

News; Domestic

THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW for March 24, 2022, MSNBC

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7,460 words

24 March 2022

MSNBC: The Rachel Maddow Show

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English

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[21:00:29]

CHRIS HAYES, MSNBC HOST: That is "ALL IN" on this Thursday night.

THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW with Ali Velshi starts now.

Good evening, Ali.

ALI VELSHI, MSNBC HOST: Good evening, Chris. Thank you and we will see you next.

And thank you at for joining us this hour, and coming again to you tonight from Warsaw, Poland, where President Biden will be arriving tomorrow after attending today's NATO summit in Brussels.

Now, the very first NATO summit was in 1957. NATO had been formed eight years earlier but there had never been a NATO summit, a meeting of all the leaders of the NATO countries. So, that was going to be a major world event. It was a dozen years after World War II, amid the increasing competition between the West and the Soviet Union.

NATO countries were gathered in Paris to reaffirm their unity. The undisputed leader of the alliance was President Dwight Eisenhower, not only because he was the American president, after being the commander of allied forces in Europe during World War II, but before he was elected president, Eisenhower became the first supreme allied commander of NATO.

When President Eisenhower almost didn't make it to the summit, because just a few weeks before the summit was due to start, this happened.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REPORTER: Illness stalks the chief executive as he stands in the chill autumn air at Blair House. Shortly after, a chill sends him to bed, a forerunner of more serious news. The following day, America hears the alarming tidings from White House physician, Howard Snyder, the nation learns that the president has suffered a mild stroke, resulting in a speech impairment. Secretary Dulles and other government leaders, including Defense Secretary McElroy, converged on the White House, where acting press secretary Ann Whitman issues bulletins.

Vice President Nixon sums up the situation.

RICHARD NIXON, THEN-VICE PRESIDENT: We expect that the president, after a period of recuperation, will be able to return to his desk in the White House. And that he will, as the factors indicated, fully recover.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: President Eisenhower had already had a heart attack in office two years earlier. Now, this mini-stroke. There were concerns that he might not be up to the regular duties of office, let alone a grueling transatlantic trip to meet with 14 other world leaders.

"The New York Times" published this cartoon depicting Eisenhower as Atlas, carrying both the problems of his office, and, questionable health on his back, while trudging uphill marked, course of world events.

"The Times" worried that going to the NATO summit would be, quote, a two gallant gesture that may bring on another siege of illness. But Ike did go to Paris, arriving at the NATO summit all smiles, just three weeks after his health scare.

And the other NATO leaders were so demonstrably relieved that he made, and that Eisenhower started his opening remarks at the summit thanking them all for their well wishes.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DWIGHT EISENHOWER, THEN-PRESIDENT: Mr. President, my NATO friends, before I begin, I should like to express my appreciation of the over-generous sentiments that has been expressed by President (INAUDIBLE) and by the prime minister of France, respecting my health. And particularly, I appreciate your wishes for my good health.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: And so the very first NATO summit ever began, the first of nearly 30 NATO summits that have taken place in the decades since. And NATO's membership at that time has doubled.

In 1957, there were 15 NATO countries. Now, there are 30. So, at today's NATO summit in Brussels, they needed a much bigger table for their meeting than they did in 1957. But the central mission of today's summit is basically the same as that very first one 65 years ago, reaffirming NATO's unity and solidarity, this time, in the face of the biggest crisis NATO has faced in decades.

Today, the U.S. and its European partners continue to increase the pressure on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, announcing new sanctions on Russian political leaders and defense companies. But Biden told reporters today that it's not any particular new sanctions that's going to stop Vladimir Putin. He said it's the U.S., and its allies, maintaining the pressure for as long as it takes.

[21:05:03]

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: I'll say the most important thing, it's for us to stay unified, and the world continue to focus on what a brute this guy is and of all the innocent lives being lost and ruined, and what's going on. That's the important thing.

But look, if you are Putin, and you think that Europe is going to crack in the months or six weeks, for two months, why not -- they can take anything for another month, but we have to demonstrate, the reason I asked for the meeting, we have to stay fully totally, thoroughly united.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: Tomorrow, Biden will come here to Poland on NATO's eastern edge on the front line of the Ukraine crisis. Over 2 million Ukrainian refugees have fled here, to pull in, since Russia's invasion began, before coming to Warsaw, President Biden will meet the Polish president in a town just 15 miles away from the Ukrainian border while he will receive a briefing on the humanitarian response. Biden hinted in his remarks today that he may personally meet with some Ukrainian refugees.

