

News; Domestic

**THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW for March 7, 2022, MSNBC**

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[21:00:03]

ALI VELSHI, MSNBC HOST: Chris, I'm grateful for that. Thank you, my friend. We'll see again tomorrow night.

And thanks to you at home for joining us this hour.

I'm in Tiszabecs, Hungary. It's a small village, as Chris said, on the Hungarian border. There's a border crossing here half a mile from here. Actual border is less than 1,000 feet to my left.

And refugees are being bused from there on these buses to this tiny village center where individual civilian volunteers and civic organizations help them figure out the next steps. The United Nations today put the number of people who have fled Ukraine at 1.7 million people in just seven days. Over half of those refugees have gone to Poland, but the second highest number of refugees, more than hundred 80,000. They've come here, and Hungary.

The U.N. says people who are crossing the Ukrainian border in the last day or so have been increasingly traumatized and increasingly vulnerable. There does not seem to be any end in sight for the stream of refugees, as Russian bombardment of major population centers in Ukraine becomes more frequent and more brutal.

In the Black Sea city of Mykolaiv, just yesterday, Ukrainian military claim to recapture their port and pushed Russian forces out of the city. Well, at dawn this morning, residents of Mykolaiv awoke to the Russian counterattack which began with an intense artillery barrage, as rockets landed in residential neighborhoods. People took shelter in basements or fled their homes entirely.

Mykolaiv is a key target in Russia's apparent goal of taking control of Ukraine's entire Black Sea coast. And cities in Ukraine's east are also under unrelenting Russian assault. Russian bombardment has devastated downtown Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city is just 20 mile from the Russian border on the East.

The southeastern city of Mariupol is in the midst of what observers say is a full-fledged humanitarian crisis. That city has been without water and electricity for days under siege by Russian forces. Ukrainian officials say, two attempts to evacuate the city have failed after Russian forces began shelling the agreed upon humanitarian corridors where civilians were supposed to be able to exit and safety. At least one family trying to flee the city was killed in one of those attacks.

The U.N. says this war has so far claimed the lives of 406 civilians in Ukraine, including 27 children. But those are only the deaths that they have been able to confirm. The toll is likely much higher. Russia's proposed new fires in five Ukrainian cities tomorrow to facilitate evacuations, but the only evacuation corridor's it is proposing would leave refugees to Russia and its ally Belarus, which is obviously not where most Russians, most Ukrainians fleeing Russian bombs want to go.

Meanwhile, the areas around the capital of Kyiv are coming under increasingly brutal attack.

NBC News chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel said this report today.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

RICHARD ENGEL, NBC NEWS CHIEF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: The Russians have now arrived at the gates of Kyiv. This footbridge is one of the only ways people are able to escape a much more intense battle of the size of the Russians were taking over, and gets a relative safety.

The Russians have taken over the suburb, which is on the northern edge of Kyiv. They're bombarding and heavily. The Iranians blew of this bridge in order to slow down the Russian advance. But it is also made it extremely difficult for people to evacuate these areas that are hotly contested, as Russian forces try to consolidate their positions. And the Ukrainians try to keep them on that side of the river.

And all day, we have seen a stream of panic people, some being carried, some in wheelchairs. They are each going one bag and some families have been separated here broken down into tears.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

VELSHI: I just want to show, you buy the, way a car has just gotten behind me to the school over there. That's what's happening, people are coming in with supplies for refugees. There's food, and list food, medication, things like that.

These people come in with only what they can carry. And while there are no refugee buses arriving right now, because there is a curfew on the regaining side right now, in fact as I said, there are no refugee buses. Look what's about to go over my shoulder here. This is a bus carrying refugees in from Ukraine.

So, apparently, the curfew is not completely in effect because there are refugees coming in. The bus is going to turn around momentarily, is going to pull up over here and it's going to let people off.

Now, as Richard was talking about, those people are headed into central Kyiv, which remains firmly under the control of the Ukrainian government.

[21:05:08]

In fact, President Zelenskyy released this video today, showing him back in his presidential office in Kyiv for the first time since the war began. Not in the fortified bunker that he is usually been broadcasting from.

