

U.S. Is Sending 3,000 Troops Back to Afghanistan to Begin Evacuations

With the Taliban sweeping across the country, U.S. officials say Kabul could fall in 30 days.



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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Pentagon is moving 3,000 Marines and soldiers to Afghanistan and another 4,000 troops to the region to evacuate most of the American Embassy and U.S. citizens in Kabul, as the Biden administration braces for a possible collapse of the Afghan government within the next month, administration and military officials said.

The sharply deteriorating situation in the country, as the Taliban rapidly advance across the north and Afghan security forces battle to defend ever shrinking territory in the south and west, has forced the Biden administration to accelerate plans to get Americans out.

President Biden, after meeting with his top national security advisers on Wednesday night and again Thursday morning, also ordered additional expedited flights out of the country for Afghans who have worked with the United States, so that their applications for special immigrant visas could be evaluated.

The embassy sent the latest in a series of alarming alerts, urging Americans to “leave Afghanistan immediately using available commercial flight options.”

And in Washington, the State Department spokesman, Ned Price, announced what he described as a drawdown of an unspecified number of civilians among the roughly 4,000 embassy personnel — including about 1,400 American citizens — to begin immediately.

“As we’ve said all along, the increased tempo of the Taliban military engagements and the resulting increase in violence and instability across Afghanistan is of grave concern,” he said. “We’ve been evaluating the security situation every day to determine how best to keep those serving at our embassy safe.”

But, Mr. Price added, “Let me be very clear about this: The embassy remains open.”

American negotiators are also trying to extract assurances from the Taliban that they will not attack the U.S. Embassy in Kabul if they take over the country’s government and ever want to receive foreign aid, three American officials said.

The 30-day estimate is one scenario, and administration and military officials insist that the fall of Kabul might still be prevented if the Afghan security forces can muster the resolve to put up more resistance. But while Afghan commandos have managed to continue fighting in some areas, they have largely folded in a number of northern provincial capitals.

The Taliban seized the strategic city of Ghazni, about 90 miles south of Kabul, on Thursday, putting the group in a better position to attack Kabul after its recent string of victories in the north.

By the end of the day, the Taliban were also on the verge of taking Kandahar, the country’s second-largest city, and Herat, in western Afghanistan near the Iranian border. Kandahar is historically and strategically important. The Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, began their insurgency there in the 1990s.



Taliban fighters patrolling the streets of Ghazni on Thursday. Their seizure of the city put the group in a better position to attack Kabul after its recent string of victories in the north. Gulabuddin Amiri/Associated Press

A senior official in the Biden administration said in an interview that the Taliban might soon take Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh Province and the country's economic engine, which is now effectively surrounded by the Taliban. The fall of Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar, the official said, could lead to a surrender of the Afghan government by September.

Another senior U.S. official described the mood in the White House as a combination of alarm and resignation — at the rapid pace of the Taliban offensive and the collapse of Afghan national forces, and over how the situation could continue to worsen. There has been a constant stream of video teleconference calls every day this week, the official said.

American officials conceded that they greatly overestimated the ability of the Afghan national forces to hold off the Taliban for at least a year or so. The collapse, they said, was almost instantaneous. But they argued that Mr. Biden accurately assessed the ultimate outcome: that if Americans stayed, they would get caught in the crossfire of yet another Afghan civil war.

The Pentagon press secretary, John F. Kirby, said that two Marine infantry battalions and one Army battalion, some 3,000 troops altogether, would deploy in the next two days to Hamid Karzai International Airport to help evacuate Americans and embassy personnel. The troops are coming from areas in the Middle East, the Central Command area of responsibility, Mr. Kirby said.

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An additional 1,000 Army personnel will head to Qatar, the Pentagon said, to help process the visa applications of Afghan who worked with American military during the war and who could be targeted by surging Taliban forces.

And as a contingency plan in case any embassy evacuation turns into a fight with the Taliban, the Pentagon is moving an entire infantry brigade combat team — some 3,500 troops — from Fort Bragg to Kuwait in the next week, so that they can quickly deploy if necessary.

