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AMBASSADOR ELIZABETH JONES

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. It is October 4, 2022. I am Robin Matthewman. Today I am interviewing Ambassador Beth Jones as part of our Afghanistan project.

So, Beth, welcome.

JONES: Thank you. Good to see you.

Q: You had a long, wonderful career in the Foreign Service, I wonder if you could summarize your connections with Afghanistan.

JONES: Yes, thank you. My first post in the Foreign Service was Kabul. I got there in January 1971 and stayed for eighteen months. I was a first-tour junior officer. Embassy Kabul at that time decided to put me on rotation, so I worked first in the administrative section, then in the political section, the economic section, and then I worked for the Drug Enforcement Agency office there.

Q: I remember reading in your oral history that it was a time of great hunger and difficulties in Afghanistan.

JONES: Right. Yes, there was a drought in Afghanistan at the time and people were going hungry. The USAID [United States Agency for International Development] director and the Peace Corps director—there was a large Peace Corps group in Afghanistan at the time—got together and formulated what was called the Work for Wheat program. USAID brought in a lot of wheat and Peace Corps and AID organized work projects around the country, such as digging wells, digging irrigation ditches, that kind of thing. The people who worked were paid in wheat. That was a way to not only do infrastructure work, which was very necessary and would be good for the farmers and the townspeople, the village people, but would also get wheat to hungry people.

Q: And this was some years before the coup and the invasion by the Soviet Union.

JONES: Yes, that's right. King Zahir Shah was still in place. He was well known to be very corrupt and that was part of the problem. One of the reasons that people were going hungry was that the government wasn't doing the kinds of things that one would expect a government to do. But at the time, it was a very open country. I knew very many of the

Peace Corps volunteers. We were all the same age. I was able to drive around the country, all over the place, and I'd go with a couple of Peace Corps friends almost every weekend to visit other Peace Corps people in other towns and villages around Afghanistan and would spend the weekend there. So I had a chance to visit almost the entire country during that time.

Q: And then, the next time that you worked on Afghanistan was right after 9/11?

JONES: The next time I worked on Afghanistan really was before that because I was DCM [deputy chief of mission] in Pakistan from 1988 to 1992 and that was just as the Soviets were leaving Afghanistan. Embassy Islamabad had within it the USAID mission for Afghanistan. So, we spent a tremendous amount of time working with the mujahideen who were in Afghanistan, and working on getting school projects going, books to the schools, mostly schools under trees, and various other USAID projects. They were all managed cross-border because it was still a bit dangerous to go into Afghanistan at that point.

Q: And then?

JONES: And then after that, the next time I worked a bit on Afghanistan was, of course, after 9/11. I was assistant secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia [EUR], and there was, of course, a tremendous amount of concern about what had happened in Afghanistan, that al Qaeda had been permitted to work out of there. I ended up doing a lot of work to get the troops into Afghanistan through Central Asia and then later through Turkey into Iraq when that started. So, it was a lot of negotiating with the countries for which I was responsible in Central Asia and then, of course, Turkey, all part of the EUR Bureau at the time.

Q: That was a pretty important effort. And then you retired at the end of Colin Powell's time with the State Department, but you came back.

JONES: Yes. Marc Grossman took over from Dick Holbrooke after Holbrooke died. He was asked by Secretary Hillary Clinton to come back and take over as special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, basically to work with the Afghans to try to come up with a peace arrangement, working with the Taliban. He asked me to come back to be one of his deputies, so I went back to government at that point. I spent a lot of time working with Ambassador Ryan Crocker in Kabul, and mostly with Karzai, to get an agreement that would reduce night raids and the collateral damage: the number of civilians that were being killed from some of the military activities that were taking place under U.S. and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] auspices. I did that for a year and a half. I had to leave when I was asked to go back to take over the Near East Bureau as acting assistant secretary for a year and a half.

And then, I went back to SRAP [United States Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan] to work with Jim Dobbins for about six months until I was asked to go to New York to be deputy US representative to the UN [United Nations] to Samantha Power when Michelle Sison was having trouble getting confirmed. So, I was in and out a lot.

Q: And then, I imagine, with all that connection, that as you watched the events in Afghanistan in 2021, it was pretty moving, to say the least.

JONES: That's right. It was very moving. But what quickly happened was that everybody I ever knew and a lot of people I didn't know kept contacting me to say, You must know people in the State Department who can help. Please help get these Afghans out. Please help get my interpreters out. Please help my staff out. Please help get my grantees out.

It was very, very stressful. It was very worrisome because everyone was so frantic about it. This was from August 15, for the two weeks that the U.S. still controlled the airport in Kabul. It was hard to know how to reach in , to know whom to contact to get people either into the airport in Kabul and onto planes, or up to Mazar-i Sharif in the north and onto some of the civilian charters, private charters that people were hiring to try to get people out.

I spent some time talking to colleagues in various European countries and other countries to say, "Would you please permit—what does it take for the government to which you are accredited to allow this private charter to land or that private charter to land?" It was a very stressful time for everyone. There were hundreds of people doing this kind of thing, I know.

And then, really out of the clear blue sky, Suzy George, the chief of staff to Secretary Blinken, called me in the middle of September and asked if I would be interested and willing to take the place of John Bass, who had just come back from Afghanistan. He had been asked to go out to Kabul to work with Ross Wilson at the time of the NEO [the acronym for the Afghan evacuation, Noncombatant Evacuation Operations]. But John Bass was getting ready for his hearing to be under secretary of state and needed to start working on that. He couldn't be working on Afghanistan full-time. It was one of those things. Since Kabul was my first post there was no way I was going to say no to that.

Suzy George just gave me an outline of the position, that I would be taking over from John Bass and that I should talk to John about what the whole situation entailed, which I did. What he explained was that his responsibility was to find planes that would go into Kabul to take out Afghans who were eligible for special immigrant visas, American citizens and their families, people who the interagency had decided were eligible for what was then known as Operation Allies Welcome. So, I said yes and started October 4, 2021, so a year ago today.

Q: Did you tell me that this operation was called CARE? Is that right?

JONES: Yes. The whole operation of getting Afghans out of Afghanistan and resettled in the United States was called Operation Allies Welcome, that was the term that was used in terms of the U.S. policy terms. The office that John Bass had created at the State Department was called the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, and the acronym for that is CARE. CARE was the office that supported the policy of Operation Allies Welcome.

Originally, I was told the job was simply to find planes, talk countries into letting us charter the planes to land in Kabul, pick Afghans up, and get them to Doha. However,

when I started, both John Bass and Suzy George said to me, actually, we need you to figure out what the entire operation should look like to get people from Afghanistan to Doha, to arrive there for processing and then on to the United States. And to work with the Afghans who ended up in various other countries on private charters who might have a connection to the United States and might be eligible to go there, based on the interagency definition of the criteria for eligibility.

So, I sat down with the group that was there, that was working with John Bass and with two other elements of what were then just called the task forces. One task force was doing all the work moving people, figuring out who was in all of these other countries, in the Emirates, in Albania, in Poland and all these other places to figure out who might have a nexus to the United States. There was another task force that was the CONUS [Continental United States] task force; that was the one that was working on what the services would be or how would Afghans be cared for when they got to the United States under humanitarian parole. By the time I started there were already several U.S. military bases in the United States that had been designated as safe havens for Afghans coming through under humanitarian parole. Basically, the tens of thousands of Afghans who had come out from Kabul on military air to Frankfurt, to Italy, to Doha, and various other places that had all ended up at these bases in the United States.

So, my job was to make an office out of that whole range of tasks. There were a lot of ideas. People had been working on a whole variety of org charts. It was really a headache for me because I wasn't familiar enough with everything that had to happen. What I finally decided and talked through with Karen Decker, who was John Bass's deputy and now my deputy, with Holly Holzer, who ran one of the task forces, with Laura Dogu, who ran the task force for the CONUS bases, and said, "I think what we should do is just pull all three of those together, not change anything, but just have them more connected—they weren't connected before at all—and have a good flow through of not only information, a flow through of people, i.e., Afghans, so that we could track Afghans from the time they left Kabul to wherever they ended up, if they came to Doha, what their processing would be, and to get them to the United States." So, that was the first big effort that we made, to create CARE in the form that it basically is now to manage Afghans all the way through to their entry into the United States.

Q: And how many people were in the office?

JONES: We were, at that time, maybe about thirty or forty people. But keep in mind, these task forces, the task forces were comprised of volunteers, volunteers for a very short time. So, the minute I started, it was clear people couldn't stay. I was briefed by this group of people who knew all about the Emirates or a couple of people who knew all about Albania and what was going on there with Afghans, or the group of people who knew what was going on in the safe havens in the United States. Then they would say, Well, I've been here for three weeks, so I have only one more week to go. So, one of the biggest handicaps that we had was we were constantly recruiting for staff, constantly. Every single one of us was constantly trying to get people to join us or talk to bosses, talk supervisors into allowing their people to join us because, of course, they were having to leave their jobs behind for a period of time. So, that was probably—of all the difficulties that we had, that was the most difficult, was keeping ourselves staffed.

