

**Letter of 24 August 2021 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence and the Minister for Migration updating the House of Representatives on the Afghanistan evacuation operation.**

This letter sets out the current state of affairs with respect to the evacuation process in Afghanistan. In recent days continuous efforts have been made to evacuate Dutch nationals, local embassy staff, interpreters who have worked for the Netherlands as part of an international military or police mission and their families, and other at-risk people identified in the motion submitted by MP Salima Belhaj et al. (Parliamentary Paper 27 925 no. 788).

In this letter, the government will give an overview of the current situation on the ground, the state of affairs with respect to the evacuation process and Dutch efforts to facilitate it. The letter will also address the implementation of the Belhaj et al. motion and the reception of evacuees in the Netherlands. Lastly, the government will take this opportunity to report on the online Extraordinary Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs and on recent diplomatic efforts to advance the evacuation operation.

This letter covers the most recent developments up to today, 24 August 2021, in so far as possible. Due to the rapidly changing situation, however, information may be out-of-date by the time the House receives this letter. We ask for your understanding should that be the case.

**Action taken by the Netherlands**

On the evening of Wednesday 18 August 2021, as reported to the House of Representatives on the same day (Parliamentary Paper 27 925 no. 803), the new team from the embassy, led by the ambassador and accompanied by military personnel, arrived at Kabul airport.

In the past few days reinforcements have arrived to bolster the team in Kabul. The Dutch ambassador to Iraq flew in from Baghdad to work in shifts with the Dutch ambassador to Afghanistan so that one of them is on duty around the clock. Additional consular capacity was also flown in, as were additional military personnel and staff of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). This brings the total number of military personnel to around 90, including the Special Security Operations Brigade (BSB). They will be joining the troops who are already engaged in the ongoing operation to evacuate as many people as possible and will provide continuing security for our aircraft, evacuees and the embassy team on site. These personnel are now stationed in Kabul, and in Islamabad and Tbilisi, the two stopover locations that are part of the air bridge between Afghanistan and the Netherlands.

The teams are working together day and night to facilitate the evacuation process and reception in the Netherlands. The Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs are doing everything in their power to get people who need to be evacuated to the airport in Kabul. Some of the military personnel on the ground are assisting evacuees in this regard. In the interests of the safety of our military personnel, diplomats and the evacuees and to avoid putting the operation at risk, the government cannot make any detailed statements on this matter. A company of the Marine Corps and a company of the Airmobile Brigade are ready to deploy to this operation if necessary.

For the evacuation the Netherlands is using two of its own C-130 transport aircraft, a KDC-10 transport aircraft, capacity in the A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft that it co-owns and a chartered C-17 transport aircraft. The Ministry of Defence is also using charter aircraft. Two Cougar helicopters with crew have been made ready for transport. In addition, an extra special forces unit is being flown to the region.

The legal basis under international law for the evacuation operation is the right of States to protect their nationals and those of allies and to evacuate them if the State in which they are located is not, or is no longer, able or willing to protect them. General information about this legal basis was conveyed to the House previously (Parliamentary Paper 29 521 no. 41; p. 7). The military units have been given rules of engagement specifically for this task and, additionally, are providing support for the execution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' consular task.

### **Situation on the ground**

The situation in Afghanistan remains highly volatile, particularly with regard to security. The impact of the Taliban takeover on the country and its population is profound. To support the Afghan people in these difficult circumstances the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation announced on 22 August 2021 that the Netherlands will be making €10 million available to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF). The funds are intended for humanitarian contributions towards providing shelter and meeting basic needs, such as food, clean drinking water and medical assistance.

The team in Kabul is working under exceptionally high pressure in extremely difficult and chaotic circumstances. Large crowds have gathered at and in the vicinity of the airport. Thousands of people are within the perimeter of the airport, and the situation is becoming increasingly desperate. A number of people have died in stampedes in recent days.

US forces, other coalition forces and the Afghan security services are responsible for security inside the airport and in the inner perimeter. The access gates to the airport are alternately closed and open, exacerbating the uncertainty and anxiety of the people outside. According to the US, it is necessary to keep the gates closed to prevent the situation at the airport becoming unmanageable. When there are too many evacuees at the airport the gates are kept closed, but this has led to crowding outside the gates.

