

Evacuations From Kabul Wind Down as U.S. Prepares to Pull Last Troops

Hundreds of thousands of Afghans are still thought to be seeking to flee the country, but President Biden and other global leaders have acknowledged that many will not get out before the deadline.

By Michael Levenson

Published Aug. 28, 2021 Updated Aug. 30, 2021

The sweeping international effort to evacuate thousands of vulnerable Afghans and foreign nationals from Kabul's airport neared completion on Saturday as the United States continued to withdraw its remaining troops from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan after carrying out a retaliatory airstrike in response to a devastating terrorist attack.

Britain planned to end the evacuation of its citizens on Saturday and to begin bringing its remaining troops home, Gen. Nick Carter, the chief of the defense staff, told the BBC's Radio 4. More American troops have also begun getting on planes and leaving. A military official said on Saturday that there were around 4,000 U.S. troops in Kabul, down from 5,800 a few days ago.

The official's comment came just as President Biden warned that "an attack is highly likely in the next 24 to 36 hours." Early Sunday morning in Kabul, the United States Embassy warned of a "specific, credible threat" to the airport area and urged all American citizens there to leave immediately.

The troop departures signaled a tumultuous end to a 20-year war that has left the country awash in grief and desperation, with many Afghans fearing for their lives under Taliban rule and struggling with cash shortages and rising food prices.

"We haven't been able to bring everybody out and that has been heartbreaking," General Carter told the BBC. "There have been some very challenging judgments that have had to be made on the ground."



Members of the British armed forces arriving at Brize Norton Royal Air Force base in Oxfordshire, England, after helping evacuate people from Kabul, Afghanistan. Pool photo by Alastair Grant

France, too, has ended its evacuations, French officials said on Friday.

With just three days remaining before Mr. Biden's Aug. 31 deadline to withdraw U.S. troops, the mission has been shifting its focus, from vetting and airlifting Afghan civilians to bringing home American military personnel.

About 6,800 people were evacuated from the Kabul airport on Friday, down significantly from early Thursday, when White House officials said that 13,400 people had been evacuated from the airport in the previous 24 hours.

About 117,000 people, most of them Afghans, have been evacuated since the Taliban seized Kabul on Aug. 15, Pentagon officials said. On Saturday, about 1,400 people were still at the airport, and had been screened and booked for flights, Pentagon officials said.

About 350 Americans have told the State Department that they were still seeking to leave the country, the department said on Saturday, adding that it believes some may have already left Afghanistan.

Hundreds of thousands of Afghans are still thought to be trying to flee the country, yet Mr. Biden and other global leaders have acknowledged that many will not get out before the deadline.

Outside Kabul's airport on Saturday, roads remained closed and the large crowds that had strained to push inside had largely dissipated in the aftermath of Thursday's suicide bombing, which killed 13 American service members and as many as 170 civilians.

At the Abbey Gate, near where the bombing occurred, only two families and two young men still waited.

The airport's South Gate remained open, and there was a growing backlog of buses carrying some 500 to 1,000 people, as U.S. military personnel screened for suicide vests and other explosives. The Taliban, which was manning checkpoints around the airport, also turned away dozens of buses. Few people, if any, were getting through the airport gates.



Members of the Taliban's Badri 313 Battalion, performing evening prayers at the airport in Kabul on Saturday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Among those still hoping to leave were two brothers who said they had traveled 26 hours from Herat, a city in Western Afghanistan, and had managed to sneak past guards outside the airport's perimeter to reach the Abbey Gate. One of them said he had been selected by a U.S. visa lottery.

The brothers knew of the deadly explosion at the gate two nights ago, “but what can we do,” one of them said on Saturday. “This is our only way out.”

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Officials from Turkey, Qatar and the Group of 7 nations are to meet on Monday on a range of issues about Afghanistan, including the future of the Kabul airport, according to two officials familiar with the discussions.

After the American military leaves on Tuesday, the path for Afghan evacuees will grow only more difficult as the Taliban takes control of the airport.

