

White House press briefing

09/20/21

1:19:36 p.m.

3 minutes and 55 seconds

JEREMY DIAMOND: And then just on the foreign policy front with the U.N. visit tomorrow, President Biden came in to office declaring that America is back, and vowing to reinvigorate U.S. alliances, but in recent weeks, we've seen European allies be unsettled by the execution of the U.S.'s withdrawal from Afghanistan, the administration has admitted to mistakenly killing ten civilians in this drone strike, and now, U.S.'s oldest ally, France, has recalled its ambassador after being blindsided by this submarine deal with Australia. So, my question to you is: How is the President going to restore U.S. credibility at the U.N. this week after all that?

JEN PSAKI: Well, why don't I give you a preview a bit of what you can hear the President talk about tomorrow in his remarks. And obviously, as you know, he'll have a number of bilateral meetings tomorrow as well as later this week. And to the degree, you all have questions, I'm happy to speak to those as well. But what you'll hear him talk about tomorrow is the President's went to layout the case for why the next decade will determine our future, not just for the United States, but for the global community. And he will talk, and this will be a central part of his remarks about the importance of reestablishing our alliances after the last several years. I also think it's important to note that reestablishing alliances doesn't mean that you won't have disagreements, or you won't have disagreements about how to approach any particular issue in the world. That is not the bar for having an alliance and important partnership, that has never been and it is not currently, with the goal, of course, of increasing the prospect of security and diminishing the prospect of war. He'll also make clear that for many of the greatest concerns we have, they can not be solved or even addressed through the force of arms, whether that is preparing for the next pandemic, something the United States continues to be the global leader on providing more vaccines to the world than every other country combined, addressing the threat of climate change as we all look ahead to COP26, leveling the economic playing field, fighting for democracy at home and abroad and against threats ranging from cybersecurity to emerging technologies and terrorism. Finally, he will also reaffirm that the United States is not turning inward including as we look to the decision the United States made, the President made to bring our troops home from Afghanistan. Anyone who reads that in that way is not reading it accurately. He will talk about his objective of turning our focus and our resources to the priorities and regions of the world that are the most consequential.

DIAMOND: But just given what's happened in the recent weeks and some of the criticism he's faced in many of the capitals of the allies whose partnerships he plans to — you know, and reinvigorate, does he believe there's work to be done to restore that credibility — or — or — you know, to address —

PSAKI: Is there a country —

DIAMOND: — the criticism that —

PSAKI: — well, tell me which — which — which country is telling you that we don't have credibility in the world?

DIAMOND: I didn't say countries that are saying there's no credibility. But there has been criticism in foreign capitals in recent weeks, including with many of those partners who the President said he's going to invigorate these allies. So, how does he square what's happened?

PSAKI: Well, the reason I asked that question is because I think it's important to note that criticism of a decision is different from criticism of the credibility and leadership of the United States, broadly speaking. And if you look back through the course of the last several decades, prior to the last administration, there are points of disagreement, including when we have disagreed with the decisions other countries are making, points when countries have disagreed with the decisions we're making.

(...)

1:30:28 p.m.

1 minute and 58 seconds

APRIL RYAN: Jen, immigration and Haiti.

PSAKI: Ah, I'll go to you next, April. Let me just — [TO MARYALICE PARKS] — go ahead.

MARYALICE PARKS: Oh, well — I'll start there.

PSAKI: Okay.

PARKS: So, the crisis at the border in Del Rio. We heard DHS say that they're going to continue expulsions under Title 42. So, what is the White House's message to Haitians immigrants seeking asylum? Is there a place for them?

PSAKI: Well, I think it's important for people to understand a couple of the components of what's happening right now on the ground. One, we extended TPS several months ago and again, evaluated to make sure that we were taking into account what was happening on the ground in Haiti.

PARKS: But the people that are here.

PSAKI: I understand, but that does apply to people who are here who arrive before a certain date. And I think that's an important component of what's happening. If you're talking about the situation on the ground in Del Rio, one, it's a challenging situation. It's devastating to watch this footage. I think it's important, though, for people to also know what we are trying to do is also protect people. One, we've been conveying this is not the time to come. We have been implementing Title 42. That's not just about people in the United States, that's also about protecting migrants who would come — and come in mass groups and be in mass groups. We are

also surging resources and taking a multi-pronged approach. We've been working with the American Red Cross to bring in many needed resources. We've worked with world central kitchen to bring in meals. And we have expediting repatriation flights both to a range of countries in south and central America where people may have come from if they can be accepted back and some back to Haiti. That is what our focus is on at this point in time. And our message continues to be, as you heard Secretary Mayorkas convey, now is not the time come for a range of reasons, including we don't have the immigration system up and running in the way we want, including there is still a pandemic and Title 42 remains in place and these are the steps that we're taking in part to protect the border communities as well as the migrants themselves.

