

News; Domestic

**MEET THE PRESS DAILY for August 26, 2021, MSNBC**

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[13:00:07]

CHUCK TODD, MSNBC HOST: Well, don't worry, Andrea, you're not going very far. We're going to come back to you in a moment. Welcome back to MEET THE PRESS DAILY. I'm Chuck Todd and we're continuing following the breaking news out of Afghanistan.

A pair of explosions have rocked Kabul and thrown the already chaotic U.S. evacuation efforts into some turmoil just five days before President Biden agreed to a deadline to get all Americans out. U.S. officials tell NBC News that at least three Marines were wounded in this attack just outside the Kabul airport. Hospital officials in Kabul tell us they're treating about 60 people injured and that at least six people have been killed.

It was Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, who Tweeted that there were two blasts and what he calls a complex attack. One of those explosions was at the Abbey gate of the airport, the other was nearby at a hotel. Kirby was supposed to address reporters this morning at the Pentagon's daily briefing. Obviously, that briefing was postponed by the events in the ground, as was the White House -- White House's COVID Task Force briefing.

The President's meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has been delayed but not yet canceled. The administration says the President has been briefed on the situation. It's our understanding right now. He's in the Oval Office after going in and out of the Situation Room.

A Taliban spokesman is telling NBC News that at least 13 people were killed including some children. And while it's unclear who was responsible for the attack to U.S. intelligence officials, say they are operating on the assumption that it was the Afghan affiliate of ISIS that is behind it. And of course, that is what our own intelligence officials had been warning about and worrying about.

We're going to go to the Pentagon, check in with our own Courtney Kube in just a moment. Richard Engel joins me now though, from Doha, Qatar.

So, Richard, this was exactly -- the threat was out there for a few days. This specific threat from ISIS-K was clearly something the administration was worried about, publicly warned about and here it is. What it is -- this obviously is setting back evacuation efforts. Could this essentially end them?

RICHARD ENGEL, MSNBC CHIEF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: No, it couldn't end the evacuation. It shouldn't end the evacuation. It is not an attack of that kind of magnitude. It didn't impact the runways, didn't impact the planes. There are three main gates into the airbase. What this was, was a horrific attention-grabbing suicide attack, a complex attack, at least one suicide attack, and another bomb right outside the gate. And all indications are that this was the work of ISIS, or at least of a member of ISIS.

And as the Taliban rolled into Kabul, they set free a lot of prisoners or prisoners in the chaos were able to set themselves free, break out of jail, and these are enemies of the Taliban. And for the last week or so, they have been roaming free, they've had no place to go and it seems that at least one or possibly more attackers took the opportunity today to carry out the attack. And what witnesses are saying and security sources in Kabul are saying is that 13 people were killed, including several Taliban guards who were outside the gate managing the flow of traffic, and these coordinates reporting three U.S. Marines who were injured.

Just to sort of bear down a little bit on the -- of the geography of where this took place because the area around military bases is sometimes quite complicated. You have the airbase, we describe it as the military side of the Kabul airport, it is a military base. It is surrounded by walls, there are three main gates into it.

By one of the gates, there is a hotel called the Baron hotel. We've stayed there, other journalists stayed there, we were just there a few days ago. The Baron hotel was built primarily for contractors because it is so close to the airport. That way they could get on and off of the airport quickly, safely.

From the Baron hotel, there was about a 200-yard corridor that leads to the Abbey gate, one of the three gates onto the base, and that corridor is flanked with high concrete barriers. And within the corridor, there is a deep sewage canal -- drainage canal. And perhaps using that training -- drainage canal, a suicide bomber was able to get into that corridor and detonate an explosive.

And the images that we have seen on social media are absolutely horrific. People -- bodies thrown into the sewage canal, some of them -- some of the dead bodies, some people who are clearly gravely injured, other people pulling them out of the -- of the wastewater and then ambulances coming and being brought in to take the wounded away and to try and treat them.

So, it will slow down the pace of the evacuations because one gate, I wouldn't say it's totally operation -- dis -- totally taken out of operation but it is certainly caused a degree of chaos, they'll be trying to step up security. But they did have a specific threat and it seems like that specific threat was carried out. And if it was ISIS, it's ISIS trying to put themselves back on the map to do exactly what we're doing right now, to get them back into the conversation.

[13:05:22]

TODD: Right. I know. Make them -- make them a major cog when perhaps they shouldn't be treated as one. But let me ask you this, Richard. We know that the U.S. military is in charge of securing the airport, they're sort of the base part of the airport. Does that security perimeter -- so is this within the U.S. security perimeter, or is the Taliban in charge of security closer to the hotel?

ENGEL: The Taliban do all the security. They control Afghanistan, it is now the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is the Taliban country except for a tiny little mountainous area that is putting up some say heroic, some say a doomed resistance movement, but they -- the Taliban control the country. They are patrolling the outer perimeter. They are controlling checkpoints throughout the city. They are limiting people to get to the airport. They are trying to find ISIS fighters because they don't want this kind of thing to happen because they want the process to move smoothly, and Americans to leave.

At the gate itself, there is a handover and we saw that ourselves. I was at that airport earlier this morning. You drive -- and it is a very bizarre thing to witness. We saw Taliban fighters in their guns, in their -- in their traditional dress, some in American-style uniforms, you pass them, a few yards later, we saw troops from the 82nd Airborne and it is a stark contrast. And I must say the troops I saw if you can see the expressions on their face, this was before the attack, they were not pleased with the situation. They were not pleased to be doing this evacuation, working a few yards away from their former enemies, evacuating the people who worked with American troops and their allies, and getting them out of the country.

So, the Taliban control the outer perimeter, Americans in the inner perimeter and the Americans are now trying to get everybody out. And then this disruption today, this horrific -- horrible incident at one of the gates.

