

White House press briefing [via CBSN]

09/02/21

2:27:14 p.m.

3 minutes and 9 seconds

JEFF ZELENY: On Afghanistan, really quickly, if I can, are there any updates on the 100 to 200 Americans who — American citizens who have worked in the country or are still in the country? Do you believe they still are? Or what's the latest on a diplomatic mission?

JEN PSAKI: Well, I know my colleague at the State Department is briefing right about now and will give a more in-depth update on this. But what he said yesterday, and I will just echo, is it as closer to 100. We are in close touch, from the State Department, from our diplomatic officials, with all of these individuals, working in close coordination with them to determine how they can leave the country, if they've left the country. There have been reports as I think, many of you have seen or reported yourself, about charter flights. If I can just speak to that for a moment, because I know it's been a popular question. There have been some confusion about this. We do not have personnel on the ground nor do we have air assets in the country and we don't control the airspace. So anyone who is suggesting we are preventing these flights, that's not accurate. We don't — we couldn't prevent a charter flight from taking off. But what is important for people to understand is where we have some concern and that is the fact that we do not have reliable means to confirm the basic details of charter flights, including who may be organizing them, the number of American citizens and other priorities groups on board, the accuracy of the rest of the manifest and where the plane may land, what security protocols they're taking into place, so just to kind of give you an example, these charter flights are landing on U.S. military basis and we have to be very careful. And I think it's understandable, we have concern about flights that — where we don't have that level of information and understanding about the manifests, what the protocols are that are underway. There's also a question, there are active — there continue to be active ISIS-K threats and there's also a question of where these flights go, where they land. We know ISIS-K has a keen interest in attacks against aviation targets and our personnel on the ground, in our air for — in our military bases and these are among the risks that we take into account. Go ahead.

ED O'KEEFE: Just a few here, most of them Texas-related questions —

PSAKI: Sure.

O'KEEFE: — to ask. I'm just, we're curious, what advice would the President give to a woman in Texas right now, who wants or needs to get an abortion at this point?

PSAKI: What the — what the President would convey to any woman who is trying to get an abortion, seek an abortion, be able to — to employ her constitutional right to — to — to seek health care and health care that is enshrined and allowed by federal law, what he would convey to them, I don't think he's going to be giving medical advice. A, that's not the role of any President, he would say. But I would say he would convey to them, I am — I have asked my team, I've asked my team to use every lever at their disposal to ensure you have this right, to ensure you

have access, to ensure that you can have the ability to — to seek medical care in the way that every woman should have the right to across the country and he has made that a priority.

(....)

2:31:33 p.m.

4 minutes and 31 seconds

STEPHANIE RAMOS: Does the administration have a message for industry and private businesses that have operations in Texas? Like, would the President and the White House support a boycott of sorts against Texas?

PSAKI: That's not a call we're making from here. What our effort and what the focus of the federal government is, is to look for every resource, every lever at our disposal to ensure women in Texas have the ability to seek healthcare.

OWEN JENSEN: Following up —

PSAKI: Go ahead.

PSAKI: — on the Texas law, why does the President support abortion when his own Catholic faith teaches abortion is morally wrong?

PSAKI: Well, he believes that it's a woman's right, it's a woman's body, and it's her choice.

JENSEN: Who does he believe then should look out for the unborn child?

PSAKI: He believes that it's up to a woman to make those decisions and up to women to make those decisions with her doctor. I know you've never faced those choices nor have you ever been pregnant, but for women out there who have faced those choices, this is an incredibly difficult thing. President believes their right should be respected.

JENSEN: What is his message to pro-life groups that support this law without —

PSAKI: Go ahead. I think we got to move on. I think we have to move on.

[INAUDIBLE JENSEN]

PSAKI: You've had plenty of time today. Go ahead.

JACQUI HEINRICH: How many green card holders and SIV applicants remain in Afghanistan?

