

Kamala Harris Pledges U.S. Help for Afghan Women and Children

As she left Southeast Asia, the vice president also delivered a blunt message to China. The United States does not want conflict, she said, but on some issues, “we are going to speak up.”



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HANOI — Vice President Kamala Harris said on Thursday that the United States would work with its allies to protect women and children in Afghanistan, as the Taliban takeover forced her to confront troubling historical parallels and diverted attention from her original mission on a five-day trip to Southeast Asia.

“There’s no question that any of us who are paying attention are concerned about that issue in Afghanistan,” said Ms. Harris, referring to the protection of women and children in that country.

The vice president made her comments in the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, on the final day of her trip to Southeast Asia, a key part of the Biden administration’s strategy to forge partnerships in the region and refocus American foreign policy on competing with China’s rising influence.

For Ms. Harris, the trip was an opportunity to assert herself on the world stage after her first overseas trip to Central America, one centered on addressing the root causes of migration, was marred by political backlash against the Biden administration’s response to soaring crossings at the southwest border.

Ms. Harris has faced the steep challenge of reassuring partners in Asia, and across the world, that the United States can still be a credible ally amid the Taliban’s swift takeover of Afghanistan and the United States’ haphazard evacuations.

With the Biden administration racing to meet an Aug. 31 deadline to leave Afghanistan, the situation in Kabul has cast a shadow over a trip meant to focus on public health, supply chain issues and economic partnerships.

In Singapore, whether it was at her meeting with the city-state’s leaders or during her tour of orchids after a high-stakes foreign policy speech, Ms. Harris consistently faced questions about the withdrawal, the future of human rights in Afghanistan and the fate of those who had risked their lives to assist American troops in the 20-year war.

In Hanoi, the pressure did not relent — particularly after the world witnessed images of desperate Afghans rushing behind U.S. military planes, drawing comparisons to the United States’ evacuation from Vietnam in 1975.

On Thursday, Ms. Harris did not directly answer a question about whether Americans were safer now than they had been before the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Instead, she touted the administration’s evacuation effort, which has swiftly ramped up in recent days.



Biden administration officials have said they have evacuated tens of thousands of people since Aug. 14, the day before Kabul fell to the Taliban. Most Americans have been flown out, although tens of thousands of Afghan allies will almost certainly be left behind after the Aug. 31 deadline.

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During her trip, Ms. Harris stayed on message, emphasizing that the administration was “singularly focused” on evacuating remaining American citizens and Afghan allies.

Her flight to Hanoi on Tuesday from Singapore was delayed for three hours because of what the United States Embassy in Vietnam described as a possible “anomalous health incident.” That is the language the Biden administration uses to refer to the so-called Havana syndrome — the unexplained headaches, dizziness and memory loss reported by scores of State Department officials, C.I.A. officers and their families in various countries. Asked about the report, Ms. Harris said only that officials were looking into it.

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.

Ms. Harris used the trip to Southeast Asia not just to forge partnerships on climate change, cybersecurity and the pandemic, but also to issue her most blunt comments yet on Beijing.

Both Beijing and Washington have homed in on Southeast Asia as a region of economic and geopolitical importance. Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam have all accused China of building and fortifying artificial islands in the South China Sea, and dispatching ships to intimidate their militaries and those who fish.

On Wednesday, Ms. Harris offered to send aircraft carriers and a Coast Guard cutter to Vietnam, in addition to a donation of one million doses of Covid-19 vaccines.

“When it comes to Beijing, let me be very clear,” she said. “We welcome stiff competition, we do not seek conflict, but on issues like you raise, the South China Sea, we are going to speak up.”

The tension between the United States and China loomed over the entirety of Ms. Harris’s trip — even when she was in the air. Beijing took advantage of her delayed flight to Hanoi to dispatch an envoy to meet with Vietnam’s prime minister and pledge a donation of two million doses of coronavirus vaccines — double the size of the U.S. donation.

After that meeting, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh of Vietnam declared that his country “does not ally with one country to fight against another,” according to Vietnamese state media.

“It’s striking,” said Aaron Connelly, a research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore. Chinese officials, he said, “believe they have the advantage and are trying to make it clear to Southeast Asian counterparts that there will be costs to engaging with the United States.”