

U.S. to Move Afghans Who Aided Troops Outside the Country

The relocations are meant to place interpreters and others who worked with departing American forces somewhere safe until visas for them to enter the United States are processed.



By Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt

Published June 24, 2021 Updated July 30, 2021

WASHINGTON — President Biden said on Thursday that his administration would begin relocating thousands of Afghan interpreters, drivers and others who worked with American forces outside the country in an effort to keep them safe while they apply for entry to the United States.

“Those who helped us are not going to be left behind,” Mr. Biden told reporters at the White House.

With the American military in the final phases of withdrawing from Afghanistan after 20 years of war, the White House has come under heavy pressure to protect Afghan allies from revenge attacks by the Taliban and speed up the lengthy and complex process of providing them special immigrant visas.

On Wednesday, administration officials started notifying lawmakers that they would soon begin what could be a wholesale move of tens of thousands of Afghans. Officials said the Afghans would be relocated outside Afghanistan, possibly to Guam or somewhere else with close ties to the United States, to await the processing of their visa requests to move to the United States.

The officials declined to explicitly say where the Afghans would wait, and it was not clear whether third countries had agreed to take them. Guam, which is a U.S. territory, is the most likely possibility, officials said. The opportunity to move will be given to people who have already begun the application process.

John F. Kirby, the chief Defense Department spokesman, told reporters on Thursday that the Pentagon, the State Department and White House officials were still working out the details of the relocation effort. “We’re committed to helping this departure from Afghanistan,” he said.

The Pentagon has planning contingencies to evacuate as many as 100,000 people under such a program, using a combination of military and chartered civilian aircraft, but Mr. Kirby said he had not seen any number that high in the most recent internal discussion.

Administration officials and lawmakers briefed on preliminary outlines of the relocation plan said several temporary destinations for the Afghan visa applicants were under discussion, including several Middle East countries as well as Guam.

More than 18,000 Afghans who have worked as interpreters, drivers, engineers, security guards, fixers and embassy clerks for the United States during the war have been trapped in bureaucratic limbo after applying for special immigrant visas, available to people who face threats because of work for the U.S. government.

Those applicants have 53,000 family members, officials said.

A senior administration official said that under the plan, family members of applicants would also be moved out of Afghanistan to await visa processing. Transportation out of Afghanistan will not come with any assurance that a visa to the United States will be granted. It was unclear whether people who somehow do not qualify would be sent back to Afghanistan.

The officials spoke on grounds of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk publicly about the decision.

The move comes as Mr. Biden prepares to meet on Friday with President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan amid a worsening security situation in the country.

Aides said Mr. Biden would press Mr. Ghani on the need for unity among the country’s leaders, urging them to stop fighting among themselves when the country is in crisis and government forces are at risk of losing control of the nation to the Taliban.

They said he would assure Mr. Ghani of continued financial support from the United States to the Afghan government and people, including a \$266 million humanitarian assistance package and \$3.3 billion in security assistance, as well as significant aid to help combat the coronavirus pandemic with vaccines, testing kits and personal protective equipment.

Sign Up for On Politics A guide to the political news cycle, cutting through the spin and delivering clarity from the chaos. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Officials said the administration had been working to streamline the visa process for Afghans who worked with U.S. forces, and had added people to handle the applications.

Pressure on the administration to act swiftly on the Afghans' behalf has grown steadily in recent weeks in both the House and the Senate. Lawmakers pressed Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a Pentagon budget hearing on Wednesday.

On Thursday, advocates for the translators expressed relief tinged with caution.

“Glad to see this critical first step,” Representative Jason Crow, Democrat of Colorado and a former Army Ranger who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, said on Twitter on Thursday. “Every day counts. We can’t wait any longer.”

Mr. Crow is part of the Honoring Our Promises Working Group — made up of 10 Democrats and six Republicans — which introduced legislation last week that would expedite special immigrant visas from Afghanistan and expand the number available to 19,000, from 11,000.

Representative Seth Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat and former Marine officer who has also been pushing the White House, expressed satisfaction that “the Biden administration recognizes that the existing visa process will not meet this need.”

Mr. Moulton said Guam was “standing by with open arms” to take in American allies from Afghanistan. He said he believed an operational commander should be put in charge of the evacuation.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

“This is a good day in this story, but it is far from the final chapter,” Mr. Moulton told reporters on Capitol Hill. “There is much more work ahead of us.”

VoteVets.org, the veterans advocacy organization, posted a video on social media featuring an Afghan interpreter who had been evacuated imploring Mr. Biden to help others still in the country.

“There are thousands of interpreters in Afghanistan who don’t have years to wait,” the video said. “As you withdraw American troops from Afghanistan, do right for the Afghan men and women who served loyally beside them. Take them too.”

General Milley, at the House hearing on Wednesday, said the military was ready to begin moving Afghans who had applied for the special visas. “I consider it a moral imperative to take care of those that have served along our side,” he said. “We are prepared to execute whatever we are directed.”

Chronic delays and logjams have plagued the special immigrant visa program for more than a decade. Democrats have accused former President Donald J. Trump of exacerbating the problem by starving the program of resources and staffing.

The coronavirus pandemic did not help matters; a surge in cases at the embassy in Kabul shut down in-person interviews and vetting.

A State Department report in January cited “limited staffing” and “local safety conditions directly related to the Covid-19 pandemic” as “severely” affecting the visa application process.

In recent weeks, Democrats and Republicans in Congress have introduced bills to speed up the process and waive certain requirements, such as mandating applicants to undergo costly medical examinations. And in December, as part of a huge catchall spending bill, Congress raised the total cap for the visa program by 4,000, to 26,500.

The Biden administration has also come under pressure from several nonprofit groups and advocates for refugees to do more.

About 70 organizations recently wrote a letter to Mr. Biden urging his administration to “immediately implement plans to evacuate vulnerable U.S.-affiliated Afghans” — a step the White House is now taking.

Luke Broadwater contributed reporting.