UKRAINE

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Department Press Briefing – March 22, 2022

NED PRICE, DEPARTMENT SPOKESPERSON
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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MR PRICE: Good afternoon.

QUESTION: Hello.

MR PRICE: Two items to start and then we’ll turn to your questions.

First, I want to take a few minutes to highlight the reports of what has happened – and what is happening – in Mariupol, a city in southeastern Ukraine that was once home to 450,000 people.

Since Putin's forces began their attack on Ukraine on February 24th, some of the most egregious accounts of what could constitute war crimes have emanated from Mariupol.

The city has been without food, without water, electricity, or gas since the early days after President Putin began his relentless assault on the city. Satellite images show whole areas of Mariupol in ruins, with smoke surrounding the city, which was peaceful and vibrant just a month ago. Although information coming out of the city is limited, reports that are getting through paint a very grim picture.
through paint a very grim picture.

The Russian Air Force bombed Mariupol's Maternity Hospital No. 3 on March 9th, just earlier this month – a children's/maternity hospital. According to a UN report, witnesses indicated that the hospital was both, quote, “operational and clearly identifiable” when it was hit.

The next day, on March 10th, Russia's forces reportedly bombed what should have been a safe corridor, preventing humanitarian supplies from reaching Mariupol.

On March 11th, the next day, a, quote/unquote, “ceasefire” to allow civilians to leave five cities including Mariupol was declared. The following day, March 12th, there was imagery of a Russian tank shelling an apartment building in that very city.

On March 16th, the Donetsk Regional Theater of Drama that was sheltering hundreds was reduced to rubble. The word “children” had been written in Russian outside the building and was clearly visible from the air – that did not deter the Kremlin’s forces. Around 130 people have been rescued, but the fate of hundreds more remain unknown.

Meanwhile, on March 16th, there were reports of Russia's invading forces seizing the Regional Intensive Care Hospital in Mariupol, preventing the staff and patients from leaving the hospital and ruthlessly using them as human shields.

On March 20th, Russia's bombs hit the G12 Art School in Mariupol, where about 400 civilians were reportedly sheltering. It's unclear if there were any survivors.

There are reports that several thousand residents of Mariupol have been unwillingly deported to Russia. We hear stories of the targeting and abduction of journalists. There have been reports of indiscriminate shelling, as well as targeted strikes on apartment complexes.

Mariupol city officials say at least 2,400 civilians have been killed since Russia launched its invasion. It's likely that number is in fact much, much higher.

Beyond the carnage, what has transpired in Mariupol is notable for another reason. The city's population, whom Russian forces are brutalizing, is overwhelmingly Russian-speaking. These are the very people President Putin had the temerity to claim – to claim to the world that he sought to, quote/unquote, “protect.” If the world needed any further indication that Putin's
justification – justifications have been entirely hollow, they need look no further than Mariupol.

Given the preponderance of Russian speakers, Putin may well have expected residents of this city to welcome his forces. Instead, they have mounted stiff resistance, disabusing the Kremlin – and the world – of any sense that the people of Ukraine would greet invading Russian forces as anything other than an aggressor and occupier.

And that fierce – and perhaps unexpected – resistance may well explain why Putin has employed such force against this particular, civilian population. The brave people of Mariupol are putting the lie to Putin's claims, and the Kremlin is reacting with characteristic brutality.

Beyond the borders of Mariupol, the UN says 10 million people – about a quarter of Ukraine's pre-war population – have been displaced by this war.

I want to echo a statement the United Nations issued just yesterday, which included the following:

The devastation and suffering in Mariupol and Kharkiv raise grave fears about the fate of millions of residents of Kyiv and other cities facing intensifying attacks.

The United States fully supports today's statement by the UN secretary general. Continuing the war, as we heard, in Ukraine is morally unacceptable, politically indefensible, and militarily nonsensical. By any measure, but even by the shrewdest calculation, it is time to stop the fighting now; give the opportunity for peace to take root. It is time to end this absurd conflict of Putin's choosing.

Second, the United States strongly condemns the abhorrent attack – terrorist attack today in Be'er Sheva, Israel, which killed four people and injured others. We offer our deepest condolences to the victims and their families and our prayers for the full recovery are with the wounded. We stand ready to provide support to the Israeli Government's efforts to investigate this heinous crime.

