

A defiant Biden calls Afghanistan exit a 'success'



A defiant President Joe Biden called the Afghanistan evacuation effort a “success” on Tuesday, in a speech that marked the end of the United States’ 20-year engagement in the country.

“As we close 20 years of war and strife and pain and sacrifice, it’s time to look at the future, not the past,” Biden said. “I believe this is the right decision, a wise decision, and the best decision for America.”

His speech came almost exactly 24 hours after Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, announced that the last military flights out of Afghanistan had departed Hamid Karzai International Airport.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday there were between 100 and 200 American citizens who “wanted to leave” Afghanistan but remained in the country. Biden confirmed that estimate on Tuesday and said the U.S. and others would continue to work to evacuate people out of Afghanistan.

“For those remaining Americans, there is no deadline,” the president said. “We remain committed to get them out if they want to come out.”

Biden’s tone was remarkably similar to the one he displayed in his speech following the fall of Kabul a little more than two weeks ago. Both were marked with sharp criticisms for the deposed Afghan political leadership and Biden’s unwavering commitment to bring the war to a close.

“I was not going to extend this forever war,” Biden said on Tuesday, “and I was not extending a forever exit.”

Biden’s speech capped a tumultuous month in which the Afghan government and security forces collapsed with breathtaking speed, forcing the U.S. to cooperate with the Taliban in order to ensure that evacuations could continue as countless lives hung in the balance.

Administration officials have stressed that the operation was “the largest noncombatant” evacuation in U.S. military history. More than 123,000 people were evacuated, including 79,000 since Aug. 14.

But the withdrawal was marred by a terrorist attack last week that killed more than 180 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, as well as by the government’s acknowledgement that tens of billions of dollars in military equipment had fallen into the Taliban’s hands.

On Tuesday, military officials tamped down reports that the U.S. had abandoned military dogs in Kabul, underscoring the government’s ongoing battle to counter perceptions that final stages of the drawdown were hasty and chaotic.

“To correct erroneous reports, the U.S. Military did not leave any dogs in cages at Hamid Karzai International Airport, including the reported military working dogs,” John Kirby, the Pentagon’s top spokesman wrote on Twitter. “Photos circulating online were animals under the care of the Kabul Small Animal Rescue, not dogs under our care.”

Throughout the process, the Biden administration remained adamant about meeting its self-imposed Aug. 31 deadline, even as doing so infuriated Republicans — some of whom have called for Biden’s removal from office — raised tensions between the White House and Democrats in Congress, and rankled some of the closest U.S. allies.

The president and his advisers have repeatedly said that they were determined to bring the war in Afghanistan to a close and did not want to extend the timeline for withdrawal — potentially upsetting the delicate balance with the Taliban and putting additional people in harm’s way.

“Leaving August the 31st is not due to an arbitrary deadline. It was designed to save American lives,” Biden said.

The White House is eager to put the Afghanistan saga behind it and refocus on pressing domestic concerns, even as the ramifications appear likely to stretch on for months, if not years.

There are tens of thousands of Afghans and their families who will need to be resettled in the U.S. and other countries — a formidable logistical challenge —

and a raft of congressional committees are embarking upon investigations of the exit from Afghanistan.

The international community will also have to figure out its approach with regard to the Taliban now that they have seized control of Afghanistan. The United Nations Security Council on Monday passed a nonbinding resolution calling on the Taliban to honor its humanitarian commitments, although China and Russia notably refused to sign on and argued that it was an attempt to distract from the United States' handling of the withdrawal.

Blinken said on Monday that the U.S. was relocating its diplomatic presence for Afghanistan to Doha, Qatar, after shuttering its embassy in Kabul earlier this month as the situation deteriorated.

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