

Evacuation from Kabul falters as chaos at airport reigns.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. embassy warned Americans not to head to the airport in Kabul because of a situation that was “changing quickly” after the Taliban entered the city on Sunday.

Witnesses at the civilian domestic terminal said they had heard occasional gunshots and said thousands of people had crammed into the terminal and filled the parking lots, desperately seeking flights out.

“The security situation in Kabul is changing quickly including at the airport,” the embassy said in a statement. “There are reports of the airport taking fire; therefore we are instructing U.S. citizens to shelter in place.”

Late Sunday, the State and Defense Departments issued a statement saying the U.S. was working to secure control of the airport and to speed up the evacuation using civilian and military flights.

“Tomorrow and over the coming days,” the statement said, “we will be transferring out of the country thousands of American citizens who have been resident in Afghanistan, as well as locally employed staff of the U.S. mission in Kabul and their families and other particularly vulnerable Afghan nationals.”

The Taliban entered Kabul on Sunday, completing the near total takeover of Afghanistan two decades after the American military drove them from power. A frenzied evacuation of U.S. diplomats and civilians kicked into high gear last week, while Afghans made a mad dash to banks, their homes and the airport. Crowds of people ran down the streets as the sound of gunfire echoed in downtown Kabul.

Helicopter after helicopter — including massive Chinooks with their twin engines, and speedy Black Hawks that had been the workhorse of the grinding war — touched down and then took off loaded with passengers. Some shot flares overhead.

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On Saturday, President Biden accelerated the deployment of 1,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to aid in the evacuation. On Sunday, orders went out to deploy another 1,000, temporarily bringing the U.S. presence there to 6,000, according to a Pentagon official who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and was granted anonymity.

Those being evacuated over the weekend included a core group of American diplomats who had planned to remain at the embassy in Kabul, according to a senior administration official. They were being moved to a compound at the international airport, where they would stay for an unspecified amount of time, the official said.

The runway of the airport was filled with a constellation of uniforms from different nations. They joined contractors, diplomats and civilians all trying to catch a flight out of the city. Those who were eligible to fly were given special bracelets, denoting their status as noncombatants.

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.

For millions of Afghans, including tens of thousands who assisted the U.S. efforts in the country for years, there were no bracelets. They were stuck in the city.

Hundreds of people swarmed to the civilian side of the airport in the hopes of boarding planes out, but by evening scores were still waiting inside the terminal and milling around on the apron amid the constant roar of planes taking off from the adjacent military air base. A long line of people waited outside the check-in gate, unsure if the flights they had booked out of the country would arrive.

While President Biden has defended his decision to hold firm and pull the last U.S. troops out of Afghanistan by Sept. 11, his administration has become increasingly worried about images that could evoke a foreign policy disaster of the past: the fall of Saigon at the end of the conflict in Vietnam in 1975.

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