The Taliban is controlling security in the outer perimeter, in accordance with its agreement with the US, which expires on 31 August. The large crowds at the airport and the chaos around it are very likely to increase significantly as the 31 August deadline agreed by the US and the Taliban approaches.

The threat of direct or indirect attacks at the airport by groups with a terrorist motive, such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), is limited. In the outer perimeter, however, it cannot be ruled out that groups like ISKP may wish to profit from the chaos.

In this complex situation, the Netherlands and its partners will continue in their efforts to facilitate a safe and orderly evacuation.

### **Progress on evacuation and implementation of the Belhaj motion**

By 15 August the Netherlands had already brought more than 500 people – 111 Afghan interpreters and their families – to the Netherlands on scheduled flights. In the week of 16 August scheduled flights and commercial charters were booked for interpreters and local embassy staff, but ultimately it was not possible to take these flights due to the Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul. The Netherlands immediately began working with partners to establish an air bridge at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) and has been using it to evacuate Dutch nationals, local embassy staff, interpreters who have worked for the Netherlands as part of an international military or police mission and their families, and other at-risk people in accordance with the Belhaj et al. motion (27 925-788).

In addition, the Netherlands has been doing as much as it can to comply with agreements made at EU, NATO and UN level, in the context of burden sharing, to help evacuate local staff of these organisations and provide reception for a number of them.

Since the departure from the Netherlands of the first military aircraft on 17 August 2021, 21 flights have been carried out from Kabul to countries in the region and from those countries to the Netherlands. To date more than a thousand people have been evacuated to the Netherlands; 644 of them have now arrived in the Netherlands, including local embassy staff and their family members, interpreters and their family members, Dutch nationals who were still in Afghanistan and people in at-risk groups in accordance with the Belhaj et al. motion. The evacuation of Dutch nationals is, as always, a top priority under the government's consular responsibility. The same applies to the interpreters who have worked for the Netherlands as part of an international military

or police mission and their families. Significantly more Dutch nationals than expected turned out to be still in Afghanistan, despite the travel warning that has been in place for years and the urgent call of 5 August for all Dutch nationals to leave the country. According to current estimates, hundreds of Dutch nationals are still in the country. More interpreters than the 67 known to the government on 15 August have asked to be evacuated. This is due in part to the fact that a growing number of EUPOL interpreters are also requesting evacuation. The government will do everything it can to safely bring as many of these people as possible to the Netherlands.

Of course, the government will also do everything it can for the at-risk groups identified in the Belhaj et al. motion (27 925-788) adopted on 18 August 2021. In recent days tremendous efforts have been made around the clock and under extreme time pressure to identify people who could be eligible for evacuation to the Netherlands on the grounds of this motion. The list of people who have requested evacuation on this basis has increased rapidly in recent days and continues to grow. To date, thousands of people have sent emails to the dedicated address [kabul@minbuza.nl](mailto:kabul@minbuza.nl) and phoned the foreign ministry's emergency number +31-6-247 247 247. That group of people includes a large number of fixers who worked for Dutch journalists and human rights defenders, including women's rights advocates, lawyers and Afghan nationals employed as local staff by Dutch development organisations. Through the mediation of partner organisations in the Netherlands that are directly involved, it has been possible to identify around 250 people belonging to these groups who, due to their involvement in Dutch activities, run an elevated risk. They have been asked to come to the airport in Kabul. Our people are helping them gain access to the airport for evacuation.

The scheduling of evacuation flights is dependent on coordination with the US and other allies and the situation at and around the airport. As a result, aircraft are permitted to be at the airport only briefly. Nevertheless, so far the main bottleneck hampering the evacuation operation has not been the availability of aircraft, but rather the crowds at the airport. Some of the people with whom the embassy team in Kabul and the team in The Hague are in contact regarding evacuation have not been able to get to the airport in time. When a Dutch flight arrives, there may not be enough people whose final destination is the Netherlands to fill the aircraft. If that is the case, after consultations with partner countries the remaining capacity is made available to evacuees whose final destination is one of those countries. Likewise evacuees heading for the Netherlands are taken aboard flights operated by partner countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is doing its best to keep track of people travelling to the Netherlands via third countries and, where possible and necessary, offering them assistance in obtaining transport to the Netherlands and travel documents.

