

# *Afghan Visa Applicants Arrive in U.S. After Years of Waiting*

The first group of Afghan interpreters and others who helped Americans during the war will stay on an Army base in Virginia until they are resettled.



**By Eric Schmitt and Jennifer Steinhauer**

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WASHINGTON — The first group of Afghans promised refuge by the Biden administration for helping the United States during the 20-year war in Afghanistan landed on American soil early Friday, starting a new life chapter after years of waiting.

A chartered airliner carrying 221 Afghan interpreters, drivers and others who worked with the U.S. military, as well as their family members, arrived at Dulles International Airport outside Washington after traveling more than 30 hours from Kabul, the Afghan capital, officials said.

From Dulles, they were bused to Fort Lee, Va., south of Richmond, where they will stay at a hotel on the base for about a week to complete their processing before being resettled in the United States permanently, officials said.

The late-night arrival marked the vanguard of an initial group of about 2,500 Afghans being evacuated under threat of Taliban reprisals in an effort the White House calls Operation Allies Refuge. Groups of Afghans will arrive by plane roughly every three days and be transported to Fort Lee, said one American official briefed on the arrangements.

At the sprawling Army base about 130 miles south of Washington, the Afghans will stay on dedicated floors of the hotel, where private security rather than military police will be in place to ensure their safety, officials said.

An additional 4,000 Afghans who worked with American forces but whose applications need further approvals will go to other countries with their families in the coming weeks to complete the visa process before coming to the United States, officials said.

The United States is negotiating with Qatar and Kuwait to house thousands of Afghans at military bases in those countries for up to several months while they complete their visa applications and await clearance to come to the United States. Diplomats are discussing similar arrangements with Kazakhstan and Kosovo, one official said.

Many of the newly arrived interpreters have long been targets of the Taliban for their cooperation with American troops during the war. Their passage was promised under two congressionally devised special visa programs, but the documentation and security requirements have bedeviled many applicants.

About 18,000 Afghans have been caught in bureaucratic limbo after applying for special immigrant visas, which are available to people who face threats because of work for the U.S. government. The applicants have 53,000 family members, U.S. officials have said.

Many more are still trapped as Taliban fighters tighten their grip around rural areas. The administration has been opaque about who precisely will receive passage, and many fear that they will never be found.

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On Thursday, Congress agreed to expand the number of special immigrant visas available for Afghans to 19,000 from 11,000 and broaden the universe of people eligible for them by removing some application requirements. The measure, part of a \$2.1 billion emergency spending bill, also includes hundreds of millions of dollars for government programs that aid and resettle refugees and migrants.

Mr. Biden and other top administration officials say they are committed to assisting Afghans who braved dangers and hardships to aid the United States during its longest war. “We have spoken many times about the moral obligation we have to help those who have helped us,” Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III said in a statement last week.

Military veterans, some members of Congress and refugee groups have pushed to speed up the evacuations. But concerns that a processing error could result in a security problem have kept that pressure in check, said several people who talked to administration officials in recent weeks.

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“Realistically, one cannot bring 20,000 interpreters directly into the United States,” said Mary Kaszynski, the director of government relations for VoteVets, a veterans organization that has focused on the issue for years because many members remain close with the interpreters they worked with in Afghanistan. “That wouldn’t be safe, that wouldn’t be good for U.S. interests and that is why they had to implement a staged approach.”

Ross Wilson, the charge d’affaires at the U.S. embassy in Kabul, heralded the success of the first flight but acknowledged the difficulties that lie ahead for the thousands more awaiting refuge as the security situation across Afghanistan deteriorates.

“Much work remains ahead to meet America’s commitment to those who have been committed to us,” Mr. Wilson told reporters Friday at a news conference held at the embassy.

The first 2,500 being evacuated under this new push by the Biden administration are roughly 700 visa applicants along with their family members, Mr. Wilson said. A second group of around 4,000 will be relocated in the coming weeks and months, he added.

Stuck in limbo are thousands of others seeking a visa who were found not to qualify for the special immigrant visa program, often for minor reasons. Many of these applicants have appealed or reapplied countless times and are afraid they will be abandoned as the United States leaves.

Currently there is no official effort to help those in that applicant pool, along with those who are unable to get to Kabul to undergo the visa process because of recent Taliban advances.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting from Kabul.