

News; Domestic

U.S. Military Completes Afghanistan Withdrawal; Hurricane Ida's Aftermath

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CAVU

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NEIL CAVUTO, FOX NEWS ANCHOR: Thank you, Martha, very much.

We are on top of two storms that are gripping the world right now, certainly our part of the world on the right with all the flooding and damage and winds and still more flooding and damage and winds to come from Hurricane Ida, now Tropical Storm Ida.

Also following what's going on in Afghanistan right now, with less than 24 hours to go before, well, we go and are gone. Where does that all stand right now?

Welcome, everybody. I'm Neil Cavuto and this is YOUR WORLD on a day of dramatic developments both on the Mother Nature storm and the storm brewing in Afghanistan, as we get ready to call it a day in less than a day after better than 20 years in that country.

Let's get the latest from Lucas Tomlinson right at the Pentagon with how Afghanistan and these final hours might look -- sir.

LUCAS TOMLINSON, FOX NEWS PENTAGON PRODUCER: Well, Neil, it's 12:30 a.m. in Afghanistan on August 31. That is the deadline for U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan.

So we know that the last plane will leave Afghanistan sometime in the next few hours. We're just waiting for that word here at the Pentagon. It could be even more than that. But all eyes are on that last flight.

Neil, this comes as U.S. forces have actually come under attack in recent days, five rockets fired at U.S. forces. We heard from Jennifer Griffin's questioning earlier to John Kirby that one of those rockets came through. The C-RAM, that counter-rocket artillery and mortar system, did not shoot- down all the rockets. One did make it through, but it did not cause any damage to any personnel or aircraft.

And, of course, on Sunday, a second U.S. Reaper drone flying from Al Dhafra Air Force Base in the UAE launched another mission to destroy a suicide bomber, two of them that were in a vehicle, a van heading for the gate. It was destroyed just two miles from the front gate of the Kabul Airport, where U.S. forces remain.

And, of course, Friday night, that first drone strike, the first time the Biden administration had ordered a strike following that deadly suicide attack that killed 13 American service members, that drone on Friday night killing two ISIS planners.

It was notable today, Neil, that the Pentagon is still refusing to name those two ISIS fighters who were killed Friday night. They call them just planners. They did not call them leaders. Normally, the word planners here is reserved for lower-level fighters, Neil.

CAVUTO: All right, thank you very much for that, Lucas Tomlinson, at the Pentagon.

Today, we're getting word that in the last 24-hour period, about 6,000 individuals were evacuated from Kabul. You might be noticing a pattern that each day that gets to be a progressively smaller figure. We're told anywhere from 1, 300 to 1, 800 were on the tarmac supposedly waiting to depart as well. So those figures, we won't have until tomorrow.

And, of course, tomorrow, at this time, it will all be over unless something is miraculously extended. And that does not appear to be possible at this point. We will be able to give you some updated numbers.

Trey Yingst following all of this from Doha, Qatar -- Trey.

TREY YINGST, FOX NEWS FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: Neil, good afternoon.

The last group of people making their way out of Afghanistan over the past 24 hours. Still, though, an estimated 80,000 Afghans with Special Immigrant Visas remain in country unable to flee. They join a small handful of Americans, officials estimate less than 250, that were not able to be evacuated.

Now, a senior State Department official does believe they have contact with the necessary Americans who want to leave, but were not able to make it to the airport. There were some disturbing reports, though, over the weekend of Afghan American University students being turned away from the airport.

The New York Times said a group of students gathered yesterday in a safe house and then took buses to the Kabul Airport. After waiting for seven hours, they were informed they would not be able to fly out. One student received an e-mail from the university, saying -- quote -- "I regret to inform you that the high command at HKIA and the airport has announced there will be no more rescue flights."

We have seen an uptick in recent days of people leaving on foot. Neighboring Iran and Pakistan have taken thousands of Afghan refugees, and we continue to hear stories of desperate Afghans fleeing other ways.

FOX has learned of a story tonight of a former translator in the U.S. Army taking a bus to Tajikistan. That individual described it as the most difficult ride of his life through Taliban checkpoints.

Now, Neil, in the coming hours, we likely will get confirmation from the U.S. government that the war is over in Afghanistan. Today, it is August 31 in Kabul, and it means that, according to the U.S. estimates, they will be wrapping up, heading home and this will all be said and done -- Neil.

CAVUTO: Just incredible.

Trey, thank you very much, Trey Yingst reporting.

Want to clarify something I said earlier. The White House is now saying that 6,000 Americans have been evacuated from Afghanistan. I assume that is since the Taliban took over Afghanistan. So, doing the rough math in my head, of the 115,000, who have been airlifted out of Kabul, 6,000 were Americans and the rest presumably Afghan nationals or friends of the United States. I'm sure they will update us on those figures.

I apologize for the confusion.

Let's go to Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg, the former national security adviser to Vice President Pence.

General, very good to have you on a busy news day.

It looks like, when all is said and done, of the 115,000-plus evacuated, 6,000 were Americans and the rest all of these Afghan and Afghan nationals. What do you think of those numbers?

GEN. KEITH KELLOGG (RET.), FORMER TRUMP AND PENCE NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER: Yes, well, Neil, thanks for having me on today.

CAVUTO: Thank you.

KELLOGG: The numbers are great.

I mean, getting that amount of people is -- out of Afghanistan is super, but what are we leaving behind? I think we're kind of congratulating ourselves for getting a certain number out. And yet it's an unforced error that we're even doing what we're doing right now.

And nobody can really tell me or you or your listeners out there how many are actually left behind and what conditions they are going to be left in. So, I mean, I congratulate the tactical units on the ground for getting the people out of there. I know they're collapsing the airhead, meaning getting ready to get out of there.

But this is almost surreal. I mean, when you think about, after 20 years, and I was in the Pentagon on 9/11. I'm just watching this go, and it's so much to unpack right now. So did we get people out? Yes. Congratulations for getting those people out.

Who did we leave behind? And why did we do that?

CAVUTO: Yes, we won't know for sure, certainly not anytime soon, General, to your point.

Also, General, I wanted to pick your brain a little bit on this Washington Post story that's gaining a little bit of traction and back and forth.