If those troops end up in Afghanistan, that would bring the number of American forces there to around 7,000, more than double the number in the country when Mr. Biden announced in April that he would withdraw American troops and end America's longest war.

The deployment is “a very narrowly focused mission of safeguarding the orderly reduction of civilian personnel out of Afghanistan,” Mr. Kirby said. “That’s what we’re going to be focused on. It’s not a combat mission.”

A Marine battalion of several hundred is already on the embassy grounds, responsible for evacuating the embassy, officials said.

“We believe this is that the prudent thing to do given the rapidly deteriorating security situation,” Mr. Kirby said.



Murals at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. American negotiators are trying to extract assurances from the Taliban that they will not attack the embassy. Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

In the Biden administration’s aspirational plan for Afghanistan, none of this was supposed to happen — at least not so quickly. Mr. Biden announced in April that American troops would withdraw from the country by Sept. 11; he later moved that date up to Aug. 31, and most of the troops have left. He insisted that the Afghan government and military, with financial support from the United States, would be responsible for defending the country’s urban areas from the Taliban.

But since the announcement, the Taliban have rolled across city after city, despite having only around 75,000 fighters compared with the American-trained Afghan security forces’ 300,000 troops. That dichotomy has caused frustration in the Pentagon and among American officials, who have repeatedly said that the Afghan troops, if their backs were to the wall, would rally to defeat the Taliban.

“They have a lot of advantages that the Taliban don’t have,” Mr. Kirby said this week, referring to Afghanistan’s national security forces. “Taliban doesn’t have an air force, Taliban doesn’t own airspace. They have a lot of advantages. Now, they have to use those advantages.”

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.

But President Ashraf Ghani’s administration has failed to carry out any kind of strategy to defend what cities that remain or retake them despite saying he would do so. Pro-government militia forces, championed by Afghan officials and reminiscent of the bloody civil war of the 1990s, have consistently been unable to push back the Taliban.

On Wednesday, Mr. Ghani replaced the country’s army chief and appointed a new commander of the military’s commando units, in what has amounted to one of his most public moves yet to contend with the Taliban offensive, which has taken more than half of Afghanistan’s roughly 400 districts.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Mr. Ghani on Thursday to coordinate planning, Mr. Price said.

The American military is still supporting, to some degree, Afghanistan's government forces with airstrikes. But those strikes have largely been limited to the southern part of the country, around Kandahar. That is because of logistics: Now that the United States has withdrawn from Bagram Air Base in the north and has hauled away its warplanes and their huge support systems, it is harder to reach the north. Such strikes could require aerial refueling and would have other logistical hurdles that make them harder to conduct.



Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief American envoy to Afghanistan, is hoping to convince Taliban leaders that the embassy must remain open, and secure, if the group hopes to receive assistance as part of a future Afghan government. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief American envoy in talks with the Taliban, is leading the diplomatic effort for assurances from the Taliban that they will not attack the embassy. Two officials confirmed his efforts, which have not been previously reported, on the condition of anonymity to discuss the delicate negotiations.

Mr. Khalilzad is hoping to convince Taliban leaders that the embassy must remain open, and secure, if the group hopes to receive American financial aid and other assistance as part of a future Afghan government. The Taliban leadership has said it wants to be seen as a legitimate steward of the country, and is seeking relations with other global powers, including Russia and China, in part to receive economic support.

A third official said on Thursday that the Taliban would forfeit any legitimacy — and, in turn, foreign aid — if it attacks Kabul or takes over Afghanistan's government by force.

Five current and former officials described the mood inside the embassy as increasingly tense and worried, and diplomats at the State Department's headquarters in Washington noted a sense of tangible depression at the specter of closing it, nearly 20 years after Marines reclaimed the burned-out building in December 2001.

Several people gloomily revived a comparison that all wanted to avoid: the fall of Saigon in 1975, when Americans stationed at the U.S. Embassy were evacuated from a rooftop by helicopter.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff reported from Kabul, and Helene Cooper, Lara Jakes and Eric Schmitt from Washington. David E. Sanger contributed reporting.