The U.S. also announced today that it will accept 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, though that obviously pales in comparison to the numbers that Poland and its neighbors are taking in. And what those refugees are fleeing remains truly hellish. A month into this invasion, this new footage from the eastern city of Mariupol's shows seemingly endless lines of representatives lined up for humanitarian aid with the bombed-out cityscape behind them.

Ukrainian officials say 100,000 people remain in Mariupol, cut off. No food, no water.

As NBC News chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel reports tonight, the brutality on display in places like Mariupol maybe partly a result of increasing Russian desperation.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

RICHARD ENGEL, NBC NEWS CHIEF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Russia has by now all but flattened Mariupol. New images released by officials in Mariupol show the once thriving port city has been devastated by Russian bombs. U.S. military officials say Russia is now concentrating its assault on the east and Ukraine, around Mariupol, close to the Russian border. Russia has begun to resupply its troops there.

Russian television showing the arrival of a landing ship in a port on the Sea of Azov, with fighting vehicles and loaded and ready for battle.

Today, Russia's plans took a turn. The ship was in flames. Ukrainian forces claim they destroyed it this morning, and damage to other Russian vessels.

Russia's new focus on the east maybe out of duress. Ukrainian forces are making advances around Kyiv, pushing back Russian troops from the capital.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: We will have more in just a few minutes on those reports of Ukrainian forces who are gaining ground, particularly around Kyiv. But whatever the reason, there is no doubt that Vladimir Putin's tactics and Ukraine are getting more brutal, and more deadly.

Addressing today's NATO summit remotely, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy claim that Russia has dropped phosphorus bombs on civilians, killing children. White phosphorus is highly toxic, and causes severe burns if it comes in contact with human flesh. There was no way to verify Zelenskyy's claim, but hanging over today's NATO summit was the fear of what Putin might do next. Particularly, if he feels like he's losing this war.

President Biden and European leaders warned Russia sharply against using chemical weapons, though they did not specify what their response would be if it does.

Joining us live now from Lviv is NBC News correspondent Cal Perry.

Good evening, Cal.

President Zelenskyy's been asking Western countries for military aid, he's been asking for a fighter jets, he's been asking for a no-fly zone. He's renewed those calls today in an address to NATO.

What kind of response is he hoping to get from them?

CAL PERRY, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: So, in the way he framed this was he approached from the Russian point of view. He said to the NATO countries, Russia is attacking us, especially in the east, with unlimited firepower. So when I ask of you, he said, is unlimited response, unlimited military assistance. And that phrase, unlimited to military assistance, is code for what you said, no-fly zone and these jets.

The jets are a logistical nightmare to begin. With the jets in Poland, we've heard recently the Polish government saying that they will transfer them to the United States, in Ramstein, in Germany, and then those jets will make their way here.

The bottom line is NATO country wants to be seen directly supporting the war effort, directly transferring things like jets. So, they're looking for a middle man, a way to do that. The problem is no country really wants to step. The U.S. doesn't want to transfer these jets. The logistical problem is the pilot.

[21:10:03]

The same goes for the no fly zone. NATO doesn't want to put a no-fly zone in here because according to the secretary general of NATO, he believes it will cost more lives than it will save if this conflict spreads across Europe. That's sort of the sticking point right now, Ali.

VELSHI: So, let's talk about people not wanting to do things directly, or at least some of the governments not wanting when you think about to do things directly that would seem like they're getting involved in a war with Ukraine. You were with some folks today in the Lviv, who you and I talked to on this show, a group of volunteers called the Blue and Yellow. They transfer critical supplies from supportive neighboring country to Ukraine. They've been doing what they have been doing for since 2014, since the Syrian refugee crisis.

But did you hear?

PERRY: Yeah. And this is a group that was put together by a man named Jonas and his friends. They're sort of a ragtag group of friends. They have been doing this, as you, said since the invasion of Crimea, in 2014. It is only since this recent invasion, a month ago, where they have seen an influx of money, 16 million euros that they got in just a month.

