

Biden Says Troops May Stay in Kabul Longer to Assist Evacuations

Tens of thousands of people trying to flee remain in the country, unable to leave.



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WASHINGTON — President Biden said on Wednesday that the United States was committed to evacuating every American out of Afghanistan, even if that might mean extending the military mission beyond his Aug. 31 deadline for a total withdrawal.

“If there’s American citizens left, we’re going to stay to get them all out,” Mr. Biden said during an interview on ABC News.

When asked whether Americans should understand that to mean that the troops might stay beyond the end of the month, Mr. Biden replied: “No. Americans should understand that we’re going to try to get it done before Aug. 31.”

But he then said, “If we don’t, we’ll determine at the time who’s left.”

The Taliban, which took over the capital, Kabul, this week, have set up checkpoints in the city, preventing thousands of people from reaching Hamid Karzai International Airport. Tens of thousands of other Afghans who worked with the United States during the war remain stranded across the country.

Earlier in the day, the Pentagon’s top two leaders said the U.S. government was committed to evacuating Afghans cleared to enter the United States, but would not commit to extending the operation beyond the Aug. 31 deadline, which Mr. Biden had set earlier this year for ending the military’s mission in the country.

“We intend to evacuate those who have been supporting us for years, and we are not going to leave them behind,” Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters. “And we will get out as many as possible.”

Speaking at a Pentagon news conference, both General Milley and Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III stopped short of assuring safe passage to the tens of thousands of Afghan allies who have been blocked by the Taliban from reaching the airport. So far, American Marines and other troops have not been sent into Kabul to extract evacuees, the men said.

“The forces that we have are focused on security of the airfield,” said Mr. Austin, who added that the military would work with the Taliban to allow Afghans with proper paperwork to pass through. “I don’t have the capability to go out and extend operations currently into Kabul.”

General Milley said the State Department was in communication with the Taliban to ensure that passengers could make their way to the airport. But there have been numerous reports of Taliban fighters beating and harassing Afghans trying to get there, despite the Pentagon’s warnings not to interfere with the evacuation.

In the interview, ABC’s George Stephanopoulos asked Mr. Biden if in making the decision to withdraw forces from America’s 20-year war in Afghanistan he had “priced in” the risk that U.S. citizens and Afghan allies would struggle to evacuate, putting them in danger from Taliban forces who might try to exact revenge.

The president initially answered “yes,” and then added, “Now exactly what happened, I’ve not priced in.”

Mr. Biden, as he did earlier in the week, offered a strong defense of his administration’s handling of the military withdrawal, which has plunged Afghanistan into chaos.

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“The idea that somehow, there’s a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing — I don’t know how that happens,” he said, according to a transcript provided by the network.

Mr. Biden insisted in the interview that the Taliban had agreed to let American citizens get through to the airport.

“Look, one of the things we didn’t know is what the Taliban would do in terms of trying to keep people from getting out,” he said. “What they would do. What are they doing now? They’re cooperating, letting American citizens get out, American personnel get out, embassies get out, etc.”

That was not the case, he acknowledged, for the thousands of Afghans who helped U.S. and NATO forces over the years and now have a target on their back.

Mr. Austin acknowledged that the United States was “not close to where we want to be in terms of getting the numbers through” for evacuations. “So we’re going to work that 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we’re going to get everyone that we can possibly evacuate evacuated,” he said.

He added: “As long as we possibly can until the clock runs out, or we run out of capability.”

About 5,000 people have been evacuated since the operation started over the weekend.

It was the first news conference by the Pentagon’s senior leadership since the extraordinary fall of Kabul over the weekend. The disintegration of the Afghan military has been deeply painful for the Pentagon, which spent 20 years and \$83 billion building up Afghanistan’s security forces. But beyond that, the collapse of the Afghan government has left the Pentagon facing questions from veterans of the war and active-duty service members, who have wondered what the point of the sacrifice was.

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.

Both Pentagon leaders tried to put some of those feelings into words. “All of this is very personal to me,” Mr. Austin said. “This is a war that I fought in and led. I know the country, I know the people, and I know those who fought alongside me.”

General Milley sought to address American service members who took part in the endeavor directly: “For more than 20 years, we have prevented an attack on the U.S. homeland,” he said, adding that 2,448 troops lost their lives and 20,722 were wounded in action, “and many others suffered the unseen wounds of war.”

Marine Corps leaders, in a letter Wednesday, also tried to reassure the corps, which has carried much of the Afghan fight, saying they “believe — without question — that your service was meaningful, powerful and important.”

General Milley also pushed back on reports in the news media that there were warnings of a rapid collapse of the Afghan military.

“I am very familiar with the intelligence, and in war nothing is ever certain, but I can tell you that there are not reports that I am aware of that predicted a security force of 300,000 would evaporate in 11 days,” he said.

General Milley said 5,000 Marines and soldiers were to be on the ground by late Wednesday to secure the airport, as military and commercial flights carrying people out of the Afghan capital continued apace.

In the previous 24 hours, 18 Air Force C-17 transport planes departed Kabul, with 2,000 passengers, including 325 American citizens, John F. Kirby, the chief Pentagon spokesman, told reporters on Wednesday. The others were Afghan civilians and NATO personnel, he said.

That total is well short of the 5,000 to 9,000 passengers a day the military is aiming to fly out of the country once the evacuation process is “at full throttle,” Mr. Kirby said.

“The goal is to get as many people out as quickly as we can,” he said.

About the same number of military flights were expected to leave Kabul in the next 24 hours, but Mr. Kirby said he could not predict how many passengers those planes would carry.

The Pentagon said 1,000 personnel have been sent to Qatar to help State Department officials speed the processing of visa applications for the Afghans who worked for the American war effort. Evacuation flights from Kabul are mostly flying to Qatar, where Afghan visa applicants are being screened before they board flights to the United States.