Ned Price, a State Department spokesman, said on Friday that officials were in talks with allies, and the Taliban, to allow nonmilitary flights to resume as quickly as possible after the U.S. military’s departure.

He would not comment on reports that Turkey and Qatar were planning to run the airport with the Taliban, although he said that Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken had spoken with Turkey’s foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to discuss “our cooperation in Afghanistan and our continuing efforts to ensure the safe and orderly evacuation of our citizens, allies and partners.”

Thursday’s attack near the airport was one of the deadliest in the nearly two decades since the U.S.-led invasion.

“The situation on the ground continues to be extremely dangerous, and the threat of terrorist attacks on the airport remains high,” Mr. Biden said in a statement on Saturday. “Our commanders informed me that an attack is highly likely in the next 24-36 hours.”

The Pentagon on Saturday gave its fullest account yet of Friday’s strike in response to the bombing outside the airport. It said that the military had used a drone to kill two “high-profile” targets for the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, also known as ISIS-K or the Islamic State Khorasan, a group that is a rival of the Taliban and that claimed responsibility for Thursday’s attack. Military officials said one other target was injured.

Defense Department officials said one drone target was an ISIS-K “planner,” and the other was a “facilitator.”

The strike was carried out by a single MQ-9 Reaper drone flying from a base in the United Arab Emirates, according to a senior U.S. military official. The targets were struck in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province, roughly 90 miles east of Kabul.

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.

The “planner” who was killed was believed to be involved in future plots against targets in Kabul, including the airport, but there was no evidence so far that he was involved in the suicide bombing near the airport on Thursday, the official said.

“I said we would go after the group responsible for the attack on our troops and innocent civilians in Kabul, and we have,” Mr. Biden said in his statement. “This strike was not the last. We will continue to hunt down any person involved in that heinous attack and make them pay.”

Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, condemned the drone strike, telling Reuters it was a “clear attack on Afghan territory.”

For the first time, Pentagon officials publicly acknowledged the possibility that some people killed outside the airport on Thursday might have been shot by American service members after the suicide bombing.

Investigators are looking into whether the gunfire came from Americans at the gate, or from the Islamic State.

The suicide bombing and the American response came as Afghanistan’s economy, which was sustained for years by an influx of international aid, has been in free fall.

Many Afghans are struggling to support their families, and have gathered outside banks and A.T.M.s in the hope of withdrawing money, only to return home cashless and despairing.



Afghans, many of whom are presumably account holders seeking cash, gathering outside a closed bank in Kabul on Saturday. Aamir Qureshi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On Saturday, hundreds protested outside one bank branch in Kabul and scores more marched through central Kabul to demand the reopening of banks that had closed after the Taliban takeover.

“Islamic government, give us our rights!” they chanted. One of the country’s largest banks, Azizi Bank, issued a statement to customers saying that it was waiting for Afghanistan’s central bank to resume operations before reopening.

A representative of the central bank said that it would reopen on Sunday, but that to prevent bank runs, it might not begin distributing money until a new government was established.

The Taliban have indicated that Hajji Mohammad Idris, a member of the movement, will serve as acting head of the central bank. News reports have indicated that Mr. Idris has no formal financial training.

Despite ending its presence in Afghanistan, the United States still controls billions of dollars belonging to the Afghan central bank, money that Washington is making sure remains out of the reach of the Taliban.

Concern is also growing about the plight of farmers and herders, who form the backbone of Afghanistan’s rural economy. The country continues to be hit hard by a worsening drought that threatens the livelihoods of more than 7 million people who rely on agriculture or livestock, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization warned on Saturday.

“Farmers and livestock owners must not be forgotten in today’s humanitarian crisis,” said Qu Dongyu, the organization’s director-general. “Urgent agricultural support now is key to counter the impact of the drought and a worsening situation in Afghanistan’s vast rural areas in the weeks and months ahead.”

Reporting was contributed by Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, Lara Jakes, Najim Rahim, Jim Huylebroek, Fahim Abed and Thomas Gibbons-Neff.