PSAKI: Let me give you — well, let me give you first and I'll get to your question. But it reminds me I wanted to give you guys an update on one piece that was asked yesterday, which is how many people have come into the country and this is something that DHS will be providing

regular updates on. But just to give you an understanding of the breakdown, and then it will come back to your question, Jackie, I promise. First, between August 17th and August 31st, of the breakdown of people who have come into the country, 31,170 — 107, I'm sorry, people have arrived in the United States as a part of Operation Allies Welcome. 4,446 are U.S. citizens, 14 percent of them. 2,785 or nine percent are U.S. lawful permanent residents. 23,876 or 77 percent, this is the statistic I gave yesterday which I then later butchered in the briefing, are other Afghans at risk, including SIV and other visa holders, SIV applicants, P1 and P2 referrals and others. Note that this group includes a small number of third country nationals that were also evacuated and processed. We will give updates on that. That's obviously the data as of just a couple of days ago. In terms of your question, which is a very good one, Jackie, in terms of how many people are in the country now, there are people who are eligible we may not even know they're eligible yet, right? It is very hard to define those numbers. That is something that certainly the State Department in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security are going to be assessing what we think the population is and how we can work with this population to ensure that we help individuals who want to leave and want to depart the country to depart. Some of those people may be eligible for a range of our programs, SIV programs, P1/P2 programs. Some of them may not, but they still may want to depart the country. Now, as I noted yesterday, and I've noted several times, everybody who wants to leave Afghanistan and come to the United States will not be able to and will not be eligible and we don't want to set the expectation that will be the case. But what we want to do is try to assess and try to do extensive outreach through diplomatic channels to see how many people there are, what programs they might be eligible for.

HEINRICH: Thank you. And then I wanted to get to the Taliban and questions of whether it's keeping its promise for amnesty. There was some reporting from the BBC, some color from that story: "Since the Taliban came to power, one man said they haven't stopped killing." "A few days ago," this person said, "they killed 12 members of special forces in Kandahar...three soldiers in Jalalabad as well." "The Taliban took them out of their homes and shot them." Given this kind of reporting that we're hearing, is it possible that our reliance on the Taliban to keep their word in terms of our evacuation is misplaced if we're going back on things like the amnesty promise?

PSAKI: Well, first, I don't have any confirmation of those details. I'm not questioning the BBC's reporting, I just don't have any confirmation of them from the U.S. government. I would certainly point you to the Department of Defense and others who might have additional details. But what I would note here, Jackie, is no one is saying from the federal government, no one, the President, secretary of defense, no one from the intelligence community, that the Taliban are good actors, right? We are not saying that. That is one of the reasons we are being so clear that we are not rushing to recognition. We will be watching clearly. We have a range of leverage at our disposal, including access to the global marketplace and, of course, we will be assessing. It's, of course, based on how they treat individuals in the country, how they treat women, whether they let people who want to leave the country leave. All of those are factors that we will be assessing. But I don't have any confirmation of that specific reporting. Go ahead.

(...)

2:37:03 p.m.

1 minute and 45 seconds

STEVEN PORTNOY: If I could just try to build in on that, the President did say an immediate response is required. I know you said you're not in a position to preview any, but what is the White House [sic] see as a federal responsibility here? I mean, you're talking about the possibility of involving the Justice Department, HHS. In Oklahoma, there are clinics that are saying, you know, okay, we are offering the service, come here. Is that something that the federal government could do, provide transportation for women outside the state of Texas?

PSAKI: These are all great questions and I would note that it wasn't just the Department of Justice that the President referenced in his statement on purpose, right? Because the Department of Health and Human Services has a range of resources, funding, programs that they can look at and potentially deploy. And yes, it is urgent. The President wants them to look at these programs now and come back and see what's possible. But it has been less than a day here and I just want the experts and the policy experts to be able to assess what's possible and then we will get back to you and make sure you all know exactly what our options look like. Go ahead.

FRANCO ORDOÑEZ: Thanks so much. There are some concerns about the recent drone strikes and the possibility of more. Some groups like the ACLU, as well as some former Obama officials feel this is an indicator that the forever wars are not over if drone strikes continue. Can you address those concerns and speak to whether these drone strikes mean an extension of the war?

PSAKI: The strikes that killed ISIS-K terrorists?

ORDOÑEZ: And the possibility of more. I mean, President Biden yesterday said that this is not over.

PSAKI: Well, if anybody wants to convey they don't think that we should kill ISIS-K terrorists and kill the people who killed 13 members of our military, then the President's happy to have that debate.

(...)

2:40:52 p.m.

39 seconds

ASHLEY PARKER: Reproductive rights activists have noted that President Biden seems reluctant to use the word — the specific word abortion although he did use it in his statement today, in the statement he put out yesterday. Can you explain the seeming reluctance to use that word? And was it a deliberate messaging strategy or choice to use it this week in relation to the Texas law?

PSAKI: I have to say as somebody who strongly supports a women's rights to choose myself, as somebody who's spent time working with groups like Planned Parenthood, amazing groups like that, that I think the most important value people should look at is what the President does in his

actions and what he fights for and I don't think I'm going to have any other assessment beyond that.

(....)

2:44:57 p.m.

1 minute and 14 seconds

EUGENE DANIELS: On Afghanistan, the Taliban says China will be their main partner and kind of financial lifeline. Does that weaken America's leverage over the group to change its behavior, especially given the geographic closeness between China and Afghanistan?

PSAKI: Well, I would first say that, as the President has said many times, so let me repeat. There are few countries that wanted us to stay in Afghanistan more than China and Russia, because it would have tied up our own resources and tied up our own U.S. military and tied up our own financial assets and options. What the — our leverage over the Taliban is, is a range of — of — of things. I mean, one is of course access to the global marketplace, which is not just China. It is a range of money that is in the Federal — that is in the New York Federal Reserve, that is — was the Afghan government's money that they currently don't have access to. It is working with a coalition of 100 countries around the world that have signed this statement on what their expectations are of the Taliban. It's working with the UN Security Council. So the world is united in what they expect the Taliban to do, which is allow people who want to depart the country to depart and China has to decide where they are in that effort.

(....)

2:27:43 p.m.

1 minute and 43 seconds

AUSTRALIAN REPORTER: A Taliban spokesman told an Australia news network that the 41 Australians who died in the war in Afghanistan died in vain. During this time, the Australian government found out about the withdrawal date change through media reporting. We weren't included on the list from Secretary of State Antony Blinken of countries called on the final day, August 31. Does the Taliban have a point?

PSAKI: I'm not sure I understand your question.

AUSTRALIAN REPORTER: We have sacrificed a lot for this alliance, including the lives of 41 Australians, and we've been left seemingly out of the loop during this withdrawal process. There hasn't been high level of communication with the Australian government during this time.

PSAKI: I don't think that's true. I don't think that we have not engaged with the Australian government. We have worked with our partners around the world to evacuate individuals from a range of countries around the world who need evacuating from the country. I would say, and the President would say if he were standing here, those 41 Australians did not die in vain, and we are

incredibly grateful for their partnership. We're incredibly grateful for their support over the course of a 20 year war and Australia remains a pivotal partner to the United States. But I would be very shocked if we had not been in touch with and engaged with, so what I was asking you for clarification on was question about the 31st and a call on the 31st. I'm not sure what that would be a reference to.

AUSTRALIAN REPORTER: [INAUDIBLE] the speech that Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State, gave at the withdrawal at the end of —

PSAKI: Yeah.

AUSTRALIAN REPORTER: — the conflict, the last flight. He listed through all these different countries that you called at the end of that, and Australia wasn't on the list.

PSAKI: I can certainly ask the State Department when their most recent diplomatic conversations were with Australian leaders, but I know that we are in close touch and close coordination, and that Australia is an incredibly vital partner, not just in — over the last several years in the war in Afghanistan, but a range — on a range of important global issues.