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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has wrapped up a one-day visit to Washington, D.C., where he called on the Biden administration and lawmakers to provide more military and financial aid to Ukraine in its fight against Russia. This was Zelensky's first overseas trip in nearly a year, since the war began. Ahead of the trip, over 1,000 faith leaders in the United States called for a Christmas truce in Ukraine. For more on the war and hopes for peace, we speak with CodePink co-founder Medea Benjamin, theologian Cornel West and Reverend Graylan Scott Hagler, senior adviser to the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed a rare joint session of Congress Wednesday night where he called on the Biden administration and lawmakers to provide more military and financial aid to Ukraine in its fight against Russia. Zelensky's visit to Washington came 300 days after Russia's invasion on February 24th. It was Zelensky's first overseas trip since the war began. On Wednesday afternoon, President Biden met with Zelensky at the White House, announcing more military aid for Ukraine, including a Patriot missile defense system.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Today, I'm announcing the next tranche of our security assistance to Ukraine: \$1.85 billion package of security assistance that includes both direct transfers of equipment to — that Ukraine needs, as well as contracts to supply ammunition Ukraine will need in the months ahead for its artillery, its tanks and its rocket launchers. Critically, in addition to these new capabilities, like precision aerial munitions, the package will include a Patriot missile battery, which will — and on which we'll train Ukrainian forces to operate as part of the ongoing effort to help bolster Ukraine's air defense.

AMY GOODMAN: During his speech to a joint session of Congress later in the day, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said aid to Ukraine should be viewed as investment, not charity.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY: It's a great honor for me to be at the U.S. Congress and speak to you and all Americans. Against all odds and doom-and-gloom scenarios, Ukraine didn't fall. Ukraine is alive and kicking. ... Ukraine — Ukraine holds its lines and will never surrender.

So, here is the frontline, the tyranny which has no lack of cruelty against the lives of free people. And your support is crucial not just to stand in such fight, but to get to the turning point to win on the battlefield. We have artillery, yes. Thank you. We have it. Is it enough? Honestly, not really. ...

Financial assistance is also critically important, and I would like to thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you for both financial packages you have already provided us with and the ones you may be willing to decide on. Your money is not charity. It's an investment in the global security and democracy that we handle in the most responsible way.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressing a joint session of Congress. He came to the United States yesterday and left after a number of hours after that address.

In Moscow, Russian Vladimir Putin made a rare admission of major problems facing the Russian military but vowed to continue fighting in Ukraine and promised to give the Russian military everything it's asking for. Meanwhile, the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov criticized Zelensky's visit to Washington and the Biden administration's decision to send more arms to Ukraine.

DMITRY PESKOV: [translated] The supply of weapons continues, and the range of supplied weapons is expanding. All of this, of course, leads to an aggravation of the conflict. This does not bode well for Ukraine.

AMY GOODMAN: Ahead of President Zelensky's trip to Washington, over a thousand faith leaders in the United States called for a Christmas truce in Ukraine. The signatories included the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Bishop William Barber and members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The [letter](#) was initiated by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, CodePink and the National Council of Elders. The groups also released this short video featuring some of the signatories.

CHRISTMAS TRUCE SIGNATORIES: As people of faith and conscience believing in the sanctity of all life on this planet, we call for a Christmas truce — for a Christmas truce — for a Christmas truce in Ukraine. In the spirit of the truce that occurred in 1914 during the First World War, we urge our government to take a leadership role in ending the war in Ukraine by calling for a ceasefire and negotiated settlement. We pray they do this before more people are killed and wounded and millions more are displaced from their homes, before the growing crisis in global hunger and poverty worsens, and before the conflict results in a nuclear war that could devastate the world's ecosystems and annihilate — and annihilate — and annihilate all of God's — all of God's — all of God's creation — creation — creation — creation — creation.

AMY GOODMAN: We're joined now by three guests involved in this call by over a thousand faith leaders for a Christmas truce in Ukraine. The Reverend Graylan Scott Hagler is an adviser to the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Cornel West is an author, activist and professor at Union Theological Seminary. He's author of numerous books, including *Race Matters* and *Black Prophetic Fire*. And Medea Benjamin is co-founder of CodePink, which helped initiate the Christmas truce in Ukraine letter. She's co-author of the new book, *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*.

