

First Flight From Kabul Is Hailed as Positive Step Amid Troubling Signs

A passenger jet's departure on Thursday was the first foreign flight out of Afghanistan since the U.S. evacuation ended. But thousands who want to leave remain stuck.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Ten days after the chaotic evacuation of Afghanistan came to an end, a lone jetliner lifted off from Kabul's airport on Thursday, the first international passenger flight since American forces ended their 20-year presence in the country.

The departure of the chartered Qatar Airways Boeing 777, with scores of Americans, Canadians and Britons on board, was hailed by some as a sign that Taliban-ruled Afghanistan might be poised to re-engage with the world, even as reports emerged that the group was intensifying its crackdown on dissent.

"Kabul Airport is now operational," Mutlaq bin Majed Al-Qahtani, a special envoy from Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said at a news conference on the tarmac.

In recent days, Qatari and Turkish personnel worked with the Taliban to repair damage and make the airport basically functional again. But just more than a week ago, the facility was a scene of frantic desperation as people jockeyed to find seats on the last commercial and military planes out.

When the last evacuation flight left Kabul just before midnight Aug. 30, it left behind a ghost town of an airport, strewn with damaged equipment and the abandoned possessions of evacuees.

Also left behind were an unknown number of foreigners and Afghans desperate to leave — but with no way out.

Mr. Al-Qahtani appeared at pains Thursday to point out the difference between then and now. This, he said, was not an evacuation. "We are speaking about free passage," he said. "We want people to feel that this is normal."

But for all the diplomat's talk of a new era, by day's end, only a single planeload of passengers had left the country, and "normal" seemed far away for a country just taken over by militants who are feared by many Afghans and who are shunned by much of the world.

More flights were promised in the days ahead. But an untold number of people remained in limbo, including at the airport in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where dozens of Americans and hundreds of Afghans were waiting for the Taliban to let them leave on charter flights.

And the country overall remained in desperate straits, as the newly installed Taliban government worked to tighten its grip, cracking down on all signs of public protest. Protesters have been violently dispersed, and reports are emerging of journalists being detained and beaten.



Afghan journalists who said they were beaten by the Taliban for covering a protest in Kabul. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

At Thursday's joint news conference at the airport, Taliban and Qatari officials hailed the flight as the moment that Afghanistan reconnected with the international community. While that may have been overstated — many world leaders clearly remain deeply wary of the country's new leaders — American officials had words of praise Thursday for the militants that U.S. forces battled for two decades.

"The Taliban have been cooperative in facilitating the departure of American citizens and lawful permanent residents on charter flights from H.K.I.A.," Emily Horne, a National Security Council spokeswoman, said in a statement, referring to the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. "They have shown flexibility, and they have been businesslike and professional in our dealings with them in this effort. This is a positive first step."

The State Department confirmed that Americans were on the plane, which later landed in Doha, Qatar's capital, but would not say how many there were. A spokesman, Ned Price, said more than 30 Americans had been invited onto the flight but that some did not go.

At Kabul's airport Thursday, as passengers were being checked in for the flight to Qatar, the mood of relief stood in stark contrast to the scene there just over a week ago.

Safi, 42, who is from Toronto, was among those passing through security to board the plane. He said he had tried to leave during the evacuation but had given up as chaos enveloped the streets outside the airport. At the end of August, a suicide bombing attack at the gates of the airport killed scores of Afghans and 13 U.S. service members.

But Thursday was a scene of relative calm.

"Things are good," said Safi, who asked to be identified only by his first name. "It seems the authorities are keeping their promises."

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The chartered plane had arrived in Kabul from Doha carrying 50 tons of relief aid, including food, officials said.



The Qatar Airways flight departing from Kabul on Thursday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban who joined the Qatari envoy at the news conference, said that the resumption of international flights would be critical to ensuring that much-needed aid continued to flow into the country.

China, making cautious overtures to its unstable neighbor, has pledged to give \$30 million in food and other aid to the new government. But China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, also urged the Taliban to work to contain terrorist groups.

The United Nations warned on Thursday that the freezing of billions of dollars in Afghan assets to keep it out of Taliban hands would inevitably have devastating economic consequences.

Deborah Lyons, the U.N. special envoy on Afghanistan, told the U.N. Security Council that the international community needed to find way to make these funds available to the country, with safeguards to prevent misuse by the Taliban, "to prevent a total breakdown of the economy and social order."

On Thursday, Afghanistan's new acting prime minister, Mullah Muhammad Hassan, urged former officials who fled when the Taliban seized power to come home. The group, he told Al Jazeera in an interview, will "guarantee their security and safety."

But those and other assurances offered by the Taliban have been received with broad skepticism. Many remember the militants' brutal reign 20 years ago. And many are alarmed by what they have already seen since the group's return.

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 Taliban have repeatedly insisted that they will respect human rights, yet these claims are completely at odds with what we are currently seeing and hearing in cities across the country," Amnesty International said on Thursday in a statement. "Afghans who have taken to the streets, understandably fearful about the future, are being met with intimidation, harassment and violence — particularly directed at women."

U.S. officials said that the Americans on board the flight from Kabul on Thursday were considered the "most interested" in getting out, but said other Americans in Afghanistan would have other opportunities to leave.

Senator Angus King of Maine, an independent who sits on the Senate Intelligence and Armed Services Committees, was cautiously optimistic on Thursday morning about Americans elsewhere in Afghanistan being able to depart from the Kabul airport, although he noted the journey could be "treacherous and difficult." But he said it was still unclear how many who wanted to leave remained in Afghanistan, or how they would get to the capital.



Foreign passport holders at Kabul's airport on Thursday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

"I don't want to sound like I have a great deal of confidence in the Taliban," Mr. King said, adding, "All I can say is that it appears that, thus far, the Taliban has honored their commitment to allow Americans to leave."

While the flight Thursday appeared to be a step toward resolving a diplomatic impasse that has left scores of Americans and other international workers stranded in Afghanistan, it was not clear if the Taliban would allow the tens of thousands of Afghans who once helped the U.S. government and now qualify for emergency U.S. visas to leave.

Taliban and foreign officials have said that Afghans with dual citizenship would be allowed to leave, but it was unclear whether any were on the first flight.

It also remained unclear whether charter flights from the airport in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where dozens of Americans and hundreds of Afghans were waiting to leave the country, would be allowed to fly.

In recent days, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken has said that the Taliban are to blame for the grounded flights, and that they claim some passengers on the manifest do not have the proper documentation.

Mr. Price, the State Department spokesman, said the United States had “pulled every lever” to persuade the Taliban to allow flights to depart from Mazar-i-Sharif carrying not only American citizens and legal residents but also Afghans considered to be at high risk.

“It continues to be our contention that these individuals should be allowed to depart,” he said. “At the first possible opportunity.”

Paul Mozur and Marc Santora contributed reporting.