

International

Afghans rush to flee Taliban as hopes emerge for more time

4,500 American citizens of the 6,000 already departed

KABUL, Afghanistan: Afghans yesterday hurried to escape Taliban rule, but Western officials said the group had made assurances that some evacuations would be permitted after next week's US withdrawal deadline. Over 80,000 people have been evacuated since August 14, but huge crowds remain outside Kabul airport hoping to flee the threat of reprisals and repression in Taliban-led Afghanistan. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday the Taliban had made commitments to allow departure of Americans, "at-risk" Afghans and people from other nations even following Tuesday's cutoff.

"They have a responsibility to hold to that commitment and provide safe passage for anyone who wishes to leave the country," Blinken told reporters. He added that at least 4,500 American citizens of the 6,000 who said they wanted to leave Afghanistan have already departed. Blinken spoke hours after Germany's envoy to Kabul said a Taliban negotiator had assured him Afghans bearing the right documents could leave after the deadline, which was confirmed Tuesday by US President Joe Biden. Washington and its allies have been flying out thousands of Afghans every day on hulking military transports, but it has become an increasingly difficult and desperate task.

Pleas for help

Many Afghans fear a repeat of the brutal five-year Taliban regime that was toppled in 2001, as well as violent retribution for working with foreign militaries, Western missions and the previous US-backed government. There are particular concerns for women, who were largely banned from education and employment and could only leave the house with a male chaperone during the group's 1996-2001 rule. The Afghan capital's airport has been gripped by chaos as US-led troops try to maintain a secure perimeter for evacuation flights, surrounded by desperate Afghans. Some have foreign passports, visas or eligibility to travel, but most do not. At least eight people have died in the chaos.

For pilots, Kabul evacuations a flight like no other

PARIS: The approach is filled with danger. The conditions on the ground are chaotic, but precise organization and timing are needed. And the passengers are exhausted and tense. For pilots in charge of the planes evacuating foreign nationals and Afghans from Taliban-controlled Kabul, the flights in and out of the Afghanistan capital have been a journey like no other. Pilots must deal with the already complex location of the airport at high altitude and surrounded by mountains, with intense air traffic like that of a major travel hub with military planes and evacuation flights, relying on their on-board Traffic Collision Avoidance System (TCAS) to avert crashes.

As Western nations prepare to wind down one of the most complex evacuations of civilians since World War II, several pilots shared with AFP their experiences of landing and then taking off from Kabul airport as chaos gripped the country. US forces, who have 5,800 personnel deployed at the airport, "are carrying out all air traffic control, ground control, tower control and approach control," according to Commander Stephen, the captain of a French A400M military transport plane. "With a plane like this, we are helped very much by our systems, but we end up landing by sight," he told AFP at French base 104 of Al-Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates, the transit point used by France, on condition that his surname was not published.

"Does anyone... ANYONE... have a contact inside the airport," pleaded one American on a WhatsApp group set up to share information on how people can access the airport. "My guy worked for us 2010-15 and needs to get out with 5 of his family. This is real bad." The Taliban have also been accused of blocking or slowing access for many trying to reach the airport, although they have denied that charge.

Biden said the Taliban were taking steps to assist, but there was also an "acute and growing risk" of an attack by the regional chapter of the Islamic State jihadist group. Despite the harrowing scenes at Kabul airport, the Taliban have ruled out any extension to next Tuesday's deadline to pull out foreign troops, describing it as "a red line". "They have planes, they have the airport, they should get their citizens and contractors out of here," said Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid. Turkey, which had more than 500 non-combat troops stationed in Afghanistan, said Wednesday it had started pulling out its forces.

The withdrawal signalled an apparent abandonment of the plans it had been negotiating to help secure Kabul's strategic airport after the American departure. Belgium said Wednesday it was ending evacuations from Kabul after its military planes withdrew around 1,100 people—including Europeans and Afghans — in recent days.

