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CHUCK TODD, MSNBC HOST: If it's Wednesday. The finger-pointing and blame game over Afghanistan is intensifying, with military and intelligence officials telling NBC News the White House ignored their advice and their warnings about the situation on the ground.

Plus, we've seen the desperation. Afghans, afraid of their lives -- for their lives trying to flee the country as the Taliban takes over. Now, the global community is bracing for an influx of refugees. For those who can't get out, where will they go? How will they be received?

And it's now official, the White House announces a plan to begin administering booster shots or a third dose to Americans in just a few weeks. It's not a new vaccine, it's the same one we've been getting. This new data shows vaccine protection does wane over time as cases, hospitalizations keep going in the wrong direction, breakthrough cases going up.

Welcome to MEET THE PRESS DAILY. I'm Chuck Todd.

For the first time since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, the Pentagon's top military and civilian leaders are going to brief reporters in person this afternoon. The silence from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley throughout this past week has been notable, especially as we get more reporting about the warnings the White House reportedly received ahead of the troop withdrawal. Of course, we know, any of the Pentagon military planners were not really in favor of any of this.

Still, multiple officials tell NBC News that top military officials are furious at Biden's national security team because they wanted to start evacuating vulnerable Afghans as early as May but were not allowed to do so. And here at NBC as well as other news outlets, we have new reporting that the intelligence community, one of the White House has a potential Afghan collapse and that those warnings were ignored. Of course, all of that -- all of this is somewhat subjective. What one person thinks they briefed and what another person thinks they heard for what it's worth.

The White House will not confirm whether President Biden ever received such a dire forecast from his national security team but a senior intelligence official just released a statement which seems to be the first official acknowledgment from the administration that there was information and the possibility of a swift government collapse.

And here's how the statement reads. We consistently identified the risk of a rapid collapse of the Afghan government. We also grew more pessimistic about the government's survival as the fighting season progressed. This was less an issue of Afghan military capabilities and more a reflection of Afghan Leadership, cohesion, and willpower. That said, the Afghan government unraveled even more quickly than we anticipated.

The interesting distinction there between the Afghan security forces and what was expected of their capabilities versus the Afghan government, that you're going to see a lot of this parsing of the type of warnings that were given.

Kelly O'Donnell is at the White House for us, Courtney Kube is at the Pentagon, and also with us on the phone is our Chief Foreign Correspondent Richard Engel.

Kelly, let me start with you. First of all, what do you make of that statement not having a person's name on it?

KELLY O'DONNELL, MSNBC WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Well, what you see now is the bubbling up of finger-pointing and reassessments. And we do know that the President was asked last month directly about intelligence assessments that pointed to this kind of rapid collapse and he flatly said that was not true at the time.

So, was that a case of the President had not received that briefing, or did he disagree with the nature of the assessment? That was in a question and answer moment in the East Room last month. That's -- a lot of time since that, and a lot of events that have rapidly changed.

This kind of an indication from within the administration also shows the degree to which this is viewed as a crisis both of optics, politics, and then, of course, all the humanitarian pieces of it, which of course, are most important. But there wouldn't be this sort of bleeding out of criticism, and, hey, we told you so if this weren't a dire circumstance. So, that's just one measure of how critical this is for the Biden White House and the President's leadership, and even ultimately, his legacy.

Here, they acknowledge that this is an hour-by-hour situation on the ground and that the efforts on operational push right now. How to Deal not with what happened before but to try to repair as quickly as possible the functioning of the evacuations, the obtaining order, all of those kinds of things are their focus right now. There are big questions, still, to be determined, like, Americans who are not in the immediate vicinity of Kabul's International Airport, can they get safe passage to the airport to be evacuated? Do we have even an assessment of where they are and how they would be moved safely from point A to point B? So, there are a lot of questions.

We expect to hear from the President later today. The topic is COVID and the booster shots but it -- certainly would be an expectation that with a crisis of this magnitude that he would also say something about that as well and we'll be looking for that later this afternoon, Chuck.

[13:05:12]

TODD: You know, Kelly, this very quickly, we know he's doing a television interview, and we expect more remarks later in the week. Is this an acknowledgment that his speech -- that they have more work to do communicating what went wrong?

O'DONNELL: I think it's both an acknowledgment that the speech that he gave where he defiantly said the buck stops with me, I support the decision I made, I have no regrets in essence, that that was a statement that is not going to be sufficient to answer the criticism that's happening day by day and reacting to events on the ground.

