

Americans told to stay away from Kabul international airport

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People gathered near the military section of international airport in Kabul on August 20, 2021, hoping to be evacuated by US military planes from the country after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. (Photo by AFP)

Kabul, August 22 (RHC)-- The United States has cautioned Americans in Afghanistan to stay away from Kabul's international airport, citing "potential security threats" near its gates. U.S. media cited reports from Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport on Saturday saying there was growing chaos caused by

people fleeing the country after the Taliban takeover.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has told congressional lawmakers that Americans who are trying to leave Afghanistan have been beaten by Taliban fighters. Reports said gunshots were heard and tear gas fired on desperate crowds in the perimeter of Kabul's international airport as it remained a scene of teeming chaos.

"Because of potential security threats outside the gates at the Kabul airport, we are advising US citizens to avoid traveling to the airport," the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan posted in an alert on its website's advisory.

"[A]void airport gates at this time unless you receive individual instructions from a U.S. government representative to do so," it added. The same warning to stay away from the airport was also tweeted by the US State Department in Washington.

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs also issued a similar warning about the ongoing chaos and teeming violence and chances of confrontation around the Kabul airport. "The security situation around Kabul airport has worsened significantly in the last hours. A large number of people in front of the airport and sometimes violent confrontations are hindering access to the airport," it said in a statement.

Meanwhile, U.S. media reported that U.S. officials were considering dispatching forces to rescue Americans stuck beyond Taliban checkpoints and get them to the airport.

The Pentagon said on Saturday that U.S. air force planes had airlifted about 7,000 people out of Kabul by cargo aircraft in the past five days since the Taliban captured the Afghan capital, toppling the Kabul government.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Thursday that he did not know the number of Americans who had been left behind in Afghanistan. Kirby pointed out that there were approximately 5,200 US troops based in Kabul airport, securing the facility and helping with flight evacuations.

He claimed that the U.S. had told the Taliban that it wanted "free passage through these checkpoints for documented Americans," adding: "By and large, that's happening."

On Friday, U.S. President Joe Biden vowed to bring home all American and Afghan allies stranded in the war-ravaged country after the Taliban's lightning takeover. Biden warned, however, that despite the progress in evacuations, which included American citizens, US Embassy staff, citizens of NATO countries, at-risk Afghan nationals, as well as Afghan nationals who had qualified for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs, the mission carried the "risk of loss."

US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday that there were currently 6,000 people at the airport who have been fully processed by the U.S. for evacuation and are waiting to board planes.

Meanwhile, there is bipartisan pressure from Congress lawmakers on Biden to expedite SIV process for Afghan allies threatened by the Taliban, including translators, drivers and others who served American military forces in Afghanistan and now fear retribution.

In order to qualify for an SIV, Afghan nationals had to directly serve US forces for 12 months, or serve in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for 24 months.

In related news, Major General Hank Taylor, Deputy Director of the U.S. Joint Staff for regional operations, J-35, said the US military's present mission was "to facilitate the safe evacuation of US citizens, SIVs and Afghans at risk, to get these personnel out of Afghanistan as quickly and as safely as possible." He said since July until now some 22,000 of the aforementioned group had been evacuated.

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