



AN ADDENDUM ON HUMAN SECURITY AND AFGHANISTAN

By Sarah Dawn Petrin, August 29, 2021

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When this podcast was recorded, we did not know that the fall of Kabul was imminent. What does “human security” mean in the context of the U.S. departure from Afghanistan?

Evacuation operations at the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) have been nothing short of heroic. Images from the airport reveal the human nature of U.S. service members as they held babies, accompanied families, and came alongside women in danger.

In the podcast, I tell the story of when a woman left her child at a Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Afghanistan. What did the soldiers do? They took the child in and tried to care for its needs. They quickly realized the FOB was no place for a baby, so they tracked down the mother.

When everything goes wrong, sometimes the only thing we can offer is our own humanity. This sense of moral obligation to help people in distress has brought together the private sector, members of Congress, veterans, and advocates to support the military in getting as many evacuees to safety as possible.

Understanding human security is about analyzing how conflict and other destabilizing events affect a population. People of different age, gender, language, race, ethnicity, religious, and political groups are going to be affected in distinct ways. Understanding the risks and vulnerabilities of each group is an important factor in the protection of civilians. Realizing that threats to civilians come in numerous forms – not only from armed groups like the Taliban – but also from environmental and health risks, is an important consideration for military operations.

The accompanying white paper on Human Security in U.S. Military Operations, argues that human security is a useful planning tool for anticipating the human dimension of operations. While the U.S. understood that the military departure from Afghanistan would pose a risk to certain vulnerable populations, the assumption that the government of Afghanistan would be able to protect the people is where things went wrong. The U.S. overestimated partner capacity because it so heavily invested in building that capacity together with its NATO allies.

The collapse of the Government of Afghanistan will be a subject of debate for years to come. In the meantime, U.S. evacuation operations have brought together resources from across the interagency to address critical humanitarian needs. As thousands of evacuees wait for their Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) paperwork to be approved, and others escape to neighboring countries, Operation Allies Refuge is far from over.

There will always be human dimensions of military operations that are critical to achieving the end state. Whether or not we consider the implications of military action on civilian populations, and how we prepare for a coordinated response with interagency partners, is an important factor for operational success that is not going away anytime soon.