

U.S. flies F/A-18 fighter jets over Kabul as evacuation continues

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A F/A-18E/F Super Hornets of Strike Fighter Attack Squadron 211 (VFA-211) is lined up for take off on the flight deck of the USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71) aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf June 18, 2015. (Reuters photo)

Kabul, August 20 (RHC)-- The U.S. military is flying F/A-18 fighter jets over Kabul amid its desperate evacuation effort as American troops withdraw from Afghanistan, according to the Pentagon.

In the last 24 hours, "F/A-18s from the Ronald Reagan carrier strike group flew armed overwatch flights over Kabul to ensure enhanced security," US Army Maj. Gen. William "Hank" Taylor, the Joint Staff deputy director for regional operations, told reporters on Thursday.

"We maintain a watchful eye and are continuously conducting in-depth assessments to protect the safety of Americans," he said. "We will use all of the tools in our arsenal to achieve this goal."

The aircrafts, currently based in the North Arabian Sea, fly "at altitude" despite reports on social media that the flights are low flying, according to Pentagon press secretary John Kirby.

This is the first time Pentagon officials have confirmed F/A-18 jets fly over Kabul, where there are now 5,200 U.S. troops to oversee the evacuation from Afghanistan the Taliban took control of on Sunday.

Nearly 7,000 people have been evacuated since then, including 2,000 individuals in the last 24 hours. The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan arrived in the US Central Command area in late June to support the withdrawal.

At the time, the Navy said the carrier "provide airpower to protect US and coalition forces as they conduct drawdown operations from Afghanistan."

"Force protection is a high priority," Kirby said Thursday. "We're going to have at our disposal all the assets and resources necessary to make sure we can accomplish this mission safely and efficiently just like we were accomplishing the previous mission of drawdown safely and efficiently."

U.S. President Joe Biden said Wednesday he would maintain the American military presence in the country beyond the end of the month if evacuation operations were not yet completed. He said, if needed, U.S. forces would be staying in Afghanistan beyond his August 31 deadline for a full withdrawal to pull out all American citizens.

Biden had repeatedly vowed the withdrawal from Afghanistan would be orderly, deliberate and safe and that there were no circumstances that Afghanistan would suddenly fall to the Taliban, after 20 years of war and occupation.

But the Taliban, who started to make gains since the withdrawal process began in May, eventually took over the capital Kabul on Sunday. The militants entered the presidential palace after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, declaring that the war in Afghanistan was over.

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