Q: So, just to give an idea of how many people for resettlement we were talking about, were there something like a hundred thousand Afghans that had left before this point?

JONES: There were, by the time I started, there were maybe seventy-five thousand that had gotten out of Afghanistan during those two weeks of the NEO. Some were still in bases in Europe and Frankfurt because there was a measles outbreak at some of the bases. So, it was decreed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control that no Afghans could enter the United States unless they had the MMR vaccination, the measles, mumps, and rubella, which is fine, but the problem is that it must mature for three weeks before you can enter the United States. So, even though we had been taking people very quickly out of Frankfurt, out of Sigonella, out of Rota, out of all these bases in Europe, now they had to stay there for three weeks, which was a seriously complicating factor, both for the Afghans themselves and their families because they are at bases living on cots and in open bays. But it was also a bilateral issue with our European allies as well because they hadn't counted on having these bases occupied for so long.

So, one of the tasks that we had in CARE after I started was negotiating or participating in negotiations with the Germans, the Spanish, the Italians, et cetera, about how long these bases would have to stay open because we had Afghans that had to stay there until they could enter the United States under humanitarian parole. The other part of what was going on at the time was the ongoing vetting would not always be smooth. Of course, all Afghans were vetted for security—on national security grounds and criminality grounds. This vetting cleared people to get on airplanes, but every so often there would be some that couldn't be cleared. We couldn't keep them in Frankfurt and Rota and all these other places. We had already set up a facility in Kosovo at Camp Bondsteel where they had portioned off part of the Camp Bondsteel base to set up a temporary camp called Camp Liya, where we sent Afghans in need of further processing.

There was an extremely capable, competent interagency vetting team of all the vetting agencies at Bondsteel who were extremely good at interviewing Afghans who had some kind of a derogatory hit—to figure out if that really was the same person that the hit was on. For example, if it was something about a phone call, had they actually had that phone in their possession when that phone call was made. And then, there were others who were caught in vetting because they had worked for the previous Taliban government and that in itself was a prohibition for entering the United States. That took us a while to sort that out because very many of the people who had worked for the previous Taliban government had been teachers and other professionals. One was the director of the Kabul Museum and his family. Some had been doctors and they all had, quote, "belonged to the Taliban," but they weren't actual Taliban fighters. So, one of our big tasks, and it took us quite a few weeks, was to come up with a definition for a waiver so that people in that category could be permitted entry into the United States under humanitarian parole. So, we were able to do that and get quite a number of people out of Bondsteel as a result of that waiver. People who, yes, had worked for the Taliban government, but they weren't enemies of the United States and had not fought against the United States.

Q: Can you explain what humanitarian parole is?

JONES: Humanitarian parole is a way that the Department of Homeland Security, who is responsible for entry of all people into the United States, can provide a fast way for people to enter the United States who may or may not be eligible in some other category, but the other categories all take much longer to adjudicate. So, in an emergency situation like this, a determination is made by the interagency, it's a formal decision, that all of these Afghans could enter under humanitarian parole. The cap on the number of people who could enter under humanitarian parole was ninety-five thousand. By the time I started, I think there were about seventy-five thousand in the U.S. and we still had quite a number we were taking out of Frankfurt and out of some of the other bases in Europe and out of Camp As-Saliyah in Doha, as well as out of the Emirates. So, in any case, at one point, we were worried about hitting the ninety-five thousand cap, but then we realized that it was going to be much smaller now because we didn't have flights every hour taking Afghans out the way it had occurred during the August NEO period.

Q: Okay. So, how did you keep track of where everybody was?

JONES: So, that was our job, to keep track of where everybody was. Our biggest partner was the Consular Affairs Bureau. They knew all the people who either already had special immigrant visas [SIVs], they'd been issued visas already, and they had visas in their passports. Or because of the way SIVs were managed just before Kabul fell, a lot of them had electronic visas that were processed remotely by a consulate in China. So, we knew, of course, who all the people were who had visas in their passports or had electronic visas. And we had spreadsheets, basically, with their contact information, phone numbers, family members, et cetera, and we started calling people. Now, to do that, we hired on the ground in Afghanistan help from an organization based out of London to do the on-the-ground work to find some of these people. We had their phone numbers, and we had our own team, including we hired some contractors to do the calling of these Afghans to say, We're prepared to take you and your family out to the United States. Do you still have passports? Do you still have your visa in your passport? Are you prepared to bring only your spouse, one spouse, and unmarried children under the age of twenty-one? And we were very explicit about that because, of course, very many Afghans did not want to leave their parents behind, did not want to leave their brothers and sisters behind, did not want to leave their married children behind. It was heartbreaking, really, because we had to force people to decide whether they wanted to go to the United States under those circumstances. That was a tremendous number of calls to make to try to pull together a manifest for a flight.

After the NEO in August, we had no flights. So, John Bass and Karen Decker and their extremely competent team, before I started, had been working with an element of the State Department that does contracting of planes. We worked with them in the Administrative Bureau, in the A Bureau, to help us contact every possible airline we could think of—Jordan Air, Egypt Air, Pakistan International Airways, Qatar Air—to ask if we could contract with any one of their airlines to fly into Kabul and bring out a planeload of Afghans to Doha.

Q: What was the security situation in October 2021?

JONES: The security situation was calming. Embassy Kabul, of course, evacuated at the end of August to Doha. They evacuated, of course. They went to Doha and Doha was where they were welcomed to set up the equivalent of a remote embassy called the Afghan Affairs Unit, and it was led by Ian McCary, Ambassador Ian McCary, who had been the DCM in Kabul and took over as the chargé for the Afghan Affairs Unit as Ambassador McCary. They had established contact as there had been contact throughout August with the Taliban. There was a delegation of Taliban based in Doha at that point, so they set up a communications channel with them to talk about what the international community expected of the Taliban in terms of the way they treated civilians, including civilians to whom the U.S. had a commitment.

That's the way we put it to the Taliban. We explained that if they wished to be part of the international community that freedom of passage, free passage, safe passage was a requirement. That if Afghans wished to leave the country, they should permit that if they wanted to establish a reputation for being a responsible government in support of the safety and security of their people and allowing them free choice to travel. The Taliban right away said, Yes, we support free passage, we support safe passage, and we basically held them to their word on that. At the end of September, about the time I first spoke with John Bass, was the first flight that they had been able to get out of Afghanistan on which there were quite a number of locally engaged staff and their families and other American citizens who had not been able to get into the airport to leave during August. Ambassador Bass was extremely pleased about that, but that was the first flight they were able to get out after we left Kabul and it was the only flight for quite a bit longer as we kept struggling to figure out how to do this.

The other avenue we had for Afghans leaving Afghanistan was, of course, overland to Pakistan. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Afghans had fled across the border to Pakistan after the Taliban took over. We were in very close touch through our embassy with the Pakistani government about how to manage these people because we knew that very many of them had a nexus to the United States. They were SIV holders or they were eligible for immediate interviews for the special immigrant visas or they were relatives of family members of American citizens, or they had a referral to the U.S. refugee program as preference one or preference two, called a P-1 or P-2.

We asked Embassy Islamabad to do their best to survey who was there, as well as to work with other embassies there who were experiencing the same thing. They had thousands of Afghans who had worked with them in Afghanistan coming across the border as well. One problem was that the Pakistanis were saying, Well, anybody who came across the border illegally can't leave. I met with the Pakistani ambassador in Washington. They made the same argument. And I said, "You *want* all these Afghans to leave. We're prepared to take them out. Why are you saying they can't leave if they don't have—if they entered Pakistan illegally?" And by entering illegally, that meant that they had entered without a passport or without a visa.

Finally, the Pakistanis said, "Okay, okay, we get it. Give us a diplomatic note with the names and passport information, et cetera, of all the people you want to take out." Every embassy did that. We submitted a list of several hundred. They were all contacted by the Pakistani government to get exit visas. As they got exit visas, we contracted with

Pakistan International Airlines, PIA, to take them from Islamabad to Doha. That was also a heavy-duty negotiation because the Qataris weren't so eager to have PIA land in Doha. It was very difficult to negotiate with the Qataris the landing permit for these planes, so we said, Okay, you know, if you don't want PIA to do this, can we contract with Qatar Air to do this? So, we did that as well.

