

## Military Bases Turn Into Small Cities as Afghans Wait Months for Homes in U.S.

An estimated 53,000 evacuees from Kabul remain on eight military bases across the country. Thousands more are waiting at U.S. bases abroad to come to the United States.



By Miriam Jordan and Jennifer Steinhauer

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FORT MCCOY, Wis. — In late August, evacuees from Afghanistan began arriving by the busload to the Fort McCoy Army base in the Midwest, carrying little more than cellphones and harrowing tales of their narrow escapes from a country they may never see again. They were greeted by soldiers, assigned rooms in white barracks and advised not to stray into the surrounding forest, lest they get lost.

More than a month later, the remote base some 170 miles from Milwaukee is home to 12,600 Afghan evacuees, almost half of them children, now bigger than any city in western Wisconsin's Monroe County.

The story is much the same on seven other military installations from Texas to New Jersey. Overall, roughly 53,000 Afghans have been living at these bases since the chaotic evacuation from Kabul this summer that marked the end of 20 years of war. While many Americans have turned their attention away from the largest evacuation of war refugees since Vietnam, the operation is very much a work in progress here, overseen by a host of federal agencies and thousands of U.S. troops.

While an initial group of about 2,600 people — largely former military translators and others who helped allied forces during the war — moved quickly into American communities, a vast majority remain stranded on these sprawling military way stations, uncertain of when they will be able to start the new American lives they were expecting. An additional 14,000 people are still on bases abroad, waiting for transfer to the United States.

"We built a city to house almost 13,000 guests," said Col. Jen McDonough, deputy commander for sustainment at Fort McCoy, where about 1,600 service members are tasked with ensuring the massive operation runs smoothly.

On a recent warm autumn day here, refugees played a pickup game of soccer with soldiers, young children made arts and crafts with volunteers while their mothers studied English in an adjacent classroom, and families at a warehouse rummaged through boxes of donated underwear, shirts and jackets.

Afghan evacuees said they were grateful for the warm reception they have received at the fort, but for many, the long wait has been grueling. None have left the base since arriving, unless they were green card holders or U.S. citizens.

"I have asked many times about the date of departure," said Farwardin Khorasani, 36, who was an interpreter at the U.S. embassy in Kabul. He fled Afghanistan with his wife and two young daughters and hopes to relocate to Sacramento. "We are jobless here and have nothing to do."



Afghan evacuees playing a pickup game of soccer against soldiers at Fort McCoy. Pool  
photo by Barbara Davidson

U.S. officials say the delays are a result of a measles outbreak, medical checks and a vaccination campaign, as well as the need to complete immigration processing, which involves interviews, biometric exams and applications for work permits. Most bases in the United States are at or near capacity, and Afghan evacuees waiting on bases in the Middle East, Spain and Germany can be flown in only once space opens up.

A shortage of housing also is creating delays. Many families wish to settle where they already have friends or relatives, in places with existing Afghan communities such as California and the Washington, D.C., area. But officials have said that a dearth of affordable apartments could postpone their resettlement. On Thursday, Congress passed a short-term spending bill that included \$6.3 billion to relocate and settle Afghan refugees.

Gen. Glen D. VanHerck, commander of the United States Northern Command, which oversees the operation at Fort McCoy, said the military was prepared to accommodate arrivals on bases through the spring, giving the authorities time to work through the housing shortage.

"We've built housing capacity and we are providing our Afghan guests the environment they need," he said.

One of the first priorities has been to inoculate evacuees against a variety of diseases.

There have been 24 cases of measles, prompting a vaccination campaign against that illness, along with mumps, rubella and polio, an effort that is just winding down. People must wait at least 21 days after those vaccinations before receiving medical clearance to leave the bases.

Almost 85 percent of all evacuees on bases have received the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine against the coronavirus, and the rate of infection among the population is less than 1 percent, General VanHerck said.

The bases also have seen crime, not unlike densely packed cities.

Two Afghan evacuees are in federal custody; one has been charged with engaging in a sexual act with a minor and another charged with assaulting his spouse, both at Fort McCoy.

The F.B.I. is investigating an assault on a female service member by Afghan men at Fort Bliss in El Paso. And in Quantico, Va., a military police officer on guard duty reported that he had observed a 24-year-old Afghan sexually assaulting a 3-year-old Afghan girl, according to a criminal complaint.