Zelenskyy is putting all the pressure he can on the United States and NATO to give his country more help. He's going to address the British House of Commons via live video conference tomorrow. This weekend, he spoke with more than 200 members of the U.S. House and Senate.

When asked what he needs most, Zelenskyy reportedly told the lawmakers he needs jet fighters. The catch, though, is that Ukrainian pilots don't know how to fly American jets. As a former Soviet republic, they fly Russian MiG fighter jets.

And so, one idea being floated, is that Poland would give Ukraine some of its old soviet made planes. And the United States would then give Poland, which is a NATO ally, American jets to replace them. Like F-16's.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ANTONY BLINKEN, SECRETARY OF STATE: We're looking actively now at the question of jets that Poland may provide to Ukraine. And looking at how we might be able to back fill should Poland decide to supply those planes.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: I want to talk to you more about those just in just a second, but I want to show you what happens here. In this refugee welcome center, because we are seeing right now, is another bus of Ukrainian refugees that is just pulling up.

I will say. I am surprised to see this bus here, because it is 3:00 in the morning where we are. But this typically happens about 20 or 30 minutes through the course of the day. You see now, all the volunteers getting off. You see people starting to gather around. They're been staying inside the school building for a while. These are the volunteers. It will momentarily be out here to meet the people coming off the bus.

Now, all the volunteers are from a good church group, a Baptist church group. Some of them are from the U.N. Commission for Refugees. There are Red Cross people here. And these are the refugees coming off the board right now, coming off the bus.

Some of them have places to go. There are men on this bus which is not usual. Normally, they are women and very young children because most of the men between the ages of 18 and 60 are supposed to stay on

Ukraine. So, there's something about this bus that is unusual because it is typically overwhelmed with women and children. These are men who are coming off, they're going to be greeted, and they're going to be provided with services, transportation, accommodation, and things like that. You can see the volunteers who are starting to come out of the building and they're going to be meeting those men shortly. We'll dig into it and find out where these gentlemen are, whether any of them are available to talk to us in a few moments.

I want to go back to this idea of Poland giving Ukraine its MiG, Russian MiG jets, and America giving Poland replacement of F16's, or similar types of jets. This idea sounds more complicated than it sounds, by the way. The U.S. and its allies are trying to give Ukraine as much help as a kind without getting into a war with Russia, without a becoming a co-combatant in a conflict.

And no one can really say for certain where that actual line is. As one senior American national security official warned, "The New York Times" this weekend, the American legal definitions of what constitutes entering the war are not the same as Vladimir Putin's definitions. For instance, the Kremlin has warned NATO countries against letting them selves be used as a basis for Ukraine's remaining air force, saying that if Ukrainian planes attack Russian forces from a NATO country, Russia is going to consider that country part of the conflict.

So, Poland is understandably nervous about this plane swap idea. Ukrainian police wouldn't be attacking Russians from Poland. Poland will be giving the plains to the Ukrainian air force. So, would Russia than consider Poland a co-combatant?

Here in Hungary, who's president has been vocally pro-Putin, right until Putin invaded Ukraine, Hungary has split the difference. They're allowing NATO troops to be stationed in this country, not anywhere near me, west of the Danube River, near Budapest. But they will not allow weapons to be shipped through Ukraine through their territory. Weapons destined for Ukraine can, and have entered Hungary. But they cannot cross into Ukraine, 1,000 feet from where I am. From this country, you have to go into a third country first.

My team shot this footage today in a town just a few miles from here. Hungarian military beefing up its presence near the border, clearly preparing for something.

[21:10:06]

We actually tried to bring you the show tonight from their barracks. They initially agreed, and then they respectfully declined, offering to help find other locations from which to do to show.

So we return to place we know, this tiny village center where it's lights out. Refugees are arriving by the busload about every hour.

Okay, I want to go back to these jets again, whether the U.S. until finding a way to get fighter jets to Ukraine. The scale of the other weaponry that they have managed to give to the Ukrainian military in recent days is staggering. "The New York Times", CNN reported that the U.S. and NATO have delivered 17,000 javelin anti tank weapons, 2,000 stinger anti-aircraft missiles in less than a week, unloading them from giant cargo planes in Poland and Romania, where they are transported across the border by land.