At one point, we had permission for PIA to take Afghans out of Kabul. We tried to negotiate a direct flight with the Qataris from Kabul to Doha with PIA. No, no, no, they wanted nothing to do with that. So, we had them go from Kabul to Islamabad and then change to a Qatar Air flight in Islamabad to go to Doha in some of these instances. I think once or twice we actually had PIA do all of the route, but stopping Islamabad on the way. So, we tried. The team, fabulous, were contractors who were used to working with airlines, calling every airline they could imagine and trying every routing. We spent a lot of time on the diplomacy of getting landing permits or overflight rights or whatever it took to get these flights of Afghans out.

At one point, we thought we could talk the Uzbeks into letting us take people from Kabul to Tashkent, especially those who already had a visa [SIVs] in their passports. They would have been able to fly to Tashkent and get on any international airline with their visa for the United States. We said, You know, we'd be glad to contract with Uzbek Air for this, that we'd pay a good fee for that, and the Uzbeks said, No, we can't because insurance won't let us. The insurance payment is too high. I was talking to the Uzbek ambassador about this. And so, I went back and talked to my colleagues on the seventh floor: John Bass [John in the meantime, had been confirmed as under secretary], with Suzy George, the secretary's chief of staff, with the deputy secretary for resources and management, all the people that I was reporting to, and they said, Cost is no object, is not a restriction. We'll pay the insurance. Whatever the insurance is, we'll pay the insurance. So, I went back to the Uzbeks and said, "We'll pay the insurance," and they said, "No, no, you don't understand. If we take Uzbek Air into Kabul, no matter who pays the insurance, the insurance is canceled for all Uzbek Air, the entire fleet, everywhere in the world. So, we said, Okay, we get it. We guess that's not an option. So, that was the end of that.

Q: When did the first flight of Afghans coming out of Afghanistan on your watch start?

JONES: We had one in mid-October. Well, we had several that we were able to get from Kabul to Islamabad and then to Doha, I think we had two or three like that in October. And then we had several on PIA to Qatar, as I mentioned. The Qataris were telling us that they would permit PIA only X number of landing permits, I think it was three or four, and as we were using those up. In the meantime, Qatar Air was bringing Afghans out of Afghanistan on their own flights. They just sent flights in, and they were bringing Afghans out on the basis of dip notes that they'd gotten from us and from various other European and Asian countries. So, we were doing those dip notes as well with Afghans we wanted to bring out who had SIVs or were American citizens or family members of American service members, locally engaged staff, people like that. We never knew who was on which flight. The Qataris were the ones who managed it. They would take our dip note and they would do all the contacting of people that were on the dip note. We never knew which of the people they were contacting, but they contacted them, got them visas

for Qatar, and then they would just appear, fifty at a time, twenty at a time, thirty-five at a time, in Doha at the airport and were put on a bus. And they would tell us, Okay, we've got Afghans coming to Camp As-Saliyah. So, that was kind of a haphazard way of doing it, in those early days, but at least people were coming out.

But at the same time, we were having so much trouble with the PIA landing permits. So we went to the Qataris, and we said, You know, it's really nice that you're giving us these seats on your planes. Whenever you happen to take your planes in, can we charter an entire plane once a week or twice a week? In the end, they said, Yes, we could do that, so we did. We had a couple of flights a week from toward the end of October and through November to Camp As-Saliyah [CAS] in Doha. All of those Afghans were being processed for humanitarian parole, which meant that they had to have the vaccinations. So we set up a clinic in CAS that we could take them to to get their vaccinations. They had to go through vetting, which the Department of Homeland Security was doing through Customs and Border Control. They're the ones who control humanitarian parole and were doing the vetting of Afghans there. Every so often, we would see that there were three hundred Afghans ready to go and so we would charter a plane, again through the Administrative Bureau, and we would take a planeload of three hundred to either Dulles or Philadelphia, depending on where CBP, Customs and Border Patrol, and then the other entry agencies decided that they wanted to process this large group of Afghans to take them to one of the right military bases where Afghans were being processed in the U.S.

The arrival of these flights in the U.S. was always problematic. There was always some reason that there was a problem. At several points the U.S. baggage handlers went on strike because they didn't like the way the baggage was loaded on these charter planes in Doha, that they weren't in baggage pods, they were all just a huge jumble of suitcases, et cetera. So we had to do a lot of negotiating even to get the baggage handler thing sorted out. It was the group in CARE that was responsible for the situation in the U.S., they were the ones that knew how to do that and were doing those negotiations. A lot of that was led first by Ambassador Laura Dogu, and then she left pretty quickly after I started, and Ambassador Tracey Jacobson was the one who was the guru of negotiations on those kinds of things with the interagency.

Q: And when they came in like that they already had been vetted, so they didn't have to go to a U.S. military base, they could then go—?

JONES: No, no. They all went to a U.S. military base. They had been vetted, but they had no way to function yet. So, when they went to the bases that's where they got the rest of their physicals, that's where they got their work permits, that's where they got their Social Security cards, that's where they got their SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] cards, and that's where the resettlement agencies then took over. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration in the State Department is responsible for the resettlement of people with that status, so they hired nine resettlement agencies in the U.S. to do the resettlement of the Afghans who were at all of these bases. That was a very big ask for these resettlement agencies, because during the Trump years, they had been decimated. There were so few people coming in under refugee status that the agencies had been forced to let go of hundreds of people, so they really had to staff up very

quickly and in a major way to be able to manage the resettlement of these seventy-five thousand Afghans.

Q: In the Washington, DC area Lutheran Social Services was a traditional agency like that. I remember being on a webinar kind of call and they were explaining that. In the one month of August, they had more people come in than they had had in a whole year, the year before.

JONES: That's right, that's right. We were also responsible with PRM, the Population, Refugees and Migration bureau, to find Foreign Service officers who would go to each of the bases to be the State Department lead there because there were so many issues that related to the State Department that we just needed that kind of coordination. Of course, the U.S. military managed all of these bases and did all of what we call the wrap-around services, the food, the medical care, the housing, that kind of thing. But we also needed to hire interpreters because of the interviews with the resettlement agencies as to where people wanted to go or where they could go. That was one of the very big issues, to find all the people that were necessary in order to have the conversations that were needed for even the resettlements to take place.

Q: But in this early period, you were working with the people that were probably the most vulnerable or frantic because they knew they deserved to come back to the United States, but they had been sort of left behind during the August evacuation.

JONES: Yeah. Yes, that's right.

Q: Is there any particular story that stands out for you, just to give a human element to this?

JONES: Yes. So, there was a very difficult situation. Well, let me back up. One of the things that we did, that John Bass did before I started was he created or established a relationship with a group of NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and veterans' organizations who were also working frantically to bring Afghans out of Afghanistan. And he thought, rightly so, that the best thing was for us to be well connected with them so that we could exchange information on how we intended to do this and so that they could tell us of people that we didn't know about who might be American citizens, or that the family had been split up at the airport during August and we needed to do family reunification, which was one of the categories that we could do. So, this organization pulled together as the AfghanEvac Coalition, led by Shawn VanDiver. We had had a relationship with them for maybe a couple of weeks when I started, and they were a group of about a hundred and twenty veterans' organizations and NGOs then and now they include about a hundred and sixty or a hundred and eighty. We've maintained that relationship with them. For a while, we had a call with them every day and then, as things calmed down a little bit, we reduced that to a couple of times a week. Now we do it once every two weeks. CARE now has a formal MOU [memorandum of understanding] with AfghanEvac Coalition because the relationship has been so beneficial.

So, one of the things that we would hear about from AfghanEvac Coalition members were issues of family reunification—about somebody being left behind. At one point, we

were told that there was a seven-year-old boy in Kabul whose family had left and we had to find his family. So, he told the story, as we got it, that he'd been with his family at a gate at Kabul Airport, that there was a huge explosion right next to him, and that he then lost his family. He didn't know what happened to his family. And he looked around, looked around, couldn't find them, and finally decided he would walk home. He knew the way so he walked home. He went to his neighbor and said, "I don't know where my family is." And this is many weeks later, this is when I was already there. The explosion, of course, that he heard was the Abbey Gate explosion. The neighbor got ahold of somebody in the AfghanEvac Coalition who then called the liaison person, March Bishop, to say, "There's this little boy who lost his family and maybe that family is in the United States and here's his name." So, we were able to find the family in a base in Indiana. Our colleagues went to the family to say, Hamid says that he's in Kabul and that you're his family. And they said, "What?!" basically. They said, "We thought he was killed in the explosion."

Q: Ohhh.