Certainly, this is a kind of crisis unfolding with imagery, human beings' lives at stake, and a lot of criticism filling the void. And so, the President needs to not let that void go without his voice as part of it. If he's going to defend and stand by his decision, he may need to do that every day for some period of time, Chuck.

TODD: Kelly O'Donnell at the White House for us. Kelly, thank you.

Courtney Kube, I want to focus -- zero in on something in that Senior Intelligence Official statement because I wonder if this is the parsing we're going to start to see, that all of the assessments about the Afghan military was about the military's capabilities, and that maybe there was a distinction between the will of the governed and the will of the government versus the capabilities of the military. Is that the kind of after-action parsing we should expect both from the military and Intel sides?

CORTNEY KUBE, MSNBC PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT: Yes, I think there have been two big developments here and what -- who knew, what, when. One is, the reality is the intelligence assessments continued to evolve, and they were evolving quickly throughout the summer. And part of that was because as -- the Taliban offensive didn't just begin a week or two weeks ago, it began weeks ago. And there were places where the Taliban were moving in and the Afghan security forces were not really putting up much of a fight. That was for a combination of reasons.

In many cases, they were rural areas, they didn't have a very strong force, they didn't have a strong connection to the central government. So, the -- but it was clear weeks ago -- months ago now that there were places where the Afghan security forces were not going to put up a fight.

There's also been this acknowledgment in the past several days and a backlash, I would say, about all this criticism for the Afghan military saying, oh, they were folding. Everywhere that the Taliban came in the Afghan military just folded. Well, the truth is, that's actually -- that's actually not true. There were places where there were -- there are some very capable members of the Afghan military, the Afghan Air Force continued conducting airstrikes until just a couple of days ago. And that the special ops guys, the commandos -- the Afghan commandos, I mean, they spread them thin in many of these capitals, these provincial capitals, and they were fighting, and they were dying, and they were trying to defend their homelands.

So, this notion that the Taliban showed up at every place, and the Afghans handed over their weapons is not true. And I -- that's one thing I've noticed in the past couple of days is people trying to correct that narrative and that intelligence -- that statement on -- background statement, that seems to me to be a little bit, of course, correction on that idea, as well.

But another -- you know, while there were some Afghans who were putting up a fight in certain places, particularly in Herat, and Kandahar, up in Mazar-e-Sharif, there also was this momentum that built with the Taliban over the past couple of weeks that really, really started to take off in the last week or two. And that was, as one place would fall -- as one province would fall, then it -- they were able to gather up more people, they were emptying prisons, they were picking up weapons and equipment that the -- from the Afghan military, and you know, it's a local environment and many of these places, it's very rural. And you know, you would hear about them taking over a town or a city or even a province and it would be -- and that would get into the next town or city or province and it became easier for them to take over the neighboring areas.

So, I guess that's a long way of saying, yes, the intelligence assessments, they were changing. But we do know that they were telling the U.S. -- the U.S. military and U.S. intelligence assessments were saying that the Taliban would take over and it could happen pretty quickly, Chuck.

TODD: Very quickly, Courtney. The significance -- what do you expect that Secretary Austin and General Milley, are they going to be trying to stay out of the policy fight publicly, or do you expect them to let us know their point of view?

KUBE: They will try to stay out of the policy fight. Their whole goal today is to come out and to face the cameras because they have not yet. They want to give an operational update but they really want to focus in on the evacuation effort and where how many militaries are on the ground now, the security of the airport, how many flights are getting in and out, they really want to focus on the operational piece of this. But the reality is, Secretary Austin, he's a civilian leader, he's a member of the cabinet, and that he is responsible for carrying out the policy decisions of this White House. So, he's going to get questions about that, Chuck.

[13:10:06]

TODD: That's for sure. Well, let me bring in Richard Engel. He's on the phone for us for obvious reasons, still in the country. And Richard, you were hearing about Courtney's reporting and this point of view of the military versus the White House, what are you seeing? And I am curious, these special operation forces on the Afghan side of things, which we had seen get praised all the time from our military is really the only aspect of the Afghan military that would be singled out for praise, what happens to them?

RICHARD ENGEL, MSNBC CHIEF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: So, there were two units that were trained by American Special Ops. They were -- they were doing very well, they were fighting, they were motivated. Those were the commandos and the Air Force, which was backing up the commandos, and they were leading the fight. The problem is, if you're -- if you -- you can't fight a war and defend a country if you only have the Navy seals or Delta Force. They are the tip of the spear but the shaft of the spear broke and eventually if you're just using fighting with the tip of the spear, you don't fight very long.