Medea, let's begin with you in Miami, Florida. Talk about the reasoning behind this call, and how both President Biden and President Zelensky, in this rare moment, Zelensky's first overseas trip since Russia invaded — how they dealt with the issue of negotiation. You're, though, calling for a truce. And talk about the distinction.

MEDEA BENJAMIN: We feel that this war is not going to be won on the battlefield. This is

something that the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said. We see that the head of NATO

, Jens Stoltenberg, who has been so hawkish on this, was asked his greatest fear; he said, "Spinning out of control. If it goes wrong, it could go horribly wrong." We see us no longer marching towards a nuclear Armageddon with their eyes closed; it's with our eyes opened. There will not be a military victory. There must be negotiations.

And we don't want the moral center questioning this war to be coming from people like Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, Donald Trump or Tucker Carlson, who are the people now questioning this war. We want it to come from the moral center of this country. That means the faith-based community, who understands that we have to protect all of God's creations and that our moral obligation is to stop the killing, stop the fighting, stop the war. And that's why we have called for this Christmas truce.

AMY GOODMAN: Professor Cornel West, you are a doctor of, a professor of philosophy and Christian practice at Union Theological Seminary. We're speaking to you in Irvine, California. Talk about why you signed on to this letter and what you think the U.S. should be doing that it's not doing right now, clearly far and above the major supporter of Ukraine financially, militarily, when it comes to dealing with Russia's invasion.

CORNEL WEST: Ooh, yeah, I'm sorry I didn't hear your full question, though, Sister Amy, but that's all right, though. I think it had something to do with the ways in which I would hope we accent how both the American empire, that set the context for this situation with the expansion of NATO and pushing the gangster Putin with his wounded Russian empire against the wall, and then the wrong, illegal and immoral invasion and occupation of our precious Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

But we have to be willing to have a moral witness that keeps track of the organized greed, of the routinized hatred, of the manipulated fear and the chronic hypocrisy of the wounded Russian empire and the American empire, that is, of course, 800 — has 800 military troops units around the world and doesn't want to be honest about its own role. We know that if there were missiles in Canada or Mexico or Venezuela or Cuba, the U.S. military would blow them to smithereens. So we have no moral authority when it comes to dealing with the gangster activity of Putin. We have American gangster activity in our military-industrial complex tied to the White House.

AMY GOODMAN: And, Reverend Graylan Hagler, if you can talk about what this truce would mean, as a minister in Washington, D.C., and senior adviser to the Fellowship of Conciliation? It seems that in the United States — this is unlike even the media in France, for example, and Germany — that negotiation is viewed as capitulation. In other places, it's viewed as how to save the planet. But talk about what it would look like here and what your response was to yesterday's joint session of Congress, to the plea that President Zelensky made, with his people under fire across Ukraine, what it means for President Biden to agree to send this Patriot missile system. Clearly, Zelensky, to laughter, has said he'll be asking for more.

REV. GRAYLAN SCOTT HAGLER: Yes. Well, thanks, Amy.

And what I want to start out with is by saying the Fellowship of Reconciliation is the oldest peace and justice organization and continues to try to lift up an alternative vision of what we need to — how we need to respond as a people. One thing that we know is that wars create carnage, and wars create an atmosphere where basically the manufacturers of weaponry and those who struggle to try to enlarge empire grow rich, while people who are caught up in the conflict grow poor, carnage visits them, there's basic destruction.

We believe that there's an alternative way. And that alternative way comes out of discussion, because, really, when you talk about discussion or a truce, you're talking about a battle for the soul, whether the soul can actually commune with another soul and produce a more just world, a world that's not built upon conflict and pain and aggression.

What we're looking at is, in 1914, on Christmas Eve, in World War I, people came out of the trenches, combatants, and celebrated for a moment an atmosphere of peace. And we're saying that that history is speaking to us right now and calling upon us right now to create an atmosphere where we can begin the road towards peace and reconciliation, because the issue is, weapons are not going to take us there, and combatants are not going to take us there. It's only when we sit down and say, "Enough is enough, and we need to reason from the heart and the spirit of justice."

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to turn to the comments that Angela Merkel made earlier this month — yes, the former German chancellor — making headlines about the Minsk agreement in 2014 to end fighting in eastern Ukraine. Merkel said, quote, "The 2014 Minsk agreement was an attempt to give Ukraine time. It also used this time to become stronger, as you can see today." Russian President Vladimir Putin later cited Merkel's comments.

