

Afghanistan: Flight lands in Qatar from Kabul after Taliban cleared Americans and others to leave

The first international passenger flight to take off from Afghanistan since the chaotic US military airlift last month landed in Qatar on Thursday, carrying more than 100 foreign nationals, including Americans, according to a source with knowledge of the matter.



© WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP/Getty Images A Qatari security personnel member stands guard near a Qatar Airways aircraft at the airport in Kabul on Thursday.

Passengers on board the chartered Qatar Airways flight that departed from Kabul airport — including Canadian, Ukrainian, German, British and US citizens — were among some 200 foreigners that the Taliban have cleared to leave the country, the source said.

The plane's departure is the first signal that at least some foreign nationals who want to leave Afghanistan will be able to, following weeks of uncertainty. Civilians have been left scrambling to find safe passage from the country since the Taliban takeover in mid-August threw a US-led evacuation effort into confusion.



© Anadolu Agency/Getty Images KABUL, AFGHANISTAN - SEPTEMBER 03: A screen grab captured from a video shows that employees make the last preparations before domestic flights begin at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan on September 03, 2021. (Photo by Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Qatar worked with parties on the ground to transport the passengers in a Qatari convoy and secure a safe passage to Kabul's airport. Live pictures showed people disembarking the Qatar Airways Boeing 777 on Thursday evening Doha time.

After landing in Doha, the passengers will head to a compound facility currently hosting Afghans and other evacuees.



© MAXAR TECHNOLOGIES HANDOUT/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock A handout satellite image made available by Maxar Technologies shows airplanes near the main terminal at Mazar-i-Sharif Airport, northern Afghanistan, on September 3, 2021.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, Qatar's deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, thanked the Taliban for their "cooperation" in restarting flights, adding that this was a signal that the militant group's "positive statements" can be "demonstrated into action."

The cooperation was also praised by the US. "The Taliban have been cooperative in facilitating the departure of American citizens and lawful permanent residents on charter flights ... They have shown flexibility, and they have been businesslike and professional in our dealings with them in this effort. This is a positive first step," said US National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horne.



© AFP/Getty Images A US Air Force aircraft takes off from the military airport in Kabul on August 27, in the closing days of a huge US airlift operation.

Afghanistan's Civil Aviation Authority is preparing for more flights to start operating from Kabul, according to an aviation source who spoke to CNN. Both major Afghan carriers Kam Air and Ariana Afghan Airlines plan to restart different routes, according to the source.

The source said that the handling company at the airport will be the same one that was used prior to the shutdown of the airport after the fall of Kabul in mid-August.

The terminal at the airport in Kabul is "ready" for flights, the aviation source told CNN.

Earlier in the day, Qatari and Taliban officials toured the Kabul airport tarmac, where the Qatar Airways Boeing 777 stood.

Several passengers waiting to check into the flight earlier said their final destination was Canada. "We are going to Canada, we are Canadians," one man told an Al Jazeera Arabic reporter at the airport in English. Another two men also said they were bound for Canada.

Other international flights are expected in the coming days.

The Taliban's acting foreign minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaki, thanked Qatari special envoy Mutlaq Al-Qahtani for his country's efforts in restarting flights out of Kabul International Airport, the Taliban said in a statement posted on an official account.

A Qatari technical team has been in the country for the past 10 days, helping Afghan officials restore airport operations.

An engineer on the Qatari team told a news conference Thursday that the airport was now 90% fixed. "There are some technical issues that we cannot fix, but in total all the equipment is working," said Mohamed Naeemi, speaking alongside Al-Qahtani.

Al-Qahtani called the flight "historic" but said the process of reopening would be gradual. Other flights have landed carrying humanitarian aid, he added.

A US official told CNN that the Taliban's agreement for the 200 or so people to leave on the charter flight Thursday came after US Special representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad had been pressing the Taliban to allow departures.

A US State Department spokesperson declined to give further details Thursday. "As we have said, our efforts to assist U.S. citizens and others to whom we have a special commitment are ongoing, but we aren't in a position to share additional details at this time," the spokesperson said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday blamed the grounding of charter flights in Mazar-i-Sharif, northern Afghanistan, on the Taliban, saying that the militant group was not allowing them to leave.

The Taliban claimed "that some of the passengers do not have the required

documentation,” Blinken said.

CNN has reached out to the White House, the US National Security Council and the Taliban for comment on Thursday’s developments.

Efforts to repair Kabul airport

The last US military planes left Kabul’s airport just ahead of an August 31 deadline, marking the full withdrawal of American forces. That landmark moment came only two weeks after the Taliban seized control of the capital.

By the time the US completed its withdrawal, more than 122,000 people in total had been flown out of Kabul airport since July and more than 6,000 Americans civilians evacuated.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said Monday that progress on getting Kabul airport “back to normal” had been held up by the damage done to radar facilities.

“The Americans had damaged the radar and it takes time to repair,” he said, adding that the US had “deliberately destroyed definite parts of the airport.”

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Tuesday that Ankara also was working with Qatar and the United States on keeping the airport in Kabul operational.

“We currently have 19 technicians on the ground there working. But the most important point is who ensures security?” Cavusoglu said in an interview with Turkish private broadcaster NTV.

“Outside the airport, it could be the Taliban but inside (the airport) it needs to be a private company or a state or two that the international community can rely on.”

Promise of amnesty

Thousands of Afghans who worked with international organizations in Afghanistan and now fear retribution from the Taliban sought to flee during last month’s desperate airlift operation but were left behind.

Afghanistan's new acting prime minister, Mohammad Hasan Akhund, said Wednesday that his government promises amnesty for "all those who have caused the Taliban fighters to suffer, and are responsible for the most severe types of torture and abuse."

"No one will be able to prove that he was subjected to revenge. And in such tense circumstances, it is easy to do what you want. But the movement is disciplined and controls its gunmen," he told Al Jazeera in an interview, adding that the Taliban "have not harmed anyone because of his previous actions."

Akhund also called on former officials who fled the country after the Taliban took control to return to Afghanistan, assuring them of secure and safe conditions in the country. He said all diplomats, embassies and humanitarian relief institutions would also be guaranteed such safety, according to Al Jazeera.

Akhund is a long-time member of the Taliban and has been leader of the group's Shura, or Leadership Council, for about two decades. He is currently under UN sanctions.

The Taliban announced a hardline, male-only interim government at a news conference on Tuesday, intensifying concern over potential threats to the rights of women and minorities in the country.

Taliban fighters used whips and sticks against a group of women who protested in Kabul on Wednesday over the lack of representation for women.

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai called Thursday for the Taliban to form a more inclusive government, including women.

In a statement on Twitter, Karzai acknowledged that the formation of an interim government was "necessary for the provision of services" but urged the Taliban to take account of the country's "rich social structure."

"Every citizen of the country, including women, has the right to participate in government and to serve the people," he said.

"In this regard, it is necessary to address the shortcomings in the announced caretaker cabinet so that all the people in this country see themselves in this government and together with full national unity work for a prosperous, peaceful, and progressive Afghanistan."

Correction: This story has been updated to reflect that the Qatar Airways flight was a chartered flight.

Source:

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/flight-takes-off-from-kabul-airport-after-taliban-cleared-americans-and-others-to-leave/ar-AAOfPmY?ocid=uxbndlbing>

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