'Won't be enough time'

European nations have warned they will not be able to airlift all at-risk Afghans before August 31. "Even if (the evacuation) goes on... a few days longer, it will not be enough," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told Bild TV. A hard withdrawal deadline presents a further complication that may reduce the number of daily evacuations. But Germany's envoy to Kabul said a Taliban negotiator had assured him Afghans who have the right documents will still be allowed to leave after the deadline. The United States deployed fresh troops for evacuations.

That 6,000-plus contingent, as well as hundreds of US officials, 600

"The fact that the system helps us a lot allows us to focus on the outside and monitor the threat," he added. To ward off possible missile fire, the A400M can drop infrared decoys that emit intense heat to deceive the projectile. On approaching the runway, the plane veers sharply towards the ground in order to "avoid the threat during our approach", he said. The incoming and outgoing air traffic is "regulated like sheet music," said Stephen. "There is so much traffic from all the nations that if it was not organized it would not be possible," he said. The pilots must "absolutely" respect their slots with only "half an hour between landing and take-off". There are a mass of planes on the ground, but it is "well-organized", he said.

'We are going to take off'

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban on August 15, at a speed that was not anticipated by the international community, prompted thousands to head to the city's airport, the only way to fly out of the country. When he landed a passenger airliner that morning, everything seemed normal, said Maqsoud Barajni, a pilot of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). Waiting on the tarmac to begin the return flight, "I started noticing that there was panic outside, and the situation was not normal. More people were rushing inside the airport and gunshots were also heard." Barajni started to push back ahead of take-off, but was then told by control that passenger flights had been suspended and he did not have authorization to take off. He then made the biggest call of his flying career. "I had a conversation with my second officer that we are going to take off even if they don't authorize it. It was not a normal situation." "After observing the situation for an hour, I finally took off. The visibility was good which enabled me to avoid the military traffic. There were some Chinooks, Gunship helicopter and some other cargoes."



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks about Afghanistan during a media briefing at the State Department in Washington, DC. —AFP

Afghan troops and the equipment, will have to be flown out. To do that by August 31, the Pentagon said operations would have to start winding down days in advance. Following their lightning victory that stunned the world, the Taliban have so far been content to allow the US-led operation to continue, focusing instead on consolidating control and forming a government.

They have vowed a different, more inclusive regime this time around, offering amnesty to opponents. An aid worker in Khost, a deeply conservative region in the southeast that fell to the Taliban shortly before they seized Kabul, told AFP the attitude of the former insurgents has so far been "much softer" than people expected. "But the people are afraid of a bad economic situation," he added. —AFP

"Had we delayed for few more minutes we wouldn't have made it. It was the last commercial flight of that day."

His PIA colleague Uzair Khan had taken off from Kabul airport a little while before on the same day. He remembered having to himself impose calm on the plane with passengers in a state of panic. "Most of the passengers were either in the cabinet of president (Ashraf) Ghani or somehow part of the government. They were fleeing the country with their families and were pushing us to take off as soon as possible." "There was no communication and I was on my own when it came to the technical clearance. I was told to manage the situation by myself." The passengers were "ready to fly and get out of Afghanistan at any cost" and experienced a wave of relief when the plane finally arrived in Islamabad, he said.

'Do our job'

The chaos only increased in the subsequent days. Photos of the hold of a British C-17 released by the Royal Air Force show people sitting cross-legged on the floor in rows of seven or eight, a single strap crossing the cabin to hang on. For the French colonel Yannick Desbois, commander of base 104, "you have to stay rational, analyze the performance of the aircraft and only accept the maximum number you can take, so as not to go too far."

A French A400M normally has 110 seats, "but here we are loading up to 235. People are seated on the ground-but in safe conditions," he said. The American C-17s are designed to carry up to 400 passengers seated on the ground, but one of them in the early hours of the airlift took on 829. Desbois said "it is above all a question of weight" and while the passenger numbers are high, they include many children. After take-off, the job is easier. "People are tired. The pressure relents. In general, they sleep and we do our job," said Commander Stephen. —AFP