

The U.S. and other nations step up evacuation flights.



By Shashank Bengali, Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Annie Karni

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Crowds continued to camp out near Kabul's airport on Thursday, while U.S. troops tried to quell the chaos and accelerate the evacuation flights.

The mammoth evacuation effort was gathering pace, with Afghan refugees and international repatriates landing in Europe, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere.

A Spanish military plane landed before dawn at Torrejon air base outside Madrid, one of three aircraft that the Spanish defense ministry has sent to evacuate citizens and Afghans who worked with the Spanish government, along with their families.

Afghan refugees who arrived in Germany, some cradling children, described harrowing scenes outside the airport in Kabul, the Afghan capital, where Taliban soldiers have blocked the entrances and beat back crowds by firing rifles and occasionally hitting people with sticks and hoses.

Australia has evacuated dozens of its citizens and Afghans to a military base in the United Arab Emirates, where they were awaiting flights to Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Thursday. Amid criticism that military flights were departing Kabul mostly empty — the first Australian plane carried just 26 passengers on Wednesday — Mr. Morrison insisted that the government was moving “as quickly as we can.”

The evacuation effort represents a test of the U.S. withdrawal plans, which call for the country's troops to stay in Afghanistan only as long as is needed to bring Americans and some Afghan allies home, likely stranding many who want to leave because they fear Taliban attacks.

The Pentagon, which has deployed 5,000 U.S. troops to secure the airport, said that it had asked the Taliban to allow safe passage for American citizens, but that it did not have the ability to go out and fetch people from Kabul or other cities.

Officials said that the U.S. military had evacuated approximately 5,000 people, and that those numbers would increase as U.S. personnel processed about 500 people per hour at the airport gates.

“The Taliban are in and around Kabul right now, but they are not interfering with our operations,” Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a news conference at the Pentagon.

On Wednesday, The New York Times said that 128 current and former Afghan employees and family members had reached safety. Michael Slackman, an assistant managing editor, said that the group had “kept their heads during some very scary moments” and asked employees to “help all of these families make the transition to new lives abroad.”

But many Afghans who have managed to flee the country have left loved ones behind, unable to secure visas for those who are not immediate family members or to get them to the airport in time for departing flights.

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