And there you see it on the left side of the screen, this was this morning that even the parking lot, just right behind me outside of a church in broad daylight. Hundreds of flat jackets, scopes for sniper rifles, drones that they say they're going to, quote, used to draw presence on the Russians. That's code for explosives. They're using these drones to run them into these armored columns, as well as anti-drone jamming equipment, especially here in the eastern part of the country.

I was unaware that the Russians are apparently using drones in the western part of the country, and some of those anti-jamming equipment what is needed. There's also an American -- there he is. There is an American among the group who came over because he saw that there was some action from NBC, and he wanted to be a part of. And I asked him how did he get, there how did that process work. Here's a little bit of that exchange.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PERRY: How did you get linked up with this group?

RAIVI KISIELAS, BLUE AND YELLOW VOLUNTEER: I just flew from Lithuania, the first, thing I just went through the Ukrainian embassy. (INAUDIBLE)

PERRY: Where, the embassy where?

KISIELAS: Lithuania. My parents live there, so -- I just asked, which organization they trust most because I brought some money here. I said -- they said Blue and Yellow.

So the first, day first day I was working in the warehouse, next day -- here I am. There you are. Three days later, I'm here. That's my second trip here now. Yeah.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PERRY: So for countries like Lithuania who, very much live in fear of some kind of Russian response to their support, they are using these middlemen, these middle groups, these NGOs, to get this here in the country. They took the stuff right out of Lithuania, Ali. They put it in vans, they drove it across Poland, they got here this morning. That stuff is all headed to the east where we see these horrendous, horrendous videos, Ali.

VELSHI: I had a chance to meet Jonas, the founder of this, over the weekend. Cal, thanks for clarifying. I mentioned that they started because of the Syrian refugee crisis. You're, right it's because of the Russian invasion of Crimea. I appreciate that, Cal.

It is late for you in Lviv. Stay safe, my friend. As always, Cal Perry, thank you for joining us.

Well, joining us now is Michael McFaul. He served as the U.S. ambassador for Russia under President Obama. Ambassador McFaul. Good to see you. Thank you for joining us tonight.

It is unbelievable, because we speak so regularly about this, Russia is one month into this war. At this point, Ukraine has reclaimed some important ground that Russia had taken. You had said that you expected a robust response from Ukrainian military. But it is impressive with the military, along with the civil defense, the territorial defense, has been able to do in a month despite what we are seeing from Russia.

MICHAEL MCFAUL, MSNBC INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS ANALYST: Yes, Ali. I did. But never did I expect that they would be this far along a month into the war. It is incredible. It's heroic what they've done. They are being -- they are using unconventional tactics to do what they can, with the limited weapons that they have. And I think it's fantastic what they have done to fight Putin's army to the stands that they have been lots of the country.

And at the same time, I think our viewers need to understand, this war is only one month into it. Wars can go on for years. The Russians still have 90 percent of their forces available. But they are doing, barbarically against Mariupol is atrocious to watch, but that city is about to fall, as it looks like to me. And that's what the Ukrainians are worried about as well.

So I think we really need to listen to President Zelenskyy today, when he said, to the NATO allies, thank you for what you've done in the past, and now you have to do more to help us fight this Putin's army that has invaded our country. This war is far from being over.

VELSHI: So there are few elements to what the world can do to help Ukraine. But in that address you just referred to, to NATO, Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked the allies for planes. He said, you can give us 1 percent of all your planes, 1 percent of all your tanks, 1 percent.

And then he continued to say, quote, you have thousands of fighter jets, but we have not been given one yet. You've advocated -- you yourself, ambassador, have advocated for giving Ukrainians more weaponry. So what considerations are they taking into consideration with they're making that decision at NATO?

MCFAUL: So, they're worried about escalation, particularly about the plains, there was an intelligence assessment by the U.S. that it would be escalatory to transfer the make 29, from where you are now. And, Ali, don't forget, there are 27 or 28 MiG-29 in Poland. According to Ukrainian government, there's 70 in the NATO alliance through different countries.

So they desperately want those planes. And they are worried about the fall of Kyiv. They're worried that while we are watching with Mariupol today will be Kyiv tomorrow. That's why Zelenskyy singled out those planes.