With that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. Just on your opening about Mariupol, is there anything that you
QUESTION: Thanks, Ned, just on your opening about Mariupol, is there anything that you guys are doing specifically in response to this as opposed to what's going on in the rest of Ukraine? Is there —

MR PRICE: Well, Matt, our response to the brutality in Mariupol is reflected in our response to the brutality that President Putin is waging against the entire country.

QUESTION: Okay. So, there isn't any action that you're taking or that you envision taking specifically related to —

MR PRICE: Well, there are a series of actions – there is a series of actions that we are taking in response to this brutality that President Putin is waging. We're doing —

QUESTION: I'm sorry, maybe I'm not making myself clear. I mean, is there, like, aid that is being directed specifically to the city, or is there – are there military reinforcements or supplies that are – that you are directing for the defense of this city, or is it the whole package?

MR PRICE: So, as you know, we are working very closely with our Ukrainian partners to hear from them precisely what they need to defend themselves. It is then up to them to use that equipment to good effect against these invading Russian forces. There has been quite a lot of work when it comes to humanitarian corridors. These are diplomatic efforts that we also have been supporting. But as you know, the viability of these diplomatic – excuse me, of these humanitarian corridors has been sporadic at best. And each time we have seen a window of opportunity open for a humanitarian corridor for civilians to go out, for much-needed humanitarian supplies to go in, we have seen that window quite promptly shut by additional Russian aggression.

QUESTION: My last thing is I took note and interest of the statement that you put out earlier about the transfer of these four pediatric cancer patients to St. Jude Hospital in Memphis. And I'm just wondering, if you have – but if you don't have, if you could get – are there similar instances where the U.S. is taking in people in particular need? Obviously, they're all in need if they've fled, but people with illnesses who need critical care treatment. And are there plans to take in more?

MR PRICE: So, our response, Matt, is and will continue to be based on an assessment of the needs of the Ukrainian people, including in specific cases when we see that our capabilities
here, domestically, is – are well suited to what is most needed. In this case, there are a number of European countries who have opened their borders to cancer patients, those who are undergoing and are undergoing cancer treatment, including pediatric oncology patients. The ability of European hospitals in some cases to accept more patients has reached a – reached capacity in some areas. And so, we recognized, in coordination with St. Jude, that they had the availability; they had the capabilities to take in these patients. These patients were stable enough to be transported from Ukraine for onward travel to Memphis, where they are now receiving treatment at St. Jude. But we are constantly in discussion with our European partners, with our Ukrainian partners. And if we have an additional ability to bring in specialized – and in special cases like this, we'll continue to do that.

**QUESTION:** As far as you know, though, this is the only one so far? Or is it possible to find out if there have been other – maybe not to this specific hospital or with these specific illnesses, but if you've taken in others? Is it —

**MR PRICE:** If there are additional cases, we're in a position to publicize, we will.

Yes, Humeyra.

**QUESTION:** Ned, so there's been a meeting with the leaders of Egypt, Israel, the UAE – I'm sure you've seen – focusing on Ukraine, but mostly on Iran. It looks like there is an Arab-Israeli axis emerging basically to counterbalance Iranian power in the region, and likely because they probably don't fully agree with the U.S. position on this issue. What do you make of this meeting? Have you been in touch with, like, these governments separately about this particular meeting?

**MR PRICE:** We're in regular touch with each of these governments. We welcome the trilateral summit between Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel that was held in Sharm el-Sheikh. It's yet another example of what is possible with normalized relations. We will continue to support the Abraham Accords and normalization agreements between Israel and countries in the Arab and Muslim worlds. To advance this goal, we will work closely with Israel, we'll deepen our diplomatic ties with the Palestinians, we'll consult with partners in the region and well beyond who have a common interest in supporting efforts to advance lasting peace.

A couple points to your specific question. First, we have been in close consultation – Rob
Malley and his team have been in close consultation with our Gulf partners. And you may recall a statement that was issued last year by the GCC after one of these consultations with Rob's team where it was quite evident that our Gulf partners recognized the threat that had – that was and remains posed by the nuclear advancements that Iran has been able to make since the nuclear shackles were removed in 2018. Countries around the world, including our Gulf partners, have recognized that with Iran's nuclear program out of the box, we do have a viable option to put it back in the box in the form of a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. In that joint statement, we saw that our Gulf partners in fact welcome – welcomed the possibility of a mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Now, that is something that is still in the works. We're still in an effort to determine whether that will be achievable. We are preparing, as you heard from me yesterday, for a world in which we have a JCPOA, and a world in which we don’t. But either way, the President's commitment to the fact that Iran will never be able to acquire a nuclear weapon – that is ironclad, that is solid, that is something that we will work to achieve, and that we will achieve, whether there is a JCPOA or not.