Ukrainian leaders have reportedly told the United States that the weaponry is making a difference. A miles long Russian convoy on his way toward Kyiv has been stalled, in part, because of a successful Ukrainian attacks with those anti-tank missiles. But no one seems to think that the current weapon supply will be enough on its own for Ukraine to defeat the Russian forces.

Joining me now from Lviv in the western part of Ukraine is NBC News correspondent and my good friend Cal Perry.

Cal, thank you for being there, my friend. What is the update from your side?

CAL PERRY, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Well, I think people here are starting to realize that the situation in the east is becoming desperate. You're meeting refugees here who lost family members behind, and specifically in those Black Sea towns. The city of mayor pol, we understand from the energy ministry, it has been completely cut off. It has been disconnected from the national grid. So there's no power, no water, no heat for four straight days.

But the humanitarian corridors were a must. We now hear from the United Kingdom's ministry of defense that Russia was intentionally targeting some of these humanitarian corridors. That's the language from the United Kingdom ministry of defense. And as you said, most of those orders were carried to Russia.

So, you have this distrust, this continued distrust by the Ukrainian government when it comes to any peace talks. The situation in the north is equally as desperate. In the Sumy region, at least, a dozen towns now are

under this consistent barrage. They've been surrounded, there's no artillery firing on those towns. And again, it seems like civilians are trapped.

A bit of Richard Engel's reporting is very key when you start talking about people not feeling safe leaving the city's. Not feeling safe fleeing the cities because they are targeted as they leave. So they're moving inward, they're going into the cities, into the center of Kyiv.

Now, that is something that we need to keep an eye on, because it's more and more civilians becoming trapped in the cities. Very briefly when I am, this is a city in the view of those supposed to be the fallback position, it was supposed to be the place that people feel safe, well, they started wrapping the statues here, Ali. They're putting these big wrap around statues, starting to ready to take them underground, maybe move them to Poland.

It's just one more indication of it doesn't seem to be any reach, or any limit to what people fear, here, about the Russian army could do, Ali.

VELSHI: Cal, stay safe where you are in Lviv in Western Ukraine. NBC news correspondent Cal Perry in Lviv.

Let's turn now to retired four- star Air Force General, Philip Breedlove. Philip Breedlove served as NATO supreme allied commander from 2013 to 2016. He's now a distinguished chair of the Frontier Europe Initiative at the Middle East Institute.

General, thank you for being with us. I really appreciate it.

I want to understand the Ukrainian government continues to push for some sort of no-fly zone. They feel that with the Russian air superiority over Ukraine, they can't hold out for very long. I remember for limits on the Ukraine will fall without a no-fly zone.

But short of that, because NATO keep saying no to that, they're talking about more fighter jets. They've got trained pilots who can fly these MiG planes. Poland has got these MiG planes, and this idea of handing them over to Ukraine, having Poland's planes replaced by America, give me your evaluation of this idea.

GENERAL (RET.), PHILIP BREELOVE, FORMER NATO SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER EUROPE:  
Well, Ali, first of all, thanks for being there. This is a story that needs to be told. As far as the aircraft, I think this is a great idea, and there are more countries than Poland that are willing to do this. In fact, I'm aware of at least three that have mentioned that they may do this.

And these are aircraft that can be quickly assimilated into the Ukrainian air force, because it's very similar to what the Ukrainians are flying. And so, this would be a fairly rapid way to reinforce their capability, to defend their own skies.

VELSHI: How would you evaluate trying to make sense of what is legal, and was not? America and NATO want to do the things that do not get them into a shooting war with Russia. Vladimir Putin has said, quite clearly, cyberattacks aren't active war. Using the Polish base from which to take planes off into Ukraine would be an active war.

The idea of pushing things across a border from Slovakia or Poland into Russia is an act of war. So, as far as Vladimir Putin is concerned, all of this is an act of war from NATO. How does the West think about this? Would you do when you think the other guys going to call it an active war?

