

A Qatari jet carries more than 100 foreigners from Kabul.

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The first passenger flight to leave Afghanistan since the frenzied U.S. military evacuation ended late last month arrived in Doha, the Qatari capital, on Thursday with more than 100 foreigners, including Americans, aboard, and Biden administration officials said they expected more such flights in coming days.

“We can confirm that flight has safely landed in Qatar,” Emily Horne, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council, said in a statement on Thursday afternoon that expressed gratitude to the Qatari government for sending the plane and facilitating the flight.

The statement also offered a measured assessment of coordination with the Taliban, who have resumed control of the country after a 20-year war with the United States and its allies.

“The Taliban have been cooperative in facilitating the departure of American citizens and lawful permanent residents on charter flights from HKIA,” the statement said, referring to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. “They have shown flexibility, and they have been businesslike and professional in our dealings with them in this effort. This is a positive first step.”

At a news conference earlier in the day at the airport, Dr. Mutlaq bin Majed al-Qahtani, a Qatari special envoy, said the passengers would head to their final destinations after reaching Qatar. He called the resumption of flights from Kabul “a historic day in the history of Afghanistan,” and said another passenger flight was expected to depart on Friday.

The Taliban has blamed the Americans for delays in letting people fly out, and said that as U.S. forces left last week, they rendered the radar and other equipment at the Kabul airport inoperable. Engineers from Qatar, alongside workers from Turkey, have been working to repair the damage and to come up with a security protocol to enable international passenger flights to resume.

On Thursday, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban’s deputy information and culture minister, thanked Qatar for its assistance in getting the airport running and flying in 50 tons of aid on Thursday morning. He said that the reopening was an “opportunity to call on all Muslim and international countries to lend a helping hand to the Afghan people and start delivering humanitarian aid.”

The Taliban agreed to allow Qatar to fly the American citizens out after being pressed by the longtime U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, and after Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Qatar’s leaders this week in Doha, according to a U.S. official familiar with the negotiations, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

A State Department spokesman, Ned Price, said that more than 30 American citizens and green card holders were invited to get on the flight, but that some did not do so, torn over being separated from their extended families or experiencing medical issues that prevented immediate travel. He said officials were cross referencing travel documents and flight manifests before releasing a precise total.

Those who checked in for the flight included scores of Canadians and a handful of U.S. and British citizens. The process was colored by a sense of relief, a stark contrast to the desperation and chaos at the airport just over a week ago.

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A 42-year-old passenger from Toronto, who identified himself only by his first name, Safi, was among those passing through security to board the waiting Boeing 777.

He said that he had tried to leave during the evacuation but had given up as chaos enveloped the streets outside the airport.

“Things are good,” he said. “It seems the authorities are keeping their promises.”

The flight was the first step in resolving a diplomatic impasse that has left scores of Americans and other international workers stranded in Afghanistan. However, there has been no indication that the Taliban will allow tens of thousands of Afghans who qualify for emergency American visas to leave.

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.

Taliban and foreign officials said that Afghans with dual citizenship would be allowed to leave, but it was unclear whether any were on the first flight.



A flight carrying more than 100 foreigners left Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, and landed in Qatar on Thursday. The New York Times

It also remained unclear whether charter flights from the airport in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where dozens of Americans and hundreds of Afghans are waiting to leave, would be allowed to fly. Mr. Price said the United States had “pulled every lever available to us” to convince the Taliban to allow the flights, and to include not only American citizens and legal residents but high-risk Afghans.

Asked if concerns over whether all the passengers had undergone security checks was contributing to the problem, as some officials have suggested, Mr. Price said the lack of flights from Mazar-i-Sharif had “nothing to do with any inaction, or action, by the part of the United States government.” And at a news conference on Wednesday at the U.S. air base in Ramstein, Germany, Mr. Blinken said the Taliban was entirely responsible, saying that they claimed some of those trying to leave did not have the required documentation.



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken meeting with an Afghan family on Wednesday at the U.S. air base in Ramstein, Germany. Pool photo by Olivier Douliery

“While there are limits to what we can do without personnel on the ground without an airport with normal security procedures in place,” Mr. Blinken said, “we are going to do everything in our power to support those flights and to get them off the ground.”