And, you know, I know these are hard decisions. I support the president when he says, we cannot enforce a no fly zone. That is a declaration of war against Russia. I think he's right about that.

I have a harder time understanding what's the difference between a Javelin and a MiG-29, or an S-300 system, that's a surface to air missile system, a Russian-made system, that the Ukrainians desperately need more of to defend the skies. It's a distinction without a difference. But, of course, the Pentagon has a different view, and so far they steadfast with that. They do want to send the planes into Ukraine.

VELSHI: Ambassador, thank you again for your wisdom, your experience. Ambassador Michael McFaul is the former United States ambassador to Russia. We appreciate your time as always, sir.

MCFAUL: Thank you.

VELSHI: Well U.S. officials now say that some of Russia's persuasion missiles are failing, 60 percent of the time. This comes Ukrainian forces push forward to take back some of the territory they laws. It might not be that simple. One of the reporters who just back from the frontlines joins me after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:21:36]

VELSHI: The highly circulated Russian tabloid "KP" had an exclusive interview yesterday with the former commander in chief of the Russian ground forces, his take on Russia's invasion of Ukraine is something. He says, quote, we are conducting military humane operation, one might say surgical in order to save peoples lives as much as possible. Their houses, roads, bridges factories, end of quote.

Hours after that interview published, Russia bombed one of the main bridges between Kyiv and the city to its northeast. Over the weekend, Russian bombed one of Europe's largest iron and steel factories in the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol. As for the rest of Mariupol, Russian forces there have stopped advancing traditionally. Instead, they are leveling the city from afar. They're starving out the civilian population, denying them access to medical, and humanitarian supplies.

Russia is quite literally destroying Ukrainian, quote, houses, roads, bridges and factories, end quote. On Monday, the same Russian tabloid newspaper around an article saying that nearly 10,000 Russian troops had been killed in Ukraine. But within hours, the article had been taken down. The site published an advisory saying it had been hacked, and the story was a fake.

But keep in mind. 10,000 soldiers as much higher than the Russian government's last public announcements three weeks ago, which only mention the loss of 498 troops. NATO's estimate is even higher than America's. It says up to 40,000 Russian troops have been killed, wounded, captured or missing an action.

If any of these non Russian estimates are correct, it's going to be hard to continue to keep that for the Russian people given the images like this one. This is a funeral for the deputy commander of Russia's Black Sea fleet yesterday in Crimea. The funeral is for just one of the dozens of high- level Russian officers that Ukraine claims they have killed so far.

Ukraine also claims to have killed six Russian generals, which is basically unheard of in modern warfare. At some point, no matter how much the Russian government tries to control the narrative, the Russian people are going to start noticing just how many military funerals of there are, and how many people they know who've lost loved ones especially given the victories that are continuing to see from Ukrainian forces.

Meanwhile the war also veers to be taking a toll on those and Putin's government. Yesterday, we saw the highest level resignation from the Russian government so far in the war in Ukraine. Putin's climate adviser resigned and fled the country. Officials had been a prime in economic reform are in the country had been serving in top assistance for decades. Now, if the Russian press -- in the Russian press, he was expectedly smeared and very quickly.

The Russian foreign minister spokeswoman saying that the climate adviser left, it would be lucky.

And today, the Russian defense minister made his first public appearance in 12 days. For a total of 11 seconds you can see him in the corner of this video call with Putin and his security council. There was a widely publicized 11 seconds hoping to quell mounting rumors about his conspicuous absence in the aftermath of this failed invasion of Ukraine.

Russia has shuttered the last of their independent press. It has clamped down on people, trying to spread the truth by a social media and is jailing people who are protesting the war. Heck, it's jailing people who use the word war to describe it, jailing people for telling the truth. But the truth is playing catch-up.

Joining us now is Joshua Yaffa. He's a correspondent for "The New Yorker" base primarily in Moscow. But he wasn't Ukraine the moment Russia bomb started dropping. He's on some incredibly reporting from their sense. He's also the author between two fires, truth, ambition and compromise in Putin's Russia.

Joshua, thanks for being with us this evening. We appreciate it.