You mentioned other groupings in the region. These are relationships that we certainly support, as I said before. We are – we continue the support Abraham Accords and other normalization agreements. For our part, you have heard us speak to new groupings that have also emerged, including in the region. One example is the trilateral relationship between the United States, India, and the UAE. You saw those three foreign ministers here at the State Department together in person late last year. It's a relationship, a trilateral relationship that we will continue to invest in and continue to develop. The fact is that we share a number of interests with our Emirati partners, with our Indian partners in the case of that grouping, but also our relationship with Egypt is one that we value, and we value Cairo’s relationships in turn with Israel and the UAE.

**QUESTION:** Right. On the nuclear talks, you used different language yesterday, so can you say how prepared is – that Plan B is and whether you guys have, like, a cutoff point in mind when Plan B should be deployed?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have always known since this process began last April that a mutual return to compliance was something that we deemed to be in our national interest, but we always knew it to be an uncertain proposition because, of course, it would take more than our
effort to achieve it. It would take a willing partner on the Iranian side. And so, the jury is still out as to whether we will be – in fact be able to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. As I said yesterday, an agreement of this sort is neither imminent nor is it certain.

And so that is precisely why for the better part of a year we have been preparing for either contingency, for either scenario, a world in which we have a mutual return to compliance – that is to say, a world in which the JCPOA is the means by which we put Iran's nuclear program back in the box, we reimpose those permanent, verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program and prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

But given that this has always been an uncertain proposition, we’ve always discussed – or we’ve long discussed, I should say – alternatives with our partners in the region. We’ve been doing this with our European allies who are part of the P5+1 – in this case, the E3 countries, so France, Germany, and the UK. We’ve had these discussions with our Israeli partners, with our partners in the Gulf, and farther afield as well. So, we have put a lot of planning and thought into this. For obvious reasons we haven’t detailed publicly what that might look like, but it is not for lack of planning on our part.

**QUESTION:** And in terms of time frame?

**MR PRICE:** In terms of time frame, we will continue to pursue a mutual return to compliance as long as that vehicle continues – mutual return to it continues to be in our national interest —

**QUESTION:** Yes, but you said that – given the breakout time and all that, you kept saying for weeks and months now that the window was closing.

**MR PRICE:** And that hasn’t changed. That hasn’t changed. What also —

**QUESTION:** That’s been a very long wait (inaudible).

**MR PRICE:** What also has not changed is that, based on non – again, the chronological clock, and I know we often deal in chronological clocks, but you’ve heard us —

**QUESTION:** We always deal in —
MR PRICE: We often deal in —

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Is there another kind?

MR PRICE: There is a technical clock when it comes to the JCPOA, as you've heard us —

QUESTION: (Inaudible) a sundial without a second (inaudible).

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PRICE: — as you've heard us discuss before. And that technical clock – again, it’s not based entirely on chronology, but it is based on the advancements that Iran has been able to make once those nuclear shackles were removed from it in 2018 or once it distanced itself from the nuclear agreement in 2018, and the continued advancements that it has been in a position to make. So, until we determine that a mutual return to compliance is no longer in our interest – that is to say, that the nonproliferation benefits that that agreement would convey to us, to our European allies, to our partners in the region and beyond are obviated by those advancements – we'll continue to pursue it.

But what we've always – what we've long said about the short runway, that remains true. We know that there has to be a great deal of urgency. And we know that now the onus is on Tehran to make decisions regarding its willingness to enter into, once again, a mutual return to compliance or not. So, we will have a good sense of all of this before long.

Paul.

QUESTION: Well, given all that that you've said, we still don't know what happened in the past week. A week ago, you, others were optimistic that a deal could be signed this week or could be reached this week.

MR PRICE: Could. The emphasis is on “could.”

QUESTION: And – could be. But – no, but there was a —
MR PRICE: And that remains true today.

QUESTION: My emphasis was —

MR PRICE: If difficult decisions are made, including in Tehran, that could and would still be true.

QUESTION: My emphasis was his tone of optimism, and yesterday then you said there’s no imminent deal. There was a – there’s a change in tone. What happened from last week to this week? What happened in these discussions where people though that something was going to be – an agreement was going to be reached, and now that we don’t hear that from you at all?