So, they -- well, although they were fighting bravely and fought and -- pretty much until the end, when the backbone of the military collapse, they collapse with them. And what happens to them now, some of the commandos are in hiding. A small group of Afghans has retreated to the Panjshir Valley, it's the one part of this country that is not controlled by the Taliban, but not enough, not that -- there's not enough of resistance there to pose any threat to the Taliban. And a lot of them have just been trying to escape going to neighboring countries, going up to the north, going to Uzbekistan, to Tajikistan.

That day, when the Taliban were taking over, unfortunately, a lot of people got on planes and left because they thought they would be the ones specifically were being targeted. You know, the Taliban is saying now that they're not going to go after women, and they're not going to really go after the translators, so they say, but the people who fought them, and who actually fought them, they would have been marked for death, no doubt.

TODD: Tell us about the evacuation situation as you're seeing it right now.

ENGEL: Sure. And I also have a little reporting on this back and forth on who knew what, when, when to quit your breathings here. I spoke to a lot of military officials on the ground, I'll get to that in a second since that seems to be a major point of discussion right now. But before we're talking about that, on the ground, things are going better on the base. So, the base is operating more smoothly, there was a great deal of chaos.

Bagram here a couple of days ago, when thousands of Afghans broke through the perimeter, climbed over the wall, now, more troops have been brought in, it's orderly, they're processing people, there's a security, the planes are landing and taking off but it's hard to get here because the Taliban control the perimeter. And the Taliban have actually been asked to keep people back but the Taliban are doing that by firing in the air

and hitting people with clubs. So, how are the people supposed to get in, particularly the ones who worked for the U.S. military?

So, had this started earlier, the U.S. would not have been threading this needle of having to evacuate people through with Taliban perimeter. It would have been much, much easier, or even that they had the paperwork completed, had the visa stamp, it would have been much easier. Now, they're trying to process people, get them onto a base through the Taliban control. It is -- it is a nightmare. That part is a nightmare.

TODD: Richard, I'm over time. As always, sir, be safe out there. And we look forward to having you home soon as well. Thank you, Richard.

ENGEL: OK.

TODD: We bring in now Republican Congressman Peter Meijer. He's an army veteran, he worked with an NGO in Afghanistan. He's now a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Congressman, let me start with this. You're going to get some briefings from the administration. You know, we can debate long term about how we went in, how we've stayed, and I think there's no doubt there is a -- this defeat has a thousand fathers in it. But let's talk about the near term in the moment. What are your concerns, and what answers do you think this administration needs to provide you?

REP. PETER MEIJER (R-MI): My concerns are that on 31 August, President Biden is going to remove all remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan, whether or not we've removed all American citizens who are trying to get out, whether or not we've gotten our Afghan allies to safety, that he will pull up the tent stakes and leave, and that there will be additional blood on our hands because this administration did not move with urgency when Bipartisan members of Congress approached it in the spring and said if we're withdrawing, you know we -- I agreed with that decision, others did not.

But if we were drawing, we need to look after these people. We need to get these processes going, we need to clear the bureaucratic hurdles and the administrative backlogs that have led us to this position.

[13:15:08]

MEIJER: And they stonewalled at every step of the way. This is not an issue they wanted to deal with. And as Richard Engel said, if this would have begun earlier, we would not have the chaos of the airport we have right now, we would not have people trapped outside of Kabul, and we would not be facing the massive humanitarian dilemma that we're in right now. But we cannot leave on August 31. We can't leave until we get everyone we need to out of Afghanistan.

TODD: So, you'd like to hear a more Declaration on that. You know, one of the strategic head-scratchers to me, and it looks really odd now was handing Bagram over when we did, we're going to have a debate about whether we should have ever handed Bagram over. But we could use another runway right now, we could use another base of operations right now. Obviously, in hindsight, should we have handed over Bagram while we're still trying to evacuate thousands?

MEIJER: I mean, knowing what we know right now, absolutely not. I mean, this is -- that was a massive strategic mistake. Again, there were intelligence assessments that said things will collapse more rapidly. The challenge was back in June, it was well, six to nine months after August 31, you know, the government should still be functional, or that's what we expect from longevity.

