

Relief, and Worry, for Arrivals From Afghanistan

Afghan refugees and Americans who recently made it to the Washington area are happy to be in the United States, but they fear for those left behind.

By Madeleine Ngo

Published Aug. 25, 2021 Updated Oct. 3, 2021

CHANTILLY, Va. — Thousands of Afghan refugees and Americans have arrived in the Washington region in the past few days, finding shelter and a sense of relief after shuffling from country to country and sometimes fending off violent attacks from the Taliban while fleeing Kabul.

At Dulles International Airport on Wednesday, Afghans were processed and tested for the coronavirus in a closed-off section. Workers at the airport, in Northern Virginia, then escorted many onto charter buses throughout the day, taking them to the nearby Dulles Expo Center, where families were being temporarily housed.

Most refugees brought few belongings. Some children carried knapsacks over their shoulders. Parents held wailing babies and stacks of diapers. Others had only plastic bags stuffed with clothes.

More than 6,000 Afghans have arrived in the Virginia area, Gov. Ralph Northam said on Tuesday. Many refugees are staying at the Expo Center before being shuttled to Fort Lee or Fort Pickett, where plans are made to release them in Virginia or other states.

At least 1,500 American citizens and tens of thousands of Afghans who fear retribution from the Taliban remain in the country, and the Kabul airport has been a scene of chaos and violence with crowds of desperate people trying to escape as the U.S. military's Aug. 31 withdrawal deadline closes in.

Those who have made it out said they were relieved to arrive in the United States, although many still feared for family members stuck in Kabul.

Kamran, 23, arrived at Dulles at 4 a.m. on Wednesday with his sister and three cousins. After evacuating from Kabul and stopping in Bahrain, he said he felt good about landing in America.

"I feel safe here," he said before boarding one of the buses. "I think it's a better place."

Kamran left for the Kabul airport five days ago, bringing only a small backpack with two shirts, two pairs of jeans, a pair of sneakers and his phone charger. While pushing his way through to get to the American side of the airport, Taliban members beat his head and shoulders with batons. He eventually made it through and spent two days at the airport, which he said were excruciating because the sun was "burning" hot and there was not enough water for everyone.

Along with a group of other Afghans arriving in Virginia, Kamran took a bus to the Expo Center, where refugees were given food, drinks and a place to rest.

Outside the center, refugees stepped off buses into the sweltering heat and were quickly taken inside. A row of buses lined the side of the building, which was blocked off by metal barriers and yellow police tape.



Airport workers escorted many of the refugees onto charter buses throughout the day, taking them to the nearby Dulles Expo Center, where families were being temporarily housed. Kenny Holston for The New York Times

Kamran said he did not yet know what he would do in America or where he would permanently live. For now, he hopes to end up in California, where one of his sisters lives.

“We are just waiting and seeing what will happen,” he said.

Noah, a 31-year-old permanent resident who was visiting his family in Afghanistan, left the Expo Center on Wednesday afternoon with his wife, 9-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son. Heading to his home in Concord, Calif., he said he was happy to be back, although he was exhausted after passing through Qatar and Germany.

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On the air base in Doha, Qatar, he said, thousands of people were cramped together and there was “nothing to eat.” He had to leave two pieces of luggage with his clothes and documents on the plane there, and he is not sure how to retrieve them.

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.

He also expressed concern for his parents and siblings back in Kabul. His brother, who helped U.S. contractors in Afghanistan, is applying for a special immigrant visa. He is doubtful, though, that it will be granted. Although his brother went to the airport with him, Noah said he was denied a flight to America.

Nadima, a 36-year-old former government employee in Afghanistan, fled Kabul the day the Taliban seized control. After her co-workers were stopped by Taliban members on their way to the office, they told her to get on a flight out of the country.

Walking more than two hours to the airport, she saw cars “bumper to bumper” and felt a “sense of panic” as people feared the return of the Taliban, she said.

“I felt heavy,” she said. “Everything I worked for, 20 years of work, crumbling in front of my eyes.”

She eventually secured a flight to Ukraine that day and arrived at Dulles on Aug. 17. She is now staying with a friend in Arlington, Va., and she hopes to find a job soon.

At the airport on Wednesday, the scene outside the processing center was tense. Anxious family members paced around, waiting for their loved ones to emerge. Many stopped airport workers to ask about flight arrival times.

Joe, a 35-year-old hospitality worker who lives in Prince William County, Va., arrived at the airport at 8:30 a.m. to wait for his wife and two daughters to land. His wife left for Kabul with their children in early June to attend her brother’s wedding, which was supposed to take place on Aug. 15, the day the Taliban took control of the capital.

“I’m feeling a little more relieved knowing they’re on a flight home, but I would be a lot happier if I saw them already,” he said.