MR PRICE: Paul, last week, if you recall, we were talking about really two different sets of challenges. One, we were referring to, perhaps somewhat obliquely, as external factors. Of course, we’ve heard a very different tone from Russia in recent days when it comes to their approach to a potential return to compliance with the JCPOA, but we still made the point at the time that we’re working through, we were working through a number of difficult issues. Now that those external factors are not at the fore of these negotiations, and we’ve heard a different tune from Moscow, we are still working through a number of difficult issues.

As I said before, the onus is on Tehran to make difficult decisions that it might consider difficult, but we have negotiated for the better part of a year – of course, indirectly through our allies and partners – in good faith in a constructive manner to get us to this point. We are still at a point where if those decisions are made, we could reach a mutual return to compliance very soon, but it will take some decisions.

QUESTION: So, are you at a real impasse right now?

MR PRICE: Again, I wouldn’t want to characterize it beyond the fact that there are a number of difficult issues that we are still trying to work through.

QUESTION: Sorry. Can I just clarify something? You just mentioned when you were talking about Russia and the external factors, you said something about Russia and a return to its compliance with the JCPOA. Is it your position that Russia is not in compliance?
MR PRICE: No, I did not intend to say that, and if I did it was a mistake.

QUESTION: Okay. Okay.

MR PRICE: Yes.

QUESTION: Thanks, Ned. President Biden just yesterday stated that India is the only Quad partner that’s somewhat shaky in isolating Russia, while the Australian prime minister said that Australia understands India's position when it comes to the historic ties. Now my question is: Are all Quad partners in sync with each other in understanding and accepting India’s historic ties with Russia? And if not, how does this impact the Quad going forward?

And another question. Over the last four weeks U.S. has sanctioned India – has sanctioned Russia, including defense sanctions. So, during this period, has the Biden administration finally made any decision or come close to a decision when it comes to the CAATSA sanction vis-à-vis the S-400 procurements?

MR PRICE: I don’t have anything new to update you on when it comes to the applicability of CAATSA. We continue to work with Congress and our Indian partners on these issues.

But let me say in terms of India’s place in the Quad, in terms of our relationship with India in the Quad context and the bilateral context, we know that India is an essential partner for us in realizing our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. That is really at the heart of the Quad's goals. And when it comes to the Quad, the President and his fellow Quad leaders earlier this month – March 3rd I believe it was – they had an opportunity to discuss the ongoing conflict in – the ongoing Russian invasion against Ukraine. Secretary Blinken just before that had an opportunity to see his Quad counterparts, including Foreign Minister Jaishankar, as well.

During these engagements, the Secretary and the President respectively reaffirmed their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific in which the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states are respected, and countries are free from military, economic, and political coercion. In fact, we heard that emanate from the leaders call on March 3rd. These are principles that we share with our Quad partners. They also reaffirmed their dedication to the Quad as a mechanism to promote regional stability and security.
Now, you raised an interesting issue of history versus where we are now. As you know, our Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Toria Nuland was – has been in India recently, and she made a very similar point, making the point that India has – of course had a historic defense and security relationship with Russia over time. That relationship came of age and came together at a time when the United States, nor some of our partners, were prepared to have that kind of relationship with India. It was a very different time, different considerations, but those times have changed. They've changed in terms of our willingness and ability to be a strong defense and security partner of India. This is a bilateral relationship that has deepened in a number of ways over the past 25 years or so. This has also happened on a bipartisan basis. It is a legacy in large part of the George W. Bush administration, where we have seen this bilateral relationship between the United States and India evolve and change for the better and deepen in a number of ways, including in our defense and security relationship.

So, the fact is that we are a partner of India now. We are a partner of India when it comes to shared interests, when it comes to the values we share in a free and open Indo-Pacific. And we've invested in that relationship in terms of our defense and security. So historical relationships notwithstanding, we are a partner of choice for India now, as are many of our partners and allies around the world.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, you said that you support alliances in the Middle East. Yesterday, it looks like, the – three leaders have discussed the possibility of creating a new alliance against Iran. Do you support such alliance, too?

**MR PRICE:** I will leave it to other countries to discuss the aims of their partnerships, their groupings, their alliances. What I will say broadly is that it is no secret – and in fact we have made quite clear – that we are facing a shared challenge and, in some ways, a shared threat from Tehran. We've seen that in terms of Tehran's support for terrorist groups, for regional proxies, its use of malicious cyber activity, the way in which it is funding and supplying some of the movements that are creating a much more volatile, unstable region. So, for our part, we are – we will continue to partner closely with our partners in the Gulf, with our partners throughout the Middle East, to push back on Iran's malign activity in whatever form it takes.