And then in July, or sorry, at the beginning of August, it became, oh, maybe not six to nine months, it might be 30 to 90 days and it turned out, you know, it was even shorter than that. I mean, it was a span of eight days from the first provincial capital Zaranj, Nimroz from that falling until the Taliban went to the presidential palace. So, we have a lot of constraints at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, I wish we had Bagram, but at the end of the day, we cannot leave on August 31, we cannot leave until we complete this mission.

TODD: Do you think there's any merit to the President's argument which he essentially made on Monday, which was, you know, this was all, you know, that there would have been -- this moment was going to happen no matter how you did it because if you had started evacuating sooner, that would have triggered the rush to the exits. That no matter what this -- to borrow a favorite movie, quote of mine, which is everything ends badly or else it wouldn't end, that this was always going to end badly. Is there any merit to that argument?

MEIJER: Well, I think it depends on at what level you're speaking, right? When it comes to the U.S. involvement and our ability to have a military victory in this conflict, I don't believe that that was possible. I think a negotiated political solution was all we could have. Sort of an extent, when it comes to the withdrawal, it was never going to be clean, it was never going to be pretty. But there's a big difference between it not being a perfect outcome, and having quite possibly the worst of all worlds.

I mean, what we are in right now is the nightmare scenario that many of us had worried about, and had said, if we are withdrawing, we need to keep this in mind, we need to worry about our Afghan allies, we can't control what the Taliban are going to do but we can control what we do before we have our withdrawal date. And so, I am not at all sympathetic to the argument that there was no way we could have prevented this.

The operational strategic and intelligence failures that led us to this point deserve strong reckoning after we get through this chaotic emergency moment. But again, we cannot wash our hands of this problem. The people who are in danger right now are the people who are in danger because we put them there, because they served alongside us, because they signed up to help us out.

TODD: Right.

MEIJER: So, this is not a situation where we can just walk away, throw up our hands and say, well, we tried. That's not good enough.

TODD: What kind of obligation do you think this country has to welcome these Afghan refugees who want out? Is there a limit to how much -- how many should be in the United States?

MEIJER: You know, I think it's -- I'm trying to be very clear because some on the right are making the -- they're conflating all refugees with those who are Special Immigrant Visa holders, to whom our obligation is to keep our promise. These are people who signed up to serve the U.S. military with the promise that they will be resettled in the U.S. So, this isn't something we're doing out of the goodness of our hearts, this is something that we are just simply keeping a promise that we made. And then you have additional folks, some Women's Rights activists that were doing their work supported by the U.S. who probably would not have put themselves at the risk that they did if the U.S. wasn't supporting them.

So, I think when it comes to individuals who risked their lives on behalf of our mission, we owe a tremendous obligation there.

Again, this is not charity, this is not, you know, oh, these poor random individuals. I mean, these are individuals that I'm talking to you every day, that military veterans, that journalists, that people who served with them overseas are talking to every day. They have faces, they have names, they have wives, they have sons, they have daughters, and they are at risk because of us and we owe it to them to make it right.

[13:20:03]

TODD: Congressman Peter Meijer, Republican from Grand Rapids, Michigan area. Congressman, thanks for coming on and sharing your perspective with us, and thanks for your service.

MEIJER: Thank you.

TODD: Coming up. We're going to hear from the other side of the aisle, Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Lee, she was the only member of Congress to vote against the war in Afghanistan. It's now over. We're going to get her assessment next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

TODD: Welcome back. As we said, President Biden's handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal is being criticized not just by Republicans, but by quite a few Democrats as well. The Democratic chairs of both the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Armed Services Committee say they will be holding hearings on what went wrong. President is being praised for now by Speaker Pelosi in the House Progressive Caucus. The situation is dividing Democrats which is exactly the opposite of what the President needs as he attempts to pass a sweeping domestic agenda.

Well, joining me now is California Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Lee. She's an emeritus Chair of the House Progressive Caucus, the lone member of Congress to oppose the authorization of military force in Afghanistan after 9/11.

Congresswoman, it's good to see you. We've had conversations about this issue quite a few times over the last few years so let me start with this, on the withdrawal itself. Do you think there's merit to the President's argument that essentially says it may not have mattered when, it was always going to be a bad time to a withdrawal, and it may have always been this chaotic, or do you think this could have been handled better?

REP. BARBARA LEE (D-CA): Well, let me just say. I think the President was absolutely correct in his decision to withdraw because we know, and I've known many have known over the years that there is no military solution to Afghanistan. And in fact, with 2500 troops remaining and the Taliban on the move, we would have had to send thousands more of our U.S. troops who honorably have done everything we've asked them to do for the last 20 years.