KELLOGG: Yes.

CAVUTO: That is that the U.S. agreed to let the Taliban control and secure Kabul right before -- at its taking.

What do you make of that?

KELLOGG: Yes, Neil, to me, that's an unforced error, I mean, first of all, even that we're talking to the Taliban about that.

But it makes sense to me, in the sense that Baradar, the political adviser of the Taliban, probably knew he couldn't control Kabul. And he probably turned to the Americans or -- the way the report goes from The Washington Post. And I don't know the veracity of it. But let's make an assumption that is true.

And turn it over to us and said, OK, can you control Kabul? And they probably went to the president of the United States as commander in chief, and he said, no, I don't want to do it, because it would have involved putting more troops on the ground to expand the perimeter.

But if your goal is to get every American out of there, and all of your allies out of there, then why not change the date that you made, and nobody else made it, and say, we're going to get our people out? It seems to be we could have negotiated that and worked that.

Instead, what they said was, nope, 31 August is a hard date. We're going to get out. And if we leave people behind, we leave people behind. But, I mean, this could be a truly unforced error, where we had the opportunity to expand the perimeter, put more troops in there until we got the people out that we wanted to get out, and then collapse the perimeter and go out.

I mean, it's almost like -- I hope we unpack this story more and more, because it really doesn't make sense to me. I don't know if it does to you. But, again, Neil, it doesn't make sense to me at all.

CAVUTO: Well, you're the expert, General. But even in my naive look at the region, if we had gotten that ability to secure Kabul, that would have meant that there would be no Taliban perimeter around the airport or anything that we ultimately saw that was compromised, obviously, by these ISIS-K bombings.

So, it's easy to Monday morning quarterback this, if indeed it was that way. But it's just part of a series of fateful decisions that brought us to where we are now. It doesn't look, as you know, General, that we're going to extend the deadline beyond tomorrow, roughly at this time, about 23 hours and 40 minutes from now.

What do you think of that?

KELLOGG: Yes.

Well, I know they're out of there. Look, what they're doing militarily is, they're actually collapsing the perimeter right now, the airhead. And General Donahue, who's the commander of the 82nd, is the guy in charge of it. And he knows how to do that.

You leave detachments left and contact. You slowly reduce the size of the airhead, and then you get out. And probably in the middle of the night, you get -- you're out of there, and you're gone. And so, tomorrow morning, when the sun rises in Afghanistan, the United States military will not be there. And that airfield will go back to control of the commercial activities that are currently there.

And I think that's what they're doing right now. And that militarily makes sense to me. But, I mean, tomorrow morning, when the sun arises in Afghanistan, I think everybody in America is going to take a deep breath and go, wow, 20 years, and this is how we leave after 9/11?

I mean, it was disorderly to get out of there, a lot of unforced errors. And I think there's going to be a really bad aftertaste in this whole thing, Neil, going forward.

CAVUTO: I just wonder as well, General, just to pick your brain on what will be Afghanistan after we leave.

We have the Taliban. We're dealing with these ISIS-K elements that supposedly are at odds with the Taliban. Well, I don't know what the real intelligence or skinny is on that. But it will be a mess, I think it's safe to say.

I'm just wondering how you see this old sorting out, if it does sort out.

KELLOGG: Well, I don't think it's going to go well.

I mean, the Taliban are not a governing body as you would you and I would understand a governing body. They're not Jeffersonian democrats there in Afghanistan. And it's going to be a nation in conflict. It has been since 327 B.C., when Alexander the Great found out about that and when the British found out about that.

And when the Russians went in, they found out about it. It's going to be a really an ungoverned territory going forward. And the problem is, it's going to have the capability and capacity to have a first-grade military because all the kit we left for them.

We left attack fighters on the ground. We left Black Hawk helicopters, more than Australia has, all those weapon systems that are out there, and you have got a government that is really not a government. It's basically a terrorist organization that now holds a lot of land.

And who knows what the future is going to bring. But I will tell you, it's going to be like the Badlands in the American West and the old days. You're going to have a lot of really bad people in that country. And we have no idea what's going to come out of it. And I don't think any of it, Neil, is going to be good. I just don't.

CAVUTO: General, thank you very much, General Keith Kellogg, the former national security adviser to Vice President Pence.

So we're continuing to monitor developments in Afghanistan.

But there was another storm to keep you abreast about, more the Mother Nature variety. Of course, I'm talking about Hurricane Ida, now Tropical Storm Ida. But she has really walloped the New Orleans region and Louisiana, Mississippi, and points north now that could see heavy winds and a lot of flooding in the meantime.

Mike Tobin in New Orleans with a lot more on that.

Hey, Mike.

MIKE TOBIN, FOX NEWS CORRESPONDENT: And, Neil, the damage you see around New Orleans is a lot of what you would expect, wind damage.

Behind me you see a roof that was pulled off. You got a lot of trees that were knocked over run, light posts that were knocked down. The boyhood home of Louis Armstrong collapsed during the storm. But it's not like the aftermath of Katrina. And that is because, after the \$14 billion rebuild, the levee system was subject to its first major test.

And, according to Governor John Bel Edwards, it passed.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GOV. JOHN BEL EDWARDS (D-LA): It would be a different story altogether had any of those levee systems failed.

Having said that, the damage is still catastrophic. But it was primarily wind-driven. But we know that there were some areas that received tremendous rainfall as well. But we're going to be dealing with this damage for quite a while.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TOBIN: It's a different story outside of the protection of the levee system.

In Lafayette, Louisiana, the levee there was overtopped, creating flash flooding. Also, a bridge there was damaged, leaving about 200 people trapped and in need of rescue. Even north of New Orleans, Slidell, Louisiana, more than a dozen people needed rescue. Some of them were trapped on their rooftops.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BILLY THON, HURRICANE SURVIVOR: They got trees down, lines down everywhere. I'm lucky I made it right here, man. This is a bad one here, very bad.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TOBIN: Now, the big impact is power.

More than two million people are without power now. That means everyone in New Orleans and significant portions of the population across the state -- Neil.

CAVUTO: Mike, thank you very, very much, Mike Tobin following those developments.