TODD: Yes. Richard Engel in Doha for us. Richard, thank you. Let me go over to Kelly O'Donnell at the White House. We've got Raf Sanchez in London., Andrea Mitchell, as I promised you, has stuck around is here in the Bureau with me. NBC News Military Analyst Colonel Jack Jacobs is with me. And National Security Analyst Clint Watts.

Kelly, I want to go over to you for a second. We know this is basically canceled all -- anything else today, or this is the focus of the administration. This is a disruption in our evacuation plans, obviously and I'm sure we don't have the answer to this, but is essentially this National Security meeting -- constant meeting that's happening with the President, it's about now what? Like, what do we do now? Can we still meet this deadline? Do we try to extend? How do we secure the area? Do you have any insight of what the discussions are that are going on right now?

KELLY O'DONNELL, MSNBC WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Well, the word of the day here so far is fluid, that everything related to the President is fluid. Meaning who he's meeting with, what his schedule looks like, will we see him publicly? All of that. As to your question about the calculation the President needs to make.

An event like what is playing out with all its glory deadly awfulness is exactly one of the factors that the President said needed to be part of his decision-making process about evacuations. The possibility, which at that time was just a threat stream of warnings, could that disrupt evacuations? And what would they need to do to complete the mission of securing all Americans who want to leave Afghanistan? The number still at this point is somewhere, roughly a thousand, not all of them determined to be American citizens who actually

want to leave but that's the latest numbers we have there. And then how does that all factor into the deadline of August 31?

So, we've been told the President has been briefed on the contingency plans that had already taken place before today's events. He's spent an extensive amount of time in the Situation Room with his Defense Secretary, his Secretary of State, the National Security team. We're told he's in the Oval Office now. And the real challenge for the President is when this began, this evacuation began and there was the initial chaos when the Taliban took over and Kabul fell, have civilian deaths at the beginning, then the administration was very proud of the ramp-up of evacuations that were being done safely. The President even noting, no one had died.

And then today, the concern about the threats being there, urging Americans to leave and then the events that have unfolded where there are clearly lots of injuries, at least three Americans included in the injury tally, we don't know how much further that will go and if the worst -- the worst news could come.

So, now we're back to a situation where the President now has a different dynamic. Does he need additional force protection? Can they work with the troops that are on the ground? And can he evacuate all the embassy personnel and all of the others in time? We don't have the answers but imagine having to work through those decisions with the contingencies and with the very difficult situation right now. The President has a real burden on his plate. He made some of these choices, and some of these are being controlled by outside events. Chuck.

[13:10:39]

TODD: All right. Kelly O'Donnell at the White House for us. Kelly, thank you. Let me go over to the Pentagon. I want to do -- get all our main checkpoints here. We did White House, let's go to the Pentagon now, Courtney Kube. So, Courtney, do we have any new information or new details on the attacks themselves? Do we have more information in finding out some more details of who was wounded? Are Americans part of the casualty count? What more information have you got?

COURTNEY KUBE, MSNBC PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT: Americans are definitely part of the casualty count but remember, the U.S. military considers the word casualty to include both wounded and killed.

TODD: Got you.

KUBE: So, what we know so far is there were three U.S. Marines that were injured. We are trying to work on whether there may have been any American -- U.S. military killed as well and we're still working through that at this point, Chuck. And obviously, that's something that we take very seriously and we don't want to get wrong so we are working very hard to figure out the ground truth there.

We also know that there were a number of Afghans injured and killed in this. The video and the pictures that we're seeing on social media are pretty tough to watch, Chuck. It seems as if these were two large explosions, one occurring at the Abbey gate, which is of course on the southeast side of Kabul airport, and one at the nearby Baron hotel, which was a hotel that was frequented by Westerners, particularly Americans and British for a long time and even after the Taliban took over Kabul. We know that there were at least these two explosions.

The U.S. had been very concerned about the potential for suicide attacks at that location and other gates around the airport. Particularly there was a threat -- a specific intelligence stream that warned about ISIS-K -- ISIS Khorasan, that they were trying to carry out attacks against Americans at the gates of the airport. It's still not clear if that's who carried this out here today but it's sure according to everything that we're seeing, it's definitely pointing in that direction at this point, Chuck.

TODD: Courtney, if the President made the decision that he needed more reinforcements to sort of finish this evacuation, how quickly -- we know the Pentagon was staging folks in Kuwait before preparing for this -- the extra troops that they ended up having to call up before. Is that -- is that -- is that one of the contingency plans that's already in place? What do you know on this front?

KUBE: So -- that's right. When they announced this deployment of additional troops for this evacuation mission, they -- the Pentagon announced that they would be sending three battalions or one Brigade Combat Team. That's -- it was the 82nd airborne, they were the immediate reaction force, which is sort of this group that is supposed to be ready to go on hours-long notice -- to go pretty much anywhere in the world if they need them. They sent those three battalions forward but all three of them were rerouted from going to Kuwait directly, good -- to go into Kabul because of the security situation at the airport.

So, that just gives you a sense, this is more than a week ago, they all went straight into Kabul. The U.S. -- if they wanted to shore up security at the airport, they could send additional troops, and then the reality is they can get troops pretty quickly. There are other Marines in the region as part of the special purpose -- Marine

Air-Ground Task Force, they could go in, and they are -- many of them are trained specifically for Embassy security, and the kinds of situations that they might be facing there at the airport. They could get people in very quickly but I have to stress, at this point, we are not hearing indications that that is in the works.

TODD: Of course. I just was curious -- we know that they're working through so many different scenarios here on that front and obviously that would be something that would be a bit of a towel if suddenly we saw it there. Courtney at the Pentagon for us, thank you.

So, let's go over to Andrea Mitchell, who of course, among the -- her Beats is the State Department -- Oh, hang on. Andrea. Kelly, you got a little news update for us, what have you got?

