

Finally, I Am Safe': U.S. Air Base Becomes Temporary Refuge for Afghans

About a fifth of all people evacuated from Kabul were brought to Ramstein Air Base in Germany, where they await the next leg of their journey, to the United States.



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RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — As the workday drew to a close at the U.S. air base in southwest Germany, “The Star-Spangled Banner” rang out from speakers set up across the vast facility.

Minutes later, the speakers cranked up again, this time in the cadence of Arabic, calling Muslims to late-afternoon prayer.

The recording is just one of the remarkable changes that have taken place at the sprawling Ramstein Air Base in Germany in the past two weeks. Teams from the U.S. military, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies have been racing to welcome, house, screen and send thousands of people — U.S. citizens and Afghans — to the United States.



A C-17 aircraft arrived with people evacuated from Kabul on Monday. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

After Kabul fell to the Taliban on Aug. 15, the United States began flying people out of Kabul at a rate of thousands a day. Many were brought to U.S. military installations in Qatar or Kuwait. But by the end of that week, those bases could not safely support any more. Ramstein, which has served as a key transit point in Germany for troops and equipment throughout the 20-year war in Afghanistan, was called on for one more mission.

When the first arrivals touched down on Aug. 20, Brig. Gen. Joshua Olson, commander of the 86th Airlift Wing, told reporters the base could hold 5,000 evacuees. Two weeks later, it is housing nearly three times as many.

“When we got to Ramstein, I just felt like, now finally, I am safe,” said Hassan, a young Afghan who had worked as an interpreter for U.S. Special Forces in Helmand Province and managed to get on an evacuation flight last week. He declined to give his last name for safety reasons, because he had left his family behind in Kabul.



Evacuees waiting in a hangar for their departure to the United States. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

After months spent hiding and making fruitless trips to the Kabul airport to get a flight out, Hassan said that sharing a tent on a U.S. air base with several dozen other people with little to do other than play soccer, volleyball or wait for the next meal didn't bother him.

“I’m just glad I’m here,” he said.

Many of the troops and officials involved in the evacuation mission at Ramstein had spent time in Afghanistan themselves, believing they were part of an effort to help the country build a brighter, more democratic future. For them, making the Afghans at Ramstein feel comfortable and getting them to the United States as quickly as possible is more than an assignment. It is personal.

“All of us know somebody who was left behind,” said Elizabeth Horst, who spent a year in Afghanistan in 2008-09 and was sent from the U.S. Embassy in Berlin to manage the civilian side of the evacuee operation at Ramstein. “Being a part of this helps,” she said.



Soldiers cleaning up the area. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

Her work day begins with an interagency meeting at which about three dozen people cram around a briefing table and update one another. Wins are highlighted — an unaccompanied infant reunited with the parents, for example — as are challenges like the number of people still missing luggage.

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The focus of the evacuation mission is to get U.S. citizens and their families home and Afghans to safety while also ensuring the security of the air base and U.S. borders. That means all arrivals undergo a health screening before they meet with U.S. border officers, who carry out biometric checks on all passengers.

“Nobody who is not cleared gets on a plane,” Ms. Horst said. As of Wednesday, about 11,700 people had been flown to the United States, or another safe location. So far, none of the evacuees have been rejected for entry into the United States, she said.



"All of us know somebody who was left behind," said Elizabeth Horst, a consular official at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

Not everything has been seamless. After enlisting base personnel and volunteers to set up cots in the tents, many of the Afghans who arrived said they preferred to sleep on blankets on the floor as they did in Afghanistan. Others did not know how to use the portable toilets set up in long rows and which are cleaned six times each day.

"Sanitation is a constant battle," said Lt. Col. Simon Ritchie of the 86th Medical Group, who is responsible for the initial screening of all new arrivals. Before passing through the biometric screening, people have their temperatures taken and are checked for illness and injury.

Colonel Ritchie said he has seen gunshot wounds and broken bones, people needing medication for diabetes or blood pressure, as well as a lot of diarrhea and dehydration, especially in the children. Sometimes he notices a young child who is so stressed and overwhelmed, he pulls them aside with a parent and sends them to a darkened, quiet tent.



Soldiers of the 86th Medical Group conducting an initial screening of new arrivals. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

“What they need is just a good nap,” he said. A special seating area was set up for an ill person’s family to wait until the patient was cleared to rejoin them, upholding one of the paramount goals of the evacuation, keeping families together — and reuniting those who have been separated.

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Many of the families include more than a dozen members and others have grown since touching down on the base. Capt. Danielle Holland, an OB-GYN with the Air Force, said she had sent three mothers in labor to a nearby Army hospital, but three other babies were coming so quickly they were delivered in the emergency medical tent set up on base.



The 86th Medical Group set up a mobile hospital on the air base. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

“Pretty much any reproductive-age woman is either pregnant, breastfeeding or both,” Capt. Holland said, adding that one Afghan mother had told her that giving birth in the tent had been the most pleasant of her eight deliveries. “These women are very stoic,” she said.

In addition to meeting the immediate needs of the evacuees by providing them with two meals a day and unlimited access to drinking water, the team has worked to make sure they understand where they are, and where they are going.

Physically weary, many are worried about family members still in Afghanistan they have been unable to contact — the tents don’t have outlets to charge cellphones or access to communication — and were stressed about the uncertainty of their future, said Capt. Mir M. Ali, an imam serving at Ramstein.



Children playing behind a fence that surrounds temporary living facilities for Afghan evacuees. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

In addition to providing tents that can serve as mosques and organizing the regular call to prayer, Capt. Ali has been speaking with the evacuees. “I remind them that with every step they have made, their situation has improved, like the Quranic verse, ‘With every hardship comes ease,’” he said.

Ms. Horst, the diplomat, hopes now to reunite people with the luggage many had to leave behind along the way — like in Qatar. Many do not want to continue to their new lives in the United States without the few belongings they were able to stuff in plastic bags, or blankets tied in bundles from Afghanistan.

“Luggage is important to people,” Ms. Horst said. “It holds their last little bit of home.”



Boarding a civilian aircraft Monday for the next leg of their journey. Gordon Welters for The New York Times