BREEDLOVE: Well, he certainly has, and mostly recently, when you skip this, he said that all of our economic sanctions are an active war. So, one could ask, why are we no worry, it's because he has considered everything that we have done so far an act of war. And, frankly, we are deterred. He has deterred us from taking actions that one might take in order to help Ukraine.

And so, now we have to plot away ahead. One of the things that worry people think about these things is, what is the risk involved? And it seems that we're trying to find the no risk solution. Well, I would say that there is a risk involved right now.

In fact, if Mr. Putin continues to have the troubles that he's having in advancing his army, I think we're going to anchor risk. And so, I think we need to sit back and make rational thought and rational decisions and understand just what the risks are.

VELSHI: Somebody told me yesterday, Alexander Vindman told me yesterday, it's been echoed through the Ukrainian government, and that is that things didn't seem likely two weeks ago are a reality today. And things that do not seem likely two weeks from now will be a reality than. This thing is moving very quickly.

And the rate at which the Russians continue to up the ante, and the things they're doing including to be the shelling of civilians in residential properties, the killing of civilians, this starts to fall to the category of war crimes. Does that motivate NATO's thinking?

BREEDLOVE: Well, I think -- I think we should use this to start conversations where we consider things. Just like you said, SWIFT was off the table, off the table, until it was back on the table.

And I would say, right now, any form of a no fly zone, and you know now we're trying to talk about is a humanitarian no-fly zone. A much less belligerent operation that might be acceptable, and lower risks. But I think that these are off the table. Clearly, our leadership of said they have been.

And so, well level of atrocities, what level of criminal behavior, what level of humanitarian disaster is it going to take? And then, maybe the sort of things are back on the table.

VELSHI: General, thanks for your analysis. We appreciate it.

Retired General Philip Breedlove is a former four-star general and a supreme allied commander of NATO.

Still ahead tonight, state media is doing its best in Russia to shield of population from the reality of the war in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin is going to have a tougher time explaining the devastating economic fallout that is now hitting ordinary Russians citizens, as the Russian president miscalculated when it comes to his people's appetite for war. That's next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:23:01]

VELSHI: This was "The Associated Press" headline on November the 13th, 1959. Dateline, Berlin. East Germans jail buyer of blue jeans. The East German communists have jailed a teenager for two months because he bought blue jeans in West Berlin. The judge told the 18 year old at the sentence would, quote, serve as a warning to certain young people who ardently want blue jeans or rock and roll, end quote.

Throughout the Cold War, blue jeans, and in particular, Levi's blue jeans were a coveted, and at times, forbidden item in the Soviet Union. But Soviet teens demanded Levi's. So much, so that Levi's jeans started getting smuggled into the Soviet Union, like narcotics. They were sold for outrageous prices.

Now, to stop the smuggling, the East German government first started to manufacture their own knock offs. That didn't work. Then the government bulk purchased 800,000 pairs of Levi's jeans, and had them literally airlifted from the United States so that they can side distributing them right away.

Well, today, once again, in 2022, Levi's jeans have halted their sales and Russia, joining a growing chorus of companies. Disney, Warner Brothers, Sony, Universal, Paramount, all stopping film releases in Russia. Microsoft, Apple, Samsung, HP, and Intel all stopping new sales. Netflix has pulled out. TikTok won't allow new posts by Russian users. Flying out of Russia is nearly impossible now, as is buying anything with major credit cards like Visa, MasterCard, or American Express. All of which, in addition to punishing Western sanctions takes a toll.

Try taking a Disney movie away from a kid, or an iPhone away from a teenager. In addition to a massive ground stop on Western goods and services, the Russian economy is showing a real strain. Russian interest rates are now 20 percent. The ruble is worth less than a penny, massive inflation.

Russian state media is doing its best to put a positive spin on this invasion of Ukraine.

[21:25:03]

Except you can't call it an invasion in Russia. It's called a special military operation.

But even Russian citizens who are fully bought into the state-sponsored narrative are going to have trouble squaring up what that means, and why they can't use their MasterCard anymore? And why they're running out of food at shops, and why their money is worth nothing if this is just a special military operation in Ukraine.