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN: [translated] Everything that is being said now only shows that we did everything right concerning the beginning of the special military operations. Why? Because it turns out that no one wants to fulfill all these Minsk agreements. The meaning was only to pump Ukraine with weapons and prepare them for battle actions. We see, apparently, we focused too late, honestly. So, it begs the question: How can we make deals? And can we make deals? And where are the guarantees? That is the question. Anyway, in the end, we have to make agreements. I've said many times that we are ready for these agreements. We are open.

AMY GOODMAN: Medea Benjamin, if you can comment on this? And then talk about the course of this war, and particularly, I mean, front page, *The New York Times*, "Putin Admits Battle Failures But Fights On" — it was a rare admission yesterday, but saying he's committed to the long haul — and President Zelensky saying the same thing.

MEDEA BENJAMIN: Well, I think it's important to understand that Angela Merkel, in her interview, also said, "Why would Putin ever trust the West in peace negotiations?" Basically, using those peace negotiations not to stop the inflow of weapons into Ukraine, but to start pouring them in even more. And so, there is no trust on any side at this point.

But there is a need for negotiations. Both sides have staked out their positions, maximalist positions on each side, Zelensky now saying they want every inch of Donbas and all of Crimea back, and the Russians saying they now control and owned these four regions of Ukraine that they can't even control on the battlefield. But these are positions for negotiations. But the call for negotiations has to come from Biden. And it is not happening. We see that after he met with Macron, the head of France, Macron said there are legitimate security interests of Russia that have to be taken into account. So that all has to be dealt with at the peace table.

And so, what we are saying with this Christmas truce call is that let's be realistic with the American people. We keep pouring more money. Now it will be another \$45 billion that will be approved by the end of this week. That's over \$100 billion, without a year going by, that could have been used for so many essential needs here in this country, and instead poured into a war that is not winnable on the battlefield. So, we need to be honest about this. And that's why we have this call for a Christmas truce. That's why Reverend Barber will be giving a Christmas Eve sermon on the moral imperative of a truce. That's why we're having a week of protests, starting January 13th; February 19th, the Libertarian Party and the People's Party calling for a

protest in Washington, D.C.; March 8th, International Women's Day, an international call of women to say, "Stop this war, and end all wars." That's what we need to do.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to turn to two clips of President Biden. This was the joint news conference that he held with the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday afternoon at the White House.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: And, President Velensky [*sic*] — Zelensky, you have made it clear that he is open to pursuing a — well, let me put it this way: He's not open, but you're open to pursuing peace. You're open to pursuing a just peace. We also know that Putin has no intention — no intention — of stopping this cruel war. And the United States is committed to ensuring that the brave Ukrainian people can continue, continue to defend their country against Russian aggressions as long as it takes.

AMY GOODMAN: And Biden went on to indicate he would let Zelensky set the timetable for any negotiated settlement with Russia.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: It can succeed in the battlefield with our help, and the help of our European allies and others, so that if and when President Zelensky is ready to talk with the Russians, he will be able to succeed, as well, because he will have won on the battlefield.

AMY GOODMAN: Cornel West, if you can respond to that awkward moment at the beginning, which sounded like he was saying that the Russian president was willing to negotiate, and then going on to say this is completely up to Zelensky? Cornel, are you having trouble hearing us? I think Cornel is having trouble, so let's go on to Reverend Hagler in answering that question.

REV. GRAYLAN SCOTT HAGLER: Well, I think that the issue is, you would hope that Joe Biden would lead in peace efforts and not in war efforts. And I think that's the issue, and that's what we've called out in terms of this letter. It's calling on the leadership to lead towards peace, towards negotiations, towards a dialogue, towards finding a way out of this. And clearly, what takes place on the battlefield will not bring solution; it will just bring further complication and loss of life. And so, we are asking that Biden lead in terms of peace and that the ears of the

world demand peace right now.

AMY GOODMAN: And, I mean, Reverend Hagler, you're right there in Washington, D.C. You had this unusual moment weeks ago when Pramila Jayapal, the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus — the caucus put out a letter from a number of progressive politicians calling for a negotiated settlement, then awkwardly retracted it. What do you understand is going on in Washington right now? Why isn't the discussion in the media, in Congress, that range of discussion? And instead, it is the far-right Republicans who are raising questions about giving so much support to Ukraine, but antiwar progressives are not speaking out as much in Congress.