**QUESTION:** And when the Houthis attacked the UAF. you sent a warship and planes or fighter
And when the Houthis attacked the UAE, you sent a warship and planes or fighter jets to protect it. Did you do anything with Saudi Arabia to help them defend themselves?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, we have a very deep security relationship with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia has been the target of some of these reprehensible terrorist attacks that have emanated from Yemen. We have condemned those in the strongest terms. These are attacks that have targeted energy infrastructure, but they've also targeted civilian populations – of course Saudi citizens, but we have a sizable American citizen community in Saudi Arabia as well who are also threatened by these types of attacks.

I would note that in terms of our concrete security cooperation, the Saudis, with our assistance, have been able to intercept some 90 percent of these attacks that have originated in Yemen. Of course, we want that number to be 100 percent and, perhaps even more importantly, we want the number of attacks to go down to zero. And we're doing that in a number of different ways, but we know that at the core the way to put an end to this threat is to address the underlying conflict in Yemen.

That is also something that we are working very closely with our Saudi partners on, to bring this conflict to a close, to restore stability, to restore security to the people of Yemen, and to address their dire humanitarian needs. Yemen continues to be home to one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes. Nearly 17 million people are suffering from some degree of food insecurity, suffering the consequences of a drought, but also suffering the consequences of a man-made war. And so, this is something that we're working very closely with our Saudi partners to address.

**QUESTION:** And you didn't provide them with the Patriot systems lately?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry, provide them with —

**QUESTION:** Patriot systems.

**QUESTION:** Patriot systems.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, with the Patriot systems. So, we have engaged our Saudi partners in a number of ways on this, and there are different ways that we can be security partners and provide them with what they need to defend themselves. There are foreign military sales; there are
direct commercial sales. There are other means by which we can supply and resupply the Saudis with what they need. I will leave it to them to speak to their defense procurement plans, but we are standing ready to continue to work with them on this.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said earlier that the U.S. still assesses the Russian soldier death toll as still in the thousands. Can you give an idea on whether the U.S. is banking on an increasing death toll of Russian soldiers being a significant factor that could halt the brakes on Putin? And I’m asking that in context of this department’s work in getting the message across, through to Russian media about the actual number of soldiers who have been killed in Ukraine and your efforts there. And, also, do you have any idea from perhaps your team, your embassy in Moscow, of how many Russian soldiers’ bodies are being returned to Russia?

**MR PRICE:** So, you heard from the National Security Advisor that firm figures are going to be difficult to come by, but it is – a couple of things are very clear. One, the number of Russian casualties number in the thousands, and two, that there are – clearly Putin miscalculated if he thought that he would be able to invade a sovereign country and subjugate without opposition, without facing stiff resistance, the Ukrainian people. And clearly that miscalculation has been on display for the entire world for some time now.

Our strategy is really predicated on doing two things. On the one hand, we are continuing to support our Ukrainian partners. We are supporting them in a number of ways, but relevant to your question, we have provided them and are providing them and will continue to provide them with an unprecedented level of security assistance. Over the past week, it totaled a billion dollars. It’s been some $2 billion over the course of this administration, and the forms of support are many. We issued a fact sheet that walked through some of the specific systems and broad categories of systems, but the fact is that we are providing our Ukrainian partners with precisely what they need to take on this invading force, whether it is in the air, whether it is on the ground.

And I think we’ve all seen the effectiveness with which our Ukrainian partners have employed these supplies. And you can measure them in any number of ways, but they have been able to put tremendous pressure on Russia, on the invading forces. And of course, we’ve all seen the
consequences of that in terms of the inability, at least to date, of Russian convoys, of Russian contingents to move forward, including against Ukrainian towns and cities in some areas.

Second, we are continuing to put unprecedented pressure on the Russian economy, on the Russian financial system, and really on President Putin and those around him. And just as we’ve supported Ukraine in a number of ways, we've employed pressure against Russia in a number of ways with our sanctions, with our other export controls, other economic measures. We have done things, including by sanctioning President Putin personally, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Defense Minister Shoigu, others in and around the Kremlin, including oligarchs and Putin cronies, to make clear that we will go after anyone who is contributing to this war effort.

