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United States Senate

COMMITTEES
ARMED SERVICES
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION
AND FORESTRY
ENVIRONMENT
AND PUBLIC WORKS
SMALL BUSINESS
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

August 17, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin,

I write requesting answers concerning the safety of Americans currently located in Afghanistan. On Tuesday, August 17, U.S. State Department officials reported that there are as many as 15,000 Americans currently living in Afghanistan that require rapid evacuation. Additionally, the State Department disclosed that they made initial contact with less than half that number, and have instructed Americans to make their own way to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.

I am gravely concerned that the lives of Americans living in Afghanistan are in danger. The Taliban's rapid takeover of both the city of Kabul and large swaths of greater Afghanistan have effectively left Americans stranded in a now-hostile land led by an inhumane and terror-fueled regime that seeks to strip away the rights of women and minorities. Americans working for charities and other non-governmental organizations seeking to educate the women and children of Afghanistan are doing so in direct opposition to the Taliban's goals. Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan will undoubtedly become a terrorist haven once again, granting safety to violent extremist organizations that have sought to kidnap, imprison, torture, and kill Americans in the past.

The United States is responsible for evacuating every single American from Afghanistan safely in the days and weeks ahead. The National Security Advisor's press conference on Tuesday effectively blamed Americans for not heeding their convoluted warnings to leave Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul. This characterization is highly inappropriate and demonstrates an alarming lack of accountability from this Administration. The Americans who remained in Afghanistan following the announcement of the U.S.'s withdrawal by September 11, 2021, did so with assurances from the President and Secretary of State that the country was not in imminent danger of falling to the Taliban, and that the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would remain open to provide diplomatic services in the near term, as recently as mid-July. Those assurances were false, and now, with thousands of Americans spread across the country, large-scale rescue efforts must proceed immediately. Staging a noncombatant evacuation operation from one site in a country the size of Texas is inadequate. I implore you to authorize the U.S. military to guarantee safe passage for Americans to Hamid Karzai International Airport, and commit to evacuating every American from the country before again withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan at or beyond the end of August.

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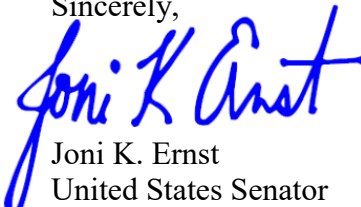
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I additionally request detailed answers and information on the following:

1. Is the Administration aware of how many Americans in Afghanistan are currently unable to reach Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul? If so, how many and how does the Administration plan to get them there safely?
2. If Americans are left to find their own way to Hamid Karzai International Airport, how should they approach Taliban-controlled checkpoints surrounding the airport?
3. What authorities will the Administration give to the U.S. military to safely evacuate Americans from an Afghanistan that is controlled by the Taliban?
4. What will be the way forward for the American people stranded in Afghanistan if the President's arbitrary end date of August 31 passes and the U.S. military has not completed the withdrawal?
5. An accurate number of Americans currently located in Afghanistan working with charitable organizations and other non-governmental organizations.
6. The number of Americans in Afghanistan that have had positive contact with the State Department, and the number of Americans that have not had positive contact with the State Department.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joni K. Ernst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator