

How News Organizations Got Afghan Colleagues Out of Kabul

The evacuation of those who worked for outlets like The New York Times and The Washington Post came after a global rescue effort stretching from the Pentagon to Qatar.



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For hours, they waited on the tarmac in the relentless heat, children and suitcases and strollers in tow, hoping for a flight to freedom that would not come. More than 200 Afghans from all walks of life — cooks, gardeners, translators, drivers, journalists — gathered on the runway of the Kabul airport, seeking escape from a country whose government had collapsed with shocking speed.

When Taliban forces surged into the crowded airport, the group — local employees of The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, along with their relatives — heard gunfire. They quickly scattered, eventually returning to homes where their safety could not be assured.

It would be several long days until some members of the group were able to secure passage on Thursday out of Afghanistan — an exfiltration that came after a global rescue effort stretching from American newsrooms to the halls of the Pentagon to the emir's palace in Doha, Qatar. One Times correspondent, a former U.S. Marine, who had been evacuated earlier but returned on a military plane to assist his Afghan colleagues, stayed inside the airport to help coordinate the escape.

The group's ordeal was one of many that played out over the past week in Afghanistan, where citizens who worked side by side with Western journalists for years — helping to inform the world about the travails of their nation — now fear for their safety and that of their families under the Taliban. Media outlets from around the world have called on high-level diplomats and on-the-ground fixers to help their employees escape a situation that none expected to unfold so brutally, so quickly.

As the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in recent days, the publishers of The Times, The Journal and The Post banded together on their evacuation efforts. Security personnel and editors shared information on morning calls. The publishers called on the Biden administration to help facilitate the passage of their Afghan colleagues, and discussions ensued with officials at the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department.

By Sunday, bureaus had been closed and Kabul's streets had grown chaotic. As American troops, contractors and security teams left the country, newsroom officials had less and less visibility into the situation on the ground. Some Afghan employees feared that Taliban forces would go door to door, intimidating or even kidnapping journalists known to have worked with American outlets.

The American military had secured a portion of Hamid Karzai International Airport, just a few kilometers from the center of Kabul, but getting there, and then gaining access to the terminal, became nearly impossible. On Sunday, the group of more than 200 people connected to the three papers, including employees and their relatives, traveled to the airport's tarmac, hoping to make contact with the American military, according to three people briefed on the events, some of whom requested anonymity to describe sensitive discussions.

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Instead, they found a scene of mass confusion, with hundreds of other panicked Afghans seeking refuge. When Taliban forces arrived, the situation grew more dangerous; members of the group left dehydrated, hungry and dispirited, with no clear idea of what would happen next, the people said.

Back in New York and Washington, the papers' leaders reached out to diplomatic contacts in countries with embassies in Afghanistan, chasing leads that could result in safe harbor and transportation for their employees. "There were many plans and many efforts that either failed or fell apart," said Michael Slackman, an assistant managing editor for international for The Times. "You'd have a plan at night and two hours later the circumstances on the ground would have shifted."

One option emerged when Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state, offered a few seats for Afghan employees on a charter flight her team was trying to arrange to help Afghan women at risk, according to three people briefed on the discussions. The employees did not end up taking the flight.

On Tuesday, 13 people from The Washington Post — including two Afghan employees and their families and an American correspondent — were able to leave on an American military transport bound for Qatar with the help of “a number of people coordinating on different fronts,” according to a spokeswoman, Kristine Coratti Kelly. Fred Ryan, The Post’s publisher, had emailed the U.S. national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, for assistance.

On Friday morning, the publisher of The Wall Street Journal, Almar Latour, said in an email to staff that a group of 76 Afghan colleagues and their families were able to leave Afghanistan, and four more people were “en route to safety.” He thanked the government of Qatar for its help and said the company appreciated “the efforts of U.S. government and military officials in a fluid and difficult situation.”

Matt Murray, the editor in chief of The Journal, said in a separate email Friday, which was viewed by The New York Times, that the people had arrived in Qatar earlier in the week and “we expect they will soon depart for another destination.”