REV. GRAYLAN SCOTT HAGLER: Well, there's this ideological wall that seems to have developed. And that ideological wall is those who continue to cheer on Zelensky and Ukraine, and, on the other hand, you have the Republicans, particularly the right-wing, ultra-right-wing Republicans, that are basically operating as agents for Putin. So, people have chosen sides, unfortunately. And the sides that they have chosen are not the — is not the side of peace, but it's the side of continued warfare, continued aggression.

And when we sit and look at this, the money that's wasted, the money that's wasted on armaments, that, yes, could be spent at home and could be spent in other kinds of endeavors that build up the world and build up the kind of human dignity and worth that we really expect — you know, when we look at this truce, this letter that went out calling for a truce, it was very interesting how quickly religious leaders signed on to it, because religious leaders understood that there is another way that we need to go. There's another thing that we need to be cheering about. And that is that we need to be cheering about coming to a place where we can sit down and solve issues, not on the battlefield, but across the table from one another. And that's what we're calling for. And that 1914 moment of truce is a history lesson that's speaking to us in the current moment.

AMY GOODMAN: Medea Benjamin, in your recent book on Ukraine, you wrote, "In May, after the U.K.'s Johnson and U.S.'s Austin delivered their message to Zelensky in April to keep fighting for the long run, the U.S. Congress passed an enormous \$40 billion aid package to help Ukraine militarily and economically to fight a long war. Not a single Democrat opposed the bill, including Senator Bernie Sanders and the most progressive House Democrats, although 11 Republican senators and 57 House Republicans voted against it," you said. There's also discussion that this moment that President Biden and President Zelensky have seized for Zelensky's joint session of Congress address is right before the House changes hands to Republicans, because a number of Republicans — not clear if the House speaker will be

McCarthy — are demanding that this money and weapons flow stop. How do you feel as a progressive antiwar activist — two things — being allied with far-right Republicans and, secondly, being called by some a Russian apologist?

MEDEA BENJAMIN: I feel that if I were in Russia, I would be in jail for protesting this war. I also feel terrible that my congresspeople in the Progressive Caucus were cowed and silenced. I think the 30 who signed on that letter, in their heart of hearts, probably believe that negotiations is the only way. And we have to pressure them more to come out and say that their original stance was right, just as Congressman Ro Khanna stood by that stance on national television and CNN and got tremendous support for it. We in the Peace in Ukraine Coalition have been putting pressure on those 30 congresspeople to come back out and say, “Yes, negotiations is the right thing. Yes, a Christmas truce would be a wonderful thing.” So, it’s our job to put the pressure on our members of Congress, whether they’re Republican or Democrat, to come out with the only rational position right now.

The U.S., unfortunately, and the Biden administration, has been against negotiations, nixed the negotiations that were going on in late March, early April, and told the Ukrainians, basically, “You don’t have to negotiate, because we’re going to keep pouring more weapons in.” This is only helping the weapons companies, who actually were the sponsors of a reception at the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington, D.C., on December 8th, brought to you by Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Raytheon. They are the ones who are getting rich in this. The Ukrainians are suffering. The whole world is suffering from this. And we have to get Congress — all of Congress — to recognize this is not in the best interest of the American people or of the entire world.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to put that same question to Cornel West: where you find yourself on the spectrum, and those that say a negotiated settlement now only serves Vladimir Putin, and Zelensky’s push right now is to not only hold ground, but to, with a Patriot missile system, go on the offensive. He says it’s the only way to win this war.

CORNEL WEST: Well, I mean, I think Sister Medea’s point that you’ve got 14,000 courageous Russian brothers and sisters who were willing to go to jail for seven years in order to have some accountability of the gangster who runs their empire, Russia, we need to have an equivalent antiwar movement in the American empire that’s willing to put pressure on our political elites. Most of our political elites and in Congress suffer from a moral and spiritual bankruptcy, because they can’t say a mumbling word when it comes to what’s really happening on the ground with the heroic struggles in Iran right now. They can’t say a mumbling word about the Palestinian struggles, what’s been going on for the last 50 years. But all of a sudden

they're willing to breakdance and act as if they're concerned about domination when it comes to Ukraine.

