

**The New York Times**

## **A university in Bangladesh evacuates almost 150 young women from Kabul.**

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Safa, center, with her friends Tamana, left and Oranous in Doha, Qatar, after being evacuated from Kabul on the weekend. Credit...Safa

As gunfire rang out in Kabul, an Afghan college graduate named Batool tried not to show her fear.

For days, she and about 150 other Afghan women — mostly students and alumni of Asian University for Women in Bangladesh — had essentially lived on a convoy of buses that they hoped would get them into the Kabul airport, the center of the U.S. military's last-ditch evacuation efforts.

University officials and volunteers had secured them visas and chartered a plane for them, but several times, the buses failed to make it past Taliban and military checkpoints.

Fear about being in the open intensified after a deadly terrorist attack on Thursday and a night on the buses listening to gunfire outside.

“We accepted that we will either die or we will leave,” said Batool, 25. “Every single one of us wanted to follow our dreams and continue our education.”

Finally on Saturday, with university leaders and other volunteers pleading their case to American officials, 148 women passed the final checkpoint. Told to leave their luggage behind, they were allowed to bring only their phones and phone chargers.

Their passage past that checkpoint and onto a plane capped a frantic, round-the-clock campaign by a university officials and others to get the women out after the sudden collapse of Kabul to the Taliban two weeks ago.

As the Taliban advanced, school officials quickly created a masters program so alumni could obtain student visas, said a university founder, Kamal Ahmad.

To keep track of the buses at all times in the chaotic scene around the airport, the school used a geocommunications app that was also used to help [evacuate an Afghan girls robotics team](#).

Lawyers with the firm Mayer Brown helped the effort, according to Marcia Goodman, a partner for the firm who said they had “reached out to contacts and friends of contacts, including military on the ground and government officials at various levels.”

But they ran into issues booking a charter plane out of Kabul, and feared paying up to \$450,000 for a single flight that might fail to pick the students up.

In the desperate effort to enter the airport, overwhelming fatigue was itself a threat to the evacuation plans.

When Safa, 20, and two friends separated from the group at the airport to tell their families they had made it past the checkpoints, they fell asleep from exhaustion as their phones charged in a hall.

When they woke up an hour later, they discovered to their horror that they had missed the flight. “We were not able to say anything,” Safa said. “We were not able to cry. We were just in shock what to do.”

Eventually, military officers put them on a flight to Doha, Qatar.

Safa has decided to “never sleep again,” she joked during a telephone interview.

Leaving Afghanistan brings mixed feelings, she said,

At the evacuation’s lowest moments, she felt resigned to giving up her dream of finishing her degree and working in public health.

“It was killing me inside,” she said. “Why I should give up? Why should I bury it? I deserve to be happy. I deserve my old dreams.”

Now, she said, she intends to finish her public health degree and return one day to Afghanistan, after the Taliban have left.

“I want to serve my country,” she said. “I can see my future, and I will be able to turn my dreams in reality.”

Most of the students are now in Spain, Batool said, with the next leg of their journey to the United States. They are not sure when they will make it to Bangladesh.

Safa said she felt “grateful” to the university but was worried for the family left behind.

“I saved my life,” she said, “but still I can’t say I have a good feeling.”

— *Isabella Kwai*