A large section of the Russian but relation is also old enough to remember the Cold War, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and won both of those things did to their economy, and how it all led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. You've already seen more than 13,000 anti-war protesters arrested across Russia. That unrest seems to be building, despite the massive increased risk associated with protesting because of a new law that has been put into place.

Is the broader Russia population, including many that support Putin, are they actually going to accept a costly war of choice against a neighbor, and the resulting economic deprivation? Or is it possible that at some point, Vladimir Putin and the Russian government could lose control of the Russian people?

Joining us now, Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, a leading global political, risk research and consulting firm.

Ian, thank you for being here. You have studied this more than most.

Let's just talk about this. Let's say you can't get the real information. You're in Russia, for whatever reason, everything you read follows official line that this is a strategic operation in Ukraine. It's not a war, it's not an innovation.

But suddenly your credit card still work and you can buy stuff, and you can do stuff, and you can see stuff, and things aren't available on the shelves, and your interest rate is 20 percent, and your money is not worth anything.

At some point, people are going to say, this official storyline doesn't jive with my life.

IAN BREMMER, PRESIDENT & FOUNDER, EURASIA GROUP: Some people are, Ali. But, most people are not. Some people are going to be primarily young, educated, literate, and online. At least previously online since everything is shut down in Russia in major cities.

But the majority of the population is overwhelmingly fed information through state media. And, that's television, it's newspapers, it's not digital. And the level of support from Putin has a story we've been exceptionally strong among this group. And it's going to continue to be.

If you think the United States is incredibly divided, and the people only follow news and cable on social media, that they agree with, that is literally exponentially less than what you're experiencing in a Russia right now. And we have to be aware of that, even as the Russian economy starts to crater, which it will do in spectacular fashion in the coming days.

VELSHI: But, the Russian economy cratering, on some of that was in part due to how much money that the USSR of spending in Afghanistan. And the body bags, and people coming back dead.

But a lot of it was the economy. It was how bad things were for the Russian people, which prompted them to throw off their systems, their political systems back then.

Why wouldn't the same thing happened no, when people are frustrated what 30 years of political gain seemed to be evaporating in front of their eyes?

BREMMER: Because, a lot of the reasons that Russians believe, again, Putin supporting Russians, which is not the whole population, but a solid 60 to 70 percent. The reason why they believe the country has fallen into disarray, they don't blame Putin. They blame things like shock therapy, they blame NATO, they play in the West.

So, when they hear from the Kremlin that the reason that the Russian economy as cratering as because of a war, then the Ukrainians have started, or special motor operations that are happening because the Russians were about to launch a war, or perhaps they were committing genocide against Russians in the occupied territories -- absolutely verifiably false, but completely with the Russian Kremlin narrative has been, now, for months. They're going to buy it.

I mean, come on, we have a strong majority in the United States, but people who voted for Trump to believe the election was fake, and then, fact a strong minority believes that they should be returned to power, immediately through violence that's necessary. That's the United States. That's a wealthy, comparatively educated country.

In Russia, Ali, this is vastly more dysfunctional. And you just have to appreciate that Putin does have the capacity to drive that narrative even in the case of what's going to be a much worse economic collapse than when anyone in the United States has been experiencing for really a century.

[21:30:02]

VELSHI: What's the blow back on the Russian world? We've already seen oil prices topping 125 bucks a barrel. A whole bunch of people tweeting me today that they filled up for more than \$4 a gallon. We are seeing -- we are approaching some of the highest prices for oil and gasoline that we've seen in a while. That's going to happen all over the world.

What else happens if this continues?

BREMMER: It's probably about a 1 percent contraction in global GDP that we will experience in the United States and Europe. It's a lot more persistent inflation. Its supply chains being more severed and more challenging, so a lot longer time for you to get whatever it is you're trying to order.

But that's really not the suffering. The suffering are the poorest. It's a combination, and we've seen about 60 million people die of starvation in the last 12 months around the world, which is higher in the pandemic than it was before the pandemic. That's going to be a hell of a lot worse.

Ali, we've just had the largest grain producer in the world invade the fifth largest grain producer in the world. This is going to cause enormous challenges. The poorest people in the world already don't get enough to eat. In sub-Saharan Africa, it's Yemen, it's Afghanistan.