### **Reception in the Netherlands – Current situation**

On arrival in the Netherlands, evacuated Afghan civilians granted reception by the Netherlands are transferred by bus by the Ministry of Defence from Schiphol Airport. Initially they are taken to the Willem Lodewijk van Nassau barracks in Zoutkamp (hereinafter 'Zoutkamp'). Once there, they are registered and received by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). As of 23 August 2021 around 480 people have been received at Zoutkamp, meaning it is now full.

The COA and Ministry of Defence have jointly arranged additional reception facilities as of 23 August at the Walaardt Sacré Camp in Huis ter Heide (municipality of Zeist). This location has room for around 380 people. Furthermore, as of 24 August the army facility Harskamp/Generaal Winkelman barracks in Harskamp will be available. Harskamp has room for around 850 people. In a general sense the use of military locations for asylum reception will have an impact on the armed forces' operational readiness. The reception locations provide beds and medical care (including tuberculosis screening and COVID-19 testing/vaccination). Initially these individuals will have to remain in quarantine owing to the threat of COVID-19, but they will be able to move freely within the location itself. After the quarantine period has ended they will be able to leave and enter the location freely, and receive visitors (though any visits will be subject to the COVID-19 rules).

The first people arrived in Zoutkamp last Friday, 20 August 2021. This was a group of 30 individuals. Later that night they were joined by around 50 more people. The final destination of some of them was not the Netherlands, but in order to prevent their having to remain at Schiphol

Airport, it was decided to transfer them to Zoutkamp. Given the limited capacity at Zoutkamp and in other COA reception locations, it is not desirable for these individuals to remain here for a lengthy period. Via various diplomatic channels, the countries concerned have now been contacted and agreements made about their transfer to those countries. With regard to incoming flights to Schiphol after Saturday, agreements are being made to ensure that transit passengers can continue immediately onward to their destination country.

The Royal Military and Border Police (Koninklijke Marechaussee; KMAR) is present at Zoutkamp, where it is dealing with the identification and registration of new arrivals. The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) is also there dealing with asylum procedures. A group of around 20 IND staff is available to process applications immediately after the quarantine period ends. In addition, organisations such as the Dutch Refugee Council, the Red Cross, GZA Healthcare and the municipal health service are doing valuable work at Zoutkamp. Efforts are currently under way to ensure that these processes can be set up at the other locations as well.

On 11 August the Minister for Migration informed the House that the government was introducing a moratorium on asylum decisions and returns involving Afghan nationals. This means that in principle no official decisions will be taken on existing or new asylum applications and that Afghan nationals will be eligible for reception by the COA. The moratorium means that the time period for reaching a decision on an asylum application will be extended because, given the uncertainty concerning the situation in the country of origin, no decision can reasonably be made on an application. However, the moratorium will not impede the decision-making process itself. In cases where the IND is able to reach a decision, it will do so, even while the moratorium is in effect.

Once the asylum procedure has been completed and residence permits granted, the residents will be paired with a municipality as soon as possible so that subsequent accommodation can be arranged, and they will be transferred as soon as possible to an asylum seeker's centre in the vicinity of the municipality concerned. Given the shortage of housing in the current market, it should be borne in mind that it will take some time for regular housing to be arranged. Given the influx of Afghan refugees, the government is calling on municipalities to make extra reception facilities available for COA. In addition the government is asking municipalities to take (additional) action to accelerate the flow of asylum permit holders into regular housing.

### **Meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers**

On Friday 20 August 2021 a special (online) meeting of NATO foreign ministers was held to discuss the events unfolding in Afghanistan. The Minister of Foreign Affairs took part in this meeting. In her intervention the Minister emphasised the Netherlands' grave concerns about the situation and stated that the evacuation was currently the top priority. In this connection she stressed that every effort should be aimed at ensuring the safety as soon as possible of all nationals of the coalition countries, anyone facing an increased risk because they worked for the international mission, and anyone else who is vulnerable because they worked for the coalition nations.

