

98 Countries Pledge to Accept Afghans After U.S. Military Departs

A joint statement from the United States and other countries said that they had “received assurances from the Taliban” that people with travel documents showing they were clear to enter any of those countries could safely depart.



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WASHINGTON — The United States and 97 other countries said on Sunday that they would continue to take in people fleeing Afghanistan after the American military departs this week and had secured an agreement with the Taliban to allow safe passage for those who are leaving.

The Taliban’s chief negotiator, Sher Mohammed Abas Stanekzai, had announced on Friday that the group would not stop people from departing, no matter their nationality or whether they had worked for the United States during the 20-year war.

The joint statement released on Sunday on behalf of more than half of the world’s governments and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization said that they had “received assurances from the Taliban” that people with travel documents showing they were clear to enter any of those countries could safely depart.

The countries also pledged to “continue issuing travel documentation to designated Afghans” and cited a “clear expectation of and commitment from the Taliban” of their safe passage.

“We note the public statements of the Taliban confirming this understanding,” the statement said.

Notably missing from the statement were Russia and China, two permanent members of the U.N. Security Council who have pledged to help the Taliban rebuild Afghanistan.

The statement came on the same day Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken told NBC’s “Meet the Press” that the United States was unlikely to keep diplomats in Afghanistan after the American military departs on Tuesday. Officials said it was expected that the U.S. mission to Afghanistan would open a diplomatic mission in a country elsewhere in the region, in part to continue helping the surge of expected refugees obtain necessary departure documents.

The statement did not warn of any consequences should the Taliban renege on the agreement, although a senior State Department official said it was meant to convey an implicit message about incentives — namely, foreign aid to the government — that the international community would use to enforce it.

The chief American envoy to Taliban peace talks, Zalmay Khalilzad, tweeted on Saturday that the Taliban’s assurances were “positive” and that “we, our allies, and the international community will hold them to these commitments.”

That stood in stark contrast to the tens of thousands of Afghans who relief agencies said feared being left behind and living under Taliban rule. That includes those who worked for the American military or the U.S. Embassy since 2001 and were eligible to immigrate to the United States.

“Most of the guys that we’re tracking now are terrified to even try to go through Taliban checkpoints,” said Michael P. Mulroy, a former C.I.A. officer and top Middle East policy official at the Pentagon during the Trump administration.

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“So when we’re not there, when the entire focus of the world isn’t on the Taliban, I have zero inclination that they will do anything but probably prosecute, and in many cases execute, people who worked really closely with the U.S.,” Mr. Mulroy said on Saturday.

Tens of thousands of the Afghans who had worked for the United States were believed to be among the more than 114,400 people evacuated so far from the international airport in Kabul, the capital, since Aug. 14. That total also included nearly 5,500 U.S. citizens, including 50 over the last day alone, most of whom hold American and Afghan passports.

The State Department said an additional 350 Americans were still waiting to be evacuated as of Saturday and estimated that another 280 who claimed to have U.S. citizenship had either signaled they would not leave or had not committed to 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.

Sunday’s joint statement was the latest in a series of diplomatic moves to compel the Taliban to pursue terrorists, uphold human rights and form an inclusive government after its fighters seized power from the country’s Western-backed leaders on Aug. 15. It is a remarkable — and uncomfortable — shift for the United States and its closest allies, who invaded Afghanistan after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and regarded the Taliban as an enemy.

In his statement on Friday, Mr. Stanekzai, the Taliban negotiator, said “we have no issues” with Afghans’ traveling abroad for medical treatment, business, education or what he vaguely described as other reasons. “No one will prevent you from traveling,” he said, according to a partial transcript of his remarks that a U.S. official provided to The New York Times.

But Mr. Stanekzai said Afghan citizens needed first to obtain passports from the Afghan interior ministry and then to try to secure visas and other approved travel documents from foreign governments before they could leave. At best, it is a process that could take months, if not years; at worst, it will alert the Taliban as to who does not want to live under their rule.

Another impediment to departures is the international airport in Kabul, and who will run it after American troops leave on Tuesday. At that point, the airport will be under the control of the Taliban.

Officials from Turkey, Qatar and the Group of 7 nations planned to meet on Monday to discuss the future of Afghanistan, including the airport, two officials familiar with the talks said on Saturday.

Ned Price, the State Department spokesman, said on Friday that it was “probably unreasonable” that the airport would be operating normally immediately after the U.S. troops withdrew. But, he said, officials were in talks with allies, and the Taliban, to get nonmilitary flights resumed as quickly as possible — in part to “provide opportunity for Afghans who may wish to leave the country.”

He would not comment on reports that Turkey and Qatar were planning to run the airport with the Taliban.