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A breakthrough for a group of 128 people from The Times came when the government of Qatar, a country with ties to both Afghanistan and the United States, agreed to help. Qatar is home to an American military base; it also has an embassy in Kabul and a relationship with Taliban leaders.

A.G. Sulzberger, the publisher of The New York Times, said the company was “deeply grateful” to the government of Qatar, “which has been truly invaluable in getting our Afghan colleagues and their families to safety.”

“We also thank the many U.S. government officials who took a personal interest in the plight of our colleagues and the military personnel in Kabul who helped them make their exit from the country,” Mr. Sulzberger said in a statement. “We urge the international community to continue working on behalf of the many brave Afghan journalists still at risk in the country.”

News outlets remain focused on aiding the Afghans whose employment in some cases stretches back decades. Some are holed up in cities outside Kabul, unable to travel to the airport or pass Taliban checkpoints. The Kabul airport itself remains inundated by waves of Afghans seeking flights out of the country, with Taliban forces blocking various entry points.

Overnight on Thursday, employees of The Times and their relatives made another attempt to reach the airport. At first turned away by teeming crowds and guards at a Taliban checkpoint, the group eventually found an open entryway, according to the three people briefed on the events.

The group was aided by a pair of Times foreign correspondents: Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff. Mr. Neff, a former Marine, had initially left Kabul with an early round of American evacuees. But he later flew back to Kabul on a military plane and stayed in the American-occupied wing of the airport, where he advised his Afghan colleagues on how and when to make their approach.

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.

“State Department officials — both in Washington and Kabul — have been in constant, around-the-clock contact with U.S.-based media organizations regarding efforts to bring their reporters, employees and affiliates to safety,” the State Department said in a statement on Thursday. “It is a priority of ours, and we welcome today’s news.”

The next steps for news outlets are unclear. For English-speaking correspondents who remain in Kabul, covering the still-unfolding story has grown more perilous.

On Thursday, a Los Angeles Times photojournalist, Marcus Yam, and a photographer for another American news outlet were beaten by a Taliban fighter who insisted they erase from their cameras any images they had taken. The photographers were detained for 20 minutes until an English-speaking fighter realized they worked for the Western media and released them.



Clarissa Ward of CNN changed into a full-length abaya in order to keep speaking with Afghans on the street. Brent Swails/CNN

Instead of armored cars, some broadcast journalists now rely on unmarked taxis, the better to avoid scrutiny or unwanted attention. After the Taliban took power, Clarissa Ward of CNN changed into a full-length abaya in order to keep speaking with Afghans on the street. Roxana Saberi of CBS News switched to Zoom when it became too difficult to freely conduct interviews in public.

Cellular service is unreliable, but some correspondents try to keep off satellite phones, “so our locations aren’t given away,” said Deborah Rayner, CNN’s senior vice president for international news gathering.

“People will be much more clandestine in their gathering of news, because they’ll have to be,” said John Lippman, the acting director of programming at Voice of America. “We’ll be covering Afghanistan from outside Afghanistan if we have to.”

Reporting remotely may be better than no reporting at all, but press freedom groups are concerned that a Taliban crackdown will keep the world from knowing what’s happening inside the country. “The local knowledge of Afghan journalists cannot be replaced,” Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, said in a statement.

One news organization has increased its staff in Afghanistan: Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based media and television network.

Mohamed Moawad, its managing editor, said this week that his correspondents were able to move mostly without restrictions in Afghanistan and that he had dispatched more reporters, including some traveling from Doha and neighboring countries. One veteran Afghan correspondent helped the network secure exclusive footage of the Taliban taking control of the presidential palace.

“Putting the focus on Afghanistan right now is very vital and crucial for the people of Afghanistan, to hold the Taliban accountable for their commitments that they have put on the table,” he said.

But Mr. Moawad expressed concern that global coverage of Afghanistan could fade as conditions deteriorate and foreign journalists, along with their Afghan colleagues, no longer feel safe. “We have to make sure the coverage continues,” he said.

Annie Karni and Michael Crowley contributed reporting.