So we want to be consistent. We want to support any people who are dominated, whether they are Dalits in neofascist India, whether they're landless peasants in Brazil, whether they're Black people and working people in America, whether they're workers in the UC, University of California, system. And not a mumbling word from Democrats like the governor, caving. We want moral consistency. That's what Martin King was calling for. That's what Dorothy Day was calling for. That's what Rabbi Heschel was calling for in the '60s. That's our legacy. And what that means is, we're going to cut against all the grains in the name of truth, in the name also, we hope, of justice and even some beauty.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to ask you about the split on the left, Professor West. Some on the left have emphasized the history of U.S. hostility to Russia in the region, including pushing NATO

expansion. You have people like the CIA

Director William Burns, who in the past was fiercely critical of the U.S. pushing to expand NATO

. And many say the U.S. now has no right to criticize Russia, which, according to this logic, is defending its sphere of influence. However, others on the left have insisted that imperialism must be opposed in all its ugly forms, whether it's U.S. imperialism or Russian imperialism against the deeply suffering Ukrainian people. Where do you stand on this?

CORNEL WEST: I stand on the highest moral ground I can gain access to, which is in opposition to imperialism, be it China, be it India, be it America, be it Britain, be it France, be it Russia. Across the board, our anti-imperialism must be consistent. I was thinking of my dear sister Charlene Mitchell, who I had such great respect for. We didn't always agree, but she was a long-distance runner, and she attempted to be consistent in her critiques of predatory forms of capitalism. And I resonate with that. But we need more Medea Benjamins, we need more Brother Haglers, and we need more Amy Goodmans in the world, let me tell you that.

AMY GOODMAN: But if you can talk more about what should happen in Ukraine right now? I mean, you also have been extremely critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

CORNEL WEST: Absolutely.

AMY GOODMAN: You have millions of Ukrainians fleeing right now. Some say that President Putin wants this to happen because it will turn Europe against Ukraine because they can't deal with the flow of refugees.

CORNEL WEST: Well, we need to have a truce. That's the first step. This is a process. This is stage by stage, moment by moment, to have a truce and then to put pressure on both ruling classes, across the board, put pressure on the power elites in both empires, across the board, and then have a moral and spiritual and political galvanizing of the people from below, because if it's dependent solely on the voices of the power elites, it's not going to happen.

AMY GOODMAN: How does a truce lead to a ceasefire, Cornel West?

CORNEL WEST: Well, one, it allows us to view the world through the lens of peace rather than war. It allows us to assume that there can be not just major interruptions in the process of war, but maybe those interruptions can become more chronic. And as they become more chronic, we have peaceful ways of dealing with the various forms of death and dogma and domination that are shot through the history of the species. And all we have is actually these utopian projects of trying to create some spaces in which people are not at each other's throats.

So, that's what truces do. They provide not just moments, but different lens through which we view the world. I think that's what Brother Hagler was saying with such eloquence, and that's what Medea Benjamin has been talking about all her life, or at least her political life. I don't think she came out of the womb talking that way, but, I mean ...

AMY GOODMAN: And if you can address that split, Medea Benjamin, something you have also been dealing with, progressives talking about supporting Ukraine at all costs because of the imperialistic invasion by Russia of Ukraine, and then seeing this war not only as it is but possibly escalating to a global conflagration, or even if it doesn't lead to nuclear war?

MEDEA BENJAMIN: I've been going around the country with my colleague Nicolas Davies on a 50-city tour, and we find that audiences come in with very different views. I asked them, "How many of you are confused about this?" And just about everybody raised their hand. We

have good discussions, and people leave with a much deeper understanding that this war didn't just fall from the sky, that there are contexts to understand and that there is not a military victory. And then they go out excited to do something about it. We have entire states that are mobilizing statewide coalitions to put the pressure on their elected officials.

I think this is what happens to us when wars start. In the beginning of the Iraq War, we were also told that we were Saddam Hussein supporters. People will come around to our side as this war drags on and more and more people get killed and we become closer and closer to this nuclear Armageddon that President Biden mentioned. So, I feel confident that we're on the right side of history. I hope more people will come over to our side more quickly, join us in the PeaceInUkraine.org coalition.