[13:25:10]

LEE: And so, I believe that the execution as all of us have seen, has not gone well, I believe that we should have been better prepared but I also know that, for instance, with many of the Afghans who have provided the type of assistance that we desperately needed, there were very few lists of any of who they were and so, that's just an example of the lack of preparedness.

And so right now, I'm really very clear on what we need to do in terms of providing the resources for the safe evacuation of Americans, Afghan allies, women, and children, to make sure that they have safe passage on to, you know, some -- into some place, some country where they will be safe and secure.

TODD: What is our -- what is our obligation to those folks for this country? How, you know, how many of them should be provided safe passage to the United States?

LEE: Well, I agree with Peter. We work together, we just had it on and we have to, one, make sure that we honor our commitments, keep our word. And I believe we must lift the refugee cap. We are going to have to have a cap that allows for more refugees to come into the United States of America. We also need to move very quickly with our international allies to make sure that they are putting forth a plan for refugee resettlement because we cannot abandon these individuals. And we have to make sure that they all are transported out of Afghanistan because it is a very dangerous situation.

And having said that, I have to just say, I think that the evacuation plans now are more -- they're becoming smoother, they're becoming clear but we have thousands and thousands of people to be evacuated from Afghanistan. Once again, the reason I could not support this is because I knew for a fact that there was no military solution in Afghanistan. And we're seeing that, unfortunately, come to play. And so, we have to be very strategic now in how we move forward and make sure that everyone is safe, who has helped us and all of our Americans in the country.

TODD: You think the President needs to make it clear that August 31 is not a deadline? That the deadline to get our troops out, is when we get all Americans out and our -- and our allies?

LEE: Well, the President and his Military Advisors will advise him on what decisions that he should make and I believe that he's going to make the wisest decision. This President has been very forthright, he's very -- been very honest, and he has indicated that, yes, he owns this, he is the President and so, I'm confident that he's going to make the right decision.

Also, Chuck, can I just read you a passage from a report that the special investigator on Afghanistan put forth very recently, I've worked with him over the years. And I just want to read you one paragraph. He said the report also found that the United States government did not -- did not understand the Afghan context, including socially, politically, and culturally. Additionally, the investigators said that U.S. officials rarely had even a mediocre understanding of the Afghan environment, much less, how it was responding to U.S. interventions, and that this ignorance often came from a willful disregard for information that may have been available.

So, I think we have to take this moment and reflect on lessons learned so that we don't make the same mistakes again in the future, and support our troops and our veterans because they did everything we asked them to do.

TODD: You could have been taken out the word Afghanistan and Afghans and said, Vietnam and Vietnamese with that statement there, was haunting, sort of, what you read there, and how familiar it is to sort of the Vietnam after action. But let me ask you this. I mean, do you think that there will ever -- I mean, do you accept the idea that there was a -- that some part of this mission was successful because it kept us safe because we got rid of al Qaeda, or was the price too high?

LEE: Listen, let me -- let me just say, we have three perspectives, three stools -- three legs of the stool are our foreign policy. I believe in rebalancing those three stools. We have diplomacy, development, and military defense. The defense military option is going to always be on the table, and I too, and very emphatic about our national security and bringing the terrorists to justice. What I was concerned about, then, three days after the horrific attacks, was that, we did not have a moment to reflect upon a rational response, the appropriate response, and in fact we gave -- Congress' responsibility to any president to the executive branch to use force in perpetuity.

[13:30:00]

That's the issue. And I think we need as members of Congress to understand now when, in fact, we're going to authorize the use of force. And, so, having said that, we have many, many national security issues that we have to deal with now. We have domestic terrorism, right. The greatest threat to our national security.

But we have to look back and just see and understand what took place as a result of 9/11 and the president has been very emphatic about having counterterrorism operations in place and, in fact, we need to look at how we rebalance our approach in the world as it relates to global peace and security.

TODD: Well, Congresswoman. I could keep going on on this but I'll tell you, you brought up something that I think every single member of Congress, one lesson now to take away is be careful when you allow the -- if you just keep farming out tough decisions to the executive branch. You guys are an equal branch of government. I think more and more of you are realizing that today.

Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Democrat from Oakland California. It's good to have you on and your perspective.