I'm also -- emerging markets that are seriously indebted and don't have access to credit are going to be much more trouble here. The potential for financial crisis in Turkey, for example. A lot of other medium income emerging markets that have lived through two years of pandemic that have nowhere near the capacity to make their middle classes whole the way the Americans and the Europeans have through the pandemic, they're going to get smashed right now.

So it's really global inequality. The last 40 years, globalization has driven the emergence of a global middle class. The pandemic and now even worse, this Russian Ukraine crisis is going to force all of those people around the world to take --

VELSHI: Ian, thanks as always for your analysis. You bring us a lot of clarity to a conversation that is confusing and frightening.

Ian Bremmer is the president of the Eurasia Group. We appreciate your time tonight.

Coming up next, the most culturally significant cities and all of Ukraine, and now, there are fears that it may be one of the Russian forces' next targets. We'll go live to Odesa after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:36:58]

VELSHI: With Russian progress largely stalled in the north of Ukraine, today Russian troops continue their assault on the city of Mykolaiv on the Black Sea. This building you are looking at was gutted by shelling this morning as Russian forces advance on the city. About 80 miles to the west in the city of Odesa, there were scenes of a heart wrenching goodbyes as some parents evacuate their children's to use that the children along to Romania.

The city continues for an imminent attack -- the main promenade just 12 days ago was bustling with pedestrians. Mostly empty now, littered with these metal hedgehogs with anti tank devices. They're obstacles.

Odesa's famous opera and ballet theater is also fortified, with sandbag barricade surrounding its famous edifice. The city's oldest church, the Transfiguration Cathedral has become a literal sanctuary for families as air raid sirens blare at night.

Odesa, located in southwestern Ukraine, is the third largest city in the country, we could see that the bottom left of your screen, about 1 million people. It's also a seaport, which makes for an economically strategic target for Russian forces.

Russian warships have been spotted from the shore for several days yesterday. President Zelenskyy released a message warning that Russian forces were planning a military assault on Odesa. Doing so, he said, would amount to a war crime.

But the resolve of the Ukrainian people remains. Today, the Ukrainian journalist Natalia Gumenyuk summed it up in an op-ed titled, Ukrainians are fighting a people's war -- and everyone is involved from top to bottom. Until recently, she wrote, defending democracy meant voting, organizing, fighting corruption, building up civic institutions. Now, it means something else. Ukrainians are fighting to save the people in the most literal sense, end quote.

Joining us now is Nataliya Gumenyuk, a journalist in Odesa.

Nataliya, thank you for taking the time to be with us.

Odesa is a historic city. It's a beautiful city. It's a fabled city. They are trying to close things up and protect them as much as they can, but when those bombs -- bombs start landing, missiles hitting, if they do, Odesa

maybe destroyed. It is something to watch people leave that historic city that they have lived in for generations.

Tell me with the situation is there.

NATALIYA GUMENYUK, UKRAINIAN JOURNALIST: So high. Yeah, I'm sorry. Yes, the situation is, of course, difficult. People are leaving. I was myself coming from the border with neighboring countries, Moldova, where there are long, long lines, especially with emails with kids coming, because indeed, those venues are here as well.

So far, it was largely calm. There are sirens. However, the attacks and strikes were closer to the outskirts of the towns to the military bases, for instance.

And indeed, as you said, it's a cultural capital.

[21:40:03]

It's a place and it's very multicultural city, which is also heartbreaking to observe. There would be Jewish restaurants cooking food for the Ukrainian army. There would be the Greek businessman organizing the -- you know, building these blocks and helping to organize the defense.

At the same time, there would be Russian art museums trying to preserve the canvases, the paintings of the Russian army saying that it's insane that we are defending Russian art from the Russians. That's probably how the people would describe it. But, yes, so far it's -- let's say the port isn't fully open. The navy line, the coastline, it could be, of course, attacked. So there are concerns.

