

Online Appeal Quickly Raises Millions for Afghan Rescue Flights

Some refugee experts were skeptical about a GoFundMe campaign by an Instagram personality working with veterans and other groups.

By Michael Levenson

Aug. 19, 2021

An online appeal for donations to organize flights to rescue vulnerable Afghans from the Taliban has quickly found a large audience of Americans eager to help.

In just a single day, more than 100,000 people have donated over \$5.8 million to the effort in Afghanistan, exceeding an early goal of raising \$4.4 million.

The question, according to some outside specialists, is whether the group behind the effort has the experience and organizational capability — let alone permission from the U.S. government — to rescue and resettle hundreds of desperate Afghans.

The GoFundMe campaign was organized by Tommy Marcus, who runs Quentin Quarantino, an Instagram account known for promoting left-wing memes and political causes, with nearly 770,000 followers. Others involved include military veterans, a former Republican operative and the International Women's Media Foundation.

Mr. Marcus says in his appeal that he has been working with humanitarian aid groups, veterans and activists on the ground in Kabul, “fighting to save people who otherwise have no chance at survival in the Taliban-occupied Kabul.”

The mission, he said, is focused on men and women who have worked as human rights lawyers, champions of women's and L.G.B.T.Q. rights, journalists, government liaisons, artists and interpreters, “all of whom are at imminent risk of being executed by the Taliban, along with their families.”

“Get these people to safety!” one woman who gave \$20 to the mission wrote on the GoFundMe page. “I wish I could give more — my heart is breaking for the Afghan people,” wrote another who donated \$25.

The money, according to the campaign, will be paid to and distributed by Raven Advisory, a company based in Fayetteville, N.C., which says on its website that it has experience working in Afghanistan and provides training, risk management, security, consulting and other services.

The company's chief executive, Sheffield Ford, and chief operating officer, David Heldt, both served in the Special Forces. The senior executive vice president, Philip Raveling, was in the C.I.A., according to the company website.

“This is an ongoing operation with real consequences,” Mr. Ford, Mr. Marcus and another backer of the effort, Karen Kraft, an Army veteran and documentarian, said in a statement.

“The organization is in direct contact with the U.S. military and has received the necessary permissions to conduct this mission,” the statement said. “The funds raised are being used to engage trusted aircraft, crews, and security operations teams. The focus will remain on extracting as many people as possible as quickly and as safely as possible.”

All the Afghans who board the flights will have identification and access to the airport and be vetted and sponsored, the organizers said on GoFundMe.

“Everyone volunteering on this project is doing so for free,” the organizers wrote. “Every dollar goes back to these Afghan refugees. We are not taking a penny.”

The mission, however, has prompted concern from some refugee specialists. Karen Jacobsen, a professor of global migration at the Fletcher School at Tufts University, said the effort “sounds crazy.”

“There are several large problems that immediately occur to me, but the most obvious one is that all these rescued people will immediately bump up against the U.S. immigration system” and may not be allowed to enter the country, she said.

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Eskinder Negash, the president and chief executive of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, said the mission would have to be planned with the State, Defense and Homeland Security Departments to ensure that the Afghans have clearance and medical screenings to enter the United States.

“It has to be organized and structured and it has to be coordinated, otherwise it’s going to be a problem for the people who come in,” Mr. Negash said. “They may not be eligible to become special immigrant visa holders.”

“It’s well intentioned, it’s wonderful,” he added. “But as you know, sometimes the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

In a statement, the State Department said: “We appreciate community-led efforts to support the Afghan relocation and resettlement process, which reflects the generosity of the American people and the international community. However, we are unable to verify the authenticity or effectiveness of these efforts.”

Phil Caruso, a board member at No One Left Behind, a nonprofit that supports Afghan war allies, said the GoFundMe group was one of many trying to organize rescue flights and contact his organization for assistance.

The group, he said, wanted to know if No One Left Behind had flights that it could fund.

All the rescue missions, he said, are facing a thicket of logistical and legal challenges. The most immediate, he said, is ensuring that Afghans can clear Taliban and U.S. checkpoints along the way to the international airport in Kabul and get through the crowds of people outside.

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.

Those boarding the flights must also have visas or be eligible for visas, and the private flights need permission from the State and Defense Departments to land at one of several designated military bases, he said.

“We’re still trying to work through these logistics now, but there’s not a clear answer yet,” he said.

Mr. Caruso, a veteran who served twice in Afghanistan, said the United States had a “moral obligation” to help Afghans fleeing the Taliban.

“Like most veterans, I spent a lot of time working with Afghans and I feel a kinship with the people,” he said. “Putting politics aside, we just want to help as many people as we can.”

Timothy Carter, a GoFundMe spokesman, said in a statement that the company had “fully vetted” the appeal, as it does with all fund-raisers related to Afghanistan, to ensure that it complied with the law and global financial regulations. He said the company had been in contact with the organizers of all these fund-raisers, including Mr. Marcus, “to ensure the aid is sent safely and securely to those in need.”

Becca Heller, executive director of the International Refugee Assistance Project, said the GoFundMe was one of many similar efforts that philanthropists and private foundations were trying to organize to rescue people from Afghanistan.



U.S. Army 82nd Airborne Division soldiers secured the flight line at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Aug. 17. Senior Airman Taylor Crul/United States Air Force

“I see something like this and I’m like, ‘Great, I hope it works,’” Ms. Heller said. “We’re talking every day to people on the ground who are so desperate to get out, and the pace of the U.S. government is not fast enough.”

Ms. Heller said the strong response to the GoFundMe effort should also send a message to the Biden administration about the depth of public support for refugee programs. “The outpouring of support from everyday Americans is a signal that there are activated people invested in things like this happening, and they’re paying attention,” she said.

According to the organizers, any money raised that is not spent on rescue flights will be donated to the International Women’s Media Foundation.

Charlotte Fox, a spokeswoman for the foundation, said the group was working on the mission with other organizations, including the Journalists in Distress Network, which has experience extracting people and resettling them under difficult circumstances.

“We are working to get out as many people as we can, and it truly isn’t a single effort,” Ms. Fox said. “These people will need continual help.”

Alain Delaqu  rie contributed research.