Coming up, what you need to know about these third shots that will be widely available soon. Plus Florida takes another step toward punishing schools for defying the governor's ban on mask mandates. But what are the punishments? Are they afraid to talk about it? That's next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[13:35:18]

TODD: Welcome back. This morning the Biden administration formally announced the recommendation that Americans are going to need a third dose of the Moderna or Pfizer COVID vaccine eight months after their second shot. This news comes as five states reached record averages for new cases, including the state of Florida where the state board of education voted last night to sanction two school districts, Alachua, which is the home of Gainesville, and Broward Counties for defying Governor Ron DeSantis' ban on the mask mandates.

NBC's Dasha Burns is at one of the Broward County schools defying DeSantis as the first day of school gets under way, also joined by Dr. William Schaffner, infectious disease specialist at Vanderbilt and an adviser to the CDC on vaccines.

But, Dasha, let me get to this dispute between the state and the county. The state voted to sanction the county but they didn't say what they're going to do. It does feel as if the state's looking for an exit ramp without embarrassing the governor here. But the county at this point, it sounds like, feels as if they've won this battle, don't they?

DASHA BURNS, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Well, look, Chuck, there's no question that Broward County is kicking off its school year in the middle of a political tug of war about masks. And that's frustrating to parents and teachers and administrators who really want the focus to be getting students back in the classroom after a year and a half of disrupted learning. Instead, they're facing these sanctions.

Last night the first punitive measures taken against school districts that are requiring masks. But, you're right, Chuck, they did not say what those measures would be, although the school board chair tells me that they've been threatened with about \$700,000 of school funding being taken from the district.

But Broward is not budging on this. They say that they're looking at the data. Last week Florida reported more than 31,000 cases of COVID-19 among those under the age of 19. And they say they're also taking the directive from their parents. They put out a survey they say to more than 270,000 students. Only 190 of them were opposed to masks.

And Chuck, I've been talking to parents dropping their kids off this morning. Take a listen to some of what I heard.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BURNS: If Broward hadn't instituted this mask mandate, would you be sending your kids to school?

JOB MARIA, BROWARD COUNTY PARENT: We would have to. I'm a first responder and my wife also works, and we wouldn't have any other choice.

SHAUN, BROWARD COUNTY PARENT: I'm all for the kids wearing masks. I believe it helps everybody in the long run.

BURNS: Are you nervous seeing some of the rise in COVID cases among kids?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Yes, very nervous.

DASHA: Sophie, how do you feel about going to school in a mask?

SOPHIE LEAVY, 3RD GRADER: I feel the same way about my mom. I'm happy that I'm wearing masks. I'm comfortable in it and it also covers up germs.

(END OF VIDEO CLIP)

BURNS: Chuck, I've been talking to parents across the country and a lot of them are pointing to kids like 8-year-old third grader Sophie who seem to understand what a mask can do and willing to wear it and they are hoping that the grownups in leadership positions will listen to kids like Sophie. Chuck?

TODD: Dasha, as we all know, anybody of us that are parents kids are much more adaptable than adults.

Dasha Burns in Broward County for us. Dasha, thank you.

Dr. Schaffner, before I ask you some specifics about the decision on the third dose, let me ask you about your level of concern about pediatric hospitalizations. What we're seeing in COVID cases in younger folks particularly kids under 12.

DR. WILLIAM SCHAFFNER, INFECTIOUS DISEASE EXPERT: Well, what's happening, Chuck, around the country and it's certainly true in the state of Tennessee is that we have seen an increase in the number of hospitalizations of young children with COVID. You know, this is difficult for people to understand and to grasp because they had heard and it's still true that if children get infected with COVID, they're less likely to have severe disease.

But all of a sudden we're having more children admitted with COVID severe disease. How can you put those two together? Delta made the difference. It's now being transmitted to people who are not vaccinated. And that includes some young children and it can produce severe disease. So, we're seeing an upsurge in pediatric hospitalizations across the country.

TODD: And it should be pointed out that all of those studies about COVID in younger folks, I believe, happened before pre-Delta, pre-Alpha, if you will on the variant. So I do think people ought to remember those studies perhaps haven't aged well.

[13:40:02]

Let me ask you about the guidance from the government here on a third dose. And I feel like a broken record. Every time there's news about a third dose, all I think about are those that got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine who are sitting there going, well, what the heck am I supposed to do?

Doctor, what the heck are they supposed to do?

SCHAFFNER: Well, the official recommendation, Chuck, would be sit tight. Because at the moment the data aren't there yet to provide reassurance that we could give them either the Moderna or the Pfizer vaccine or for that matter a second dose of the J&J vaccine. Now, having said that, I have to be honest with you, there are already individual patients and doctors who are advising their patients to say, go ahead and get either Pfizer or Moderna vaccine because we know it's safe and it probably will help you, even though it's not officially recommended.