I want to get a sense of, given you've been inside Ukraine and then to Russia, Putin has got a very tight grip on power in Russia. Does it matter if Russia citizens learn the truth and turn against him? Would actually change something for Vladimir Putin's reality?

JOSHUA YAFFA, THE NEW YORKER CONTRIBUTING WRITER: I think it certainly would change something for Vladimir Putin's reality if as you say Russian citizens on mass were to learn the truth of this war, whether the degree of description of Ukrainian cities -- that something not talked about in Russia intelligent. It continues to be called the special military operations in official channels.

If you look at polling, many Russians believe that this is a limited military engagement to the east of the country, the Donbas region. And people aren't aware that Kyiv is being bombed. Kharkiv is being bombed. Mariupol usually have those terrible pictures of how destroyed that city is. Many people don't know that.

So, if Russians were to learn indeed the war that's being -- what it looks. Like the ugliness of war. I think many of them would be surprised if not shocked at how widespread the violence is against Ukrainian citizens and against Ukrainian people, and I think of course equally impactful could be the knowledge of how many Russian soldiers are being killed in this war. This estimate of 10,000 that we saw published in the Moscow paper the other day before it was quickly retracted.

The question is, will they? Not what the effect will be, but will they even learn of that information. And that is a bigger question. So far, since the beginning of the war, in the month since the war began, a month today. In fact, a number -- in fact, nearly all of the nearly independent opposition minded but any independent non-state run, non-state controlled sources of in Russia have been blocked, shuttered. Its journalists forced to leave the country. Websites taken down or law blocked access to them. Even social media, Facebook blocked, Instagram blocked.

So where will Russian get that information from? That's a tricky question. There are, of course, VPNs. People are using them but not everyone has that kind of technical ability. Russia government regulators are also trying to go after VPN operators.

So, really, it's a cat-and-mouse game. But people left with not that many sources where they can find out that sort of information. And I think the reason that the Kremlin is being so diligent and going after the sources of information and making sure that Russians don't have access to them is because they know that if -- Russians were to learn the truth of the it could be very destabilizing.

But I'm not sure that that turn of events will come anytime soon given the Kremlin's control over the social, critical, and medias fears. They may well succeed from preventing misinformation from spreading worldwide.

VELSHI: You mentioned the VPN, though. I was going to ask you about that? Can people get around the information in Russia?

For the last month or so you've been driving around Ukraine. Place the place and getting a sense of how this has evolved. You've really seen it evolve in real time. What's your take away?

YAFFA: Well I was shocked as anyone on the morning of February 24th when I woke up in my hotel room in Kramatorsk, a city in eastern Ukraine, in the Donbas, to the sound of explosions, the first missiles hit, Kramatorsk, just as they were hitting Kyiv, Kharkiv and so many other cities across Ukraine.

And from the very first moment, we saw the scale and scope of this war. And it was clear that Putin was going for regime change. He was looking to strike the capital of Kyiv, take it over, in fact, and remove President Zelenskyy from power, and install pro-machine government. That clearly was the aim in the first hours and days of the war.

And what we've seen since then is how the war plans clearly did not go as Putin and his top officials you mentioned Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu, who's been missing for sometime in from the Russian scene for some days now.

[21:25:01]

Clearly this plan that Putin, Shoygu and other officials cooked up didn't go according to their initial estimation. Kyiv didn't fall. Zelenskyy himself didn't flee the capital. Ukraine military put up a great heroic fight, continues to in Ukrainian society really galvanized together, and that ultimately is the biggest takeaway from me.

VELSHI: Joshua, thank you for your great reporting on this. Joshua Yaffa is a Moscow correspondent for the New Yorker. Thank you for your time tonight.

YAFFA: Thank you.

VELSHI: Of course, Joshua was an outside of Ukraine right now. When we come back when I speak to someone inside Ukraine who's literally on the front lines of the battle.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:35:20]

VELSHI: It's been a grueling month since Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, but it's failed to take the capital Kyiv, or build momentum across the country. That's because Ukraine has launched a ferocious counter offensive like this one today at a seaport in Berdyansk. Ukrainian forces say it's sunk a Russian warship in the occupied port. You can see the flames and smoke.