General VanHerck said the military would "continue taking all necessary measures to ensure the safety" of both those working on the base and the Afghan evacuees. He said many reports to law enforcement were made by Afghans.



The barracks at Fort McCoy are each housing 50 to 60 Afghan evacuees, including families and single adults. Pool photo by Barbara Davidson

The residents seen on a tightly controlled media tour of the base represented a cross-section of Afghan society.

Among them was a group of 148 young women who hoped to finish their university education in the United States, and the principal of an international school. There was an Afghan Air Force pilot who had learned to fly UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters in Alabama and Texas.

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There were men and women from remote provinces, including a cook who had prepared food for soldiers in a far-flung outpost. Some people wore traditional Afghan attire. Others donned jeans and T-shirts. About half knew some English, but others would need to begin learning to read and write once they resettled in the United States, officials said.

Farzana Mohammadi, a member of the Afghan women's Paralympic basketball team who has been unable to walk since she had polio as a child, said she hoped to keep playing sports and to study psychology in Seattle.

While optimistic about her own future, "I am only thinking all the time about my parents and younger sister," said Ms. Mohammadi, 24, whose family was still in Kabul.



Although Farzana Mohammadi, a member of the Afghan women's Paralympic basketball team, is hopeful about her new life, her thoughts remain with her family back in Afghanistan. Pool photo by Barbara Davidson

About 50 to 60 people live in each two-story barracks, where single beds sit side-by-side. For privacy, families have improvised partitions using sheets.

### 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.

There are robust security details outside the living quarters, which are clustered into "communities," each with a center where evacuees can get personal hygiene items or learn about activities, such as town halls with military leadership.

"Grab and go" cafes offering tea, coffee and light snacks are bustling. But the eight self-service laundromats have been underutilized: Most Afghans have preferred to wash their clothing by hand and hang it out to dry on lines, which the military quickly erected.

An imam certifies that meals served at four cafeterias are halal, but the lines to buy pizza at the base exchange often stretch outside.

After weeks of being bottled up together with no timeline for leaving, there have been tensions among the residents. Fights often break out in the line to enter the cafeteria, and there are occasional arguments between people from different tribes.

Several young single women said they were verbally harassed by Afghan men because they were on the base alone.

"We were told, 'How are you here without your male family member? We won't tolerate this,'" recalled Nilab Ibrahimy, 23, who made it to the Kabul airport in a convoy of seven buses carrying the 148 students from the Asian University for Women, based in Bangladesh, where they had all been studying before the coronavirus outbreak stranded them in Kabul.

Ms. Ibrahimy took the issue to the U.S. military leadership, and the entire group of students was moved to another barracks housing mainly single women. There have been no problems since, she and others said.

Passing the time has been another challenge. "When we arrived here, we were sitting in our rooms doing nothing," said Sepehra Azami, 25, who was studying economics before she fled.



Shoes and clothing in the donation center at Fort McCoy. Pool photo by Barbara Davidson

Ms. Azami, Ms. Ibrahimy and another friend, Batool Bahnam, asked some mothers whether they were interested in having their children learn basic conversational English: What is your name? How are you? Thank you.

They were. Soon, adults began approaching the young women about lessons, too, and classes were added for women and men. “The demand is really high,” Ms. Azami said. “Families are struggling with language barriers.”

Mounds of clothing have been donated to the refugees, but it took until last week for every evacuee to receive items.

On Thursday, it was finally the turn of a 12-year-old boy named Nayatola. Dressed in a brown kurta pajama, he searched for clothes in his size. He ended up with an oversize white pullover. On his feet were the adult-size plastic slippers his father had brought from Afghanistan — Nayatola had no other shoes.

As the day wore on, children could be seen outside doodling with chalk. When the visitors passed by, they called out. “Hello, how are you?” a few of them shouted, trying out their new English phrases.

Abdulhadi Pageman, the former Afghan Air Force pilot, looked toward the warehouse where families were getting clothes. “These children are the future of the United States,” he said, talking about the children on the base. “They will be scientists, engineers. You just have to be patient.”

Seamus Hughes contributed reporting from Alexandria, Va.