

International

UAE helps evacuate 28,000 from Afghanistan

Abu Dhabi is not coordinating any evacuations with the Taliban

ABU DHABI: The United Arab Emirates has helped evacuate 28,000 people from Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, a senior Emirati official said yesterday. The UAE and Qatar have been instrumental staging posts for evacuation flights for Western countries' citizens as well as Afghan interpreters, journalists and others. Western countries including Britain, France and the US are scrambling to get the last of their citizens and protected Afghans out while Poland and the Netherlands are wrapping up their operations.

Of the headline 28,000 to have passed through the Emirates, some 12,000 were evacuated by Britain, and 9,000 by the US. Prior to the fall of Kabul, the UAE had helped evacuate 8,500 others although the official, who declined to be named, did not specify when these evacuations started. Speaking to journalists in Abu Dhabi, the official said his country is currently hosting 8,500 evacuees on a temporary basis with most expected to head to the United States in the coming days. Others had been hospitalized and were receiving medical care.

Abu Dhabi is not coordinating any evacuations with the Taliban, the official said, but convoys to the airport were guaranteed through the US—although security conditions on the ground were a concern. Abu Dhabi expects the operation will conclude by the end of the month, the official said, coinciding with the August 31 deadline set by US President Joe Biden. —AFP



AL DHAFRA AIR BASE, United Arab Emirates: People walk on the tarmac as they disembark from an Airbus A400M military transport aircraft at the French military air base 104 of Al Dhafra, near Abu Dhabi, after being evacuated from Kabul as part of the operation "Apagan". —AFP

In Texas, an Afghan refugee loses sleep over family left behind

HOUSTON, United States: Having fled the Taliban, Mohammad is ready to start a new life in Texas. But the former US government translator's heart aches when he thinks about his relatives left behind in Afghanistan. "Brothers, mother, sister—always we think about them. Trust me, I am in (the) United States but I (don't) sleep well," said Mohammad, 36. For security reasons he did not give AFP his last name. As city after city fell to the Taliban amid the withdrawal of US troops, on August 12 Mohammad and his family traveled to Kabul airport and boarded a one-way flight to Washington, DC.

Three days later the Taliban overtook the Afghan capital, resulting in a panicked rush to the airport to by throngs of people trying to flee the country. Mohammad managed to escape with his wife and eight children, but the rest of his family stayed behind in the southeastern city of Khost. Mohammad, interviewed at the office of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston — a local charity that helps refugees—hopes the United States, France and Germany step up to help Afghans fleeing the Taliban and their harsh rule.

'Too many people' left behind

From 2005 to 2013 Mohammad worked for the US military and two military contractors. Starting as an ordinary worker, he learned English and rose to become a translator, and then a supervisor for other translators at the Salerno US military base less than 30 kilometers (18 miles) from the Pakistani border. When the base closed in 2013 Mohammad started his own business, which he did not want to discuss, fearing he might

be recognized by the Taliban. Mohammad's entire family, especially his brothers, cooperated extensively with the US-backed government and he is afraid the Taliban might retaliate.

Recently, he learned his cousins and nephews were able to flee to Qatar, but his brothers and their families are in hiding in their home province. "I don't trust the Taliban," Mohammad said. "They don't like people who like education, who like to go to school." He thinks the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan "was not a good decision," saying the United States and its allies are leaving "too many people behind."

'Good workers'

Over the past two months, the Interfaith Ministries welcomed around 50 Afghan refugees to Houston and 50 more are expected next month. With help from the group, Mohammad found an apartment and is trying to get used to the stifling summer heat in Houston, where the temperature is higher than in Kabul or Khost. In the coming days he plans to send his children — six daughters and two sons aged between four and 16 — to school, get a driver's license and find a job to pay his rent. He is also considering trying to get a taxi permit. "Afghans are good workers," he said. "I (believe) in myself: I speak four languages."

Ali Al Sudani, chief programs officer at Interfaith Ministries, said Texas has historically been a popular destination for refugees due to its affordability, strong economy and support from the local government and community. Houston "is a very diverse city, a very welcoming city," said Al-Sudani, who himself was helped by Interfaith Ministries when he arrived from Iraq in 2009.

"And this is what all immigrants and refugees are looking for when they are trying to search (for) a new home." Mohammad hopes the move will give his children a better future. The United States is a country "that was built by different nations and we are one of them," he said. —AFP

'Painful moment' as Dutch halt Kabul evacuation flights

THE HAGUE, Netherlands: The Dutch government said it would stop evacuation flights from Kabul yesterday in what it acknowledged was a "painful moment" that would leave some people behind in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The Netherlands said it had been ordered by US forces to leave ahead of the withdrawal of American troops on August 31, and advised people to avoid the airport for security reasons.

"The Netherlands has been informed today by the United States that it has to leave and will in all probability run the last flights later today," the Dutch foreign and defense ministers said in a letter to parliament. "This is a painful moment because it means that despite all the great efforts of the recent period, people who are eligible for evacuation to the Netherlands will be left behind," Foreign Minister Sigrid Kaag and Defense Minister Ank Bijleveld said.

The Dutch embassy and military team at Kabul airport would also fly out on the last planes yesterday, it said. "Everything possible is being done to help the several hundred people who are now within the gates of the airport take the flights that are scheduled today."

One C-130 Hercules would remain in the region in case of emergencies. The Dutch said the US order to leave the airport ahead of August 31 was because "for a few days before that, large numbers of American soldiers and equipment have to fly out." The "rapidly deteriorating security situation" around the airport, where Western officials have warned of a possible terror attack, was also taken into account, the Dutch government said. —AFP

Afghan girl born on US military plane named Reach

WASHINGTON: An Afghan girl born aboard a US military plane as her family was fleeing Taliban rule was named Reach after the aircraft's code name, US military officials said Wednesday. The baby's mother went into labor on Saturday while being flown to a US military base in Germany. As soon as the plane landed, military medics helped the woman deliver her baby in the cargo hold of the plane. The mother and child were then taken to a nearby hospital.

Each US Air Force aircraft has a code name to communicate with other aircraft and control towers, and the code for C-17 cargo planes is usually "Reach" followed by a number. The code name for the plane that brought the Afghan family to safety was Reach 828 — and that's how the parents decided to name the child, said General Tod Wolters, the head of US European Command. —AFP