JONES: And so, the people who are talking to him said, "Do you have any evidence that this boy is your son?" Because there was a lot of concern about trafficking and that kind of thing. And they said, "Yes, we have his passport." And they did, so they gave the passport to my colleagues on the base, who got the passport out to Doha for us, and we made arrangements for the little boy to be linked up with an Afghan family that were family members of an American citizen. Or I think the man himself, the American citizen, was there. And we linked Hamid up with him and had the Qataris take his passport in on the Qatar Air flight to Kabul so that he could show the Taliban—because the Taliban insisted everybody had a passport—that he had a passport, and eventually got him on a plane. And we saw pictures of little Hamid with his American citizen escort and got him to Doha. Then got him on a plane to Dulles Airport. In the meantime, we got his family to Dulles as well and then my colleague, March, who was the one who had orchestrated this whole thing, which took weeks and weeks and weeks. It was like two months of work to make all this work. March went out to the airport to greet little Hamid when he came in, to see him reunited with his parents.

Q: I can imagine how complicated that was. And how rewarding at the end.

You mentioned that you were able to get a plane, a charter plane here and there. How did your team prioritize who was going to get on those planes?

JONES: So, the priorities for travel out of Afghanistan on our planes were American citizens and their immediate family members, legal permanent residents and their family members, SIV holders, locally engaged staff and their families and family reunification. So, what we tried to do on every flight was to have all of those categories on the flight and that wasn't that hard to do. It's not like there were only American citizens eligible, because so many people didn't have passports and the Taliban wouldn't permit them to leave without a passport and the Qataris wouldn't permit them to come in without a passport. Of course, at the time, in the early days, the Taliban's passport office wasn't open. They weren't yet functioning as a state. They finally did open the passport office. I'm not sure when, as I remember, it was in about late October or early November, that

the Taliban hired back all the previous staff who had run the passport office before and they were virtually all women. So, the Taliban had been forced to do this—they wanted to have passports because, of course, they wanted Afghans to have passports too. They had plenty of people who they wanted to have on these flights to get to their jobs in the Gulf. They had plenty of people who had jobs in the Gulf or could get jobs in the Gulf . That was in their interest because of the remittances that would flow back to Afghanistan.

Q: But those people weren't going to be on our flights.

JONES: No.

Q: No, they just wanted them to be able to fly?

JONES: Right. Yes. And that ended up being another problem. These flights were going very nicely through the month of November, we were doing really well. We had a flight on December 6, no problem. The next flight was three days later, all the people were at the airport to get on a plane and the Taliban said, No, the plane's not going, the flight's canceled, everybody go back, we're finished with this.

What had happened was that the Qatari foreign minister, in a moment of just happiness, I guess, had said publicly how pleased that Qatar was to be able to help the United States rescue Afghans and evacuate them from Afghanistan. The Taliban took umbrage at this. They said Afghans don't need to be rescued, they don't need to be evacuated. If you want people on planes, we can have commercial flights. They also told us, through the channel that we had with the Taliban, that the Qataris have reneged on the deal they made with us for their flights to put regular Afghans on the plane who needed to go to the Gulf for work. They claimed that the Qataris had reneged on that promise. We had no idea about any such promise. The Qataris hemmed and hawed about whether they really had agreed to something like this, but in any case, they said, You know, that's nonsense, they can put people on Ariana flights all they want. So, December 6 was the last Qatar Air flight we got out of Kabul. After that we had no flights, except for one in January that we were able to talk various people into letting us do. It was a one-off. We kept trying to understand what the problem was and the Taliban kept saying, in our channel, no Afghans need to be rescued, only commercial flights can go.

So, we kept pressing on free passage and safe passage and what about that and their commitment, et cetera. They just kept saying it has to be commercial, it has to be commercial. So, Tom West, my colleague who was the negotiator for Afghanistan on policy—I was doing the logistics part—was planning on meeting senior Taliban officials on the margins of a conference in Turkey in late March and asked if I wanted to go along to see if we could make some headway on the whole issue of flights out of Afghanistan. So I did. And we met with them on the margins of this conference in Antalya, Turkey. The conference was three days long. We had meetings with the Taliban so-called foreign minister and about seven other Taliban officials on each of those three days on various different subjects. One subject, of course, was flights out of Afghanistan. When it was my turn to talk I explained that there were many, many Afghans who had worked for the U.S. embassy, had worked for the U.S. government that had visas for the United States, that there were others who were eligible for entry into the United States, and that because they

were committed to free passage that they should permit these people to get on airplanes. I said that we understood that they wanted all these flights to look commercial or be commercial and could they please explain to me what that meant, what would it take for us to have a commercial flight.

They said, Everybody has to have a passport. I said, "Got it. That is already the case." Everybody has to have a visa for wherever they're going. We said, We got that, they all will have Qatari visas. Everybody has to have a ticket; it can't look like a charter flight where nobody has a ticket and everybody just gets on because it's a charter. We said, Okay, we will do that. And they said, It has to be done on Ariana Airlines, the national carrier, because they fly regularly, which is not quite true, but anyway, and they must be on Ariana Airlines. And I said, "We'll see what we can do." I said, "We also have a contract with an international carrier, that we have a contract with them called Nomad. They have authorization from the Ministry of Transport, they have a license to operate out of Kabul, will you permit them to fly as well?" No." And I said, "Well, we'll talk about that another time." Anyway, the bottom line was that we were able to start getting flights then.

The tricky bit was that because Ariana doesn't have the safety record and the maintenance record would permit American citizens—U.S. government officials—to fly on it, we needed to get a waiver from the State Department to use Ariana for people that we were flying out. We also needed to find a way to pay for it in a way that was appropriate given the sanctions. So, we did two things. We negotiated with Qatar Air to charter the Ariana flights and agreed that Qatar Air would send us an invoice for the flights and we would pay Qatar Air and they would do whatever they were going to do with Ariana. But we had to send a memo to the under secretary for management, John Bass, to ask for him to give a waiver. We couldn't get clearance on the memo from the aviation people in the Economic Affairs Bureau. They said, This is ridiculous, you can't use Ariana. And we said, Okay, we know you're opposed, just say that in the memo, just say we're opposed to this, but let the memo go forward for the under secretary to decide, and they absolutely wouldn't do it.

So, I finally called Under Secretary Bass myself and I explained the situation. I said, "We have a memo coming to you so you can make a decision on the waiver. Can you demand that the Economic Bureau send you the memo?" And he said, "Yes, I can do that." And he said, "Now, tell me what this is all about." We'd explained this before, obviously, and I went through it again, and he said, "Beth, you know, you and I have flown on Ariana Airlines a lot." He was ambassador in Afghanistan. He said, "It's not the best airline, but I'm going to give approval because this is the only way we're going to get Afghans out." And I said, "You're right. Either we agree to this, or we can just forget the work that CARE is supposed to do because we're not going to be able to get it done." So, he approved the use of Ariana, and we started two Ariana flights a week.

There were a lot of glitches at the beginning in terms of what was required. The Qataris kept sort of increasing the demand on what information and formalities were required and how much in advance this was required. We had to scan all the passports. It was almost impossible to send an email with these scans on it without doing one email per passenger for three hundred passengers. It was really difficult. My team was up all night before a

flight. It took weeks before a flight to get all this done, to get all the scanned passports to the Qataris. There were times when our group on the ground, who were supposed to make sure that everybody had a passport, accepted copies of passports, photocopies of passports, and got the visas that way so that we had several flights that landed with people without passports. All they had was a photocopy and the Qataris freaked out about that. So every time we had a flight there was something that didn't work right, but we eventually got to the point that there was a way to check to make sure everybody had a physical passport, everybody had a physical visa, and that they were really the people that they said they were bringing only the people that were authorized to come. So, we had two flights a week from March all the way until June.

Q: Was the embassy in Doha taking care of them when they got there?

JONES: No. We had a CARE team at Camp As-Saliyah. That's one of the things Greta Holtz did. She was my counterpart there when I first started. She ran Camp As-Saliyah, so I was in touch with her a lot. And then, when she left, Joann Wagner took over. She'd been DCM in Bangladesh.

We had a whole team at Camp As-Saliyah who ran it and they coordinated with the military on all of the wrap-around services. But the State Department or the CARE people were the ones who made sure that these really were the right people, that they were being processed properly and that they were getting their chest x-rays. With a positive x-ray that could have TB [Tuberculosis], they had to stay behind for many weeks for treatment until it cleared.

But the deal that we had made with the Qataris, we had a formal MOU with them that was signed in November 2021, between the Qatari foreign minister and Secretary Blinken. The MOU had been negotiated for Camp As-Saliyah to be used to bring out special immigrant visa holders from Kabul. This was envisioned before there was any thought that the Taliban might take over. But when that did happen, we said, Okay, we're going to use it not only for SIVs but to bring other Afghans out. And so, they changed the draft memorandum of understanding at that point, and they said, Okay, anybody who's not in the SIV track can stay only thirty days. SIVs were going to be permitted to stay for a year.