In the meantime, back to what's happening right now with all of these refugees coming from Afghanistan. We broke it down for you, that roughly 115,000 have been airlifted out of the country. But the fact of the matter is, 6,000 of those were American, so the overwhelming majority of these Afghan nationals who have to find a home and make a home.

But what has the vetting process been like for them? And what is it like now?

Greg Palkot has been following all of that from Landstuhl, Germany -- Greg.

GREG PALKOT, FOX NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Neil, yes, basically, we are in the final hours of the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

And there are a lot of lives hanging in the balance. Take a look at what we saw today at a major U.S. military hub not far from where we are right now.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PALKOT: Right now, there is a double focus for the U.S. military, getting all troops and gear out of Kabul by the Tuesday deadline and, of course, getting as many Afghans out of harm's way as soon as possible.

Ramstein Air Base here in Germany is a very busy place.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PALKOT: Now, Neil, there are 18,000 Afghans now at that base. And they are being vetted, they are being checked, housed and fed.

The flow of incoming refugees from Kabul slowing down, only one plane in the last 36 hours. Flights out to the States, though, ramping up, 12 planes today with 2,000 on board. Still, there are thousands in Afghanistan who could be targeted by Taliban.

Hear what some refugees told us through a security fence and hear what the commanding general said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Taliban and ISIS, they are enemies. So, enemies never change.

PALKOT: Family is still there?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yes, my family is still there.

PALKOT: You worry about them.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I do.

PALKOT: What about the future under the Taliban?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The future is -- I don't think the future will be very good.

PALKOT: Do you wish you had more time?

BRIG. GEN. JOSHUA OLSON, 86TH AIRLIFT WING COMMANDER: Always. Always. More time and more sleep. So...

PALKOT: But you're doing what you can.

OLSON: We're doing everything we can, again, going back to the humanity and providing hope.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PALKOT: Humanity and providing hope, Neil.

General Olson did say that this base would be playing a role in the military evacuation as well. But, in fact, they are busy with this humanitarian mission. We're just about two miles from the base, Neil.

We have been hearing planes go over our heads for the past couple of hours, a lot of stuff going forward, but, again, a lot of people remaining behind -- back to you.

CAVUTO: All right, Greg Palkot, thank you for that.

Now, as Greg touched on, a lot of these Afghans are going to be housed at Air Force bases, military bases all around the country, certainly in the United States, a good many of them at Fort Bliss in Texas.

The former commanding general of that Fort Bliss facility joins us right now, the former ground commander in Iraq, co-author of "Hunting the Caliphate." I'm talking, of course, about General Dana J.H. Pittard.

General, very good to have you. And thank you for coming.

MAJ. GEN. DANA PITTARD (RET.), U.S. ARMY: Good afternoon, Neil. Good to be here.

CAVUTO: How will it go in your mind at Fort Bliss? And how will the process go and the continued weeding out of potential problems? But you generally hope that, by the time they arrive at Fort Bliss and these other facilities, all of that has been screened. But maybe you can explain what we might be in for.

PITTARD: Well, the Afghan refugees will be taken to several bases in Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and even New Jersey.

For Fort Bliss, Fort Bliss just happens to be the largest post by area in the United States Army. In fact, between Fort Bliss and the adjoining base, White Sands Missile Range, that's 25 percent of the U.S. Army's total land.

So there are places at Fort Bliss that are remote, where the refugees can be secured. Places like Donald Ana Range or MacGregor Range. And so the screening probably will not be that difficult, because it's away from a major population area like El Paso.

CAVUTO: Got it.

General, much has been made of the fact that, in the rush to get people out, maybe we didn't do our due diligence. There are reports of some cases where paperwork wasn't in order or there was no paperwork at all. It's too late to quibble over that now.

But I'm just wondering, in light of all of this, whether you fear some, some nefarious characters might, might have slipped through.

PITTARD: I'm sure there's always that possibility.

I think that's the beauty of taking them to a place like Fort Bliss, because it's 1.2 million acres of land. So, there are remote areas where more detailed screening can probably take place, the biometrics and everything else, and to keep American citizens safe, and to make sure that the Afghan refugees are in fact safe, and can safely move into society by going through those remote areas.

CAVUTO: So, General, as our former commander in Iraq, you have heard these Washington Post stories that report, the early days -- early days -- a little more than a few weeks ago, I guess, the U.S. had agreed to let the Taliban take control and essentially run Kabul.

What do you make of that? What do you think that has created since?

PITTARD: Well, again, if true, I have got a lot of confidence in General Ken McKenzie, who is the commander of CENTCOM. I know him.

Trying to secure a city of Kabul, as large as it is, would be extremely difficult if you do not have the troops to do it. Apparently, he chose to secure the Kabul Airport, which was more within the constraints that he was given as far as troops.

So maybe that's a possibility. The initial planning, as discussed before, I think was very poor, when the withdraw and, in fact, abandonment of Afghanistan took place. Now, the evacuation itself, with 114,000 citizens, Afghan and American citizens, being taken out was done well, once that took place.

The initial planning was terrible.

CAVUTO: So the 6,000 troops that ultimately were targeted to be there for this ultimate withdrawal from the country and to help people evacuate, that would have been way too small to take control and include in your operations Kabul, right?

How many troops do you think we should have had if that were the -- if that was the call?

PITTARD: It's hard to estimate.

Kabul, millions of people in Kabul. I think it would have taken at least a division level force of 20,000 to 30,000 to secure all of Kabul. So, General Ken McKenzie chose the smaller footprint of what he thought he could control.

CAVUTO: You know, General Pittard, I'm curious.

As someone who's written extensively on hunting the caliphate and all that stuff, now trying to make sense of what Afghanistan that looks like in light of warring terrorist groups like this new ISIS-K and the Taliban and others, what is Afghanistan like right now? And from the new Afghanistan, whatever evolves, is it a threat to us?

Is what's happening there a potential physical threat to us?

PITTARD: Well, the new Afghanistan is Taliban-run.

So, potentially, it is a threat. And time will tell. If the Taliban allow Al Qaeda, ISIS-K and other terrorist groups to exist and to operate within Afghanistan, that's a problem. And that's a problem that we're going to have to deal with.