O'DONNELL: Yes, I don't mean to step on our colleagues at the Pentagon but John Kirby now says we can confirm that a number of U.S. service members were killed in today's complex attack at Kabul airport. A number of others are being treated for wounds. We also know that a number of Afghans fell victim to this heinous attack. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the loved ones and teammates of all those killed and injured. The worst news, Americans among the dead.

TODD: Right. (INAUDIBLE)

O'DONNELL: We have not heard from the President yet. This is a statement from John Kirby, the spokesman at Pentagon, Chuck.

[13:15:01]

TODD: All right, Kelly, thank you for alerting us to John Kirby's Tweet there. The sad confirmation that yes, American service members are among the -- among those that died in this attack.

Andrea Mitchell, what is the plan C, D, and E now that the State Department is thinking and trying to get the remaining Americans out, trying to get Afghan allies out? Obviously, these gates are sitting targets. It was something we were -- they clearly our own folks were concerned about the warnings were out there. How are -- you know, there's not -- are they going to start having to helicopter people onto the runway?

ANDREA MITCHELL, MSNBC CHIEF FOREIGN AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT: Exactly. I think that the -- first let me just say, the fact that we first heard that Marines were injured, and now we've heard that they were Americans killed, we don't know who or how many but that is just the worst possible tragedy, obviously. And this is going to bear very heavily on the President, and any decisions that he makes. He has said he wants to get all the Americans out. I think that getting people into the airport, as difficult as it may be, there can be helicopter movements, which they have identified the people -- those that they've identified, as of yesterday, there were thousands they were still trying to get in touch with. There were 500, that there were -- we believe already in the airport, if not evacuated safely, already.

So, we're talking about a thousand people that were known to be American still in Afghanistan, or who would not say, we want to stay. So, that was the other -- the other cohort, there could still be people. They were having a great job to give me that number. I think that this now could be helicopter movements and other kinds of movements that were trying to create some sort of secure zones but that's going to take a while. With the cooperation of the Taliban, presuming that they were not complicit in this in any way and it wouldn't seem that they would have an interest but I was just interviewing H.R. McMaster who was very vigorous in suspecting the motives of every one of these groups involved and thinking that the Haqqani network was really running the show.

Haqqani, the leader of Haqqani network from Pakistan showing up in Kabul -- a member of the Taliban leadership and showing up in Kabul last week being told that we -- we were told that he was going to be in charge of parts of Taliban -- of Kabul security, he showed up at Friday prayers very publicly. So, that is. He's on the FBI's most wanted list as a terrorist.

So, he is not the same as the Taliban, whom they've been negotiating with, at least in terms of the way the State Department is dealing with it, the way the White House is dealing with it. This is a mess and it's a terrible resurgence of terror from Al Qaeda groups that are also part of Haqqani.

TODD: Right. Well, I guess I want to go back to the issue of OK, Americans were told -- the State Department put out that bricks do not go to these gates right now, they put out that warning, but you know, knowing -- I mean clearly, they were worried and I guess the one upside here is our intelligence was pretty sound on this. What are -- what are Americans being told to do right now? Just shelter in place until they hear from the State Department or somebody else in government about where to go and when to go and how to go?

MITCHELL: Precisely. And what we know is that these were service members so we don't know the American civilians that may have been injured or killed in these terrible attacks today but there were plenty of Afghan civilians. We saw that from the videos earlier that they were desperate Afghans who tried to get to the

airport, who either did not know of the American State Department warnings or just were believing that they were so desperate to get out that they were going to take the risk of being in a crowd, even though the U.S. warnings were very clear not to be in that crowd.

So, the tragedy is that these were service members on the perimeter working with the Taliban. There's got to be an after-action, of course, immediately as to how much the Taliban did or did not know about this, and whether any of our assumptions have been misleading about relying on them as much as we were through our own leaders, General McKenzie and other military, using them and their acceptance of all of this in order to continue these evacuations. I do not see a lengthy extension past August 31. If it's a day or two because of this interruption, that's one thing but I do not see a redeployment at all from this President.

TODD: Now, you're probably right, there. Andrea, stick around, of course, don't go anywhere. We've been covering this mostly from the American government point of view, what we're hearing from the American side. I'm going to go to Raf, our -- my colleague in London, Raf Sanchez, who's monitoring things from the European side with our European allies. Any new information, new intelligence that our European allies have surfaced on this attack, anything more that you've learned from your end?

[13:20:00]

RAF SANCHEZ, MSNBC FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: Chuck, there is no indication right now from any of the coalition allies that their service members were caught up in this attack, which we now know, killed Americans. We have heard from the British, from the Italians, from the Turks, and from the Germans that none of their service members were harmed.

There are about a thousand UK troops at Hamid Karzai International Airport serving alongside American forces. The British have had the second-largest number of Western troops in Afghanistan over the course of this 20-year war, they have the second-largest number of troops there today.

Chuck, it is the early evening here in London. But beginning this morning, the British government began sounding the alarm very urgently, that there was a threat of an imminent and lethal explosion at Kabul airport. This was not a general expression of concern, this was a very, very serious sounding of the alarm. And within a few hours of a British Minister going on television and warning about this, that explosion came through. So clearly, there has been intelligence shared among the different allied nations about this possibility.

Now, the British and other G7 allies earlier this week tried and failed to convince President Biden to extend the deadline beyond August 31 for keeping U.S. troops in the country. When the Americans go, the other allies are going to go with them. They cannot stay on the ground without U.S. support. And we are beginning to see now, the other allies bringing an end to their evacuation efforts.

TODD: Right.

SANCHEZ: The last Canadian and German flights have gone out today and the British are saying they will begin winding up too, Chuck.

TODD: Raf Sanchez in London for us. Raf, I appreciate that update. All right, let's get a little bit more on two separate things. One is the logistics of finishing this evacuation of Colonel Jacobs, and one is more on an ISIS-K and the intelligence side, we got Clint Watts to cover that.

But, Jack, let me start with you. So, now you're dealing with known security, I -- clearly, a security problem there of getting -- of getting folks that get queued up to get evacuated, what kind of military options is the President being offered up by his military advisors right now to finish the job here? Is it more reinforcements? Is it a change in how we get folks inside the airport perimeter? What are the various options he's being handed by his military advisers?

JACK JACOBS, MSNBC MILITARY ANALYST: Well, typically what will happen is that the Chiefs will give him as many options as they can think of, including sending lots more troops to secure the area, accelerating the withdrawal by having more planes, evacuating people from other places inside Afghanistan, a wide variety of options from the ridiculous to the sublime, and then they'll make a recommendation. And the recommendation is likely to be, can't send any more troops because that will make the final evacuation of the troops much more difficult.

And -- but we'd like to see, this Joint Chiefs talking, we'd like to see an extension to the deadline of the 31st of August because we're not going to be able to get everybody out by then. This is a real logistical problem. Roll the tape forward. Even absent the horrendous attack today that slowed everything down, think about what it's going to take to get everybody out, who's remained there, particularly the troops.

As you withdraw troops, the force on the ground gets smaller and smaller and less capable of defending itself. Which means that the detachment left and contact, those soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who

were left behind at the very end who go out on the last plane are most at risk, how you're going to protect them? Protect them with airstrikes and Overwatch and all the rest of that.

But at the end of the day, some credence is going to have to be given to the Taliban to make sure that they protect our troops. What's been demonstrated today is that they can't do it. They're certainly not going to be able to guarantee safety. Now, the Taliban would surely like to have us out as quickly as possible. They also need money.

There's an argument -- and we would like to have a little bit more time to make sure that we get as many people out as we possibly can. There's an argument that says that there is a deal here. For like Andrea says, maybe an extension of a couple of days to make sure that we get as many people out as we possibly can and the exchanges, the Taliban get some of the money or all the money that's currently locked up and sequestered by a Western financial institution.

Whether or not that's actually going to happen, remains to be seen. But at the end of the day, some Americans got to turn the lights out on the American presence there and that's going to be the most dangerous time.

[13:25:21]

TODD: I know. It sounds like we're having to pay a ransom to the Taliban, right? I mean, that's what -- that sounds like, and it's an uncomfortable position for any American President. Is it -- no matter what you're trying to do here.

JACOBS: No, I think we've already -- we've already paid a ransom to them -- we've already paid a ransom to them in agreeing that 31 August is the date, they will give us safe patches until 31 August, and that was the deal as originally struck.

TODD: Let me move over to Clint Watts on the intelligence side of things and ISIS-K. This is an odd thing to say but clearly, our intelligence was correct here. The warnings, I mean, we -- that -- the warnings were shouted from the rooftops here within the last day or so, and yet it happened anyway. You know, can we be sure that somehow ISIS-K -- we know ISIS-K is called a sworn enemy of the Taliban, the President keeps emphasizing that. But are people looking the other way? I mean, we were all looking out for this, and it happened anyway.

CLINT WATTS, MSNBC NATIONAL SECURITY ANALYST: Chuck, I'm not convinced that Richard Engel's reporting earlier, you know, it seemed to suggest that they'd devise some sort of a pretty sophisticated plan, and they know the area to get in there. Separately, there's reporting already out there that there could be up to 100 ISIS-K operatives working in and around Kabul, that would make sense.

Remember, we've been there 10 days, if you're a terrorist group, you want to execute an attack against the Americans. You start moving to the target, you start moving your supply chain, essentially to do explosive attacks into Kabul. So, I'm not convinced that the Taliban would really be in on it. I think from their perspective, as soon as the Americans go, that's better for them.

I think the dangerous part of this is just like Colonel Jacobs was saying is, as we get a smaller footprint, the attack pattern gets more intense. And what we're seeing right now is Kabul is the equivalent of a Mogadishu, or Baghdad Serco kind of 2004 where -- yes, the timeline can have so-called taken over the country but they do not control the country. There are tons of different factions operating in and outside of Kabul right now.

We cannot go out and really expand the perimeter anymore. We have lost a lot of our intelligence capability, or we have retracted it around protecting this particular airport. I am super curious about our allies and were they some of the ones that tipped us off about ISIS-K in this scenario because they all seem to be in on it very quickly and making that warning. So, some positive sign is that we have the intelligence. The downside is counterterrorism ground operations, airstrikes in a major city, those aren't going to happen. You know, unless it's just absolute devastation, you know, in terms of attacks there. So, our options are extremely limited here in the final days headed up to 31 August.

TODD: Explain why ISIS-K is a sworn enemy of the Taliban?

WATTS: So, ISIS and Al Qaeda have really been rivals. You may remember back to 2015, there was a split, essentially between the Islamic State which became the Islamic -- ISIS which became the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda. That is really a younger generation of fighters that were tied to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Whereas al Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, which we were talking about, are lined with the Taliban over the last two years. And particularly in the last year, there's been a significant uptick in ISIS Khorasan, which means Afghanistan, that territory. ISIS Khorasan, essentially increasing their terrorist attacks.

Here's the other challenge with this, Chuck is, ISIS doesn't control territory, necessarily inside Afghanistan, they're more of a terrorist group, they blend in with the population. So, if you want to retaliate or do something, there's nothing really to go after except for that terrorist network and at present, we really can't do that. So, Al Qaeda and ISIS are in rivalry. Al Qaeda and the Taliban are in alignment, they're allies in a sense.

So, they would love to do an attack like today but repeat those attacks over and over because it's a double whammy for them. They get to harm the United States as they execute them in withdrawal, get some tons of global media coverage, and they're going against the Taliban, which is going to be their enemy after the Americans leave.

TODD: All right, Clint Watts with a little bit of wanting to get a little more information out there, a little more context on who these various entities are for viewers.

We go back to Kelly O'Donnell. We know we're going to hear from the President at some point today. Anytime you have a situation like this, you will. I guess the question is when? So, Kelly, do we have any idea of when we may hear from him?

O'DONNELL: We've asked it many times and we are presuming given the gravity of the events that we will hear from the President but officials have not told us specifically yet. If you look at a guide of the Biden White House, it tends to be later in the day.

[13:30:00]

Imagine what's happening behind the scenes, remarks have to be drafted, the president needs to get a command of facts that are on the ground, so he needs to get information from what the assessment is of injuries and deaths, and then he needs to be able to say what comes next.

So it's not just seeing the president, decisions need to be made and articulated in a form that he can present to the country, and perhaps even some ally phone calls need to take place or some other things. So there's a lot of work that would typically happen behind the scenes to prepare that kind of an address. I think it's fair to say this is the worst day of the Biden presidency, when you have Americans in harm's way killed and injured, and this has been a presidency dealing with the life and death drama of COVID and economic worries.

And then when you have men and women in uniform who are sent on a controversial mission in that there are so many opinions about what should happen with Afghanistan, clearly a very difficult day for the president. He often speaks of not wanting to send more sons and daughters to Afghanistan, speaks of his own son, the late Beau Biden who had served in Iraq. So if you talk about all that emotion, the decision making and the need in what is clearly a fog of war moment on the ground there to get some facts.

TODD: Yes.

O'DONNELL: It would seem to me it's going to be a while before the president addresses the nation. But we would expect to not get ahead of anything official, we would expect that this kind of moment requires it. Chuck?

TODD: Kelly, thank you for that.

You know, Andrea Mitchell, the president last week, and I'm just going to quote him directly here. He goes, "As we carry out this departure, we've made it clear to the Taliban that if they attack our personnel or disrupt our operation, the U.S. presence will be swift and the response will be swift and forceful. We will defend our people with devastating force if necessary. Our current military mission is short in time, limited in scope, and focused on its objectives, get our people out, our allies as safely and quickly out as possible."

Those were pretty tough words obviously. It doesn't -- right now it doesn't appear the Taliban is involved. But at the same time, Americans were killed since he made that, you know, drew that line in the sand. He's got to obviously respond here. What does a response look like?

MITCHELL: The problem is, as Clint Watts was just pointing out, is whom do you target?

TODD: Right.

MITCHELL: We're not talking about a nation state, we're not talking about a leader somewhere, in fact, they're part of the population. The worst terrorists in the world. Some of them were in those prisons throughout Afghanistan that the Taliban released at Bagram in Kabul. And now who are the leaders of ISIS-K? Where are they? What about Haqqani? He's walking around in plain sight, you know, who are we going to take out and how do we determine responsibility?

None of that has been accomplished as far as we know. I was talking to intelligence officials earlier today, and they were saying we're not going to ascribe responsibility except that we knew that there was this threat, this level of threat from ISIS-K which started on Saturday, accelerated and then was announced very dramatically last night with the alert for all Americans to get away from the airport.

There were times over the last few days, as you recall, where evacuations were halted, and they were telling Americans not to come, just come if we call you. What they said last night was just don't come. Don't come until we contact you. So it was very clearly identified that there was a threat.

TODD: Right.

MITCHELL: But who actually pulled this off, what are the casualty counts, you know, the president is probably right now calling families. I mean, there are terrible things that a commander-in-chief is doing at this moment, both the emotional level and the tactical level, and thinking also of the deadline and whether he sticks with that deadline, whether they try to get the last Americans out.

TODD: Right.

MITCHELL: This is just -- to respond forcefully, you have to have a target and you have to know who did it.

TODD: No. Right.

MITCHELL: And I don't know how he can do that that quickly.

TODD: Let me bring in Clint Watts back in here. What are the Taliban's capabilities here of, you know, this uneasy relationship where we have to trust them in some form right now as we get folks out? We have really no other choice. Is there a reassurance they could give our folks on security? Would they even have the capability or do they just -- you know, as you point out, they're just getting control now, so they're in charge but not necessarily in control.

WATTS: Chuck, that's part of it. I think that we have the sense that the Taliban suddenly magically took over all of Kabul and are in control, and not meeting any resistance.

[13:35:04]

Remember most of the people in Kabul did not expect the Taliban to take over that quickly and so they have done this in such a short period of time. The Taliban don't have probably as good of sensors or nose or intelligence capabilities right now inside Kabul as they do other parts of the country. So they're really, you know, probably trying to figure out what's going on. They're trying to secure as many areas as possible.

This is, as you can see right there from the footage, this is not the same as the American military presence that was there in Kabul and now to Bagram Air Force Base. And so we're relying on a group that might say, I want to protect the air base, and we'll let you go, just get out by the 31st, but maybe has no capability to do that. You know, some things to think about is, remember when the U.S. took Baghdad back in 2003.

There was a brief lull but it wasn't long after that that U.S. forces could not control all of Baghdad. They did not have intelligence. You start seeing insurgencies pop up. I think you'll see a similar phenomenon in a lot of these Afghan cities, where the Taliban have varying degrees of control, they understand the networks better or worse. And in fact it might be our own intelligence capabilities and contacts or our Western allies, that Five Eyes partners as they would say like the U.K. who still have really good sensors, really good human intelligence in a lot of these networks, will have to rely on a combination of factors.

And so we can't just take at face value the Taliban saying they'll do it, they have alternative motives. But let's also be honest about their capability to rule and govern and know everything going on in a town they just came into two weeks ago.

TODD: Kelly O'Donnell, I want to go back, you know, to the president's own words which I know we're going to get played for a lot of folks, on what he said last week. But this is complicated. I mean, on one hand, our operation was disrupted. American service members are dead because of this. Yet there is no identifiable, quote-unquote, "enemy" here. What are the calculations the White House is dealing with here?

O'DONNELL: Well, certainly the president has to deal with how many American lives have been put at risk and taken by this attack, how do you respond to that, so certainly dealing with the immediate concern of force protection and those evacuees who are in the process. How to deal with that. That's one set of concerns. And then the president has said ISIS-K is a sworn enemy of the United States and Taliban and so how to strike back at that?

It is not lost on any of us that when Americans died 20 years ago, it was U.S. forces that went into Afghanistan in search of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. This is an attack of a much smaller scale but



certainly it's impactful and it's going to change the lives of a number of American families and it could alter sort of the dynamic on the ground there. So these are complicated issues.

What the president has been clear about is that he did not believe it was in the long-term national interest of the United States to be with a military presence in Afghanistan.

TODD: Right.

O'DONNELL: So now the question is, do you strike back in some targeted way? We know that of course there are CIA assets, there are special operators in the region, there has to be some intelligence as you mentioned earlier. This intelligence appeared to be spot on, so much so they were giving Americans through phone calls and e-mails and warnings, and our allied partners saying get away from those gates.

And then of course many Afghan civilians may not have been aware of that or may have been willing to take the risk trying to get out. So a lot of complicated issues for the president on how to respond, how protect those still there, and what happens with the remaining evacuation operations. Chuck?

TODD: Kelly O'Donnell, Andrea Mitchell, Raf Sanchez, Clint Watts, Colonel Jack Jacobs, really appreciate having you all on to help us navigate what is just a terrible day here. That's for sure.

As we learn more about these attacks, I want to bring in someone who's been in contact with some senior military officials over in Kabul. Democratic congressman from California, senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, longtime member of Congress, John Garamendi is joining me now.

So, Congressman, play reporter for us. What do you know? What more details can you fill in that we haven't been able to report?

REP. JOHN GARAMENDI (D-CA): You've covered almost every detail that I have available to me. We do know that American service members have lost their lives. Tragic, heartbreaking. But not unexpected. This is extremely dangerous operation from the very moment it began. The collapse of the Afghan government, the Taliban taking control or really not taking control of the city. It's extremely dangerous.

For all of us, we need to take a short pause here, gather the information, and then let the president and the military and the intelligence make a determination on the best step forward.

[13:40:06]

Right now, we can all take a guess, we can all that pretend that we know what's going on. The fact is we don't. But we do know it's a dangerous situation. The president will make a decision in due course here. Whether the extension -- deadline is extended or not remains to be seen. Where are those Americans? In many places, we simply don't know where they are and they may or may not even exist.

TODD: So let me ask you this. When it comes to trusting the Taliban, and I guess that's a strong word, they've got to earn it over time, but do you think we have no other choice but to give the Taliban some opportunity here to show that they can get control? Do we use the frozen assets as a way for them to get tough, and not allow an al Qaeda or an ISIS to sort of get safe harbor? Clearly this ISIS-K has some safe harbor here.

How much do we attempt to work with the Taliban here versus against them?

GARAMENDI: Well, we really will have no choice but to work with the Taliban, as long as they are in apparent control of Kabul and other major cities. Now what leverage do we have? I suspect there are many and it may very well be best for the United States to work through an international organization like the United Nations and to recognize that we're not the only player in this game.

Clearly the countries that are surrounding Afghanistan have a major and a critical stake in what the future will hold and will undoubtedly be in touch with the Taliban as we are trying to sort out what needs to be done there. The Taliban face an awesome and very, very difficult and dangerous situation of their own. They're not loved by everybody. In fact, they were hated and they were involved in fights, revenge killings and power conflicts are going on as we speak.

All of those things create a very unstable situation. So right now for the United States, it's to get all of our people out as the president says, those who want to get out, and as many of those people that helped us over the last 20 years. That's our goal. And then to extract the American military safely. Obviously American military personnel have lost their life and so the safety issue is even more on the minds of all of us, so it's going to be complex.

The president needs all of our support as he works through a very difficult situation that actually began long before he became president and the stage was set for tragedy. And here we are, the tragedy that all of us

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feared, the president very clearly feared this happening, and now where do we go from here? We'll be as safe as we possibly can for military and try to get the Americans out.

TODD: Right. Colonel Jack Jacobs earlier was on and he sort of floated that one of the potential ideas that the president is being offered, you know, I said put yourself in the shoes of General Milley, Secretary Austin, what are the various options he's being given. And that is use the frozen assets as leverage to basically get a commitment from the Taliban that look, we need to go longer now. It's going to take us maybe one more week, maybe 10 more days. It's in your interest and here's how. Are you comfortable with that type of negotiating?

GARAMENDI: There will be -- the negotiations are under way, have been under way from the very outset of the Taliban takeover of Kabul and Afghanistan. The CIA director was there. We don't know what was in that discussion but we do know that there was a negotiation that presumably led to the Taliban attempting to provide security outside of the airport.

Are there ongoing discussions now? There certainly are with regard to military to military, such as the Taliban has a military organization. Are there quid pro quos? Of course there are. Afghanistan is in deep, deep economic, financial, and social chaos. They need -- the Taliban and the Afghan people are going to need significant international support. Everything from food to economic assets, all of those things are on the table.

[13:45:07]

Are there some that are more imminent that would lead to an extension of the American presence? I suspect that there are. It doesn't do much good for me or I guess for any of us to try to figure it all out.

TODD: Right.

GARAMENDI: We do know that it is in the process of being figured out by the American military, by our diplomats, and by the intelligence agencies. Will it lead to an extension? Possibly. Will it lead to better access for Americans to the base? Hopefully. These things are under discussion. Right now, the White House is holed up in the situation room going through all the things that I'm sitting here guessing about, and I just assume leave it to the president.

He understands the weight of this decision is going to be enormous, but my opinion is, he has made the proper decisions along the way, given the hand that he was dealt. He came into this situation with a May 1st deadline for American soldiers all out. That's three months -- four months after he took office. And so what is he to do? He extended the deadline, giving more time for Americans to get out, for more stability for the Afghan government.

Did any of us, and I say any of us -- the Afghan government was at the White House and in the Congress meeting with us two weeks before they simply fled Afghanistan, giving us assurances that they would fight to the death, just give us the money, they said, give us the support, aerial support, all of which we gave them, and then they up and left and abandoned the country, leaving a vacuum that was immediately filled, partially and unsuccessfully thus far, by the Taliban.

TODD: What is -- there's going to be a lot of after-action hearings. If there is one --

GARAMENDI: You bet.

TODD: If there's one big thing that you want to get an answer to, you know, once we get this behind us and to sort of unpack how the withdrawal process worked, what is the one issue you want to drill down on the most?

GARAMENDI: I want to look to the future. I want whatever hearings take place to provide a foundation of information about what America, what the world needs to do to deal with Afghanistan. I'd like to know what the surrounding countries want to do, what their interests are, how we can engage with others in providing as much stability as possible in Afghanistan, providing the humanitarian support that Afghan is desperately going to need, and also how we and others can deal with international terrorism that could reoccur in Afghanistan.

So those are the interests that I have, as to who's responsible for what, when, and how, I have no interest in that, except that it could provide information about what we need going forward.

TODD: John Garamendi, senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, a veteran here, on both coasts, in government and politics.

Congressman, thanks for your time.

GARAMENDI: Thank you, Chuck.

TODD: And your input here.

GARAMENDI: Thank you.

TODD: Let me bring in Admiral James Stavridis who, of course, was in charge of the NATO command.

Jim, walk us through what the president, what the options that are being put forth on him, put forth before him right now of dealing with this current security mess that we have at that airport. It's obviously much harder to get people into the airport. It's not going to get easier. It's going to get harder. What are the various realistic options in order to finish this evacuation?

ADM. JAMES STAVRIDIS (RET), FORMER NATO COMMANDER: Option one will be wrap it up right now. Stop taking anybody else and get our military out of there. I don't think he'll select that. Smack too much of the Lebanon response to the terrorist bombing there where we effectively decamped immediately.

TODD: Yes.

STAVRIDIS: Option two, Chuck, will be continue the mission with a very firm eye toward getting out of here as currently postulated on Tuesday, try to push the security perimeter out further, try to work with the Taliban to get better security, but effectively option two is continue the mission.

Option three would be to extend the mission, open it more broadly, perhaps conduct strikes against ISIS-K at their camps and so forth. I don't think the president is going to go there. I suspect he'll land on some variant of option two.

[13:50:02]

TODD: Is there -- are there realistic targets for ISIS-K that are identifiable right now or is that a bit complicated given that -- I mean, look, our intelligence seemed to be solid enough that we were forewarned about this attack? So what is your sense of how quickly we could acquire targets if we wanted to?

STAVRIDIS: My sense is we could in fact find and exploit targets. It would be a big mission, a long-range mission, we'd have to coordinate it. We wouldn't have to, but we would probably need to coordinate it with the Taliban. I think it's very unlikely that we're going to want to do it, it would be low bang for the buck. Think about those Tomahawks we launched, Chuck against bin Laden way back in, you know, the 1990s that almost got him and got his training camp. Really doesn't have much effect.

TODD: Right.

STAVRIDIS: I doubt we'll go that way.

TODD: Pull back a minute here. The NATO alliance, we know some of our allies in Europe are not happy with how this has played out. I assume it is -- these are disputes that can heal over time, but what is your feeling on the impact on NATO going forward?

STAVRIDIS: I think it is a speed bump if you will. There are much bigger issues for the alliance going forward including working together to counterterrorism. As we know that's not going away, to deter Russia, to look to the Arctic, to work on cybersecurity, to continue to stabilize the Balkans. NATO is not going anywhere in the immediate future.

Yes, there are some grouching I would say from some of the allies about this, but I would say even there, Chuck, over the last three days, you've seen the Biden administration work very hard to heal those, convening the G7, talking very consistently to the allies. I think that one you can kind of put behind us.

TODD: Yes. And, you know, one thing, I'd -- were there really any of our allies arguing for us to stay indefinitely when it came to Afghanistan? I mean, did -- you know, were the Brits making that case behind the scenes? I mean, I didn't see a ton of evidence of that? But was there any of our allies that were wanting us to stay?

STAVRIDIS: No, I think that our allies would have been willing if we have wanted to continue to have a presence, you know, in the, say, U.S. kind of the 3,000 to 5,000 range, probably could have gotten allies to match that one to one. You probably could have built a continuing NATO mission around 10,000 troops. I think they would have stayed. I think when the U.S. made the determination to pull out, they were on board with that.

TODD: Admiral James Stavridis, it's a tough day losing American service members in a mission, but I know they all knew how dangerous this mission was, but it doesn't mean we take these deaths any lightly.

STAVRIDIS: Yes. Think of their families today. Think of their families today.

TODD: Yes. I'm thinking of all the families who haven't gotten the call yet, who are wondering, am I going to get that call, too? So thinking of all of them these days.

Anyway, Jim, thanks very much.

According to new estimates by "The New York Times," there are at least 250,000 Afghans in Afghanistan who worked for the United States who haven't been evacuated yet. So how will this latest attack on the ground impact evacuation efforts and the future for these Afghan refugees?

Joining me now is Mark Hetfield. He's the president and CEO of HIAS, who is focused on this issue of Afghan refugees right now, to discuss this.

So, Mark, first of all I know you've got a lot of contacts on the ground. What are you hearing about safety and security and the ability to get out right now?

MARK HETFIELD, PRESIDENT AND CEO, HIAS: Well, Chuck, there is no safety and security, and there is no ability to get out right now. Even for people who are U.S. citizens, even for people who are (INAUDIBLE) residence or a special immigrant visa holders, let alone the many vulnerable people, religious minorities, activists, people associated with U.S. media or U.S. NGOs. They can't get out right now.

TODD: There's 250,000 Afghans, we know there are some Afghan-Americans that can get out now, but they can't bring their families with them. Explain that struggle. Is this more having to do with the Taliban or more having to do with our SIV process?

HETFIELD: It has everything to do with our SIV process. We had 20 years to prepare for this not unlikely outcome, and it wasn't done. And so as a result, we are now scrambling, and there is a cascading effect. Because we're scrambling to help these SIVs who laid their lives down for American soldiers, we now are not paying enough attention to the other people who are vulnerable and need assistance. So this is an absolute disaster. Refugees have to stop being an afterthought in U.S. foreign policy.

[13:55:03]

It should be in the front of everybody's minds when we go into a situation like this 20 years ago.

TODD: In fact, when we hear the president say, look, we're getting every American who wants to get out to get out, the ones that say they don't want to get out, it's your understanding, are most of them Afghan Americans who are not ready to leave because they can't bring their family with them? They want to get out. They just can't get out by themselves. Is that a better way to put it?

HETFIELD: Exactly. And most SIVs hightailed it out of Afghanistan as soon as they got the status to do so. I mean, the SIV process, it's a 14-step process, and God knows if you were associated with the U.S. Military, you're not going to leave your family behind. So that's exactly it.

There's just no leadership on this issue right now, Chuck. There is no special envoy who's overseeing the humanitarian evacuation, the SIV process and the refugee process. There's nobody at the U.N. who reports to the secretary-general looking at this stuff, either. I don't understand why. But there has to be some leadership on this issue, there has to be somebody with authority.

TODD: Well, walk us through the scope of what you expect in the next year when it comes to Afghan refugees. I mean, we're talking about -- so we have 250,000 Afghans who have a direct connection to the United States operation who deserve some sort of special status, but we're going to have a couple million Afghans who want to -- you know, who are the next level down, who can't get that special, you know, can't qualify for the special visa, but certainly aren't going to feel as if the Taliban are friendly to them. How many do you expect to try to get out and where do you expect them to try to go?

HETFIELD: Well, I mean, there needs to be a humanitarian corridor established to get people out, whether that's an air corridor or a land corridor, but it's very tough to leave Afghanistan in the winter. It's almost impossible by land. So people are going to be trapped there. There needs -- and that needs to be a multinational force, and if the U.S. is going to leave at the end of the month, I don't know how that's going to happen.

But we've seen this -- we've seen this show before unfortunately, and we know that there is going to be hundreds and thousands or more, fleeing for Pakistan and Tajikistan and Iran, and if you get to Iran, good luck trying to get to United States from Iran.

TODD: Obviously, the rise in this nationalism particularly in Eastern and Central Europe has made these refugee and migrant flows even more complicated. Are you having a hard -- I mean, even the politics in our

country, you want to know why we don't have a czar in refugees, I might point to our current politics when it comes to what's happened on this issue, particularly on the right side of our political spectrum.

Are you having more trouble with Western nations being open to taking in these refugees?

HETFIELD: Yes, absolutely. I mean, that's the problem is we have refugees that are -- well, they're not refugees yet because they're stuck in Afghanistan. They're trying to get out. They have flights lined up, they have planes lined up, but they have no place to go, so people aren't flying out. So absolutely, they have absolutely no place to go, whether it's the United States or a country in Europe or in the Middle East.

There's just -- it's a St. Louis situation, but people aren't even able to leave Afghanistan. And when I say St. Louis I mean the --

TODD: I know what you mean, yes.

HETFIELD: The shape of geography (INAUDIBLE).

TODD: Right. Jewish-German refugees turned away before World War II. Let me ask you this, who do you deal with in the administration, and who would you like to get some more Facetime with? I mean, it does sound like you're a bit at wits ends here.

HETFIELD: Well, the thing with the refugee program, one of the flaws of its accountability spread across multiple agencies. The State Department, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, then multiple vetting agencies, law enforcement agencies, and intelligent agencies, and then you need the Department of Defense to implement right now. Right? And so you have -- there is no one person. There needs to be somebody who reports to the president who can coordinate all of these different pieces. I mean, that's what's missing here. So the person I should be talking to doesn't exist.

TODD: And so -- and that's basically what you're arguing for is that there needs to be almost a single person put in charge right now because this is turning into a bureaucratic calamity is what you're describing.

HETFIELD: Absolutely. Who reports to the president and can really make things happen.

TODD: All right. Mark Hetfield, the head of HIAS, who's working entirely on this refugee situation -- in some ways we hope becomes a refugee situation because it means these folks were able to actually get out of Afghanistan.

Mark, thanks for coming on and expressing your perspective with us.

HETFIELD: Thank you, Chuck.

TODD: So that does it for me this hour. We're obviously going to be back tomorrow with more MEET THE PRESS DAILY. MSNBC's coverage is going to continue without breaks right now. Here's my friend, Geoff Bennett.

Geoff, take it away.

GEOFF BENNETT, MSNBC HOST: Thank you, Chuck. It's good to be with you.

And as await further updates from the White House and the Pentagon, we want to bring you up to the minute with what we know.

END

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