So, what happened by June 2022 is that there were more people on Camp As-Saliyah than had been agreed in the MOU. Two thousand six hundred was the optimal number of people at CAS because those are all the ones that could be put into housing, into apartments. Even though the MOU said we could go up to five thousand, above twenty-six hundred they would be in open bay housing. In other words, it wouldn't be private. It wouldn't be air conditioned, it would be very uncomfortable, and it would be more difficult to separate single men from families and that kind of thing. So, by the end of June the Qataris were saying, Okay—by the end of June we had gone over twenty-six hundred at CAS and were up to four thousand and heading to five thousand. I'll explain in a minute why that happened. But at that point the Qataris came to us and said, We have to reduce to one flight a week. We can accept only one Ariana flight a week and you've got to really work on getting more people processed and out of CAS. And we said, Yes, yes, we'll try, we'll work on it.

So, the problem of overcrowding at CAS came up because the way we processed Afghans was forced to change. The interagency changed it effective March 1 of 2022. Before that, you were either in the SIV track or you were processed for humanitarian parole, and they all got on the same plane, were divided up in groups and went to the bases. But what had happened is, in late November in the U.S. all of a sudden, the Pentagon said, We're closing all the Afghan sites at the bases in the U.S. on December 31. At that point, there were seventy-five thousand Afghans on these bases. We at State all said, Are you kidding? There is no way that seventy-five thousand Afghans can be resettled in communities in the U.S. so quickly. If you force them out, they're going to be on the street. There was a huge discussion, to use the polite word—between the Department of Homeland Security and the Population, Refugee, and Migration [PRM] Bureau of the State Department responsible for the resettlement—to work out how long it would take the resettlement agencies to resettle that number of Afghans, keeping in mind that these resettlement agencies were still trying to staff up and low-cost housing was increasingly unavailable in the United States. It was still the COVID period, it was really difficult. PRM came back and said, If we really press hard, we can probably resettle all those Afghans by February 15, 2022. So, they were held to that, and all the bases gradually closed. They started closing in December and the last base closed February 15.

So, that meant that there was no place to take new people who were coming out under humanitarian parole. So, in the meantime, the military said the civilian part of the government has to come up with a place, a civilian safe haven, to take Afghans who were still coming out under humanitarian parole. DHS and PRM and CARE negotiated. We looked all over the place for what would be a good place to house people, and in the end contracted with the National Conference Center in Leesburg, Virginia, for that to be the place where we took Afghans who were coming in under humanitarian parole. That place didn't open February 15, it opened later, I can't remember exactly when, but that meant that there was a hiatus in bringing Afghans out of either Abu Dhabi or Doha to resettle in the United States. But we overcame that, and they started going into the National Conference Center.

The other thing that happened was that it was decided that we shouldn't continue to take Afghans to the United States under humanitarian parole because humanitarian parole doesn't give Afghans any kind of real status in the United States. They are allowed to enter, because of an act of Congress they got resettlement assistance, financial assistance, and they got their work permits and their Social Security cards and their SNAP cards and resettlement assistance by these resettlement agencies. But it would be up to them to adjust status within two years, either because they were actually authorized an SIV, because, of course, thousands came out who had SIV status but just happened to be able to get into the airport. And others had to demonstrate that they could be approved for asylum in the United States, which is not an easy process. I'm not an expert on it, but it isn't cheap. There are fees to be paid, et cetera, although I believe some of those fees may have been waived.

But in any case, it was decided that it would be far better for Afghans to come in either with an SIV, with a special immigrant visa in their passport so they could enter right away and be eligible for green card status immediately, or they should be processed for

refugee status. So, the same thing, they could come in as a refugee and be eligible for green card status immediately. That would be a great benefit to the Afghans who were coming into Operation Allies Welcome. And we all agree that that was true, but we said, you know, the refugee process usually takes two to three years. These people can stay in CAS only thirty days, you know. Explain to us how you can possibly process people in thirty days. They went away and they came back a couple times. They said, Okay, we figured out how to do it. Now, I've never done refugee processing or been around where refugee processing has been done in any detail, so I honestly didn't know enough to ask questions about how in the world they were going to do this, and they insisted that they could do it in thirty days and they insisted that it was all possible, and insisted they would have all the people out that they needed to have, et cetera, et cetera.

Well, as it turned out, as of March 1, as we were bringing Afghans into CAS, any Afghan who wasn't in the SIV track was in the refugee track and they were being processed as refugees. Well, one thing that I hadn't understood was that the normal processing of refugees is all done by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, also part of DHS, but not Customs and Border Patrol. But USCIS [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service], when they interview people for refugee status and they get a derogatory hit, they just drop that person. So, if they go to Bangkok or wherever, and they say, Okay, we're going to process five thousand for refugee status, they just keep going through all people, they just drop all the people who have derogatory and just keep going until they have five thousand people who don't have derogatory information. Well, that wasn't possible to do at CAS. Anybody we brought to CAS was someone that we had a commitment to and had undertaken formally with the State of Qatar that they would not stay more than thirty days, or we would take them elsewhere. Well, almost 50 percent of the people who are coming in under refugee status got USCIS hits.

Q: And just to pause there, what is a hit? Does it mean that they check a database and see some kind of derogatory information that may or may not be disqualifying?

JONES: Correct. Yes. So, a hit means something pops up against that name that's derogatory of some kind. And it could be any number of the vetting agencies where this hit pops up, because USCIS was passing the names through to all of the vetting agencies, appropriately so. That's what had been done previously as well by the Customs and Border Patrol. The difference was that the refugee people had no experience with trying to clear derogatories. The CBP people, when they were working with the people requesting humanitarian parole, would sit down with the National Counterterrorism Center or the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] or the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], whoever—wherever the derogatory hit was—and work out was this really a genuine derogatory on that person, and if it was, did it matter, was it something that was truly national security or was it something that wasn't indicative of a threat to the United States?

As I say, USCIS had no experience doing this, and therefore, as we were having success bringing Afghans out of Afghanistan to CAS, it was completely backed up by all the people in the refugee track who were not cleared in the vetting process. We had meetings after meetings, imploring that vetting agencies and USCIS come together with a plan and a method for actually having a conversation each time there was a derogatory hit, to

either try to clear the person or determine that they couldn't be cleared. That is still the case. That has not been solved with the result that as I left CARE as of September 30, 2022, we were bringing out of Afghanistan no one in the refugee track. We were bringing out only people in the SIV track, because we couldn't be sure that they wouldn't be stuck forever in CAS. We had thought that intense vetting at Bondsteel would help with those in the refugee track, so we took several planeloads of not cleared people in the refugee track to Bondsteel. But it turned out that the refugee processing there was identical to what was going on at CAS. There were no Afghans being cleared out of the refugee track there either.

So, right now, in CARE, my last day was Friday, four days ago, there is still a big effort underway to try to find a way to look at these derogatory cases to see if there's any way any of them can be cleared. That's number one. Number two, the other thing that we had started was to do the same kind of USCIS clearance of people still in Kabul. We had had some success with doing more with our Afghan guests, Afghan people we were manifesting, so we had several months ago had contracted with a clinic in Kabul to do several of the vaccinations that take a long time to cure, the COVID vaccination and the MMR for example, the measles one. We also had them do chest x-rays in case any had indications of TB or had TB, and those people would then be able to wait out the six months for further testing of TB in Afghanistan, at home, rather than be stuck at CAS, which was what had been happening. So, in addition to this additional medical clearance that we were doing inside of Afghanistan we're now starting this refugee track pre-travel vetting in Kabul to make sure that people who get on planes can actually be cleared for refugee status and go to the United States. We don't know that that's the case, we don't know that the pre-travel refugee track, pre-travel vetting in Afghanistan will work the way we want it to because it had just started. The vetting had just started as I left last week.

For the people who are in the SIV track, we continued doing basic pre-travel vetting as we did on all passengers and the SIVs were going through the Security Advisory Opinion, the SAO process, as one does when you're in a consular track. They were having very, very few denials of visas in the SIV track. The few denials tended to be for people whose documentation to substantiate their work for the U.S. government was discovered at the interview in Doha to be fraudulent. Or, when the consular officer would say, "Oh, you were in such and such a job, tell me what that job was about. What kind of work did you do?" they couldn't describe it. So, there are a few being denied on those grounds.

One thing I should mention is that as it became clear that we needed to do more efficient processing at CAS, we thought about and finally did set up the only pop-up consular section in the world at CAS. We did that because it was going to be cumbersome to take those who needed SIV interviews from CAS to the embassy for their interviews. That was because the Qataris insisted that there had to be a military escort on every bus that took Afghans out of CAS. They only wanted to do it late at night. It was going to be very, very cumbersome. So, we did a lot of research. This was done by the Afghanistan Affairs Unit, Consular Section, so the people who normally would be interviewing Afghans in Kabul set up a consular section with secure windows and the computers that they needed

so that they could access the special immigrant visa information on each applicant, et cetera. That was all set up at CAS.