CAVUTO: General, the administration, others have criticized -- been criticized for not being able to fathom the rapid fall of the Afghan government. They were not alone. But the rap is that by not appreciating how quickly the government could fall, we were caught off-guard and in the position we're now in kind of running out of town in the next 23 hours.

Do you agree with that, that people should have been more aware of that potential, especially as the Taliban was accelerating its run and takeover the country at a pretty swift pace, as this discussion was going back and forth?

PITTARD: I'm just not sure how -- how anybody could really predicted how quickly the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government would have fallen.

We have had examples, though, and parallels. If you remember, in Iraq, in 2011, when President Obama moved all troops -- I think it was an ill- advised -- moved all troops out of Iraq, within three years, ISIS was able to fester and form in Iraq and Syria.

So, in 2014, when ISIS attacked Iraq and took over a third of Iraq's territory and the city of Mosul of over a million people, at that time, five Iraqi divisions were defeated, and the Iraqi security forces were melting. At that time, people thought something very similar is that ISIS would take Baghdad and the Iraqi security forces would be ineffective and the government could fall.

A different path was chosen, though, with a small footprint of U.S. soldiers, which I was very, very honored to lead in a different pathway. Instead of evacuating the embassy, we ended up fighting ISIS.

I just wonder, as we look at the current situation in Afghanistan, if it had been really thought through by the administration, that, without the backbone of U.S. forces, how long did we think the Afghan security forces would last, unless we knew, in fact that they could handle the fight?

So I wish that it had been thought through much more. I wish there hadn't been a treaty -- or not treaty, an agreement made by the previous administration, Trump administration, with the Taliban to get us in this place in the first place.

However, President Biden is the president. He could have chose differently, and he could have had a vision of what the region should be looking like. And I'm not sure that vision is what we're seeing right now, a Taliban-run Afghanistan.

CAVUTO: So your argument, General, just to be clear, is that a presence, even a small presence of 2,000, 2, 500, 2, 600 troops would have been enough to at least avoided what we saw happen?

PITTARD: I think so, a small footprint, maybe 2, 500, maybe 3, 500.

But they were basically enablers. They were able to help conduct airstrikes. They helped secure the massive airfield at Bagram Air Base. They were able to do intelligence. They were also able to be a good platform against other terrorist groups that are in the region.

Now what we find ourselves is in a position where we have a Taliban-run government and we have no assets in the region to be able to protect ourselves from abroad from terrorism that could come here.

So, yes, I think it could have been done differently. And if it had been explained that way to the American people, I think the American people might have understood that.

But we had not only this administration, but the previous administration, that was focused on domestic politics, and for just getting out of Afghanistan, and not really explaining to the American people the strategic impact of leaving.

CAVUTO: Finally, sir, Donald Trump has been commenting on this thing, saying this would have never happened under his watch, saying: "Never in history has a withdrawal from war been handled so badly or incompetently."

He goes on to say: "In addition to the obvious, all equipment should be demanded to be immediately returned to the United States. That includes every penny of the \$85 billion in cost. If it's not handed back," he says, "we should either go in with unequivocal military force and get it or bomb the hell out of it."

What do you think of that?

PITTARD: Well, I think there's enough blame to go around for four administrations of presidents with Afghanistan.

I do agree, though, that leaving much of our military equipment is a wrong decision. So if it is important equipment, it's equipment that should be destroyed. I do agree with that.

CAVUTO: Now, to the notion that this would not have happened had he been president, what do you make of that?

PITTARD: Again, I don't want to do Monday morning quarterbacking on this, but the agreement that his administration did was really a cut-and-run agreement with the Taliban.

In fact, much of the negotiations of the Taliban didn't even include that the current Afghan government that we supported. So, the movement early out of Afghanistan was already in play when President Trump was around.

However, the actual plan for the evacuation itself, that's on President Biden and his current national security team.

CAVUTO: Finally, General -- you have been very patient -- everyone worries about this so close to the 9/11 anniversary, that something is going to happen. They fear this has raised the risk of that.

Do you share that concern?

PITTARD: Always concerned when there's a 9/11 anniversary, of course.

We just all have to be vigilant as a nation. We got to keep our feelers out intelligence-wise throughout the world, and also be looking for things that just don't seem right domestically and around in our neighborhoods. We just have to be vigilant -- or vigilant as a people.

CAVUTO: General, thank you very, very much. I appreciate it and your service to this country, sir, General Pittard.

I want to go right to Jennifer Griffin at the Pentagon right now to update us on some news regarding Afghanistan -- Jennifer.

JENNIFER GRIFFIN, FOX NEWS NATIONAL SECURITY CORRESPONDENT: Neil, we have just heard from sources on the ground in Afghanistan that Taliban guards at the airport are saying that the last American warplanes have left Kabul Airport. There are no more U.S. warplanes at that airport.

The American presence is gone from the airport. I can confirm with multiple U.S. officials that I have spoken to in recent moments America's longest war is officially over. In fact, the last military transport plane took off and almost out of Afghan airspace. It's at the border as we speak.

So what we can say right now is that America's longest war is over. We expect a briefing here at the Pentagon any minute. If we look back on the cost of this war, Neil, 2,461 Americans killed in action, 13 of them in just the last week as they were carrying out this humanitarian mission to bring Americans and their allies to safety, 6,000 Americans evacuated since August 14, 122,000 Afghan allies.

In the past 20 years of war, more than 20,000 American service members were wounded fighting against the Taliban, the very same group that harbored the Al Qaeda terrorists who struck the United States on September 11. That same group marched into Kabul on August 14 of this year, 20 years later. Today, they are back in control of Kabul -- Neil.

CAVUTO: So, Jennifer, the last plane left today.

Do you know how many were evacuated today?

GRIFFIN: We do not have any of those figures.

I know that, in the last 24 hours, as of 3:00 a.m., 1, 200 people were evacuated. We understand that, as of now, the total Americans who might be left on the ground in Afghanistan, and the State Department says that that is about 250, they're making arrangements now, now that the U.S. military is gone from Kabul Airport.

They're making other arrangements with partners and allies to try and get those Americans, if they do actually want to leave Afghanistan, to get them safe passage.

