specific about the objectives would be? Are we talking about getting all Americans out? A certain number of Afghans out who helped the American effort. What — what will be the specific sort of benchmarks in deciding that the objectives of the mission have been met?

PSAKI: Well, the statement also conveys in evacuating Americans who want to come home, third country nationals, and Afghans who were allies during the war. And we, again, have evacuated 50,700 people in the last nine days. That is the mission we're continuing to work to deliver on. I also noted in the statement — we also noted in the statement that, of course, we have to access the security threats and the security threats not only to individuals on the ground, to the men and women serving on the ground. I mean, that is front and center in the President's mind.

SULLIVAN: So, that means all the individuals in the categories that you note in the statement —

getting all of them out?

PSAKI: Again, we've been clear our objective is to any American who wants to leave to help them leave. That is what we're focused on every day. I don't have anything more to add beyond what I said in the statement.

SULLIVAN: If I can ask one follow-up —

PSAKI: Yeah

SULLIVAN: — I know, putting aside the specific activities of the CIA director, why did the President decide to dispatch him to meet with the Taliban?

PSAKI: I'm just not going to have anymore on this. As we've noted and confirmed many times in the past, we've had communication with the Taliban. They are currently overseeing most of the country of Afghanistan, so by necessity, that's part of the jobs of the national security team. But for any details on the CIA director, I'd point you to the CIA.

(...)

4:08:23 p.m. [via ABC News Live]
33 seconds

JENNIFER JACOBS: Do you know what the tenor of the G-7 meeting was today? Was there any, like, satisfaction expressed by some of the allies? Can you say if they conveyed some of their displeasure with the U.S.'s actions or the President's actions?

PSAKI: I know Bloomberg has reporters all around the world and I will let them report on their leaders and not kind of give an evaluation of their tenors, but —

JACOBS: Can you also say it's accurate that the U.S. is already starting to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan?

PSAKI: I would point to the Department of Defense for any operational specifics. I know they'll brief again today.

(...)

4:13:59 p.m.
14 seconds

KAREN TRAVERS: A follow-up on some of the questions about your statement. When you're say that he's asked the Pentagon and State Department for contingency plans to adjust the timeline, should that become necessary, what metric would determine whether that becomes necessary? What is the President looking for?

(...)

4:19:36 p.m.
22 seconds

BOB CONSTANTINI: As a follow up to Jennifer's question —

PSAKI: Sure.

CONSTANTINI: — about the G-7 virtual meeting —

PSAKI: Yeah.

CONSTANTINI: — this morning, from a White House point of view, when the meeting was over, was the President satisfied that the message had gotten through to them was — did you think there was a consensus among those leaders? Was there a lot of pushback? Or were you happy with how it ended? Let's put it that way.

(...)

4:21:05 p.m.
33 seconds

UNIDENTIFIED MALE REPORTER: How do you describe U.S. relationship [sic] with Taliban now? Do you think it is the de facto ruler of Afghanistan now?

PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, that it is — it is true that they have over — taken over much of Afghanistan, but this not about trust. This is not about validation. Right now, we are working them a coordinated to get American, to special Immigrant Visa applicants, to get individuals who are eligible evacuate the Afghanistan out, either to third countries or to the United States. But I'm not going to put a further on it than that.

(...)

4:22:25 p.m.
33 seconds

SEBASTIAN SMITH: Say, after the withdrawal — it's done — U.S. declared it's done. Everyone's out. If one U.S. citizen was suddenly discovered, you know, "hey, I really want to get out and I'm stuck" who knows where — somewhere in Afghanistan or in Kabul. He's got any problem. Would this trigger a diplomatic, military, all hands on deck-type thing to get that person out, whatever the date?

PSAKI: Our commitment continues be to U.S. citizens: If they want to leave, we will help get them out.

SMITH: It doesn't matter on the date?

PSAKI: Again, we expect there could be some, but I don't — I'm not going to get into it further.