Like many other Allies, the Netherlands strongly urged the US to keep the airport open, accessible and secure for as long as possible and necessary to achieve this objective. The Netherlands also called for humanitarian air routes to be kept open. Finally, the Minister of Foreign Affairs urged other countries to formulate a crisis plan for the reception in the region and elsewhere of Afghan refugees and for such efforts to be coordinated. This was in accordance with the motion submitted by MP Sylvana Simons (Parliamentary Paper 27 925 no. 795) and the motion submitted by Laura Bromet et al. (Parliamentary Paper 27 925 no. 792).

Allies expressed their serious concern about the events in Afghanistan, which had unfolded at rapid tempo in the preceding days. The situation underscores how important it is for NATO to draw lessons from these recent events. Many Allies therefore called for an in-depth and – as stipulated by the Netherlands – independent evaluation to ensure that a situation such as the one occurring now can be avoided in the future.

Many Allies further called for unity, information-sharing, coordination and cooperation with other relevant actors, such as the EU and the UN.

Looking ahead, many noted that Afghanistan must never again be a safe haven for terrorists. Ministers expressed the fervent belief that, wherever possible, we must prevent the loss of 20 years' worth of progress in areas such as education, human rights and strengthening the position of women. Finally, the ministers adopted a statement, which is included as an annexe to this letter.

The Netherlands asked the NATO Secretary-General to convene a meeting of the NATO defence ministers as well if circumstances demand it.

### **Other international contacts**

In the past few days the government has employed all political and diplomatic channels and, at bilateral and EU, NATO and UN level, has called for a well-coordinated evacuation of all vulnerable groups. For example, in addition to the contacts about which the House was informed in a letter of 16 August on the situation in Afghanistan (Parliamentary Paper 27 925 no. 787), the Minister of Foreign Affairs has held intensive consultations with her German, Belgian, Luxembourg, Turkish, Pakistani, British, Qatari and UAE counterparts about the evacuation, and has been in contact with her French, Danish, Norwegian, Canadian, Italian and Chinese counterparts. In all these conversations she stressed the importance of safe access to the airport in Kabul and keeping the airport open for as long as necessary. The Prime Minister has conveyed similar messages in conversations with his British, French, German, Belgian and Pakistani counterparts. Furthermore, the Minister of Defence and the Chief of Defence have been in contact with various counterparts concerning the crisis in Afghanistan and the current state of the evacuation operation. The Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation has been in contact with UNHCR and OCHA regarding the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. The Dutch government has also maintained close contact with the UN via the Dutch Permanent Mission to the UN in New York.

In addition, the Netherlands has been in close contact with the US authorities, through various channels. The Netherlands' diplomatic missions abroad have also been actively working to support the evacuation by propagating this message.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs discussed the situation with her EU counterparts at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of 17 August 2021. The House will be informed about this separately.

### **Conclusion**

The government is doing its utmost, in close cooperation with its allies, to bring to safety in the Netherlands the maximum possible number of Dutch nationals and others at risk because of their work with or on behalf of the Netherlands. An acute concern is that the window for getting people out will soon close. The Taliban has informed the US that it will not consent to any change to the agreed deadline of 31 August 2021 for the withdrawal of US troops. The US needs several days to safely extract its own troops (around 6,000). That means, as British defence minister Ben Wallace said on 23 August, that the opportunity to evacuate people is now a matter of 'hours, not weeks'.

As noted above, in recent days the Netherlands has been pressing via all political and diplomatic channels for the airport to be kept open for evacuation flights for as long as possible, and it will continue to do so. This is also a key theme of today's special (online) session of the G7.

The Netherlands is preparing for the imminent withdrawal of coalition troops from the airport in Kabul. This means that every hour counts. With that in mind, we are working with all hands on deck to safely evacuate as many eligible people as possible. The circumstances of the evacuation are growing ever more difficult. The government is keenly aware of the possibility that not all those who are eligible can be evacuated in time. Every country concerned faces a major challenge in getting their evacuees out of Afghanistan.

Together with its partners the government is seeking ways to continue assisting people in Afghanistan after the evacuation has ended. The government will inform the House in more detail regarding these efforts soon.