



News Advisory

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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Team Charleston helps bring families home safely

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437 AW Public Affairs

The first of several flights contracted to bring more than 1,300 Air Force family members and non-essential civilian employees from Incirlik AB, Turkey, arrived at Charleston International Airport, S.C., Friday.

Armed with teddy bears, cell phones and dog biscuits, more than 100 members of Team Charleston and the local Red Cross met the first 312 passengers, including 167 children and 4 pets, at 3 a.m.

“Being that close to the current operations, (family members) might be uncomfortable, and we’re here to offer them the opportunity to come back to the United States,” said Lt. Col. Charles Capps, 437th Mission Support Squadron commander.

The voluntary evacuation of Incirlik AB is in response to increased security concerns and offers family members and non-essential civilian employees the option of departing Turkey should they feel the need to do so.

Passengers stepped off the plane to find everything they needed to help them make a comfortable transition from Charleston to their chosen United States “safe havens.” Organizations from across Charleston AFB greeted individuals with financial help, plane tickets, hotel reservations and warm cups of coffee.

“We’re here to provide comfort services to help families come back to America at a stressful time,” said Ben Myers, director of disaster services for the Lowcountry Chapter of the Red Cross, who donated more than 500 teddy bears to the children coming off the planes.

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“It was a long trip back,” said 5-year-old Alex, a 39th Wing family member, who was all smiles as he clutched a teddy bear. “I just can’t wait to have spicy meatballs and go fishing.”

But the safety and care of children weren’t the only thing on the minds of volunteers. Veterinarians were standing by to provide services needed to keep the animals in the families healthy, safe and happy.

“For a lot of people, bringing their animals is just as important as bringing their kids,” said Army Capt. April Ulmer, 437th Services Squadron veterinarian. “And animals can have a lot of the same health problems humans have, but we’re ready with first aid kits. We’re also here to feed, walk and groom them before matching them back up with their owners.”

Family members receive full travel per diem for the first 30 days here, according to Air Force Personnel Center officials. From days 31-180, they will receive 60 percent of the per diem. Also included in their initial entitlements for evacuation, is a maximum \$10 per-day local travel allowance.

“The safe haven entitlement enable these family members to live comfortably while they are separated from their (home, schools, friends, neighbors and community),” said Peggy Rayfield, Air Force Personnel Center Family Matters Operations.

When families leave the Charleston area, they’re not alone.

"No matter where the family goes in the U.S., Air Force family support centers will be keeping an eye on them," said Fora Hoss-Mason, 437th Mission Support Squadron Family Support Center director. "Once families leave Charleston and arrive at their safe haven location, the closest FSC contacts them to offer assistance and connect them to Air Force community. It makes a big difference in how they feel about the evacuation and being separated from the military member."

Although Department of Defense officials said there is no specific threat to American military forces in Turkey, there is a general threat of danger to the Americans in Southeast Turkey. Officials emphasized the cautious thing to do to keep families as safe as possible is to take them to a “safe haven” in the United States.

“There are a lot of people with mixed emotions,” said Chaplain (Capt.) Chuck Knauer, 437th Aerial Port Squadron chaplain. “They’re tired and anxious, but we’re here to meet their total needs. If we get them safely back home, then we’ve done our job.”

Despite a long 18-hour flight, many people were in good spirits.

“It went very smoothly,” said Michelle, a 39th Wing family member, pregnant with her first child. “It was a hard decision. I left the most important thing (her husband) behind.”

Michelle added that she never felt threatened in Turkey and would “definitely go back.” But most importantly, she, and many others, just wanted their family members and the armed forces overseas to “make (the war) quick so you can all come home.”