(...)

1:32:49 p.m.

3 minutes and 14 seconds

RYAN: Jen, back on Haiti — I hear that, but digging into the weeds a little bit more. The process for Haitian migrants is always, in some estimations, been different than other nations. You have people like Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee who's calling for equal treatment and fairness when it comes to the Haitians at the border and overall. You're allowing Afghans to come in — Afghan supporters to come in as well as Mexicans and then Haitians are not allowed. Can you speak to that — the issue of equity and fairness?

PSAKI: Absolutely, April, and I appreciate your question. Let me just take these different pieces side by side. One, our immigration policy is not about one country or discriminating one country over another. We want to end that and hopefully put an end to what we shot over the last four years. Let me start with Afghan allies, Afghans who are arriving in our country are entering in a sanctioned and orderly process that includes vetting and security screenings led by the departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security. It's not about one particular country of origin, but we've outlined very specifically in here what those processes look like as individuals who are evacuated go to Lily-Pad countries, go through security vetting before they come to the United States on a range of programs. As it relates to individuals who are coming across the border, wherever they're coming from, whatever country they're coming from, Title 42 remains in place. There are a range of programs that people who are in the country can apply for, or may be eligible for, including TPS for Haiti, which is something that we still are continuing to look at and review. The Secretary of State, the Secretary of Homeland Security are constantly assessing circumstances on the ground that would necessitate a TPS designation for any country. And they've obviously made a couple of designations over the course of the last couple of months as it relates to Haiti.

RYAN: Okay. And — and no matter whether it's the people who left — the Haitians that left in 2010 and traveled to South America and are now trying to travel here or the ones who left after this earthquake, either way, what is there for them to go back to when these planes are taking them back? The nation is in unrest. The President was assassinated. There are gangs — the people are scared to — they're scared of. Democratic rule is not necessarily in place. They — the people are calling — particularly those here in this nation — are calling for the elections not to

be held, you know, on time because of the unrest there. And then you also have the issue of the earthquakes. So, what is there to go back to? What are you deporting them back to?

PSAKI: Well, April, I will say that our objective and focus is not only in implementing current immigration policies. We have also been working to provide a range of assistance, working closely with officials from the government as individuals are going back to Haiti to provide a range financial assistance to provide a range of technical assistance. That's on-going. And we certainly support and want to be good actors in supporting Haiti during a very difficult time, as you noted, with a government that is still working to get back to a point of stability, with recovery from an earthquake and that's why we have a range of programs, options as well as financial support in place.

(...)

1:37:12 p.m.

5 minutes and 25 seconds

SEAN SULLIVAN: We've seen other priorities on the Hill that both the president and Democrats campaigned on. You know, police reform, gun control — also stalled. Is there a recognition in the White House now that some of the priorities he and the party campaigned for last year are just simply not going to happen, not going to become reality before the midterms?

PSAKI: No. [TO DOOCY] Go ahead.

PETER DOOCY: Thank you, Jen. Back to the drone strike, you said last month, “our over the horizon capacity can work and has worked in going after ISIS targets and killing people who went after our troops. But you guys didn't kill people who went after our troops. You killed 10 civilians, including seven children. So, does the President think these over the horizon strikes can work?”

PSAKI: Absolutely. And I will just reiterate, as our secretary of defense conveyed, as general McKenzie conveyed, that there was a serious mistake. The Secretary of Defense has authorized, as I noted before, a thorough review of the investigation just completed by U.S. Central Command, including the degree to which the investigation considered all available context and information, the degree to which accountability measures need to be taken, at which level and the degree to which strike authority procedures and processes need to be altered in the future. That's an important process. I would not note, which I noted earlier, that there is a difference between a self-defense strike which is exactly what this was. And I would note there was one prior to this that was a successful, self-defense strike and — and those that — that — posing an imminent threat to U.S. forces who were, as we all know, on the ground at that time, facing real threats in real time and in over the horizon strike where we typically expect to have more time to assess both the threat and the potentially target. That is a different approach and it requires a different approach and it is a different approach internally and General McKenzie spoke to that last week as well.

DOOCY: Some of the victims' relatives are saying they want to be relocated here. Is that something that the administration is going to help them do?

PSAKI: I'm certainly — I'm not aware of that request or that — that ask. I'm happy to certainly speak to our — our national securities team to see what that process would look like.

DOOCY: And then a question on what's going on at the border. Is somebody asking the foreign nationals who are walking into Del Rio, Texas and setting up camps on this side of the border for proof of vaccination or a negative Covid test?

PSAKI: Well, first of all, I can re — re — I can readdress for you — or retalk you through what —

DOOCY: That is — that is —

PSAKI: — steps we've taken.

