

White House press briefing
08/26/21
6:08:06 p.m. [via MSNBC]
25 seconds

AAMER MADHANI: A few minutes ago, one of my colleagues asked the question about what the president would say to Afghans who fear they won't get to leave. Was — the pres — the President said getting every single person out can't be guaranteed of anyone. Was he lowering expectations for smaller but still significant population that's trying to get out that's still there?

(...)

6:09:00 p.m. [via CNN]
18 seconds

MADHANI: And just real quick, on the Taliban, they are in charge of the perimeter. For the suicide bomber to get in, they would presumably have to get beyond the Taliban guard. So why isn't the Taliban in part responsible for what happened today?

(...)

6:09:57 p.m.
23 seconds

ED O'KEEFE: Just a few things to clarify, Jen. Thank you. He talked about the ongoing mission to get people out after the 31st.

PSAKI: Yeah.

O'KEEFE: But to be clear, as of tonight, is it still the plan to get all U.S. forces out by August 31st?

PSAKI; Nothing has changed on that timeline.

O'KEEFE: Okay. Did the President, based on his public comments over the last few days —

PSAKI: Mmmhmm.

O'KEEFE: — did the President see this coming?

(...)

6:10:42 p.m.
17 seconds

O'KEEFE: And does — what does today's attack say about the U.S.'s ability to keep the terrorist threat in check once the U.S. pulls all military forces out of Afghanistan? Cause this is something he talked about —

PSAKI: Yes.

O'KEEFE: — in early July when he reiterated what the plan was.

(...)

6:11:41 p.m.

5 seconds

O'KEEFE: Do you know yet if he would go to Dover to greet the caskets of those who were killed?

(...)

6:12:38 p.m.

2 minutes and 59 seconds

PETER DOOCY: General McKenzie described this — one of the explosions at the Abbey Gate happening at a point after someone had been searched by the Taliban. How is the United States still going to work with the Taliban the way that the President is describing — or just did his remarks — to get American citizens and Afghan allies out if that is what we're working with?

PSAKI: Look, I'm not trying to sugar coat what we think of the Taliban. The Taliban is — is not — they're not a group we trust. They are not our friends. We have never said that. It is also the reality that the Taliban controls large swaths of Afghanistan and to date, because of coordination with the Taliban, we have been able to evacuate more than 104,000 people, save 104,000 lives and that coordination is necessary in order to continue our evacuation measures. Now, I understand your question, Peter, and the questions of others on what they knew or what their role was. There is no assessment we have at this point in time of their involvement in this. Obviously that's at this time. If that changes, we will let you all know.

DOOCY: And does the President really think that they are going to be reliable partners if we're already getting reports that they're not letting Afghans to the airport and the U.S. is still at the airport.

PSAKI: Well, I think — you mean after the 31st —

DOOCY: After the 31st.

PSAKI: — or moving over the next couple of days.

DOOCY: Well, well, we've heard that it's already happening, so does he think that's going to better?

PSAKI: Well, I'd note also that, as the President said, more than 7,000 people have been evacuated over the course of the last 12 hours. That was while there were active attacks that were happening. Those were individuals who were let through gates, who were let on to planes, and who got us well over 100,000 people who have evacuated. Again, this is not about trust. This is not about relying on the Taliban as an equal partner. No one is suggesting that. But because they control large swaths of the country, including a lot of security perimeters around the airport, we have to coordinate with them in order to get people out. We'll continue to do that. Go ahead — but oh, so — one more thing I would say is that we have an enormous amount of leverage. This is our view over time. That includes economic leverage, it includes leverage that we will make clear to the Taliban as it relates to coordination to continue to get American citizens and our partners out. Go ahead.

MIKE MEMOLI: Jen, there have been reports of explosions happening throughout the afternoon in Kabul or evening now, obviously, and some reporting to indicate this is the beginning of a process of the U.S. military beginning to destroy equipment on the ground. Can you confirm that's what's taking place.