The other thing we did, because the Qataris were not eager to have all of these Afghans going to clinics for their panel physicals that had been required by CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] since January 1, we worked with the International Office of Migration, who does this work under contract for PRM, they set up the medical processing, the equivalent of panel physicals, in CAS. So all of the vaccinations were given there, the x-rays were taken there and sent off for evaluation, and IOM, the International Office of Migration, sent in physicians and nurses to do all of the medical work on CAS. So, CAS was a full-service immigrant visa processing place, as well as a refugee processing place because all the refugees had to have the same kind of medical physical exams, et cetera, to enter the United States.

Q: And so, half of the refugees had some kind of derogatory information and have been stuck at CAS for months?

JONES: That's right. They have been stuck at CAS for a very long time. The goal that we set when the interagency decided that we needed to change to what they called normal processing. In other words, everybody who came into the U.S. had to have an immigrant visa, special immigrant visa, their own immigrant visa, or refugee status. Under all this, the normal processing, then it would be easy to do all of that except that, in fact, it's not working. The goal was for there to be a thousand refugees processed every month and a thousand SIVs every month for two thousand out every month. The SIVs are up to an average of about a thousand a month. They did more than thirteen hundred in September, a thousand a month. People processed for refugee status are about a hundred a month.

Q: And is this considered to be a finite number of people or is this considered to be a pipeline that's going to go on for years?

JONES: It's a pipeline that will go on for a long time because there's no limit, there's no end date for people who can apply for SIVs. So, people are still applying. We see the numbers going up and up and up and up. Every week we get a report on how many have applied. Consular Affairs has increased dramatically the contract staff that looks at all of the paperwork, the documents that SIV applicants submit to demonstrate that they have the qualifications and they did the work that makes them eligible for SIVs. Then that goes to the chief of mission for chief of mission approval and the chief of mission decides whether the information provided is sufficient. The chief of mission approval approver in Kabul was Scott Weinhold, and when he came back to the U.S. after Kabul closed, continued to be the chief of mission approver for SIVs. The number approved was about 60 percent of those applications submitted. The percentage was the same as it had been before Kabul fell. So, people were applying for SIVs because they were applying for anything. To apply for an SIV all you have to do is send an email and that puts you on the list as an applicant. So, there are tens of thousands still who are potentially eligible for SIVs.

There are also, because of the number of people who could be referred to the U.S. Refugee Application Program, USRAP, as a preference one or preference two, those are

in the tens of thousands too. We can't actually bring those out of Afghanistan yet, that isn't part of what's authorized, but that is coming in the future. In the meantime, we still have parents of unaccompanied minors that we're trying to bring out, family reunifications, families of American service members, there are a few LES [locally employed staff] staff, and then there are exceptions. Throughout the process, throughout the year that I was in CARE, various agencies put forward exceptions, meaning that so-and-so, this group didn't work directly for the U.S. government, but they were contractors as local prosecutors or as informants for the FBI or various categories like that would be presented to the interagency group to get agreement that they could be an exception, to be brought out by CARE to Doha for processing as a refugee in the United States.

So, we have lots of those still that are still trying to come out. One reason it's slow is it's hard to get passports and they can't come out of Afghanistan without a passport.

Q: Do you have a sense of how many people came out during the year that you were there?

JONES: Yes. The number that we have is about 14,700 came out in the year.

Q: And I know this wasn't part of your mandate, but the U.S. citizens did get out, the ones that were willing to leave? That was a big issue.

JONES: Yes. There's a hitch to this. We thought we had gotten all of the American citizens out at one point and then the number started going up. What we realized was happening is that American citizens were going back in because it was easier to get their family members out through CARE as a refugee than it was to do all the work to apply for their immigrant visas. Because to get an immigrant visa for a spouse and children—you have to pay a pretty hefty fee, it's five hundred dollars or so. To substantiate an immigrant visa there are a lot of documents that need to be filed, such as the tax returns, work authorizations—substantiation of salary, et cetera, et cetera. It became clear to Afghans that they didn't need to do all that, all they had to do is go back to Afghanistan and say, I'm an American citizen and this is my family and I need to get out. So, there's an increased number of American citizens who go back in to do that. There's a lot of work underway now to see if there's a way that we can persuade them not to do that. But in fact, one of the problems they are encountering is that American citizen family members are among those getting derogatory hits through the refugee process and are stuck. So, we should be going to all of those people to say, for heaven's sake, file an I-130 for immigration status so that you don't have to worry about this refugee application stuff. There's a lot of work underway right now in the interagency to sort that out.

Q: Right. Were a lot of these people, the 14,700, were they people that had worked for DOD [Department of Defense] in Afghanistan?

JONES: Some had, but very, very many of them were people who had worked for Justice, worked for the Drug Enforcement Agency, had worked for various NGOs. So, for

example, the exceptions were women judges, women prosecutors, women commandos, those were the kinds of exceptions that allowed us to bring people out.

I should add there's a whole segment of this that I haven't described. I've just talked only about the work we did to bring people from Kabul to CAS. We had a huge, and still have a huge amount of work with all the Afghans that ended up in Abu Dhabi, in Poland, in Germany, in Denmark, the Netherlands, Albania, Mexico, Ukraine, Uganda, et cetera. So, it took us a whole month to get this, but we in CARE, made the case to the interagency that anybody who came out during the NEO, even on a private charter, should be permitted into Operation Allies Welcome. They should become eligible because the fact they got on a charter flight rather than a U.S. military flight was not their fault. That happened willy-nilly at the airport. People got on whatever plane they were told to get on and just because they ended up on a private charter and ended up in Albania, the UAE or the Netherlands doesn't make them less eligible than the people who ended up at Frankfurt and on a military base.

It took me until November to get it accepted that we could process those people. One of the teams that was responsible for Third Country Operations, as we called it, worked with the interagency and the local embassies to survey those people to see what status they might have. Would they come in under humanitarian parole or did they have SIV status or were they relatives of American citizens? Once we had all that sorted we then were able to work with DHS and we formed an agreement that, wherever there were more than a hundred Afghans, USCIS and PRM would sent a flyaway team to interview all those people and process them for humanitarian parole in the United States. we, CARE, then would have a charter flight ready to take them out to the U.S. as soon as all the processing had been completed. We were able to do that in Albania, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Mexico. Those were the places where more than a hundred Afghans had languished for quite a while. It was a lot of hard work for the embassies. They all had to make sure that all of these people got their panel physicals before the flyaway team got there and that we knew who they all were and where they were so that they could be interviewed by the flyaway team as soon as the flyaway team got there. So, that was one whole big effort.

Q: I think I saw an article recently that there was a group, I think maybe in Albania or Kosovo, that had arrived after some deadline, whether it was August 31 or something like that. And they had to wait a year, but they had just gotten word from you that they could be included in CARE's work.

JONES: That was true. What happened was, we got all the people who had come out during the NEO, but there were hundreds all over the place that hadn't come out then, but had come out on charters later. We worked and worked and worked with the interagency to get them to understand. "Okay, what's the fair way to do this because there are all these Afghans that are sitting in Albania and the United Arab Emirates and Mexico and various places, they don't on the face of it have a nexus to the United States. In other words, they did not have a P-1 or a P-2 filed for them and they were not eligible for special immigrant visas, and they weren't eligible for an immigrant visa. So, eventually, the interagency agreed that it would make sense to say, Okay, we will permit those who came out later to be considered for eligibility for OAW [Operation Allies Welcome].

What we didn't want to do is say, "all those who came out by X date," say, "all those who came out by December 31," in case there was one plane that came out on January the third, or something like that. So, what we said was, We'll look at all Afghans who came out on private charters to see who might be eligible for Operation Allies Welcome. That's what's underway right now.

The difficult part is that they all have to be processed by what they're calling a USCIS circuit rider. They're not going to do flyaway teams anymore, they're going to do a circuit rider. The flyaway teams will do humanitarian parole. The circuit riders would do refugee processing. So, the circuit riders are PRM and USCIS and they go all over the world. The circuit riders go to many, many, many countries, wherever there are refugees, to process them.

Q: I remember when I was in Iraq, they would come through a couple of times a year.

JONES: Right. So, places where there are Afghans have to wait their turn for a circuit rider team to get there. We're very hopeful that a circuit rider team will be in Albania in the first quarter of fiscal year 2023. We kept saying, Please, early in the first quarter of '23, which is now. And the same thing in the UAE—I'll talk about the UAE in a minute. But that way, we think we'll get the largest majority of Afghans who came out under emergency circumstances, on all of these private charters and other means, to come into the U.S.