DOOCY: — that is the policy for people who fly into the country. So, if somebody walks into the country, right across the river, does somebody ask them to see their vaccination card?

PSAKI: Well, let me explain to you, again, Peter, how our process works. As individuals —

[INAUDIBLE DOOCY]

PSAKI: — as individuals come across the border, they are both assessed for whether they have any symptoms. If they have symptoms, they are — the intention is for them to be quarantined. That is our process. They're not intending to stay here for a lengthy period of time. I don't think it's the same thing.

DOOCY: But they're here. What's the difference?

PSAKI: It's not the same thing. These are individuals, as we've noted and as we have been discussed [sic], we are expelling individuals based on title 42 specifically because of Covid, because we want to prevent a scenario where large numbers of people are gathering, posing a threat to the community and also to the migrants themselves. So, those are the policies we put in place, in large part because again the CDC continues to recommend Title 42 be in place given we're facing a global pandemic.

DOOCY: Where's the Vice President on any of this? Wasn't she supposed to be addressing the root causes of migration?

PSAKI: Absolutely and she has been addressing the root causes of migration by working with countries in the region to make sure they the assistance they need, to reduce the number of people who are coming and trying to make those journeys across the border. We've actually seen a reduction in some of those numbers. That doesn't change the fact that this is a very challenging

situation in Del Rio. We're working to implement our policies and we're working to ensure we are also addressing root causes.

DOOCY: Just a quick one on boosters. Why did the President say on August: "Just remember as a simple, eight months after your second shot, get a booster shot" if there not enough data to support that for the general population?

PSAKI: Well, what the President also said is that: "I want to be very clear. The plan is pending on the FDA conducting an independent evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of a third dose of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and the CDC's advisory committee. We are, right now, in the week of the September 20. The advisor committee is meeting on Thursday. We've seen some recommendations that felt was a step forward in providing more protections to people across the country and we'll wait for that process to play out. Our objective and our role is to ensure we have the capacity, the number of shots to provide them to the American people.

DOOCY: 16 out of 18 FDA advisors say there is not — the science. The President talks about following the science. Is this a case of him getting ahead of the science?

PSAKI: Well, first of all, I think what you heard Dr. Collins and Dr. Fauci convey yesterday is that this is going to be an on-going process. I would remind you that the percentage of individuals at this point who would be eligible to get a booster are largely people over 65 cause those are people who would have had the second dose six months ago. If we're looking at when we're going to have available data, that's what the CDC and the FDA looks at, they need enough data to make assessments. No one is suggesting that there will never be boosters. We are suggesting that there needs to be a process to be seen through for when boosters should be approved and when a broader swath of the population is eligible.

(...)

1:44:06 p.m.

1 minute and 7 seconds

KELLY O'DONNELL: And one last point given the whole political timing or at least the timing seen in a political context of this vaccine requirement — following up on what Jeremy was asking, does the President go into UNGA knowing that his relationship with allies has hit a bumpy patch?

PSAKI: Look, I think the President's view, having been on the world scene for 50 years, is that you always have to work on your relationships and that includes with global leaders, but he believes that our relationships are — are sustaining over the course of many decades, that every step he's taken from the moment he took office was with the intention of rebuilding alliances and rebuilding those partnerships that were frayed over the last four years and his view, as I've conveyed over the early part of the briefing, doesn't mean that the bar is that we will always agree with everything our partners and allies do nor will they agree with everything we do, but that our relationships are stronger, they have a stronger basis that we have an opportunity to work

together on the global issues that the world is facing and that's what he expects the focus of the next few days to be.

(....)

1:50:29 p.m.

3 minutes and 41 seconds

BRYAN LOWRY: Jen, a follow up question on Haiti, there are photographs and reports of border agents on horse back using what appear to be whips on Haitian migrants. Does the administration view that as an appropriate tactic? Can you speak to that? There are people that are upset.

PSAKI: Yeah, understandably. I have seen some of the footage, I don't have the full context. I can't imagine what context would make that appropriate but I don't have additional details or context and certainly —

[RYAN SCREAMING]

PSAKI: — I don't have additional context, April. I don't think anyone seeing that footage would think it was acceptable or appropriate.

LOWRY: And then DHS said it will — or said yester — said Saturday that federal agencies will be partnering with the Haitian government to provide assistance to the returnees. Can you elaborate on what that assistance will entail exactly?

PSAKI: You mean to the people who are returning to Haiti?

LOWRY: Right.

PSAKI: Yes, we've been in close contact to the government about, when people return, what that looks like. I — let me get you some more additional details when they get on the ground.

[REPORTERS SHOUTING] [TO YAMICHE ALCINDOR] Go ahead, Yamiche.