But we can report right now that the last U.S. warplanes left Kabul Airport and are on their way to safety.

CAVUTO: So, the remaining 23 hours or so of our presence in Afghanistan will be about what, getting remaining military personnel, attaches, those types out of the country?

GRIFFIN: No.

CAVUTO: Essentially closing up shop.

GRIFFIN: Actually, Neil, as of midnight, Kabul time, those last warplanes took off. So all Americans are gone from Afghanistan, in terms of U.S. military, in terms of diplomats.

The war is officially over.

CAVUTO: So all Americans are gone right now, as we speak?

GRIFFIN: All U.S. military personnel, all State Department personnel were on those final flights. And those flights took off from Kabul Airport. We have confirmed it with U.S. officials. And we also have confirmation from Taliban officials at the airport who say that the last U.S. flights left.

CAVUTO: Do those who've been waiting, the many who have been waiting in Kabul and these other areas to be jetted out of the country, are they aware of this, do you know?

GRIFFIN: I believe that given the security considerations, that that is not something that was communicated, per se, but they would certainly have seen the gates being closed, the gates being sealed.

But now the Taliban has announced that it's in control of the airport. And there were negotiations taking place with NATO allies, with the Turks, as well as the Qataris, to work with the Taliban to try and reopen that airport at some -- airport at some point to civilian aircraft.

But right now, the last U.S. warplanes are nearly out of Afghan airspace. In fact, they may have -- in fact, as of right now, they are out of Afghan airspace. They were -- they were going to cross two minutes ago.

So, the last U.S. forces are out of Afghanistan.

CAVUTO: You know, Jennifer, I keep putting you on the spot. And I don't mean to.

But you know the area and the people there so well. For the thousands who were waiting to get out of there, what is their fate?

GRIFFIN: I think you can't put too fine a point on it that we don't know what happens next in Afghanistan.

The Taliban are a vicious terrorist organization. They are now the government of Afghanistan. They have made certain promises to the U.S. government. They kept some of those promises while U.S. forces were on the ground, and that they were...

CAVUTO: All right, Jennifer, I apologize.

This briefing has now started, again, a Pentagon briefing.

Our troops, our people are now largely out of Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan, to their point, is over. Let's go to the Pentagon.

(JOINED IN PROGRESS)

GEN. FRANK MCKENZIE, COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND: Hey, John. I can hear and see you just fine. (INAUDIBLE) Over.

JOHN KIRBY, PENTAGON PRESS SECRETARY: Thank you, sir. Thanks for being here today.

And I turn it over to you, sir.

MCKENZIE: Thanks, John.

Good afternoon, everyone.

I'm here to announce the completion of our withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of the military mission to evacuate American citizens, third country nationals and vulnerable Afghans.

The last C-17 lifted off from Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 30 this afternoon at 3:29 p.m. East Coast time, and the last manned aircraft is now clearing the airspace above Afghanistan.

We will soon release a photo of the last C-17 departing Afghanistan with Major General Chris Donahue and the U.S. ambassador, Ross Wilson, aboard.

While the military evacuation is complete, the diplomatic mission to ensure additional U.S. citizens and eligible Afghans who want to leave continues. And I know that you have heard and I know that you're going to hear more about that from the State Department shortly.

Tonight's withdrawal signifies both the end of the military component of the evacuation, but also the end of the nearly 20-year mission that began in Afghanistan shortly after September 11, 2001. It's a mission that brought Osama bin Laden to a just end, along with many of his al Qaeda co-conspirators.

And it was not -- it was not a cheap mission. The cost was 2,461 U.S. service members and civilians killed and more than 20,000 who were injured. Sadly, that includes 13 U.S. service members who were killed last week by an ISIS-K suicide bomber.

We honor their sacrifice today, as we remember their heroic accomplishments.

No words from me could possibly capture the full measure of sacrifices and accomplishments of those who serve, nor the emotions they're feeling at this moment. But I will say that I'm proud that both my son and I have been a part of it.

Before I open it up for questions, I do want to provide some important context to the evacuation mission that we just completed, in what was the largest noncombatant evacuation in the U.S. military's history.

Since August the 14th, over an 18-day period, U.S. military aircraft have evacuated more than 79,000 civilians from Hamid Karzai International Airport. That includes 6,000 Americans and more than 73,500 third country nationals and Afghan civilians.

This last category includes Special Immigrant Visas, consular staff, at-risk Afghans and their families. In total, U.S. and coalition aircraft combined to evacuate more than 123,000 civilians, which were all enabled by U.S. military service members who were securing and operating the airfield.

On average, we have evacuated more than 7,500 civilians per day over the 18 days of the mission, which includes 16 full days of evacuations, and more than 19,000 on a single day. These numbers do not include the roughly 5,000 service members and their equipment that were sent to Afghanistan to secure the airfield and who were withdrawn at the conclusion of our mission.

The numbers I provided represent a monumental accomplishment. But they do not do justice to the determination, the grit, the flexibility, and the professionalism of the men and women of the U.S. military and our coalition partners who were able to rapidly combine efforts and evacuate so many under such difficult conditions.

As such, I think it's important that I provide you with what I hope will be some valuable context.

When the president directed the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in April, the team at U.S. Central Command began to update and refine our existing plan for a potential noncombatant evacuation operation, or a NEO, in Afghanistan.

We have a framework of plans that included numerous branches and sequels, depending on the nature of the security environment. Over time, we continued to refine our plans, which included the interagency, the international community and other combatant commands.

Plans such as this are built upon a number of facts and assumptions. And facts and assumptions change over time. While observing the security environment deteriorate, we continued to update our facts and assumptions.

As the security situation rapidly devolved in Afghanistan, we took a number of actions to position ourselves for a potential NEO, based upon direction from the secretary of defense. We positioned forces in the region and put them on increased alert. We began to preposition supplies, and we began some preparatory work on intermediate facilities in Qatar, with the support of our gracious host nation.

When the evacuation was formally directed on August the 14th, we began to carry out our plan based upon the initial assumption that the Afghan security forces would be a willing and able security partner in Kabul, defending the capital for a matter of weeks or at least for a few days.

