

UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR POLICY
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PREPARED REMARKS BEFORE THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
OCTOBER 26, 2021

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, and distinguished members of the Senate Armed Services Committee—thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss the military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Department’s role in Operation ALLIES WELCOME. Today, I am joined by Lieutenant General Mingus, Director J3, Joint Staff, who will also provide opening remarks following mine.

Let me start by echoing Secretary Austin and expressing my pride in our servicemembers. Over the last twenty years in Afghanistan, our men and women in uniform have performed countless acts of bravery—2,461 of them paid the ultimate price while doing so. I know members of this Committee share my gratitude to our troops, who have faithfully served and sacrificed; spent months and years away from family and loved ones; and endured repeated combat tours, all to protect the homeland.

For two decades, our men and women serving in Afghanistan acted with courage and compassion—yet, the performance of our Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, and Marines during the historic evacuation was unparalleled.

In the 48-hour span following the Taliban takeover of Kabul, our troops on the ground secured an airport in contested territory. In just *seventeen days*, they facilitated the largest airlift of people in history—unprecedented both in scope and scale—enabling the evacuation of 120,000 U.S. citizens; lawful permanent residents; third-country nationals; Afghan partners, including those eligible for Special Immigrant Visas and the State Department’s locally employed staff; and other vulnerable Afghan evacuees. As I testified previously, no other military on Earth could have accomplished that feat, and we, as Americans, should be immensely proud.

The success of the U.S. evacuation operation was enabled by our military planners and their diligent development of contingency plans. Immediately following the President’s April announcement of our military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Department went to work ensuring the drawdown could be accomplished responsibly.

Though we did not imagine a situation in which the Afghan Government and security forces would collapse in a matter of days prior to the conclusion of our retrograde, the Department began iterating on evacuation scenarios—including the possibility of a contested evacuation—in the spring of 2021. Not only did we plan—we proactively took steps in case of emergency.

In June, the Secretary pre-positioned forces in the region and sent the Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group to the Gulf to cover the withdrawal. In August, as conditions worsened, additional forces were placed on alert. Forethought, as much as skill and bravery, allowed our servicemembers to execute this extraordinary mission.

To be sure, there were complications. While airlifting up to 9,000 people per day from Kabul, we experienced overcrowding at the airport and at our interim staging bases for evacuees on their way to the United States. In a highly dynamic environment, we constantly had to adapt to access and evacuate U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and Afghan evacuees; and in the end, we were unable to reach some of those we sought to evacuate by August 31.

There were also heartbreaking costs. In the final days of the withdrawal, we lost 13 American servicemembers to a horrific ISIS-K suicide attack. These 13 heroes sacrificed their lives to save tens of thousands of innocent people. We will forever mourn the tragedy of their deaths and honor the humanity they demonstrated in their final mission.

I am also acutely aware of the costs borne by Afghans. Last week, I met with the President of Nutrition & Education International (NEI), Dr. Steven Kwon. He told me of the extraordinary life lived by Mr. Zemari Ahmadi, an aid worker employed by NEI and one of the 10 civilians mistakenly killed during the August 29 U.S. air strike in Kabul. It was clear from our conversation that—among the 10 innocent lives lost, including children—Afghanistan lost a tremendous humanitarian in the erroneous strike. For that, we at the Department are deeply sorry.

Just as I committed to Dr. Kwon, I commit to each of you that the Department will ensure a thorough investigation and accounting for the August 29th air strike, how we can more stringently prevent civilian harm in the future, and how we can support the family of those lost via a condolence payment.

Our military mission in Afghanistan may have ended on August 31, but our servicemembers, diplomats, and government employees remain hard at work. The U.S. Government continues to facilitate the departure of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents, as well as Afghans who worked for and with us, from Afghanistan.

The U.S. Government has directly facilitated the departure of 234 U.S. citizens and 144 lawful permanent residents¹ since September 1, and others have come out on private charters.

Physically evacuating U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, third country nationals, Afghan partners, and Afghans at risk from the Kabul airport was only step one of the extraordinary accomplishment of our military. Across the globe and throughout this country, over 10,000 of our men and women in uniform continue to support the Afghan people alongside our interagency partners via Operation ALLIES WELCOME.

We built out our military installations across Europe and the Middle East to serve as temporary locations for evacuees as they underwent the necessary vetting and health screenings for them to come to the United States. This portion of the mission was enabled by America's network of allies and partners, a network no other nation can rival. It demonstrates that our bilateral relationships across the globe continue to be a source of great national strength.

¹ Number of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents current as of October 22, 2021.

At home, we have drawn upon another well of national power—the generosity and hospitality of the American people. We have welcomed over 65,000² Afghan evacuees to eight safe haven sites, located on domestic military installations, as they complete the necessary steps to be resettled into the United States. American communities are opening their arms and embracing the evacuees, and with their support, the resilient spirit of the Afghan people is coming to life.

For example, at Fort Bliss, Texas, an Afghan interpreter organized and started an informal education program for Afghan children, and at Fort Dix, New Jersey, volunteers organized weddings for Afghan couples who delayed their ceremonies during the fall of Kabul. American servicemembers continue to work around the clock to ensure evacuees are safe and welcome on our installations. Every day, we see our men and women in uniform trading high-fives, giving fist bumps, and playing ball with Afghan children. This mission has not been without challenges, but we are truly proud of all those supporting this historic operation.

Despite the end of our military presence in Afghanistan, the work of the Department is far from over. We are examining and learning from the past, reckoning with the uncomfortable truth that despite decades and billions of dollars of U.S. investment, the Afghan military evaporated in the face of the Taliban assault. Additionally, we are turning to the future, bolstering our capacity to engage in over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations to ensure that no threat emanating from Afghanistan can harm our homeland or our interests, even as we re-focus the Department on the challenges posed by China, Russia, and other competitors and adversaries.

I know this Committee has many questions about the war, the evacuation, and our path forward. I look forward to taking them, but before I do, I'd like to thank the members of this Committee for your enduring support and partnership. Now, I will turn it over to my colleague, Lieutenant General Mingus.

² Estimated number as of October 23, 2021.