TODD: You know, those are two types of vaccines. One is a more, and I'm not going to -- we're all amateur experts these days. After going through 18 months of this. But, you know, one with this mRNA vaccine of Pfizer and Moderna, does it help the other vaccine be more effective in this case or is it just basically you're putting a brand-new vaccine and you may actually need a two-dose version of it?

SCHAFFNER: Well, actually the thinking is that the mix and match actually enhances the protection. You know, J&J's vaccine is different than the AstraZeneca vaccine that is being used in England. But they're made in very similar ways. And, indeed, in many European countries, they're now giving one dose of the AZ vaccine followed by either one dose of Moderna or Pfizer.

And there are physicians here who are saying, you know, the analogy is close enough with J&J. So they're actually recommending this for their patients. I hasten to add this is not an official recommendation, but there are physicians and patients who are kind of gaming the system and taking advantage of that European experience. Not exactly, but close enough they think.

TODD: Well, one thing our government officials need to do is they need to be a little more proactive at least giving those who got the J&J vaccine some more information rather than to grasp for individual recommendations from great doctors like yourself.

Anyway, Dr. Schaffner, I appreciate you coming on and sharing your experience with us.

SCHAFFNER: Thank you so much.

TODD: All right, please send us your questions on how to stay safe during return to the office. Ask us on Twitter with the #MSNBCanswers. Or just e-mail them to us, talk@MSNBC.com. We're going to have our experts on Friday at 11:00 Eastern answer those return-to-work questions.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[13:46:17]

TODD: Welcome back. Sadly the death toll in Haiti has now risen to more than 1900 after this weekend's powerful earthquake. Nearly 10,000 more are classified as injured. The urgent rescue efforts are ongoing. Teams are searching for survivors amid some extreme conditions caused by what is now Hurricane Grace, by the way.

The storm caused massive flooding in some areas already hit by the quake. U.S. coast guard and Navy support landed in Haiti earlier this week and are now helping to airlift people out of flood zones. UNICEF estimates that the earthquake damaged and destroyed 84,000 homes in a country still suffering from the 2010 earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands of people.

And the political turmoil after the assassination of the president just weeks ago only adds to the challenge of this rescue effort.

Coming up, we're going to head back, though, to the Middle East as the humanitarian crisis grows and countries scramble to prepare for an influx of Afghan refugees who can't get out.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

TODD: Welcome back. As evacuation operations continue in Kabul, the U.S. is preparing for its own influx of Afghan refugees. According to the Department of Defense the Army is preparing to receive as many as 22,000 Afghan refugees at military bases in several states. Other countries are also promising increased humanitarian aid saying that they're going to accept refugees at least temporarily.

And right now the evacuations are mainly bringing out Americans and some Afghans who worked for the U.S. and managed to get visas so they've sort of pre-vetted if you will. There are tens of thousands of Afghans, though, who want to get out of the country but can't. There's also a growing humanitarian crisis within Afghanistan as an unknown number of people have been forced out of their homes and are displaced and maybe just simply running for a border.

One of those borders is with Iran. So joining me now is NBC News Tehran bureau chief Ali Arouzi, and I also have with us JC Hendrickson of the International Rescue Committee.

[13:50:07]

But I want to talk about one of the countries bordering Afghanistan, Iran, and the expectation and preparation that is happening there for what will be an influx of Afghan refugees,

Ali, what are you seeing on the ground, and what is the government's, I guess, stance when it comes to Afghan refugees?

ALI AROUZI, NBC NEWS TEHRAN BUREAU CHIEF: Hi, Chuck. Well, Iran has traditionally housed Afghan refugees for decades and there is about two million of them here, and they are mostly undocumented. They have a very difficult life here, Chuck. They have to do menial, dangerous jobs for little pay, their children can't go to school. But for many of them, it's a better option than Afghanistan, and as this tragedy unfolds in Afghanistan, the border is filling up with Afghan refugees trying to get into Iran.

The government here has set up three makeshift refugee camps to house the influx of refugees coming in, but of course, Chuck, a lot of them don't want to stay here because it's very hard, they want to get to Iran's western border and get into Turkey. But Turkey has now built a 185-mile- long wall along Iran's western border specifically to stop Afghan refugees coming in. So it's getting tighter and tighter for them to move.