Within 24 hours, of course, the Afghan military collapsed completely, opening Kabul up to the Taliban's advance. On August the 15th, in a meeting with Taliban senior leadership in Doha, I delivered a message on behalf of the president, that our mission in Kabul was now the evacuation of Americans and our partners, that we would not tolerate interference, and that we would forcefully defend our forces and the evacuees if necessary.

The Taliban's response in that meeting was in line with what they have said publicly. While they stated their intent to enter and occupy Kabul, they also offered to work with us on a deconfliction mechanism to prevent miscalculation while our forces operated in close quarters.

Finally, they promised not to interfere with our withdrawal. It's important to understand that, within 48 hours of the NEO execution order, the facts on the ground had changed significantly. We had gone from cooperating on security with a longtime partner and ally to initiating a pragmatic relationship of necessity with a longtime enemy.

Into that environment, Rear Admiral Pete Vasely and Brigadier General Farrell Sullivan of the Marines, and, subsequently, Major General Chris Donahue of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division deployed and employed their forces, and did extraordinary work with the leading elements of our reinforcement package to safely close the embassy in one period of darkness, or one evening, to establish a deconfliction mechanism with the Taliban, to establish security at the airport, and to bring in the rest of our reinforcements into the airport.

They accomplished this difficult list of tasks within 48 hours of supporting the transfer of the embassy to the airport. I visited Kabul on Tuesday, August the 17th, to see the work being done to establish security firsthand and to observe the transition to the evacuation.

I left on a C-17 that brought more than 130 Afghans and American citizens out from Karzai International Airport to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Our men and women on the ground at the airport quickly embraced the dangerous and methodical work of defending the airport while conducting the hand-to-hand screening of more than 120,000 evacuees from six different entry points under the airfield.

We also conducted three separate helicopter extractions of three distinct groups of civilians, including at least 185 American citizens, and, with our German partners, 21 German citizens. Additionally, U.S. special operations forces reached out to help break in -- bring in more than 1,064 American citizens and 2017 SIVs or Afghans at risk and 127 third country nationals, all via phone calls, vectors and escorting.

We have evacuated more than 6,000 U.S. civilians, which we believe represents the vast majority of those who wanted to leave at this time. It would be difficult to overestimate the number of unusual challenges and competing demands that our forces on the ground have successfully overcome.

The threat to our forces, particularly from ISIS-K, was very real and, tragically, resulted in the loss of 13 service members and dozens of Afghans.

I have said this before, but I'd like to say it again. We greatly appreciate the contributions of the many coalition partners that stood with us on the ground at Hamid -- at Karzai International Airport.

I'm just going to single out one nation as an example of the many, the Norwegians, who maintained their hospital at the airport and who were absolutely critical for the immediate care of our wounded after the Abbey Gate attack. Even after the attack, they agreed to extend the presence of their hospital to provide more coverage for us.

Our diplomats have also been with us in Kabul from the beginning, and their work in processing over 120,000 people stands right beside that of their military partners. We were a team on the ground.

As I close my remarks, I would like to offer my personal appreciation to the more than 800,000 service members and 25,000 civilians who have served in Afghanistan, and particularly to the families of those whose loved ones have been lost or wounded.

Your service, as well as that of your comrades and family members, will never be forgotten. My heart is broken over the losses we sustained three days ago.

As the poem by Laurence Binyon goes, we will remember them.

The last 18 days have been challenging. Americans can be proud of the men and women of the armed forces who met these challenges head on.

I'm now ready to take your questions.

KIRBY: Thank you, General.

We will start with Lita at AP. I'd ask you to -- because we're limited on time, to please limit your follow-ups, so that more people can get questions asked.

Go ahead, Lita.

QUESTION: General, thanks for doing this. It's Lita with AP.

Can you give us a sense of whether or not there were any American citizens or other civilians who were taken out on any of those last couple of C-17s that flew out this afternoon?

And can you give us a picture of what you saw with equipment and other things getting either destroyed or removed at the airport before they left?

MCKENZIE: Lita, no American citizens came out on the last what we call the joint tactical exfiltration, the last five jets to leave.

We maintained the ability to bring them in up until immediately before departure. But we were not able to bring any Americans out. That activity ended probably about 12 hours before our exit, although we continued the outreach and would have been prepared to bring them on until the very last minute, but none of them made it to the airport and were able to be -- and were able to be accommodated.

(CROSSTALK)

MCKENZIE: We brought some of it out. And we did demilitarize some of it.

Let me give you an example of something that we demilitarized. You're very much aware, of course, of the rocket attack that occurred yesterday, where five rockets were fired at the airfield. Our C-RAMs were very effective in engaging the two rockets that did fall on the airfield.

And we believe they probably kept them from doing more significant damage. We elected to keep those systems in operation up until the very last minute. It's a complex procedure, complex and time-intensive procedure to break down those systems.

So, we demilitarized those systems, so that they will never be used again. And they were just a -- we felt it more important to protect our forces than to bring those systems back.

We have also demilitarized equipment that we did not bring out at -- of the airport that included a number of MRAPs, up to 70 MRAPs that we demilitarized that will never be used again by anyone, 27 Humvees, a little tactical vehicle, that will never be driven again.

And, additionally, on the ramp at HKIA are a total of 73 aircraft. Those aircraft will never fly again when we left. They will never be able to be operated by anyone. Most of them were non-mission-capable to begin with, but, certainly, they will never be able to be flown again.

Thank you.

KIRBY: David.

QUESTION: General, David Martin with CBS.

Was there any attempt to interfere with the final flights out either by the Taliban or by ISIS or any other group? And did -- at the end, did Americans just vacate the premises? Or did they turn it over to the Taliban?

MCKENZIE: Oh, we know that ISIS-K has worked very, very hard to strike is and to continue to strike us.

We feel that the strike we took yesterday in Kabul actually was very disruptive to their attack plans and threw them off-stride. And I think that was one of the significant reasons why they were not able to organize themselves and get after us as we conducted the final withdrawal.

I will tell you, the Taliban have been very pragmatic and very businesslike as we have approached this withdrawal. We did not turn it over to the Taliban. General Donahue, one of the last things he did before

leaving was talked to the Taliban commander that he had been coordinating with as soon as -- about the time we were going to leave just to let them know that we were leaving.