In the Emirates: The Emiratis were very generous and allowed very, very many private charters and NATO military air to land in Abu Dhabi and to take Afghans there during the NEO and right after the NEO. They had Emirates Humanitarian City, which they had built as a COVID quarantine area, that they turned over to all the Afghans who came out. The Emirati Humanitarian City itself can house ten thousand people. There was an adjacent one that could house another two thousand. Those were both full by the time I started in October. The Emiratis kept saying to us, We let all these people in because so many different Americans asked us to do that, and we said, Well, that's nice, but these Americans were who? I mean, they were university presidents, they were Congressman So-and-so, they were head of such-and-such NGO. I said, "You didn't do this at the behest of the U.S. government, so we don't have an obligation to resettle these people in the United States. But there are plenty, probably, that we can resettle in the United States, and you need to let us do a survey in the Emirati Humanitarian City," which they completely control. We couldn't go in without permission, not the U.S. or any other embassy.

So, on one of my trips, I went to Abu Dhabi and sat down with the Emiratis at a senior level and said, "Okay, explain to me how you're looking at this." They would say, We need your help to get all these Afghans—get as many Afghans out as possible. I said, "Okay, we're ready to help. We certainly have a lot of people in there who are eligible for SIVs, but we need to go in there to do a survey to verify that. We need to go in there to see if there are plenty of other people who might have SIVs that we don't know about. We need to go in there to see who has a P-1 and a P-2 or who might be American citizens." And they finally, finally, finally let us do that.

Q: Why were they reluctant?

JONES: In terms of the survey, they just didn't want outside people going in there. They wanted it to be totally under their control. They couldn't quite understand why we needed to do it, et cetera. They would say, Just, put them on airplanes and take them to the United States, which is, of course, what happened, right at the beginning during the NEO, right? Anybody who got on a plane got to the United States. We kept saying, We're not doing it that way anymore, we can't do it that way anymore. But then, when I said, "The only way we can process a great number of them is to take them to the embassy for interviews. You need to let us take them out of the camp." It's a twenty-minute drive to the embassy. And they refused, refused, refused, refused for a long time because they thought that the Afghans would abscond somehow, they would end up in the Emirates and cause trouble.

But finally, when I talked to them, they finally came around and said, Okay, we will let you take them to the embassy, but we'll provide the transportation, we'll control it. We said, Fine. You can control whatever you like so long as you take them to the embassy. I said, "But you also have to take them to the clinic because they have to have this whole panel physical and all these vaccinations and everything." And they said, Okay, explain to us what's in the panel physical. So, we got CDC together with their health people and, in the end, they built a whole panel physical situation inside the Emirati Humanitarian City, hired all the doctors, got CDC to approve their physicians. We had an entire operation in EHC [Emirati Humanitarian City] for the panel physicals. We started in March, we were able to start processing SIVs. The embassy was able to process several hundred SIVs a week.

The interesting thing there—and we had been taking those who were processed for humanitarian parole out by charter so long as the bases were open. But as soon as the bases closed, we could take only very few out under humanitarian parole, just the few who were left. We had one charter of humanitarian parole after March 1 to go to the NCC [National Conference Center], it might have been two. But in any case, of course, when you get an SIV, you have an SIV and you can get on a commercial flight, that's not a problem. The other part of this is we had to really, really work hard to persuade the Emiratis to allow the International Office of Migration people to come in. The Emiratis are completely opposed to any international refugee status or refugee anything. They won't let UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] come in to do any refugee work. Again, we said, "If you want Afghans to leave, the only way they can leave is to have IOM there to give them the assurances that they need, in other words, the resettlement place in the United States. IOM gives them their tickets to get to Peoria or Houston or wherever it is they're being resettled." And finally, they granted visas to the IOM people that we needed, and that took a while. But the result is that with all the work that we did with the survey to figure out who all was there and all of the work that was done with the SIVs, of the twelve thousand Afghans in Emirati Humanitarian City, we're down to only eighteen hundred who don't have an avenue to the U.S. There are about two thousand there that still need to finish getting their SIVs and get their P-1, P-2 referral refugee status, but that's waiting for a circuit rider and that will work—we'll get them out.

In the meantime, we've also talked to quite a number of our friends and allies to ask them for help in taking Afghans out of EHC. Then Canadians agreed to take out a thousand—they were already taking some out—a thousand out of the last group. There may be other countries that will agree to take a few. But we're very proud of ourselves that we got that many out, that we figured out ways to do it so that we could make good on our arrangement with the Emirates to get out as many as we could.

Q: The ten thousand from the United Arab Emirates, is that in addition to the 14,700 you mentioned?

JONES: No. A lot of that ten thousand went to other places. A lot went to the United States, but that's part of the fourteen thousand.

That's who's entered so far, so there are several thousand still to go that are in EHC. That number also includes the two hundred we got out of Albania, a hundred out of Denmark, a hundred out of the Netherlands and 150 out of Mexico. So, that's part of the fourteen thousand that have come out so far, that we've gotten out so far.

Q: At the beginning, in August and September of 2021, there was a lot of criticism of the U.S. government, or maybe specifically the State Department, of not being geared up to handle these extraordinary numbers.

JONES: Yes.

Q: Did the criticism ebb?

JONES: What happened was that the criticism was intense. It came from the public, it came from other agencies, it came from the Hill. So, the first thing we did was Karen Decker and I went to the Hill, with our group that works on congressional relations, and said, We need to do Hill briefings. Help us do Hill briefings. They assigned a person from congressional relations to CARE to help us with that who was absolutely fabulous and fantastic, Courtnay Rosenberger. She was with us until Friday, Friday was her last day with us as well as it was my last day. But we started to do Hill briefings every two weeks to the four State Department committees, House and Senate Foreign Affairs, Foreign Relations and the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. This was to the staff. We decided that the leads of each of our strands of work, lines of effort should be there so that we could answer every single question.

One thing I forgot to mention is as we pulled all the teams together right at the beginning in October 2021, we called the group that was bringing people out of Afghanistan, we called that group Afghan Ops. We called the group that was working with all of the people that ended up elsewhere Third Country Ops. And then, we had a third that was a team called Engagement and Analysis that did all of the public affairs work and worked with the Center for Analytics to get the numbers right and to come up with a whole thing. Part of Afghan Ops was a group we called Future Ops. They did all of the thinking ahead of time because we needed to establish ourselves as a real office so we could have—we could get positions and all that, rather than have to beg, borrow, and steal to get people to work with us or get supervisors to let them work with us.

So, we started to do Hill briefings every two weeks, to all four committees. We were all hoarse by the time we did four committees every two weeks. It was very, very aggressive and tough at first, but because we were very upfront in what we were able to do and what we had so far not been able to do and very detailed in the information that we gave them, it took a while, but I would say by the end of November and into December we were doing much, much better. But of course, December 6 was the last flight out, so they were not happy about that. We just kept saying, we still were doing it every two weeks in various ways. We said, Let us tell you all the airlines we've been to and all the of the conversations we've had with the Taliban, with the Qataris, with the Pakistanis, with the Uzbeks about how hard we're trying to get this, and we're bringing a bunch of people across the border into Pakistan and getting them out, so at least that part's working.

We eventually—we had an hour with each of these, an hour with the four committees every two weeks and gradually, they didn't have questions for more than about forty-five minutes. Then we said, Okay, maybe we don't need to do it every two weeks, we can do it every three weeks. So, we've been doing Hill briefings every three weeks until fairly recently. Recently, maybe in August, we started doing it once a month. But in the end, they basically spent a lot of time saying, How can we help? How can we help?

Q: So, there's a lot of stories of food problems, hunger problems in Afghanistan now. Are the people coming out these days having more and more harrowing stories?

JONES: They might. I don't hear them because I'm not there. When I did, I went to CAS twice, two different times while I was doing this work, and sat down with Afghans there. They were mostly talking about what they were going to do next. They had left Afghanistan and they were gone as far as they were concerned. Their heads, you know, they didn't want to know about it.

One of the things that we did, though, there were various points where, because the processing at CAS is so slow, there has been a big effort on the part of the team—my teams out there—to do town hall meetings or meetings with groups of Afghans to answer their questions about what's the problem and what's taking so long. The same thing happened at the Emirati Humanitarian City because we still didn't have terrific access. We ended up getting some access, obviously, but we had a harder time controlling rumors. The rumor mill among the Afghans is legendary. Everybody has a phone, everybody has an idea, everybody passes on an oh-my-god story every twenty seconds. So, the teams out there, the people working with us, spent quite a bit of time in various places, including in Albania and places where there were quite a number of Afghans, Bondsteel, talking with Afghans to tell them what was going on with their processing, what the holdup was, what the plan was, when is the processing team coming and all that kind of thing. So, I worked most closely with Albania, Kosovo, UAE, and Qatar in terms of the information flow because that's where most Afghans were. Of course, in Kosovo and Qatar we were using a U.S. military base for all of this.

