

THE MEDIA EQUATION

How Mexico Helped The Times Get Its Journalists Out of Afghanistan

A humanitarian effort led by Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard gave Afghans and their families a sanctuary amid the fast-unfolding crisis.

By Ben Smith

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A group of Afghans who worked for The New York Times, along with their families, touched down safely early Wednesday — not in New York or Washington, but at Benito Juárez International Airport in Mexico City.

The arrival of the 24 families was the latest stop in a harrowing escape from Kabul. And Mexico's role in the rescue of journalists from The Times and, if all goes as planned, The Wall Street Journal offers a disorienting glimpse of the state of the American government as two of the country's most powerful news organizations frantically sought help far from Washington.

Mexican officials, unlike their counterparts in the United States, were able to cut through the red tape of their immigration system to quickly provide documents that, in turn, allowed the Afghans to fly from Kabul's embattled airport to Doha, Qatar. The documents promised that the Afghans would receive temporary humanitarian protection in Mexico while they explored further options in the United States or elsewhere.

"We are right now committed to a foreign policy promoting free expression, liberties and feminist values," the Mexican foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, said in a telephone interview. Citing a national tradition of welcoming everyone from the 19th-century Cuban independence leader José Martí to German Jews and South Americans fleeing coups, he said Mexico had opened its doors to the Afghan journalists "in order to protect them and to be consistent with this policy."

Mr. Ebrard added, explaining the country's swift work, "We didn't have time in order to have the normal official channels."

The path of the Afghan journalists and their families to Mexico was as arbitrary, personal and tenuous as anything else in the frantic and scattershot evacuation of Kabul. Mr. Ebrard was at home around 5 p.m. on Aug. 12, when he got a message on WhatsApp from Azam Ahmed, a former chief of The Times's Kabul and Mexico bureaus, who is on book leave.

"Is the government of Mexico willing to receive refugees from Afghanistan?" asked Mr. Ahmed, who maintained a cordial relationship with Mr. Ebrard despite occasionally heated Mexican government criticism of his coverage. "We have people there, good people, who are trying to get out."

Mr. Ebrard quickly responded that it wouldn't be possible. Then, he said, he thought about whether his department could circumvent what would typically be "hours and hours" of process and a cabinet meeting. "And so I called the president and explained the situation," he said.



Mexico's foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, last week. He "was in the position to make some decisions," he said. Sashenka Gutierrez/EPA, via Shutterstock

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador agreed that "the situation was moving very fast, and the decision should be taken at the same speed," Mr. Ebrard said in an interview this week.

"We looked at this request not as foreign policy between Mexico and the U.S.," he continued. "Instead, it's a common position between someone who was a New York Times reporter in Kabul several years ago and myself, who was in the position to make some decisions."

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Mr. Ebrard wrote back to Mr. Ahmed around 6:30 p.m. to say Mexico was ready to help by providing assurances — to a charter airline, or another government — that it would accept a list of Afghans.

As the Taliban closed in on Kabul, however, the situation changed. The commercial airport shut down, and for a time only American military flights would depart. Qatar, where the U.S. jets landed, would usually accept Afghans only if officials there could be assured that they would move on to a third country.

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Many of the details of the Afghans' passage are being kept confidential by news organizations, in part for fear of flooding the narrow channels of escape. The Times did not promote its arrangement with Mexico. After it was reached, Mexico extended its invitation to The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post. The editor in chief of The Journal, Matt Murray, said the paper planned to send its team, now in Qatar and Ukraine, on to Mexico. A spokeswoman for The Post declined to comment on its plans.

While the United States has ramped up its evacuation flights, the politicized and bureaucratic American immigration system has struggled to meet the crisis. Processing the special visas that are available to journalists often requires them to spend at least a year in a third country, presumably to satisfy the forces warning that Muslim immigrants may be terrorists working under extremely deep cover.

So governments around the world are stepping in, as they did when Syrian journalists fled that country's war — most of them to find homes in Europe. Many others went to Turkey, which has also scrambled to provide lifelines to Afghan journalists. Uzbekistan, too, has accepted refugees and offered itself as a short-term destination for Times journalists, a senior Times editor said.

Qatar, which maintained ties to the Taliban and hosted peace talks, has played the central role. Its ambassador to Kabul has reportedly led convoys to safety, and the first wave of evacuees — including the journalists — bivouacked in Doha. British soldiers also played a role in evacuating journalists, The Journal reported.

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Mexico's help in rescuing U.S. allies cuts against the usual image of the country in America's divisive immigration politics, but Mr. Ebrard declined to dwell on the irony. "Maybe society in the United States is not aware of the Mexican tradition in terms of refugees," he said mildly.

The foreign minister added that he could not fault the American withdrawal from Kabul. “It’s not easy to organize the evacuation of thousands of people in a short period of time when you are withdrawing from some country,” he said.

The Mexican government is now looking to extend similar protections to other journalists and to women who are in danger in Afghanistan, Mr. Ebrard added.

“We are deeply grateful for the help and generosity of the government of Mexico,” A. G. Sulzberger, the publisher of The Times, said in an email. “Their assistance has been invaluable in getting our Afghan colleagues and their families out of harm’s way. We urge the whole international community to follow this example and continue working on behalf of the many brave Afghan journalists who are still at risk.”

Many Afghan journalists remain unable to get into the airport — including most of the staff of the U.S.-government-operated Voice of America and Radio Azadi, a U.S. official said.

Mr. Sulzberger said the assistance would not affect The Times’s coverage of Mexico, describing it as a humanitarian matter and noting that “everyone who has assisted us understands that our coverage is totally and completely independent.”

Mr. Ebrard is a large figure in Mexican politics, a former Mexico City mayor who is often mentioned as a possible successor to President Obrador. He’s also known for a lighter touch with the press than the president, who often castigates news organizations (including The Times) at lengthy news conferences. But the foreign minister said he didn’t expect any favors from the newsrooms that Mexico had helped.

“I think that those newspapers have different positions about the government, very critical ones, and I suspect this will not change,” he said.

The Mexican government is trying to stem a tide of migrants from Central America, and I asked how it could justify admitting Afghans while pressing Nicaraguans to stay home. Mr. Ebrard said the government’s actions were consistent with the Mexican push “to make clear the difference between economic migrants and the people who are looking for refuge and asylum,” he said.

Mr. Ebrard said he didn’t expect much domestic criticism for moving fast to accept Afghans. “The people in Mexico are very sympathetic with refugees right now in Afghanistan,” he said. And he said he’d be at the airport Wednesday morning to meet the Afghans himself and to say, “Welcome to Mexico.”

Ben Smith is the media columnist. He joined The Times in 2020 after eight years as founding editor in chief of BuzzFeed News. Before that, he covered politics for Politico, The New York Daily News, The New York Observer and The New York Sun. Email: ben.smith@nytimes.com @benyt

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