PSAKI: I would — I would defer you to the U.S. military on specific steps of their retrograde process which, as we know, would have to take place in advance of a departure.

MEMOLI: And then in terms of what we've heard from the Pentagon and then the President just articulated which is his confidence they have enough troops on the ground at this time to continue to facilitate the mission, I guess the question is: how can that be the case given what we saw today, the tragic loss of life? And doesn't that call for additional troop levels potentially needed — reinforcements needed on the ground? And, additionally, what is the concern for the ongoing threat that ISIS-K continues to pose to these efforts?

(...)

6:16:25 p.m.
9 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: You just noted you were in some of these meetings today. Was there ever a point where the President was reconsidering this deadline of having all U.S. forces out by August 31st?

(...)

6:17:01 p.m.
7 seconds

COLLINS: And does the White House still anticipate those flights of mass evacuations will end

before the actual 31st?

(...)

6:17:19 p.m.

11 seconds

COLLINS: One more question: Is there an alternative plan being discussed for how to get these people who are seeking to leave to the airport given it is potentially perilous to go and wait outside the gates right now to get in?

(...)

6:17:54 p.m.

21 seconds

TREVOR HUNNICUTT: Is it your opinion that the President has the authority he needs from Congress or wherever else to continue operations beyond August 31st? He kind of talked about pursuing ISIS-K wherever, whenever he needs to. Is there any expectation that he'll need any authority to do so?

PSAKI: I don't believe there's an expectation of additional authority needed.

HUNNICUTT: And what about for military commanders on the ground? Do they — will they need to come back in order to do — conduct counterterrorism operations, to do anything of the — of the sort?

(...)

6:18:49 p.m.

7 seconds

HUNNICUTT: And is it possible to do that with no military troops and no bases in the surrounding countries around Afghanistan?

(...)

6:19:15 p.m.

1 minute and 6 seconds

KAREN TRAVERS: Jen, you mentioned today about the increasing concerns about this terror threat. The President just two days ago said: "Each day of operations brings added risk to our troops." Today, we saw the deadly consequences of that. If the risk grows tomorrow and keeps growing the next day and beyond that, how should Americans feel about this operation continuing right now for the coming days?

PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, you heard General McKenzie convey clearly that we had every intention, they had every intention of continuing this evacuation mission over the coming days and that they plan for incidents of these kinds. I mean, to the degree that they can. They have every intention to continue. The President has regular consultations every day, multiple times a day on days like this about how they see the circumstance on the ground. But that is our expectation at this point in time that it will actually continue over the coming days.

TRIVERS: And can you give us details about how the President spent his day?

PSAKI: Sure.

TRIVERS: He was scheduled to get briefed in the nine o'clock hour by his national security and that's when the first reports were coming in on this. Walk us through what he did over those coming hours and color behind the scenes, today.

(...)

6:21:31 p.m.

23 seconds

TRIVERS: Was there ever a second meeting of that entire national security team with the President in the Sit Room?

PSAKI: No. This was just regular ongoing contact with members of his national security team through the course of the day.

O'KEEFE Just to clarify, since you said you were with him —

PSAKI: Mmhmm.

O'KEEFE: — how was he? How was his mood? How was he in dealing with all these — with the incoming information? How was he in asking the questions of military commanders and such?

(...)

6:22:54 p.m.

1 minute and 1 second

COLLINS: Sorry, Jen. Just, quickly, can you confirm your reports that it is now 13 service members who have died?

PSAKI: I would leave that to the Department of Defense to confirm any additional casualties. Go ahead.

SEAN SULLIVAN: Thanks, Jen. You talked about the ongoing threats earlier. We heard from General McKenzie talking about, you know, this extremely active threat stream. But how would you sum up the level of confidence that the administration has there won't be another attack like this before the completion of this evacuation mission?

PSAKI: I can't give you that. As I — as our national security team has said, members of our national security team, these are ongoing threats. We are watching them closely, but I can't give you that assessment from here. Go ahead.

