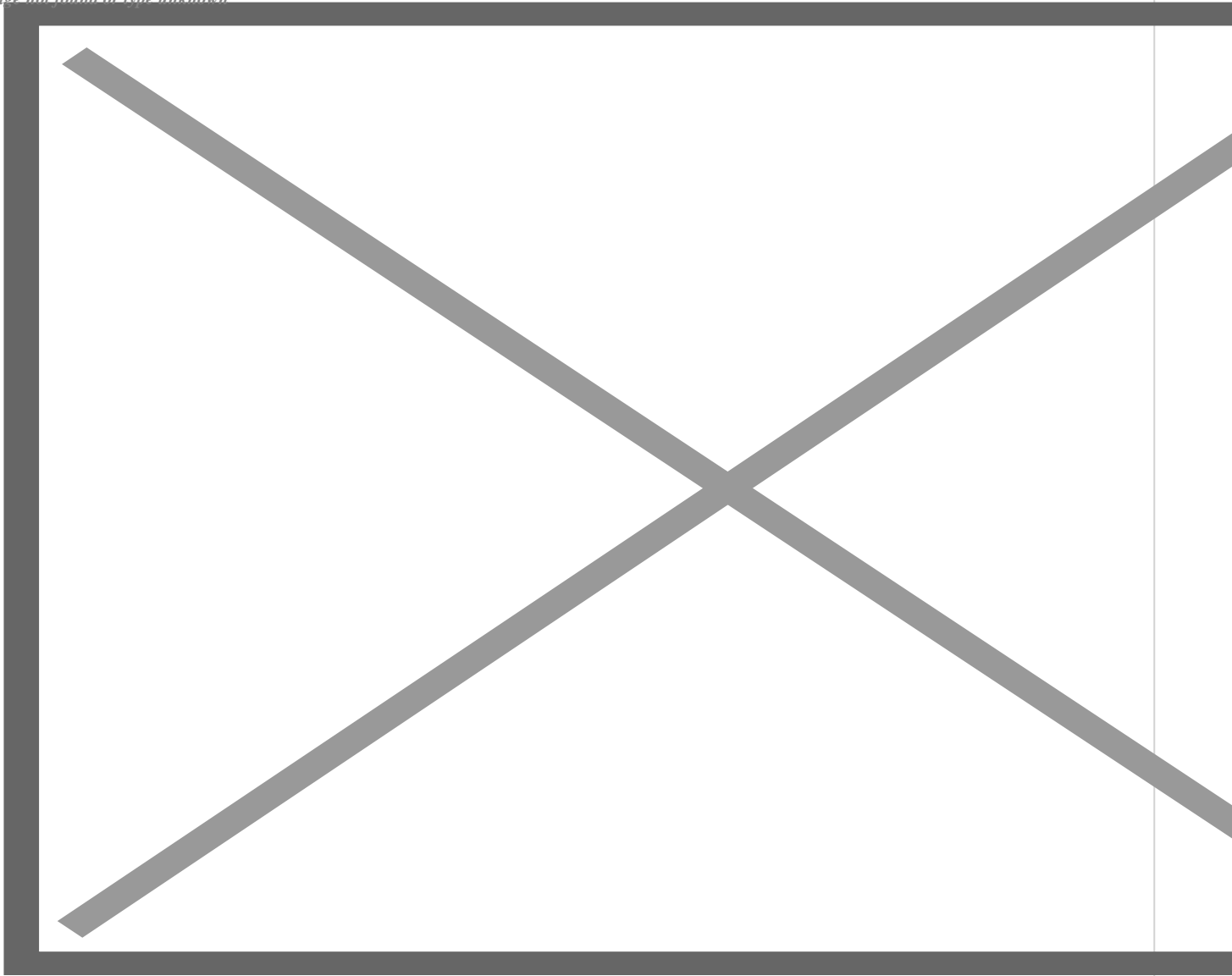


Biden plans evacuation of Afghans who helped the U.S.

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Village elders speak with a US Marine through an interpreter as US and Afghan forces search for weapons in a village in Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan in 2008 [File: John Moore/Getty Images]

Kabul, June 25 (RHC)-- The Joe Biden administration is preparing to evacuate potentially thousands of Afghans who worked for the United States as it nears completion of its military withdrawal from Afghanistan in coming months, U.S. officials said on Thursday.

"Those who helped us are not going to be left behind," President Joe Biden said in response to a reporter's question as he left a media conference at the White House.

"They [translators] will be welcome here just like anyone else who risked their lives to help us," said Biden who will meet his Afghan counterpart Ashraf Ghani and national council Chairman Abdullah Abdullah at the White House on Friday amid rising concerns about Taliban advances in northern Afghanistan.

Biden has set a September deadline for the complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the withdrawal is "on pace," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday. The U.S. military has been working "for some time" on plans to airlift a large number of Afghan interpreters and translators and their families from Afghanistan to the US, Kirby told reporters at a Defense Department media conference.

"We are still in the planning stages" of an interagency effort to provide air transport, housing, medical care and feeding Afghan evacuees and their families, the Pentagon spokesman said. "We are working our way through exactly what that's going to look like," said Kirby, who declined to say how many would be evacuated.

Calls have been growing in Congress for action including a potential plan to relocate Afghans to Guam, a U.S. island in the Pacific that was used after the Vietnam War to temporarily house refugees. As many as 18,000 Afghans who have worked for the U.S. as interpreters, drivers and clerks during the war have applied for special visas to enter the United States. Adding family members could bring the number seeking to leave Afghanistan to 70,000.

Wait times can already take up to three years and the processing of applications at the US embassy in Kabul has been stalled because of a worsening outbreak of COVID-19. "We have a sacred obligation -- and we don't use that phrase lightly here -- to help those who helped us," Kirby said.

The Taliban said in a statement earlier this month that people who worked for foreign forces in Afghanistan would be kept safe as long as they show "remorse" and should not flee the country.

Ghani and Abdullah met US congressional leaders on Capitol Hill on Thursday and will meet Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at the Pentagon on Friday before their meeting with Biden at the White House. "Their visit will highlight the partnership between our two nations as the US military drawdown continues," Kirby said.

Austin "will emphasise the United States enduring commitment to the people of Afghanistan and to the department's goal of ensuring that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorist groups who pose a threat to the US homeland", Kirby said.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001 after the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia.

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