

US State Department admits few Americans remain to be evacuated from Afghanistan

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The US State Department declared Wednesday that the number of Americans still waiting to leave Kabul is under 1,000, perhaps only a few hundred. The announcement came as the Biden administration continued to maintain that it would complete evacuations by the August 31 deadline announced by President Biden last week.

The pace of evacuations has reached a new peak of 19,000 Wednesday, according to official Pentagon figures, with 90 flights departing from the Kabul airport in a 24-hour period, counting all planes, US and other foreign, military and civilian.

At a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Secretary of State Antony Blinken provided the first official estimate of the total number of Americans present in Kabul before the US-backed puppet government collapsed on August 15 and the Taliban consolidated its control over the entire country.

He said there were 6,000 Americans in Afghanistan at that time, and that 4,500 had been evacuated in the past 10 days. Another 500 had been reached by State Department officials and were scheduled to leave the country, leaving about 1,000 who had not yet responded to State Department inquiries.

This figure would include many who had left the country without notifying the US Embassy of their departure, as well as others who were not actually US citizens or who had decided to stay in Afghanistan because of family considerations. The actual number of Americans who remained to be evacuated was likely “considerably less” than the figure of 1,000, he said.

This accounting undercuts one of the principal props of the non-stop campaign in the American media demanding an extension of the US military presence at Kabul airport beyond the August 31 deadline. That narrative suggests that huge numbers of Americans are

trapped in the country and require military force to free them from the Taliban.

The major daily newspapers and television networks continue to sound this theme at full volume, suggesting, in the most strident version, that nothing less than a full-scale re-invasion of the country is required.

Republican congressional leaders have taken up this issue as well, with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy denouncing the Biden administration for “creating the largest international hostage situation we’ve ever faced as a nation.”

President Biden has “turned his back on our own citizens stranded in Afghanistan,” McCarthy told a press conference Wednesday. “He’s turned his back on his duties as a commander in chief.”

Congressional Democrats also pressured the administration to extend the August 31 deadline, both at a House Intelligence Committee briefing Monday and at a closed-door briefing for all members of Congress on Tuesday, conducted by Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines.

Representative Jason Crow, Democrat of Colorado, a former Army Ranger who fought in Afghanistan, said full evacuation “can’t be accomplished between now and the end of the month, so the date has to extend until we get that mission done.” Crow is one of 11 US military-intelligence veterans first elected to Congress in 2018 as Democratic candidates, who now exercise inordinate influence over US national security policy.

Another of these “CIA Democrats,” Elissa Slotkin of Michigan, said there was a bipartisan demand by Democrats and Republicans that administration officials pressure the president to shift the August 31 date. “A major theme, a major comment, a major point

that we all tried to make: urging them to do more to advocate with the president to extend the deadline,” she said.

Biden had suggested over the weekend that the deadline was flexible, but this changed abruptly on Monday after a meeting in Kabul between CIA Director William Burns and Taliban political director Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. While Biden himself initially set the August 31 date, the Taliban has now embraced it and apparently rejected efforts by Burns to shift it.

The Islamic militia is in full control of the environs of the airport and could shut down further evacuations at will, simply by using mortars and artillery to bombard the runway. This would not only stop flights carrying US and Afghan civilians, but would also trap the 6,000 American troops currently deployed at the base.

Neither the Taliban nor the Biden administration seems prepared to risk that scenario.

In comments Tuesday, Biden emphasized the cooperation offered by the Taliban to facilitate the evacuations, but left at least a small loophole. “The completion by August 31st depends upon the Taliban continuing to cooperate and allow access to the airport for those who ... we’re transporting out and no disruptions to our operations,” he said. “In addition, I’ve asked the Pentagon and the State Department for contingency plans to adjust the timetable should that become necessary.”

While the corporate media in the United States continues to portray the conditions at the airport as chaotic, with huge numbers of desperate people packed into the facility, seeking to flee, the reality on the ground is apparently different.

This was confirmed by two members of Congress, one Democrat and one Republican, who carried out an unauthorized visit to Kabul and came away with a different view from that portrayed on the television networks.

Representative Seth Moulton (D-Massachusetts) and Representative Peter Meijer (R-Michigan) traveled to Qatar on commercial flights and then boarded military planes to reach Kabul on Tuesday, where they spoke to officials and soldiers before taking a flight out.

The two were widely quoted in the media Wednesday declaring that they believed Biden should extend the August 31 deadline, and that there were so many people seeking to flee that they could not all be evacuated by

September 11.

But in a remarkable interview with the *New York Times*, posted Wednesday night, it was clear that the “September 11” quote was taken entirely out of context. Moulton told the *Times*, “Almost every veteran in Congress wants to extend the Aug. 31 deadline, including us, and our opinion on that was changed on the ground, because we started the evacuations so late. There’s no way we can get everyone out, even by Sept. 11. So we need to have a working relationship with the Taliban after our departure. And the only way to achieve that is to leave by Aug. 31.”

Meijer added that the conditions at the airport were orderly and controlled, not chaotic: “There were I think close to 20,000 individuals who were waiting on flights out a day or two before we arrived. When we were there, the Air Force and the other personnel on the ground had so efficiently moved those individuals to intermediate staging locations that there were some people there, but it was by no means an overwhelming number waiting for flights. It was probably in the few hundreds.”

In one of the few honest or self-critical media comments to appear in recent days, Stephen Collinson of CNN.com wrote: “Throughout this crisis, there has been a strong impression that the fury at the President from Washington’s national security, political and journalistic communities over the fate of Afghans left to face possible death at the hands of the Taliban has not been more broadly shared in the general population.”

The media frenzy has not had a significant impact on popular opinion in the United States, where working people overwhelmingly oppose any renewed American military intervention in Afghanistan and are concerned about the ever-rising toll of infections, hospitalizations and deaths brought on by the surge of the Delta variant of the coronavirus.



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