But the other concerns are that -- there is some hope, whether it would be Russia destroying these cultural parts of the city. However, the example of other towns is that it could happen -- just myself, which have also written. I've been in close touch with people indifferent other towns. Some people are living in the city of Kharkiv. It's an important cultural place on the Russian border.

If in the very beginning, the attempt was to attack and overtake it. Later, when it didn't happen, the strategy changed to -- let's say terrorizing people with attacks on civilians areas, as well, museums, residents, places in the center of the town, or just people standing in line to buy some groceries.

So, that's also -- in this moment, we cannot say it won't happen to Odesa as well. If it won't be defended, we understand the Ukrainian army would defend it, but there is a limit to what is possible.

VELSHI: Yeah, and what you say is interesting, but here in Hungary, I've met people who have come from Kharkiv. I've met people from Dnipro. I've met people from Donbas, from Kyiv.

All of them said the same thing, they knew it was going to happen. It was likely to happen. They didn't leave because they kind of hoped it wouldn't happen, and now they see the images and they hear the stories and things that you described, which are war crimes, when you attack people -- when you attack residences and you attack hospitals, and you attack people who are trying to escape in the streets.

What is it that is causing people to either stay or make the decision to leave? Is it the idea that when enough bombs fall and missiles fly, they realize this is real and they have to go?

GUMENYUK: Absolutely. So, first of all, there are people who are leaving. They are trying to move the elderly, kids, the second group of people who are living who are capable, who normally have cars, who have some relatives abroad.

But then, when they really see that it's happening close to them, then everybody tries to flee. That was the case in Kharkiv. So, it's becoming a real danger for your parents. You really make the efforts to do that.

But the active people are prepared to stay. Everybody says it is our town, it is about being invaded. We have from here, we have to defend it, but, of course, a huge amount of people are taking to defend. But that should be a limited amount of course. Everybody could fight.

VELSHI: Nataliya, we wish you the best, and those of you in Odesa.

Nataliya Gumenyuk is a journalist in Odesa. We appreciate your time tonight. Please stay safe.

Well, just ahead, the United Nations says more than 1.7 million Ukrainians have now been forced to flee their country as Russian forces advance. Where they are headed now and how they are being received. A report on the burgeoning refugee crisis is next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)



[21:48:15]

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ALEX CRAWFORD, SKY NEWS: They were running for their lives. Frantically trying to keep their family together, desperately handing over their toddlers the soldiers and strangers. Scrambling to get away from the firing and shelling, even as they fled. Many have spent under fire, trapped in their homes until they realized it was run or die, with the Russians getting closer.

The stream of people fleeing are traumatized, but many are also angry and full of despair.

Putin is a war criminal, she says, the antichrist. You've been waiting for him, now, you've got him.

Families have been torn apart in the chaos. They run into urban from the villain -- before escaping urban to, and they lift elderly relatives behind.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Our houses are in fire. That's all they can say.

CRAWFORD: How much destruction is there that you can see in the town center?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I think, all those destroyed. There is nothing to help -- sorry, there's nothing to build or defend. There is nothing.

CRAWFORD: I came here, I left my parents to die, she tells us. I told my husband, you have to go back and bring them here, because I can't just leave them to die.

But in amongst all of the suffering and trauma, there are small glimpses of hope. Her 81 year old mother and father are found.

And the family is reunited. How could I live without you? She says.

There is incredible heartache and fear, but also an astonishing defiance with all these people.

Alex Crawford, Sky News in Irpin.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

[21:50:06]

VELSHI: That was Alex Crawford reporting from Irpin, a small town northwest of Kyiv where Ukrainian families have been fleeing amid heavy Russian shelling. Those families, they are lucky, will join the more than 1.7 million refugees, mostly women and children, who have fled Ukraine since Russia began its invasion 12 days ago.

All of this migration and less than two weeks makes this the fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

And with Russia potentially targeting more population centers across the country, millions more Ukrainian refugees will likely flee and need someplace to stay. Refugees like this 11 year Ukrainian boy named, Hassan, who arrived at the Slovakian border alone this weekend. He traveled about 600 miles by himself, with only a backpack, a plastic bag, his passport, and more importantly, a phone number written on the back of this hunt.