JOSH WINGROVE: Can you speak a little bit to what the impact on flights has been in touting U.S. and coalition flights, but this attack has slowed some of those flights from coalition partners. Other countries are now out. Does this restrict bandwidth that you thought you would have for the next five days to get people out? Are fewer Americans and Afghan allies, SIVs, etc. are going to get out because of this attack?

(...)

6:24:30 p.m.

18 seconds

WINGROVE: What you believe to be the end of the case at the airport now as opposed to — not particularly at this hour, given what — would be there —

PSAKI: Yep.

WINGROVE: — but can Americans go, should Americans go? Are Afghan SIVs getting through Taliban check points and to the airport? Are you discouraging them from doing that? What is the situation on the ground in that perimeter?

(...)

6:25:13 p.m.

40 seconds

WINGROVE: There are warnings that led up to this attack warning, other countries have been warning, the administration has been warning this is a dangerous situation, et cetera. Can you speak to whether there was [sic] specific indications this was being planned? And if so, you have specific indications that other ones are being planned now?

PSAKI: I'm not going to get into specific intelligence, but I will tell you and re — reup — confirm for you that the threat is ongoing and we are continuing to watch and assess the threat. Go ahead.

FRANCO ORDOÑEZ: Thanks, Jen. President Biden has spoken a lot about the need to end the forever wars. How do you end — but how do you end the forever wars in Afghanistan if you are

still or if the United States is still continuing to attack ISIS-K?

(...)

6:28:14 p.m.

50 seconds

ANDREW RESTUCCIA: And then you said that there is a threat that he's remaining days and that U.S. troops are in Kabul. Is there — are there any additional precautions that are being taken to protect these troops? Obviously you're not going to send in additional troops, but are any other sort of precautions being taken?

PSAKI: I don't think I'm going to get into operational steps of what is happening on the ground. Certainly, there are steps taken to protect our troops on the ground by the commanders who are leading the efforts on the ground. Go ahead in the middle — oh, go ahead.

JAKE TURX: Thank you, Jen. Just last week, the President said the following: "We made clear to the Taliban that any attack on our forces or disruption of our operations at the airport will be met with swift and forceful response. Was this an attack? Were our forces targeted? Was this at the airport? Were our operations disrupted? And if indeed it was, would this qualify as a swift and forceful response?"

(...)

6:30:18 p.m.

22 seconds

ELI STOKOLS: Given that Kabul has been the main — the only departure point in the country, I wonder if the administration knows how many of the American citizens left, the green card holders, SIVs in the country still are outside of Kabul and if there have been or may be in the future efforts to go out and rescue people from those more far flung places.

(...)

6:31:24 p.m.

7 seconds

STOKOLS: And you — just to be clear, you're saying that those missions, even if you have to be vague about it, they have taken place at times?

(...)

6:31:46 p.m.

26 seconds

RACHEL SCOTT: Earlier today, General McKenzie said that, right now, they are focused on active threats to U.S. service members there on the ground. Are all the threats the U.S. is currently facing from ISIS-K? Are there other groups that may be bad actors?

PSAKI: I'm not going to detail information about ongoing life threats.

SCOTT: And are — do we know if the President still feels as though the chaos and the violence that we've seen there on the ground in Kabul was all unavoidable even at this point?

PSAKI: You mean from about 11 days ago?

SCOTT: Yes.

(...)

6:37:49 p.m.
42 seconds

SEBASTIAN SMITH: Despite the lack of true trust that you and the President and everyone who is highlighting in this relationship with Taliban is understandable, but having said that, it's been a remarkable level of cooperation, I mean, something no one would ever possibly imagine, whatever, you know, a month ago. And as the president is saying, it's actually ongoing now despite the incident. They're kind of helping try and deal with this. Given that, after the 31st, is it — is it actually conceivable that there could be a longer-term relationship on the mutual interests that the President talks about, security, humanitarian aid, and, you know, whether you call it recognition or not, they're basically working alongside the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan long term?

(...)