An attack like this can be even harder for Russia to get supplies and troops to critical areas. Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, has been under attack by Russian forces for weeks, but so far they have repelled their advance.

The city of Mykolaiv has also taken heavy losses as it holds off Russia's attempt to seize it.

But a senior U.S. official says that Ukrainian forces have not only kept Russian ships were making progress, they force them to reposition around the city. And because of stories like this, it was hard not to be encouraged when the mayor of Kyiv told reporters that Ukrainian forces had retaken in the suburb of Makariv.

My next guest, Sudarsan Raghavan, a correspondent at large for "The Washington Post", learned that the situation on the ground is not as clear as with the mayor stated. Here's what he wrote in a piece for "The Washington Post".

Quote: As a team of "Washington Post" journalist passed through the checkpoint on Wednesday, Ukrainian soldiers ordered them to quickly leave the town, warning of incoming Russian rockets or artillery. Minutes later, reporters heard the sound of shells falling. Black plumes of smoke rose over the houses. Soon, more blasts followed. Makariv remains a contested front line, end quote.

Joining us now is the author of that story, Sudarsan Raghavan.

Mr. Raghavan, good to see you gain. Thank you for being with us tonight.

Give us the nuance of this because for those who have not spent time in a city that's under conflict or war zone, how do these things look when the Russians say they've taken, it then the Ukrainians say they've taken it back -- it's blurry. It's not like an old-fashioned frontline.

SUDARSAN RAGHAVAN, THE WASHINGTON POST CORRESPONDENT AT LARGE: Not at all, especially in disinformation age. But we really see here is two different wars happening. They're intertwined wars happening in Ukraine. One is on the battlefield, one is an information war. And what happened in Makariv exemplifies these two different wars.

What you have his, the fog of war, known as a propaganda campaign, both sides have made solid information hard to come by. So, journalists are finding it increasingly difficult to reach areas outside the capital, to verify facts, bombardments, shifting front lines, just a lack of clarity over the Russian military positions.

So oftentimes, you're relying on statements from Ukrainian officials as what happened with Makariv in Tuesday. The defense ministry claimed the town had been liberated from Russian forces, and Ukrainian forces planted a flag, a Ukrainian flag on top of the town. We went next day to check it out, and as you read in the article, we found that it was anything but liberated. In fact, the mayor himself told us that this was just a bunch of nonsense. And in fact, the Russians were still in control of nearly 15 percent of the town. And it's been like that for the past three weeks.

So, there are tit-for-tat battles just like what you are seeing in other parts of Ukraine, especially the north of here, but the Russians definitely have not liberated by any means in this town.

VELSHI: So, you talk about Irpin, or Makariv and places like that, what does taken or liberated even mean? How does that get determined? We definitely hear about flags being flown. That of course is the age-old way in which you claim a land that wasn't otherwise under your control.

But what does it mean in these towns? Do things keep working? Does the city council changed allegiances? What happens when the Russians take territory?

RAGHAVAN: Well, it's a very chaotic situation, still. I mean, there are people -- even less -- people are still evacuating from these areas, even as these claims of liberation take place. They're still fighting, they're still shelling going on. In Makariv, the Russian tanks positioned right outside of the town shelling it.

So it's a very chaotic situation. The mayor of this town, his main job is to go around, today, and try to feed people, try to deal with people who are -- who have lost their homes from shelling. Many of which, we are told, are held in a hospital, inside the town, and that hospital is being shelled as well.

So, the mayor has to deal with all these extremely chaotic situations through -- wants to preserve the lives of his residents, in some cases try to get them out. And for those who don't want to leave, and stick it, out he has to find ways to help them deal with electricity shortages, water shortages, gas, and all the other necessities of life.

VELSHI: Sudarsan Raghavan, we are grateful for people like you who are there to report so that the rest of us can see these things.

Sudarsan Raghavan is a correspondent at large for "The Washington Post". We appreciate your time. Thank you, as always, sir.

RAGHAVAN: Thank you, Ali.