So, you marry those two forms of pressure, and our goal is that both of them will combine to push the Russian Federation in a better direction when it comes to seeking a genuine, diplomatic resolution to this conflict. There have been any number of conversations to date in any number of fora, but what we have not seen yet, at least, is any indication that the Russians are interested or willing to de-escalate. And that really is going to be the metric that we continue to look to. We know it is the metric that our Ukrainian partners will continue to look to.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just quickly following up on the children that were brought over to the U.S., obviously these four children were able to obtain these expedited visas, have access to the U.S. with their families. What would you say specifically to Ukrainian Americans who have not had the same success in terms of getting their elderly parents or vulnerable family members – to get those same medical exceptions? These are obviously lifesaving medical treatments that they would be receiving here. They are obviously fleeing war and not, for example, economic – they are not economic refugees. Why leave them at the mercy of essentially strangers in another country when there are families in the U.S. that could receive them here?

**MR PRICE:** So, a couple things on that. We have, and will continue to be, the most generous country when it comes to humanitarian assistance for the people of Ukraine. That includes the people of Ukraine in Ukraine – the more than 6 million people who have been internally displaced within their own country – and the some 3.5 million Ukrainians who have been forced to flee their home country, many of whom are in neighboring European countries. We
have, since Russia's invasion began last month, contributed nearly $300 million to that effort, and we will continue to be the world's leading humanitarian donor for, and with, the people of Ukraine going forward.

We also know that there are many individuals who are seeking to be reunited with their families. Family reunification is something that we are taking a very close look at. We're working with USCIS and the broader Department of Homeland Security to determine what more we might be able to do when it comes to family reunification, including those who have family members here - knowing that most Ukrainians have been forced out of their countries with every intention of returning, and hopefully returning quite soon. It continues to be our goal to bring this conflict to a close as quickly as we can so that families can be reunited back in their home country – in many cases, where they have left brothers, fathers, sons, who have stayed behind to fight. And so, for many of the individuals who have been forced to flee Ukraine, the 3.5 million Ukrainian refugees, they want to go back to their home country, and it continues to be our goal to see to it that they can get back to a peaceful Ukraine just as soon as is possible.

Now, Europe has done a tremendous job, including some of Ukraine's neighbors – Poland of course at the top of that list – in accepting in some cases hundreds of thousands or even millions of Ukrainian refugees. We are going to continue through our humanitarian assistance to support those countries, and as you heard from the President and others, we have every expectation that there may be a need to resettle Ukrainian refugees elsewhere in third-country resettlement. We'll work with UNHCR, we'll work through the USRAP program to determine which and how many Ukrainians may wish to be resettled here in the United States. That is a process that we will continue to work on, just as we continue to do everything we can to see to it that Ukrainians can return to their homeland as soon as they can.

**QUESTION:** But your advice from this building is for those – even those that have family here, that your advice is go try these European neighbors first before – you'll have better success there before attempting to come to this side?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Ukrainians are crossing land borders. Of course, air travel is not an option at this —

**QUESTION:** But for vulnerable individuals, those with medical illness, things like that?
MR PRICE: There are – of course, we know that many Ukrainians are receiving medical attention in surrounding countries and neighboring countries. The fact is that we were able to accept these children because capacity limits have been reached in some areas in Europe. We will continue to work closely with our European partners to take a look at their capacity, to take a look at the need on the ground in Ukraine, and to marry our capacity with the needs on the ground and what our European partners are in a position to do.

Yes.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you, Ned. A couple of questions on Bangladesh, if I may. Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland conclude her three days official visit to Bangladesh without having any meeting with ruling prime minister. May I know why she didn't meet with the prime minister of Bangladesh?

And second, this visit took place after imposing U.S. sanction on Rapid Action Battalion for widespread allegation of serious human rights abuse in Bangladesh and the country’s abstention on UN resolution on Russian aggression on Ukraine – obviously this country is supportive to Russia one way or another. So – and the country itself is a problematic situation now in terms of democracy, absence of voting rights, and freedom of expression. Main opposition leader Begum Zia still is in house arrest. May I know what message conveyed to the authoritarian Government of Bangladesh from the Biden administration during this senior official visit? And will Biden administration critical on Bangladesh current regime?

MR PRICE: Well, we have spoken to our relationship with Bangladesh, but the fact that Toria Nuland was there is another – I think underlines our partnership with the people of Bangladesh. This is a country – this is a people with whom we have a longstanding partnership. This is a country that has welcomed refugees. We've been speaking to Ukrainian refugees, but of course, there have been any number of refugee crises in recent years, and Bangladesh, of course, has – as a country has opened its arms to the Rohingya population that was forced to flee Burma.