But there was no discussion of turning anything over of that at all.

KIRBY: Jen.

GRIFFIN: General McKenzie, Jennifer Griffin from FOX News.

If I could just have you reflect personally, after 20 years of war. You have served there. You have now watched the last troops leave. You have lost troops in recent days. How did it feel leaving Afghanistan to the very group that you overthrew 20 years ago, the Taliban?

MCKENZIE: Well, as I sort of said, in my remarks, as you know, I have been there a couple times. My son has been there a couple times.

So -- and it was very -- I was very conflicted, actually. But I would tell you, I was pretty much focused on the task at hand. I will have days ahead to actually think about that. But there were just so much going on in this headquarters. And we were so completely focused on getting our troops out and, in the days before, getting our citizens out and vulnerable Afghans, to the best of our ability, that I did not have a lot of time for reflection.

I'm sure I will do that in the future. But, right now, I'm pretty much consumed with the operational task at hand. That's a good question. And I am going to be thinking about that in the days ahead.

GRIFFIN: Your message to Americans and Afghan allies who were left behind?

MCKENZIE: So, the military phase of this operation has ended. The diplomatic sequel to that will now begin.

And I believe our Department of State is going to work very hard to allow any American citizens that are left -- and we thank the citizens that were not brought out number in the low, very low hundreds. I believe that we're going to -- we're going to be able to get those people out.

I think we're also going to negotiate very hard and very aggressively to get our other Afghan partners out. The military phase is over. But our desire to bring these people out remains as intense as it was before. The weapons have just shifted, if you will, from the military realm to the diplomatic realm, and the Department of State will now take the lead on that.

KIRBY: Nancy.

QUESTION: General, if you could clarify just a couple of points, can you tell us how many people were on that final C-17 flight? Can you tell us where that slide is headed?

And you mentioned that General Donahue talked to his Taliban essential -- essentially, his counterpart. Can you give us any sense of what role the Taliban plays from a security perspective to allow the U.S. to safely depart Kabul?

MCKENZIE: Yes, so I'm not going to be able to answer the first two questions because those operations are still concluding as to where those aircraft are going and the exact disposition of our forces on the aircraft.

I can tell you this, though, about what the Taliban has done. They established a firm perimeter outside of the airfield to prevent people from coming on the airfield during our departure. And we have worked that with them for a number of days. They did not have direct knowledge of our time of departure. We choose to keep that -- we chose to keep that very -- information very restricted.

But they were actually very helpful and useful to us as we closed down operations.

KIRBY: I'm going to go to the phones. I haven't done that yet.

Dan Lamothe.

QUESTION: Yes, thanks for calling me.

General, can you give us, I guess, a deeper level of detail on what this last day looked like in terms of number of flights, number of people you had on the ground to start with, who might have been on that last plane, particularly senior leaders, and kind of just how it's all played out?

Thanks.

MCKENZIE: Sure.

So, let me actually begin with the back end of your question. On the last airplane out was General Chris Donahue, the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division and my ground force commander there. And he was accompanied by our charge, Ambassador Ross Wilson. So they came out together.

So, the State and Defense team came out on the last aircraft, and were in fact the last people to stand on the ground, step on the airplane.

So what has happened over the last 12 or 18 hours is we -- first of all, we were intent on maintaining the ability to bring out Americans and other -- and other Afghans as long as we could. So we kept that capability until just a few hours ago.

And we were able to bring some people earlier in the day, although, as I have noted earlier, we had to cut it off some time before this operation began. But we were intent on maintaining that capability.

We were also intent on maintaining our force protection, because the threats from ISIS were very real, very, very concerning. And so we did a number of things. We had overwhelming U.S. airpower overhead, should there have been any challenge to our departure.

And, again, there was absolutely no question we were not going to be challenged by the Taliban. We were -- if we're going to be challenged, it was going to be by ISIS. And I think some of the things we have done yesterday, particularly the strike, and other things we have done have disrupted their ability to conduct that -- to conduct that attack planning.

But they remain a very lethal force. And I think we would assess that probably there are at least 2,000 hardcore ISIS fighters in Afghanistan now. And, of course, many of those come from the prisons that were opened a few days ago. So that number is up and it's probably as high as it's ever been in quite a while.

And that's going to be a challenge for the Taliban, I believe, in the days ahead.

KIRBY: Idrees.

QUESTION: Thank you, General.

Two quick questions. There were about 500 Afghan soldiers who were protecting the perimeter. Did you evacuate them and their families? And, secondly, just on the airport, now that you have departed, do you believe it can take on civilian aircraft pretty soon? Or will it require some type of repair or expertise?

MCKENZIE: Sure.

To the best of my knowledge, which is actually pretty good, I believe we brought out all the Afghan military force who were partnering with us to defend the airfield and their family members. I believe that has been accomplished.

We need the airport to be operational. And we need the airport to be operational quickly for civilian -- for civilian traffic. So we're going to do everything we can to help with that.

Let me give an example. One of the things we did not demilitarize as we left were those pieces of equipment that are necessary for airport operations, such as the fire trucks and the front end loaders, things like that. We left that equipment. So that is available to allow that airport to get back and get operating as soon as possible.

And it needs to get operating as soon as possible.

KIRBY: Louis (ph).

QUESTION: General, today is August 30. And the deadline had repeatedly been said that it was going to be August 31.

Do you think that there may be some people who had some false hope that they had at least one more day before this happened? And can you explain a tactical decision as to why you completed this mission on the 30th, as opposed to the 31st?

MCKENZIE: Sure.

So, it's actually the 31st in Afghanistan, as we take a look what day of the week -- what day of the month it is. It's the 30th here. It's the 31st in Afghanistan. So we actually went out on the 31st, not the 30th, if you look at Afghan time.

Look, there's a lot of heartbreak associated with this departure. We did not get everybody out that we wanted to get out. But I think, if we'd stayed another 10 days, Louis, we wouldn't have gotten everybody out that we wanted to get out. And there still would have been people who would have been disappointed with that.