The Slovakian ministry of the interior says the volunteers were able to use that phone number to reach the boy's relatives who arrive to pick him up. Today, Hassan met with the interior minister of Slovakia said that the young boy has already sought temporary protection in the country. Slovakian officials called him a hero for making that long journey. And there are millions more like him trying to make their track to safety, too.

Meanwhile, here near Hungary's border with Ukraine, we're also seeing an influx of refugees. I got a chance to speak with some of them, and with their humanitarians who are coming to their aid.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

VELSHI (voice-over): Here, smoke rises from chimneys that were new a century ago. This tiny village of Tiszabecs, Hungary, sits just across the river from a now, war torn Ukraine. But as refugees pour out of these buses, it might as well be a war apart.

SVETLANA PAULO, UKRAINIAN REFUGEE: I feel that I don't have a home, because somebody thinks that they can take our country. It's not normal. We need to do something.

I really wanted to stay in Ukraine. I love Ukraine. It's my home. But, I can't.

VELSHI: A home both on the safe, and for now, unreachable. Friends Svetlana Paulo and Oilena Hradic met in Kyiv. Oilena hails from the Donbas region. No stranger to fighting, but fighting that hasn't touched her home until two weeks ago.

OILENA HRADIC, UKRAINIAN REFUGEE: My part of Donbas, it's Ukraine. But now, a Russian military comes to my home, and now, I don't know what happened -- what will happen with my mom, with my grandma, with my two grandmas, tomorrow, today, right now. I don't know, because --

VELSHI: You can't call them?

HRADIC: Yeah. We don't have Internet, lights --

VELSHI: She says that story with everybody. The faces are mostly women and children. The men have to stay and take up arms in Ukraine.

A quarter of this quiet village not bustles with activity, to show refugees that they are welcome here.

Hungary hasn't been so friendly recently to outsiders, but not this time.

A pop-up barbecue stand here, a wave of friendly hello. And some of these helpers arrived only to realize they needed to stay.

GABOR PROKAJ, AIDING UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN HUNGARY: They showed me pictures about their city, and about the street. They don't have a house anymore. It has been bombed.

VELSHI: Gabor Prokaj came to drop off supplies when we know they're distant village. He stayed for nine days.

PROKAJ: You can't prepare yourself for this. You can't. You have to solve everything, and every people's lives. But, you have to do it one day, four or five tasks, which are done. And if it's okay, then your soul may be okay.

VELSHI: Most of the people of whom we spoke plan to go someplace else in Europe, none plan to stay. There is only one place they want to be.

Do you want to go home?

PAULO: Yeah, of course. I want to see my family. It's my family.

DANA SAFARIAN, UKRAINIAN REFUGEE: We are going now to Budapest, and then, we will make our cat passport, and then we will get to the airport, maybe tomorrow, or in two days, three days.

VELSHI: Do you believe that you can go home?

SAFARIAN: Of course. I believe it.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

[21:55:01]

VELSHI: Of course, I believe the. The young Ukrainian refugee keeping hope alive as she will one day be able to return to her home.

We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

VELSHI: An update tonight on a Ukrainian man whose story we've been following. This man, a 55-year-old Ukrainian man named Taras has for the last ten years served as a mechanic on a luxury super yacht. The yacht is owned by a Russian arms dealer -- the yacht is moored currently in the Spanish island of Majorca in the Mediterranean.

A little over a week ago, Taras was upset to see Russia was attacking his homeland, so he sabotaged the yacht. He tried to sink it. He only ended up doing damage to the engine when he was arrested, admitted to the crime, released from jail from a local judge and immediately fled Majorca, making his way to Ukraine to sign up for the military.

We last checked in on Taras, he had arrived in Kyiv but we're still waiting to be allowed to join the fight. Today, he sent a picture of himself with his military recruiter. Taras told our producers this is the last time you will see me in civilian clothes.

Now he says he's been issued a uniform and a weapon. And he's undergoing training. And Taras says he's prepared to die for Ukraine.

That does it for us tonight. We're going to see you again tomorrow.

Now, it's time for "THE LAST WORD WITH LAWRENCE O'DONNELL."

Lawrence, good evening to you.

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