VELSHI: Well, today, President Biden said that the United States and NATO would absolutely respond if Russia used chemical weapons in Ukraine. New reporting shows that response has likely been drawn up of by a secret team of national security experts called the Tiger Team. One of the reporters who broke that story joins us live, next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:45:10]

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY, UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT (translator): We just want to save our people, just survive. As any nation, I believe we have the right to live. Today, they used phosphorus bombs, Russian phosphorus bombs. They killed more adults and more children.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: That was Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in an address to NATO today accusing the Russians of using phosphorus bombs against Ukrainians. NBC News has not independently verified this claim, and the Pentagon says it's not verified it either, but when used against people, phosphorus bombs are a horrific weapon. They can reach temperatures high enough to melt metal. You can imagine the devastating effect phosphorus bombs would have on the human body.

International chemical weapons treaties do not ban all uses of phosphorus on the battlefield. They can be used, for instance, to create smokescreens. And it has been used by many countries, including the United States, in Iraq. However, it is illegal when used against human targets.

As it is, Russia's attacks on civilians and Ukraine have already proved to be devastating, but if Zelenskyy's accusation about phosphorus bombs troops proved to be true, it will represent an escalation in the types of deadly weapons that Russia is willing to use and it's brutal invasion of Ukraine. And "The New York Times" is now reporting that the Biden administration is preparing contingency plans for what to do if Russia decides to draw upon some of the most deadly weapons in its arsenal.

A special group of experts known as the Tiger Team have reportedly been assembled in the White House, mapping out how the United States and its allies should respond to a chemical biological or nuclear attack by Russia inside of Ukraine. A senior administration official confirmed the existence of the Tiger Team to NBC news and says that the team is prepare for contingencies of various scenarios, including Russia's potential use of biological or chemical weapons.

All of that is increasing concern, as Vladimir Putin may take more reckless and drastic actions as this invasion drags on more slowly than he expected. As "The New York Times" notes, quote: Just a month ago, such

scenario seemed more theoretical. But today, from the White House to NATO's headquarters in Brussels, a recognition has it in a Russia has turned may turn the most powerful weapons in his arsenal to bail itself out of a military stalemate.

Today, President Biden was asked, directly, about what a U.S. response to a Russian chemical weapons attack would look like.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REPORTER: If chemical weapons were used in Ukraine, would that trigger a military response from NATO?

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: It would -- it would trigger a response in kind, whether or not you are asking if NATO would cross, we would make that decision at the time.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VELSHI: Joining us now is one of the reporters that broke the story of the Tiger Team, Eric Schmitt is a senior writer covering terrorism, and national security for "The New York Times".

Eric, thanks for joining us.

We are talking about the use of chemical weapons, let's put aside nuclear weapons for a second. They are long established thinking on what to do in that instance. We are talking about chemical weapons as if it is a red line. The U.S. seems to not be drawing red lines at the moment, because once you say that there is a red line and somebody crosses it, you're compelled to do something about.

But it is it your sense that the use of biological or chemical weapons against the Ukrainian people would constitute a red line where the United States and NATO would have to respond?

ERIC SCHMITT, SENIOR WRITER ON TERRORISM & NATIONAL SECURITY, THE NEW YORK TIMES: Well, certainly, Ali, that was the warning that President Biden seem to integrate today in Brussels, that if there was -- were to be those kinds of weapons use against civilians in the campaign in Ukraine, that there would be some sort of consequence. The president obviously is deliberately vague and what the consequences would be, the U.S. military would not be directly involved in the Ukrainian crisis.

As you said, the Tiger Team, this group of separateness -- it could possibly draw American forces in under certain scenarios.

VELSHI: Eric, what is different about the Tiger Team compared to, what is always in effect with respect to countries that are in a conflict, that have non conventional weapons, or weapons that would perhaps be unduly adverse to civilian populations and noncombatants?

SCHMITT: Well, the Tiger Team is basically a team of specialists, this goes for many different national security crises.

[21:50:00]

When you pull together a group of specialists across the government who can look at a range of options for the president, so you don't have to deal with a crisis situation that you haven't thought of some of these things in advance. So, these individuals are looking at various scenarios. They are looking at a range of different chemical weapons.

What happens if one of them is lobbed only inside of Ukraine? But something goes awry, and goes into one of the neighboring countries? Is it considered accidental or a deliberate strike? Those are very important questions to think about in advance, so you can think about what your options, our and discuss those options with allies.

