



January 31, 2011

U.S. Begins Evacuation Flights From Chaotic Cairo Airport

By LIAM STACK and J. DAVID GOODMAN

CAIRO — The State Department began a voluntary evacuation of hundreds of American citizens from [Egypt](#) on specially chartered flights to what it called “safe havens” on Monday, and governments around the world scrambled to put together evacuation plans for their citizens.

The first American government flight left Cairo for Cyprus in the early afternoon with 42 passengers, followed by three larger flights to Athens and another to Cyprus, said Elizabeth O. Colton, a spokeswoman for the American Embassy in Cairo. Toward the end of the day, eight flights had left, carrying about 940 passengers, with one later departure scheduled. At least six more flights were planned for Tuesday.

Embassy employees passed out water and crackers in Terminal 4, a small building being used only for flights chartered by the United States. About 300 Americans were still waiting for a flight late in the day. “I’m probably camping out here for the night,” said Arlene Mollang, 44, from Maui. “Under the circumstances, it’s as relaxed as can be.”

But elsewhere at Cairo International Airport, the country’s largest airport, chaos reigned as a sea of tourists and Egyptians scrambled to get on an outbound commercial flight on Monday. Throngs pushed through Terminal 1 where stranded travelers slept on luggage on the litter-strewn floor. A dozen people stood atop ticket counters, seeking a view over the crowd.

Tempers boiled over at times as travelers struggled to get seats on the limited commercial flights still operating. At one point the airport stopped posting flight times on its departure board in an effort to ease tensions, The Associated Press reported. But the move served only to stoke anger over delays and cancellations.

In a statement, the American embassy said, “Our goal is to get people to a safe place where they can make their own onward travel arrangements.”

There was a brief moment of levity in Terminal 4 as an American official, dressed in a red polo shirt and holding a megaphone, informed those waiting that families with small children and older Americans would be considered first for flights. A murmur went through the crowd and grew into a questioning chant: “How old? How old?”

“We’ll let you self-select,” the embassy official said.

Americans taking the government-chartered flights — including dependents of American officials in Egypt, some diplomats and private citizens — will be expected to reimburse the State Department for the cost of travel; the amount has not been determined. The flights were meant to replace commercial travel plans, the State Department has said, and those with ticketed flights should contact their airlines.

More than 50,000 Americans live and work in Egypt, most of them in the major cities that have been shaken by antigovernment protests and looting. The State Department said that roughly 2,400 had asked for help leaving the country.

Austria said it would evacuate hundreds on special flights and would send a small army plane to help; Turkey said it had already taken out more than 1,500 citizens over the last three days; and Japan chartered flights for its citizens stranded at the Cairo airport, Reuters reported.

“The Austrian Embassy is helping us,” said Danny Washington, 25, from Mannheim, Germany, whose commercial flight had been canceled the day before. He said he was now scheduled to fly on a chartered Austrian military plane late on Monday night.

Even as governments worked to process all the requests for flights, many foreign citizens had already found room on planes chartered by private companies with workers in Egypt. Coca-Cola was among the companies chartering flights, which began over the weekend.

A regional information manager for International SOS, a company that provides emergency evacuations and has many major international companies as clients, said by telephone from Dubai, “We are getting a lot of client queries and requests for evacuation.” The manager, Rabih Fayad, said that as of early Monday evening, 80 of his company’s several hundred clients had called for evacuation assistance, and that 300 people had been evacuated, with 200 more on the immediate waiting list. The company and others that provide emergency charter service said the number would grow sharply on Tuesday.

Michael J. Kelly, chief executive officer of On Call International, a company that specializes in medical and other emergency evacuations, said on Monday: “We got about 60 travelers out of Egypt — about 35 out of Cairo and about 28 out of Alexandria. Some of these were business travelers, some leisure travelers, and a fair number of study-abroad kids as well. The real challenge was not getting planes into the airports, it was that these people were all over those cities and we had armed guards that had to pick them up in vans and then deliver them to the airport and then get the variety of clearances required.” He said their flights went to Athens.

At a university dormitory in the upscale Zamalek district of Cairo, a crowd of young foreign students spent the morning sitting on suitcases or milling about nervously, awaiting word about

the start of embassy-organized charter flights out of Egypt.

Nearly 500 American students were at the [American University in Cairo](#), which has a main campus in a Cairo suburb and another adjacent to the central Tahrir Square, when the unrest began last week. The semester was scheduled to begin on Sunday, but has been pushed back at least until Feb. 13, as administrators and students warily monitor events in the capital. “A majority of students are pursuing the voluntary departure,” said Morgan Roth, a university spokeswoman, though a few dozen have chosen to stay. The university has the largest concentration of American students in Egypt.

Gunnar Dancer, 20, of Minneapolis, said he would head to the American Embassy on Tuesday to try to get on a flight. “I feel safe here, and I don’t really want to leave,” Mr. Dancer said. “But it would give me family some peace of mind.”

But his two dormitory roommates — Matthew Layden, 21, of Tampa, Fla., and Dillon Sodaro, 19, of Norwalk, Conn. — said they had decided not to take the embassy up on its offer. “It makes sense for tourists, but not if you live here,” Mr. Layden said.

In a geopolitical shift, even Iraq decided it would evacuate its citizens, sending three planes — including the prime minister’s plane — to take home those who wish to return at no charge, The Associated Press reported. Thousands of Iraqis had once fled to Egypt to escape the violence in their own country.

About 800 Iraqis had left Cairo by Monday afternoon, said Capt. Mohammed al-Moussawi, a crew member for the prime minister’s office, according to The A.P. He said the flights would continue until all those who wished to return had done so.

Liam Stack reported from Cairo, and J. David Goodman from New York. Joe Sharkey contributed reporting from Tucson.