So, we will continue to be in close contact with our Bangladeshi partners in government, but also our partners in Bangladesh extend well beyond government, as they do around the world: Bangladeshi civil society, working on our trade and economic relationship with...
Bangladesh as we continue to stand up for values that are universal and that apply equally to the people of Bangladesh as they do to people anywhere else.

Yes, Conor.

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask you about Aleksey Navalny? Do you have any response to a Russian court sentencing him to nine additional years in prison today?

**MR PRICE:** We do. We strongly condemn the Russian Federation's orchestration of a sham trial to convict Aleksey Navalny on further spurious charges, and sentencing him to nine more years in a high-security prison. We note with grave concern that the court's sham ruling is the latest in a series of attempts to silence Navalny and other opposition figures and independent voices who have been critical of Russian authorities, including Navalny's near-fatal poisoning with a nerve agent by Russian security services in 2020.

This disturbing decision, the one announced today, is another example of the Russian Government's widening crackdown on dissent and freedom of expression, which is intended to hide the Kremlin's brutal war and unprovoked war against Ukraine. Confident and political leaders do not fear competing voices, nor do they commit violence against or unjustly detain political opponents. Russian people, like people everywhere, deserve a government that supports an open marketplace of ideas; deserve a government that supports transparent and accountability, as well as an independent judiciary; and the ability to exercise their human rights of freedom of expression or peaceful assembly without fear of retribution. We urge the Russian Government to provide a level playing field for all political parties and candidates seeking to compete in the electoral process. We demand his immediate and unconditional release.

**QUESTION:** Let me just follow up as well on what you had to say about Mariupol, in the start. You said again that there were these reports of Ukrainian civilians being forcibly removed. Yesterday you had said the U.S. was investigating those reports. Have you still not been able to confirm whether or not this is actually taking place?

**MR PRICE:** We're still in the same position of having seen these very disturbing reports. Every day when it comes to potential atrocities, we are seeing – we are all witnessing additional evidence that the Russians are in fact committing atrocities, committing acts that may go above that threshold, to include potential war crimes. So, it's something we are watching very closely.
above that threshold, to include potential war crimes. So, it’s something we are watching very closely. We are – beyond doing that, we are documenting, we are sharing, all with an eye to seeing to it that any of those who perpetrate these atrocities, these abuses, these potential war crimes are held accountable, whether they are political leaders, whether they are commanders on the battlefield.

**QUESTION:** And on Kherson, for the second day in a row now Russian troops have used tear gas, live fire against Ukrainians who are protesting Russian occupation. Do you have any response to that as well?

**MR PRICE:** We issued a statement this morning on Twitter regarding that just abhorrent use of force against protesters. It is consistent with what we have seen on the part of the Russian military that has sought to brutalize a people that are doing in many cases nothing more than standing up for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their country. In this case, these were individuals who were peacefully protesting. The use of force against peaceful protesters is something that we condemn in every instance. It was especially egregious in this instance.

Alex.

**QUESTION:** Just following up on the people who – the residents of Mariupol who are now in Russia. The Russians have admitted to this. They say that it’s 62,000 people. And I get that you’re still looking into these reports, but given the scale, are you in any position to talk to those numbers? But perhaps more importantly, do you have a sense of whether they were forcibly removed? Did they evacuate themselves? You heard the Mariupol city council say that they are in camps. Would this, do you think, be traditional, say, refugee camps or more like prison camps? Do you have any sense of the condition of these people? Any – any details?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we’re not in a position to detail it yet. Of course, as I’ve said before, we’ve seen these disturbing reports, and if we’re in a position to verify them, to speak to them, we will. But this gets to the other point that I noted at the top. Mariupol is a city of 450,000. The vast majority of that population – well over 60 percent – is Russian-speaking. And yet, this is a population that President Putin and his forces have brutalized, and there are a number of theories as to why they have used and exerted such force against this population. Mariupol, of course, is a strategic location.

But there also may be an element of vengeance, in particular vengeance against this.
But there also may be an element of vengeance, in particular vengeance against this population, with Putin having – perhaps having been under the misimpression, whether he was misinformed or just unwitting of reality, that his forces would not be greeted as anything other than the aggressors that they are. Russian forces have faced stiff resistance in Mariupol. The fact that they share a language – we have seen the residents of Mariupol rise up to defend their homeland, their country, to defend the territorial integrity, the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.

It’s no surprise to us; it may well have been a surprise to President Putin, may well have been a surprise to the Kremlin; and that may well be why we have seen such ferocious force employed against the people of Mariupol.

QUESTION: I was going to ask you about that. Why – but CNN reported yesterday that there does not appear, at least the U.S. does not appear to know who an overall, overarching commander of these Russian forces is. Do you have a – do you believe that that could play into why we’re seeing particular ferociousness, when it comes to Mariupol? Are you seeing forces in different parts of the country acting independently of one another and in different ways?

MR PRICE: That is a question that’s better directed to my colleague at the Department of Defense. I believe the Department of Defense has made the point that Russia’s command structure is quite different from our own, and the way that they – the way that they command their forces doesn’t look like the way we do it here. It’s more of a forward-deployed structure. But whether the varying tactics, what we’re seeing in Mariupol versus other parts of the country, owes to a particular commander, owes to a doctrine, owes to a strategy, that’s a question you may wish to ask them.

Yes, John.

QUESTION: Hey, Ned. The National Security Advisor said today that the war is not going to end rapidly or quickly. Is that causing the – for the diplomats here representing the United States any new sort of creative thinking or a different tack about trying to change that outcome that we see in front of us as a sort of long, grinding war?

MR PRICE: Well, I think you’ve seen that determination and really, to use your term, that creativity already applied. The fact that we are doing things that have been unprecedented in terms of their scale and scope, and we are in a position to do them precisely because of the
terms of their scale and scope, and we are in a position to do them precisely because of the diplomacy that has taken place in this building and in this administration, not over the course of months – really, since late last year, but really over the course of 13 or 14-plus months. The fact that we were able and have been able to unite much of the international community – and you can measure that by any number of votes at the UN, any shows of solidarity and determination on the part of various alliances and partnerships, collections of countries – but the fact owes to the investment that Secretary Blinken and this building made to repairing, to revitalizing our system of partnerships and alliances starting in January of last year. The fact that we now see and hear the world acting in unison, speaking clearly, is a function of the spadework that was done over the past 14 months since January of last year.

But speaking to the creativity, and speaking to the determination, the fact that we have been able to provide our Ukrainian partners with such an unprecedented show of support – again, in any number of forms, security assistance, humanitarian assistance, economic assistance, financial assistance – all speaks to what this building has been engaged in since the prospect of a large-scale Russian incursion came on the radar screen a number of months ago. The fact that we have been able to isolate Russia diplomatically, politically, economically, financially, strategically on the world stage also speaks to the level of effort, the level of determination, and yes, the level of creativity that in many cases has emanated from this building.

So, no one here is under any illusions, as you heard from the National Security Advisor, that this conflict is necessarily going to have a swift or near-term conclusion. But we are – we have, and we will continue to do everything to put our Ukrainian partners in the strongest position they can be in at the negotiating table. We have done everything to put as much pressure as we can on the Russian Federation so that we have – we are strengthening Ukraine’s hand, we’re weakening Russia’s hand as we continue to support the people of Ukraine in their fight against an invading force, and the people of Ukraine who have been forced to flee their homes.

All right.

**QUESTION:** Hold on.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I’ve got one more. Completely unrelated to this. Yesterday, you guys announced
sanctions on this Sudanese police unit. There has been some concern expressed by pro-
democracy activists in Sudan that these sanctions don’t go far enough, that they should have
included – a quote here – the Rapid Support Force, which is a paramilitary unit, and also senior
military officials. Can you explain why the sanctions that were imposed yesterday were limited
to this one unit, and then are you considering expanding out?

MR PRICE: Matt, we are – well, let me start by saying that just because we have targeted one
unit or one element with sanctions is not dispositive in terms of what we might do next. We
can always add to those sanctions, expand them, sanction other entities or units. And we have
the authorities with which to do that.

What we are focused on now is putting back on track a civilian-led transitional government.
We’re working very closely with the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission to Sudan, or
UNITAM, in their efforts to do that. We are standing with the Sudanese people in terms of the
support and the assistance that we are providing them. And we’re going to continue to hold
accountable those in the Sudanese military who have used excessive force, violence, who have
abused the rights of the Sudanese people, who – in many cases – have done nothing more
than take to the streets peacefully to protest the overthrow and the overturning of what was a
peaceful transition to democracy. It's our goal, working with our UN partners, with our
broader set of allies and partners on this, to put that transition back on track. We'll support the
Sudanese people, and we'll hold accountable those who are responsible for overturning or
attempting to thwart that transition.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PRICE: Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:14 p.m.)
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