And also today, we just heard from the minister of borders that they are considering shutting down that border refugee camp temporarily. They are citing reasons of COVID not spreading in the country and other concern of theirs is that many of the Afghan refugees coming, won't be able to leave through the western border now that Turkey has closed it, and they're probably also trying to see what sort of a relationship they can establish with the Taliban while all of this chaos unfolds.

So for Afghan refugees trying to flee all the problems in Afghanistan it's getting more difficult for them to move. This was always a safe haven for them, and it's becoming even tougher for them to come to Iran.

TODD: Would you still call Iran a safe haven for these refugees the way they want to close or how would you classify it?

AROUI: Well, safe haven maybe is a too broad a word, but there are opportunities for them to make some money, not a lot, to try and get some of their family members. Look I know a lot of Afghans that have been calling me, that have worked here for many years, begging for help, money, any influence to get their family members out of Afghanistan because as difficult as it is for them in Iran, it's still a better option than what faces them in Afghanistan.

TODD: That tells you a lot there.

Ali Arouzi in Tehran for us. Ali, as always, sir, thank you.

Let me move to JC Hendrickson here. Walk us through the scope of what you see coming, the expectation of what a resettlement program is going to look like, how many people, and I guess our most recent, you know, comparison would be with what happened in Syria. What do you expect and what are you preparing for?

JC HENDRICKSON, SENIOR DIRECTOR, REFUGEE AND ASYLUM POLICY, INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE: Well, I think it's important to start with the big picture that Afghanistan has hosted a decades of conflict, and there are currently 18.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. This year alone, the number of people --

TODD: That's half of the country's population.

HENDRICKSON: That's right. That's right. And this year alone, there are 550,000 people who have been internally displaced according to figures from earlier this week, and that's up from 390,000 people which was reported just last week. So this country is in dire need of humanitarian aid. The U.S. government right now should be surging aid to trusted partners on the ground and this is not a time to take our foot off of the gas when it comes to humanitarian leadership.

TODD: You say they should give, not withhold the aid from the trusted partners on the ground. How many trusted partners are on the ground left? You know, they've frozen a lot of money right now for fear it'll get into the hands of the Taliban?

HENDRICKSON: Well, there are 165 humanitarian actors on the ground in Afghanistan including the IRC. There are humanitarian actors in all 401 of the districts in Afghanistan, and, you know, for our part, we intend to operate in Afghanistan as long as we possibly can. So, you know, the work goes on as long as we're able to.

[13:55:02]

TODD: What -- what do you expect the number to be when you -- over the next couple of years? Do you expect that we are going to see Afghan migrants, millions of them, look for safe haven around the world?

HENDRICKSON: Well, right now, I can speak to the U.S., there are two programs that refugees from Afghanistan can, you know, use to migrate. However, these programs themselves would only help less than 1 percent Afghans, and that's if they are fully operational and functional, but right now, they are not. The SIV program which is one of the routes that many people have taken over the last several weeks through relocation flights is plagued with backlogs.

There are somewhere around 20,000 people who are at some stage in the process in the SIV program, and the newly announced program just last week requires Afghans to get out of Afghanistan and get to a third country, which as you can imagine right now is impossible, so, yes, these programs need to be scaled up and fixed, but there also needs to be solutions in the region. The United States should be negotiating agreements with the surrounding nations, and we should also be leaning on other wealthy nations to drive aid to the country.

TODD: Well, look, as you know, the politics of migration has taken an ugly turn in some parts of the country including in some -- in some parts of this country, but you look at what Turkey is doing, you look at what we already saw happen in Europe, how concerned are you that this is going to become a larger problem?

HENDRICKSON: Well, it could without the United States taking a whole of government approach to addressing this crisis. And, you know, I think I could speak for a moment about support in the United States. Across the United States, we are seeing widespread support for Afghan refugees, but for refugee settlement in general. The IRC has offices in 25 cities and we have seen support surge in this time.

We also, I think, have seen and it's important to note that across the political spectrum throughout the country, you're seeing is support for refugees from Republican and Democratic governors from the East Coast to the West Coast, and that's really critical right now.

TODD: Well, that's step one for sure, Mr. Hendrickson. It's a big mission on your hands. Good luck to the folks that you have on the ground there, and if you can help, take a look at what they are doing.

That does it for us. We'll be back tomorrow with more MEET THE PRESS DAILY. MSNBC's coverage will continue with my friend Geoff Bennett right after this break.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

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