So, one thing that is ahead of us is that the U.S. military announced earlier this year that they were not going to continue to allow us to use CAS to process Afghans and they were not going to allow us to use Bondsteel to process Afghans. They said that it was up to the State Department to come up with civilian platforms where all of these people could be

processed. That was a huge blow to us because the State Department doesn't do that kind of thing. We build embassies, but we don't build processing sites. So, we thought about it and thought about it and thought about it and then had the bright idea to say to DOD, "So, what are you going to do with CAS at the end of FY 2023?" They said, "Oh, we're going to give it back to the Qataris." I said, "How about if you give it to us?" So, that's what's underway, to work out how to do that. We tried to do that with Bondsteel, and the military said, Ah, no. We're keeping it. We don't want you there. But there's another site that NATO took not far from there. It's called the Bechtel Camp, so there's work underway right now to see if that might be a place where we can do this kind of thing.

In the meantime, the huge amount of money that DOD was given—to process Afghans overseas, to manage the bases, et cetera—it was no-year money and they had a huge amount still. In the continuing resolution that was just passed, that three billion dollars was turned over to the State Department to manage these bases or these civilian platforms. That just happened Friday.

Q: And to help with the other costs?

JONES: Yes, all of the work that we do with flights, et cetera, and to pay—for example, the flights out of Kabul. We pay for, but in terms of people going to the United States, they're basically all on individual tickets getting out on commercial airlines. And so, that all gets paid for—by PRM.

One little thing that happened was—we were doing very well processing SIVs. We're not doing well processing refugees during the summer, both in Doha and Abu Dhabi. But all of a sudden, the numbers leaving CAS were really low and CAS especially was getting more and more jammed even when we brought in only one plane a week. We said, What the heck is going on? They said, You know, it's vacation season in Qatar. There are no seats on any planes. We can't get tickets for any of the Afghans to leave. So, I went to the Qataris, and I said, "You can't yell at us for people staying too long at the camp because there are no more flights out of Qatar." They said, Okay, okay, we get it. But now, they're all able to leave now. That was an unforeseen impediment to our work. The same thing happened in the Emirates. There just weren't enough seats on planes. Everybody was going on vacation in July and August—so, forget about it for us.

Q: Right, right. So, do you think that in agencies outside of the State Department, is there just Afghan fatigue, or do you think it's because of a southern border surge of asylum refugees on one hand [DHS] and then Ukraine [DOD] on the other?

JONES: That was certainly the case with the Customs and Border Patrol. That was one of the reasons that they really wanted to get out of the business of doing humanitarian parole, because they said they were needed on the southern border. That was hard to argue with. We were very concerned when the whole thing happened with Ukraine in terms of what was going to happen to Afghans, but it turns out the Ukrainians didn't really want to go to the United States. They all wanted to go to Europe so they could go back quickly and that's exactly what's been happening. So, we ended up not being in competition with the Ukrainians for resettlement. That was our biggest concern.

But there's one Ukraine story I should tell you. We got a call or an email from Embassy Kyiv in very early February or maybe late January that said, "Gee, we have forty-five Afghans here that we've been housing since August. What should we do with them?" This was just as they were talking about evacuating the embassy. We said, What forty-five Afghans have you been housing since August? They'd never said a word to us. They said, Oh, yeah, the embassy's been paying for them to stay in hotels. And we said, What the hell? Anyway, we said, Okay. We've got to get them out of there, they don't need to be evacuated twice. We went to the Qataris, and we said, Okay, we've got forty-five Afghans in Kyiv, we need to bring them to CAS. These are who they are, this is their passport numbers, et cetera. Will you give them visas? They said yes, and they did their vetting on them and said, Okay, here are the visas.

It was getting down to the wire because the embassy was about to evacuate, and they said, Oh, we can't handle this anymore. We said, We still have Afghans there. Can't you give us an LES staff person who's going to be staying who can help us with this? And they did. I don't remember her name, but she was beyond fabulous. So, the visas came in from the Qataris, to the embassy, to this person, and she went—the Afghan passports had all been picked up upon arrival by the Ministry of Interior, the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior. So, she went to the Ministry of Interior to get their passports so that they could put the visas in them and get them on flights that we had already bought tickets for, et cetera, to go from Kyiv to Doha. They said, Oh, we evacuated all the passports to some village way north, you know, two hours north. So, she drove up there, she had the right contact person, and got the passports for them. We had to cancel one set of tickets because we just couldn't get it done in time, but she got it done for the second flight and got them all, except one family. One family didn't pass Qatari vetting and the Qataris wouldn't give them a visa. We said, Okay. You know, what are we going to do? So, that family is still in Kiev or somewhere in Ukraine. Or wherever they are, we don't know. It's one of those situations, we didn't bring them out of Afghanistan, so we didn't know about this group. We're doing our best with as many as we can, but we can't do it for everybody.

Q: Yeah. Well, it was quite a year. (both laugh)

JONES: Yes.

Q: Do you want to sum up your experience of the last year?

JONES: The way I'd sum it up is that it was one of the most difficult jobs most of us who worked on this have ever done. We were having to invent ways to do it and ways to overcome obstacles all the time. Every step of the way, we had in mind that we're dealing with the lives of human beings who are potentially truly in danger. They're having to make heartbreaking decisions about leaving family members behind if they were going to get out themselves. In addition, we were, of course, dealing with a huge number of unaccompanied minors who'd ended up in the U.S. in federal care. These are all kids who'd gotten into the airport during the NEO, gotten on planes by themselves. Of course, when they got to the U.S. they were clearly minors and were put into care through HHS [Department of Health and Human Services], the Office of Resettlement Assistance. That's not quite the right name. But we worked with them and with the Qataris to help

them find the parents so we could bring them out to be reunited with kids who were in worse and worse shape as the year went on.

But that's part of the next part, which is that a lot of the work we did was just heartbreaking, that we couldn't do more than we were permitted to do by the interagency or by the circumstances in which people found themselves. As much as we rejoiced in the special cases that we were able to get out—we had a lot of medically fragile cases that we really had to work hard to get them with their wheelchairs onto our flights, get them off the flights into wheelchairs and into sometimes a hospital if it was a cardiac patient or a cancer patient, and then do the direct connection to hospitals in the U.S., where they were going to be resettled, to make sure that they could be put directly into hospital care that could take care of whatever their ailment was. But as heartbreaking as it could be, it was also the most affirming kind of work that any of us could do. It's something that we all talked about a lot, was how difficult it was but how much it mattered to an awful lot of people.

Q: Before I retired in April, I remember every once in a while seeing notices about therapy dogs coming through the department and people on task forces saying, Oh, please, don't forget our task force over here.

JONES: Yes, the therapy dogs come every so often still, but it's for the whole department. That was during COVID, that was what that was originally for.

Our therapy was to post pictures on our bulletin boards of Afghans meeting their long-lost relatives at airports. Getting off the airplane, all the little girls in their yellow jackets and pigtails.

Q: Did you, by chance, happen to help somebody you knew from way back when?

JONES: Not that I knew of. I served in Kabul fifty years ago.

Q: Right.

JONES: I must say, I played the age card a bit when I was talking with the Taliban. This was with the so-called foreign minister and so-called information minister, and there were about eight Afghan officials. And as we were chatting between the two delegations about the Afghans that we wanted to bring out, towards the end one of them said, "Oh, you should come visit sometime." I said, "I'd love to visit, I'd love to ski in Afghanistan." I said, "It would be really, really great." I said, "You know, I skied there when I was there at my first posting in 1971 and '72." I could almost see them doing the math and, I thought, if anything, I'm way older than you guys.

Q: What did you think about the Taliban officials you were working with?

JONES: They were very straightforward. They said their piece, they didn't mince words if they had a problem with something. For example, in talking to me, they said, "But we are really opposed, we're very worried about a brain drain." I said, "Frankly, sir, we're not interested in draining Afghanistan of brains, but you have to understand that the vast majority of people who worked for the U.S. embassy were people who were guards and

gardeners. So, yes, there were people who were professionals who were in that group, but certainly the majority were not."

They said, Oh, okay. I asked Tom West a little bit more about the background of some of them, particularly the one who speaks very good English. He said, "Oh, yes, he was a guest of ours for thirteen years in Cuba." I thought, Oh my goodness. He turned out to be the one who, when the so-called foreign minister would get kind of grumpy about something, would come around with, "Well, why don't we think about it this way," and would get everything back on track. It was really, really, really interesting.

End of interview