YAMICHE ALCINDOR: Thanks so much, Jen. I want to follow up on the question about Haitians and, specifically, these — these photos that are surfacing on Border Patrol agents —

PSAKI: Yeah.

ALCINDOR: — seemingly using whips. I know you said that there's no context that it would be seen as appropriate, so the question really is: Why would this be happening under the Biden administration? Is this going to stop? What would — I wonder sort of what are the consequences if what we're seeing is what we're seeing?

PSAKI: I mean, Yamiche, it's all good questions. We just saw this footage. It's horrible to watch.

I just have to get more information.

RYAN: If it's true, will anyone be fired?

ALCINDOR: Can I ask — can I ask a follow-up?

PSAKI: April, April. I don't — I don't have more information on it. I've also seen the video, I can't imagine what the scenario is where it would be appropriate. I'm certainly not suggesting that. But we've just seen the footage earlier this morning.

ALCINDOR: And if I can also ask. I was talking to Haitian American advocates this weekend. They say that deporting people back to Haiti is like dropping people into a burning house, this idea that the country is just not in a place where it can handle this. Haiti's — Haitian officials have said can you please have a pause on this. Is there any sort of discussion being made to make exemptions for some of the migrants? If so, who would these people be? Or are all of these people just going to end up dropped back in Haiti?

PSAKI: Well, first, I would say, I mean, we are constantly assessing circumstances on the ground. Obviously, the secretary of state and the secretary of homeland security are the ones who had to assess circumstances TPS status, which would be one that we granted and — and adjusted over the course of the last several months to account for circumstances on the ground in Haiti. I don't — I can't make any predictions of that, but I would just reiterate that, obviously, our objective here is to not just work to address the circumstances, which are very difficult in Del Rio, but also to continue to work with the officials in Haiti to improve the conditions, to provide assistance. We're doing all of these pieces that same time. It is not just one at the same time, but I can't predict for you what an assessment would look like or what the outcome of that assessment would like.

ALCINDOR: And a quick follow-up on the — on the photo. I know you said you're still assessing it. But just to add, if this is what we see, is it the President's stance or the White House's stance that whoever these border agents are using what seems to be whips on migrants, that they would be fired or at least never able to do that again?

PSAKI: Of course, they should never be able to do that again. I don't know the circumstances would be. It's obviously horrific the footage. I don't have anymore information on that, so let me venture to do that —

RYAN: But why won't you say fired?

PSAKI: — to see if there's more to convey.

RYAN: Jen, why don't you say fired?

PSAKI [TO KAREN TRAVERS]: Go ahead, Karen.

RYAN: If they are deport —

PSAKI: I think —

RYAN: — this is a humanitarian issue.

PSAKI: — April, I absolutely understand your question and I think I have been very clear how horrific the footage is. I don't have any more information. As a U.S. official, it's — I have a responsibility to get more context and information.

(...)

1:57:36 p.m.

2 minutes and 5 seconds

VOA REPORTER: Following up on Haiti, some of the Haitian migrants at the border told VOA that they were treated worse than their Spanish-speaking counterparts, they were denied the opportunity to change clothing, that they were not given adequate information on their deportation or their deportation statuses. And one guy said it was like being in jail. No food, nothing. You know, what is your response to this? Is this policy and, just secondly, Haitian Americans say this mass deportation and this treatment of people that border is — is the President going back on campaign promises to their community.

PSAKI: In which campaign promise?

VOA REPORTER: To help them, um, kind of get over some of the challenges facing Haitian and also to help people migrant to the U.S.

PSAKI: Well, the President committed to extending Temporary Protected Status to Haiti, which is something he did and he extended that — we extended that to a longer period of time to account for the turmoil on the ground following the assassination on the ground of the leader, so that was the campaign commitment that he made. But I think I can assure people that is not our policy. Obviously, any circumstance where individuals are not treated humanely, whether they are coming to our border or not is not in line with the Biden administration policies. This is clearly a challenging circumstance on the ground, one where we have worked under our homeland security to expedite, surge resources which includes World Central Kitchen bringing in meals, the American red cross bringing in much needed resources to the population. These are all things from a humanitarian perspective. It does not mean that every individual — there are not individuals as you evidenced that didn't have experience where they didn't have access to these resources, but our policy is to provide resources, is to treat people humanely but we also need to implement what is our law and what is our — and that is implementing Title 42 and continuing to — to insure that people who are not coming here lawfully are sent back to the countries they came from.

(...)

2:00:03 p.m.

13 seconds

EDWARD LAWRENCE: When's the President going to hold another news conference where we can ask our questions to him about all of these issues about inflation, about the border, and Afghanistan?

PSAKI: Well, the president took questions probably four or five times last week, so I would point you to that.