President Putin, of course, has threatened to use chemical weapons, and while the United States has not seen any indications yet that that is being planned anytime soon, Russia, of course, has in Syria, operated within Syria, has been using chemical weapons there. Things like chlorine, sometimes Syrian regime's supported by Russia there. So, you have to take these kinds of threats, seriously, to the U.S. government.

VELSHI: Of course, this becomes real to countries like Poland, where if there was a Russian attack on a military base 15 miles from the Polish border, it was conventional weaponry and it was not military base, but that becomes very real.

I want to get your response to Volodymyr Zelenskyy talking about phosphorus bombs. Not something that people think about a, lot they are used for military purposes, but if used against civilian populations, or non

combatants. That of course becomes an illegal thing. What are you hearing about the use of phosphorus bombs?

SCHMITT: Well, clearly as you indicated, this would be an escalation of the kind of weaponry that is already being used, the horrific weaponry that Russia has used in Ukraine. The Pentagon has not been able to confirm that used yet. Clearly, if this were to be something that the military was able to confirm, I would think that at the very least, the U.S. would help to guide intelligence to Ukrainian forces, so that they can, on their own perhaps, attack the source of this weaponry, whatever kind of bombs, or artillery shells, or other delivery systems that they are using. After that, if they were to escalate beyond, that that is again, what's the scenarios that the team of specialists is looking at, the kind of weapons that are being described.

VELSHI: Eric, thanks for your great reporting on this. Eric Schmitt is a senior writer covering terrorism and national security for "The New York Times". Thanks again for your time.

All right. Coming up next, we're going to take you inside of a convention center here in Warsaw, that has been converted to house thousands of refugees who fled Ukraine, right after this break.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[21:56:50]

VELSHI: More than 3.6 million refugees have fled Ukraine. The number includes more than 2.1 million refugees who have fled here to Poland. Today, we got a somber assessment about the number of children in Ukraine, who have had to flee their homes. UNICEF announced today that more than half of Ukraine's children, a staggering 4.3 million children, have been displaced. One month into the war.

With that humanitarian crisis worsening by the minute, President Biden today in Brussels announced the U.S. will accept up to 100,000 refugees from Ukraine, with a focus on reuniting displaced Ukrainians with family in the United States. He also announced that the U.S. will donate almost 1 million dollars to help European countries deal with the surge in refugees.

Here in Warsaw, Poland, a city that has already accepted about three times more refugees than the U.S. is a planning to take. The regional government has staked up to take care of its share of this huge crush of people.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

VELSHI: This sea of cots at this Warsaw convention center may look familiar, but the scenes that follow hurricanes, floods, and fires. This disaster is entirely man-made, and the people sheltering here may not have the chance to rebuild their homes.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: We came here two days ago, because we need help. We didn't know what to do, and how to -- we are trying to find a house in the U.K. We don't have anything in the U.K., but just people that are willing to help us.

VELSHI: Eve Prokopenko (ph) is just 15. She is here with her mother, alongside 6,000 other refugees here on this day. Most don't have a plan.

To help, the regional government has turned this massive convention center into a safe haven for up to 20,000 people. Many arrived sick, so there is medical care on-site.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE (through translator): Obviously, that most of the people coming here, our women and children, then we have a gynecologist office. For pregnant women, we can do diagnostics. And we can even give birth here. Which we have already done a couple of times.

VELSHI: Despite Warsaw being the biggest center that receives refugees from Ukraine, where you won't see anywhere around the city are tense, or temporary housing. A number of refugees are going to a stadium where they can spend some time. They're generally then sent to a hospital, or some sort of temporary accommodation. But after a few days they end up in private accommodation hosted by Poles, or they leave for other European cities.

Many of the cities can be reached with the help of a temporary bus terminal set up outside of the convention hall. About 1000 people leave every day, as thousands more pour in. Some who arrive here, like Eve and her mom hope to get as far away as possible.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Even Russia wants to invade Poland. That is horrifying. We are right here. We see a lot of buses, people are going in very different countries in Europe, like Italy, everywhere -- anywhere that they can get, just to escape all of this.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

VELSHI: That is just one center in one city in Poland, which has shouldered more of the refugee burden than any country so far.

Well, that does it for us tonight, we'll see you here again tomorrow.

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

Good evening, my friend.

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