It's a tough situation. But I want to emphasize again that, simply because we have left, that doesn't mean the opportunities for both Americans that are in Afghanistan that want to leave and Afghans who want to leave, they will not be denied that opportunity.

I think our Department of State is going to work that very hard in the days and weeks ahead.

KIRBY: Courtney.

QUESTION: Just one clarification, General McKenzie.

It's Courtney Kube from NBC News.

So, were there any evacuees left at the airport when the last U.S. military flight left?

MCKENZIE: There were no evacuees left at the airport when the U.S.' last flight left, Courtney.

QUESTION: Thank you.

And then just on the Taliban, you have talked about their pragmatic ways of operating with U.S. military here. Do you see a role for the U.S. military to have open conversations with the Taliban, even potential coordination going forward, in particular, with this growing and now accentuated threat from ISIS?

MCKENZIE: Well, I will tell you, my dealing with the Taliban and my -- the dealings of my commanders on the ground with the Taliban revolved around our determination to execute this operation and the very flat statement we made to them that, if we -- if you challenge us, we're going to hurt you.

And I think they recognized that. And for their own purposes, this is something they wanted to have happen too. I would, -- I can't foresee the way future coordination between us would go. I would leave that for some future date.

I will simply say that they wanted us out, we wanted to get out with our people and with our friends and partners. And so, for that short period of time, our issues, our view of the world was (INAUDIBLE). It was the same.

Finally, I do believe the Taliban is going to have their hands full with ISIS-K. And they let a lot of those people out of prisons and now they're going to be able to reap what they sowed.

KIRBY: Tara.

QUESTION: Thank you.

General McKenzie, Tara Copp with Defense One.

Can you assure the American public that every single U.S. service member is now out of Afghanistan?

MCKENZIE: Every single U.S. service member is now out of Afghanistan.

I can say that with 100 percent certainty.

KIRBY: Carla (ph).

QUESTION: Sir, really quickly, just to clarify, you mentioned 123,000 out of Afghanistan. Earlier this morning, we heard 122,000.

So can we assume that that was 1,000 Afghans that came out in these -- some of these final flights? And then I have a quick follow-up.

MCKENZIE: We brought about 1,000 Afghans, I think over 1, 500 out in the last 24 hours or so.

Now, the exact number, I'm sure it's probably -- that computation is probably going to change a little bit in the days ahead. I don't think it's going to change much. But, yes, we brought a number of Afghans out here at the very end.

QUESTION: And then, sir, how would you characterize this evacuation mission?

Because, on the one hand, 123,000, people got out. On the other hand, of course, you lost 13 Marines. More than 100 Afghans died. And there are still potentially tens of thousands, SIVs, P1s, P2s, and others that wanted to get out that did not get out, as you said. So how would you characterize this mission?

MCKENZIE: Well, first of all, the 11 Marines, the soldier and the sailor that we lost, I will never forget that. That will be with me and I know every other commander involved for the rest of our lives.

We have all lost -- we have all lost people before. And it's never an easy thing. You would like to bring out everybody that wanted to come out. We were not able to do that. The situation wouldn't allow it.

I think we did a very good job of getting everybody that we could get -- that we could get out, given the unique challenges of the tactical situation the ground, the fact that really not -- not all Americans wanted to leave. There are Americans that, for a variety of reasons, want to stay for a while.

I think we will go back, and they will have the opportunity to -- they will have the opportunity to revisit that and come out if they want. I think it's just important to note that we shouldn't look on this as the end of that engagement about people in Afghanistan. I am confident that that engagement is going to continue through a variety of venues.

And it won't just be the United States that's going to be engaged on this. I think our international partners are also going to be very engaged on this as well going forward.

KIRBY: We have got two more, I'm afraid.

We will go to the phones again.

Jack Detsch.

QUESTION: Thanks. Thanks, General McKenzie.

I'm kind of curious just how American citizens are going to be expected to get to the airport and what the continuing terror threat will be just in the coming days and what the evacuation picture is going to look like for them.

MCKENZIE: Well, I think the terror threat is going to be very high. And I don't want to minimize that.

But I think what we will do is, we will work with the Taliban, we will work with the next government of Afghanistan, whatever its characterization is going to be, in order to ensure that our citizens are protected, and that they have an opportunity to leave.

As you know, we still have a variety of significant leverage over whatever future government exists in Kabul, and I have no doubt that the Department of State will fully exercise that leverage.

QUESTION: OK. Do you have any confidence in their ability to secure the city right now, the Taliban?

MCKENZIE: I think they're going to be challenged to secure the city.

I do know this, just speaking purely practically, as a professional. They helped us secure the airfield, not perfectly, but they gave it a very good effort. And it was actually significantly -- significantly helpful to us, particularly here at the end.

KIRBY: Last question for today.

Meghann.

QUESTION: Are there any U.S. -- sorry. This is Meghann Myers at Military Times.

Are there any U.S. aircraft still doing overflights of Afghanistan, either Kabul or otherwise, looking out for potential threats?

MCKENZIE: So, as we have said for quite a while, we always reserve the opportunity to go after in the C.T. realm, the counterterrorism realm, Al Qaeda and ISIS when those targets present themselves. So we will always retain the ability to do that.

KIRBY: OK, that's about all the time we have.

General, any concluding thoughts you might want to add?

MCKENZIE: John, it's been a long day and much longer, actually, for our forces that are coming out.

The operation has gone smoothly so far. And I just look forward to -- look forward to recovering the force completely, getting everybody home.

KIRBY: Thank you, General. Thanks for your time.

Thank you all. Have a nice afternoon.

CAVUTO: It is over. Our 20-year ordeal in Afghanistan is over.

The last plane has flown out of the country. And the reading from the general oversaw the process is that it is now up to the Taliban to make it a new country, giving compliments to the Taliban and their cooperation to make sure this evacuation worked.

There were some bumps, to put it mildly, including the death of 13 of our soldiers and close to 200 Afghans. There are thousands, we're told, that are still left behind, but for whom the general says there are evacuation hopes, just not ones involving the U.S. military.

The State Department will be shortly briefing Americans on what could come next and what role they will play with the new Taliban government, the same Taliban that was behind terror attacks 20 years ago, very different.

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