6:38:53 p.m.
19 seconds

SMITH: On — on other issues, beyond — beyond the evacuations, let's say that gets done, you know, hopefully is done. But there's going to be all sorts of other things. There's going to be the security, the terrorism, the humanit — from their point of view, the humanitarian aid. Could — could you see this kind of mutual interests agenda continuing with them?

(...)

6:39:43 p.m.
21 seconds

SHELBY TALCOTT: This morning, Kirby tweeted that the evacuation operations in Kabul won't be wrapping up in 36 hours and that they'll be evacuating as many people as they can until

the end of the mission. What is the administration defining the end of the mission as? Is it the 31st or is it once we evacuate everyone that the administration has promised to get out?

(...)

6:40:32 p.m.
12 seconds

TALCOTT: And then just one more. The President promised that they will continue to get any American who wishes to get out of Afghanistan out, even after the 31st. How is the administration going to ensure the safe evacuation for U.S. citizens without troop presence when even with troop presence we just saw this attack happen?

(...)

6:41:27 p.m.
1 minute and 42 seconds

PHILIP WEGMANN: Moments ago, you said that the commitment doesn't end at the end of the month and that, you know, despite August 31st, the commitment remains. During his remarks a moment ago, the President said that we were going to try to get, "as many people out as we can." Is he trying to prepare the American public for a sort of harsh reality that some Americans might still be left on the ground there when we leave?

PSAKI: There are some Americans who may not have decided to leave by the 31st. That is possible. Many of these Americans who remain are dual citizens. They may have extended family members, 20 family members, 30 family members, others who they want to bring with them and they're not ready to make that decision yet. Our commitment to them does not end. We will continue to work to get them out, but his objective and focus and laser focus, which he asks for many updates a day on, is getting every American who wants to leave out now in the next few days. That is what our U.S. military is working to deliver on.

WEGMANN: Thank you, Jen.

PSAKI; Go ahead.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #1: A follow-up to that. What are those Americans supposed to do on September 1st?

PSAKI: We — we have been reaching out, in touch with every single American who has reached out to us and we have contact for. Via phone, e-mail, text, WhatsApp. That will continue. That will continue. But our focus right now is getting every single American who wants out in advance of the 31st. Go ahead.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #2: Jen, given that you had intelligence about the attack even, as I

understand it, down to the very gate but weren't able to stop it, what hope do you have of thwarting further attacks that the President told us just now and I quote, "were inevitable." And if not, isn't the decision to stay potentially the wrong one?

(...)

6:43:52 p.m.
29 seconds

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #3: You mentioned earlier I think in an answer to Kaitlyn that there were other operations or methods of getting Americans to the airport — given what's happened today. What will you do for the thousands or tens of thousands of Afghans with and without visa papers who were finding it impossible to get to the airport prior to the attacks today and who will now be presumably even more full of fear and confusion as to how they could possibly get out? What — what do you say to them?

(...)

6:44:59 p.m.
45 seconds

HILLARY VAUGHN: Can I follow up on that?

PSAKI: Sure.

VAUGHN: It seems like right now Americans and Afghan allies still in Afghanistan are facing two choices: Either they stay where they are and risk being hunted down by the Taliban or they try to go to the airport and risk being blown up by ISIS. How does this evacuation mission continue without evacuees risking their lives?

PSAKI: We are in direct contact with every American citizen we have contact information for, e-mail, phone, text, WhatsApp. And we're working with each of them and their families on an individual basis on how to get them evacuated to the airport and evacuated. That's the process. I'm not going to get into more details about how that works because it's not their interests, it's not in the security interest of our troops or the individuals we're trying to work to get evacuated.

(...)

6:45:47 p.m.
14 seconds

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #3: Has Joe Biden spoken with any foreign leader after the attacks in Kabul?

PSAKI: This — today? I will have to check on that for you. That's a — that's a great question. I'm not sure he has today. But I will check on that for you. And as you all know, he's going to be meeting with the prime minister of Israel tomorrow.