



Fire crews make headway as Algerians pray for 71 dead

Mocimboa da Praia: Mozambican ghost town



HERAT: A Taliban fighter holds a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) along the roadside in Herat, Afghanistan's third biggest city, after government forces pulled out the day before following weeks of being under siege. — AFP

Arms seizures 'massive boon' for Taliban

Afghan defense forces have shown little appetite for a fight

KABUL: The United States spent billions supplying the Afghan military with the tools to defeat the Taliban, but the rapid capitulation of the armed forces means that weaponry is now fuelling the insurgents' astonishing battlefield successes. "We provided our Afghan partners with all the tools—let me emphasize: all the tools," US President Joe Biden said when defending his decision to withdraw American forces and leave the fight to the locals.

But Afghan defense forces have shown little appetite for that fight and, in their tens of thousands, have been laying down their arms—only for the Taliban to immediately pick them up.

The Taliban's social media is awash with videos of Taliban fighters seizing weapons caches—the majority supplied by Western powers. Footage of Afghan soldiers surrendering in the northern city of Kunduz shows army vehicles loaded with heavy weapons and mounted with artillery guns safely in the hands of the insurgent rank and file. In the western city of Farah, fighters patrolled in a car

marked with an eagle swooping on a snake—the official insignia of the country's intelligence service.

While US forces took the "sophisticated" equipment with them when they withdrew, the Taliban blitz has handed the group "vehicles, humvees, small arms and light weapons, as well as ammunition". Justine Fleischner of weapons-tracking group Conflict Armament Research, told AFP.

'Massive boon'

Experts say such hauls—on top of unacknowledged support from regional allies such as Pakistan—has given the Taliban a massive boost. The weapons will not only help the Taliban's march on Kabul but "strengthen its authority" in the cities it has captured, said Raffaello Pantucci, senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. With US troops all but gone, the Taliban now find themselves flush with American-supplied tools, without having to raise a single penny.

"It is incredibly serious. It is clearly going to be a massive boon to them," he said. Some of that

weaponry is now being brazenly paraded ahead of the US troops' 9/11 withdrawal deadline by insurgents who have maintained ties with Al Qaeda, the group behind the 2001 terror attacks.

Washington had prepared for the Taliban to claim its weapons, but the rapid fall of cities was its most dire scenario, Jason Amerine, who led US special forces in overthrowing the Taliban in 2001, told AFP. "The US equipped the ANA with the assumption that weapons and materiel might fall into Taliban hands," he said, referring to the Afghan National Army. "The current crisis was a worst-case scenario considered when making procurement decisions."

Propaganda

At Kunduz airport, a Taliban fighter on a red motorbike, head-to-toe in insurgent dress, was filmed staring at a military helicopter sitting on the tarmac. It is a picture of jubilation mirrored across insurgent-held territory. While the group will continue to show off these big prizes, the air-

craft at least will have no impact on the battlefield without pilots. "They will be for propaganda purposes only," former CIA counter-terrorism analyst Aki Peritz told AFP. More useful will be the light arms and vehicles used to navigate the country's rugged terrain.

Coupled with the army's dwindling morale, they will boost the threat the Taliban pose to the Western-backed government. As the crisis unfolds, Biden's administration says it will still equip an Afghan military that appears on the verge of collapse. Observers of the Middle East have seen this transfer of arms play out before.

After the US withdrawal from Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) group overran the Iraqi city of Mosul in mid-2014, seizing US-supplied guns and humvees. The jihadists used their gains to build an Iraqi-Syrian caliphate the size of Belgium. Like IS fighters in Mosul, joyous Taliban recruits are now posing for photographs with enemy munitions in the newly won cities in all corners of the country. "This retreat is turning into a rout," Peritz said. —AFP

Taliban tame the 'Lion of Herat', capture his city

HERAT: A month ago, one of Afghanistan's most famous warlords vowed to defend his city from the Taliban as he called for locals to join the fight. But on Friday Ismail Khan was in the Taliban's hands as militants patrolled the dusty streets of Herat, his longtime fiefdom and the nation's third-biggest city.

The "Lion of Herat" has been a huge figure throughout Afghanistan's tumultuous modern history, initially rising to be one of the most powerful mujahideen rebel figures fighting the Soviets in the 1980s and 1990s. From Herat, his vast militia then had a series of successes against the Taliban when the hardline Islamic group was rising to power. But he was forced to flee to Iran with thousands of his men in 1995 after an ally defected to the insurgents.

He was captured by the Taliban in 1997 when he returned to organize an uprising, then escaped from prison two years later and was at large until the

US invasion in 2001. Khan was then a minister in former president Hamid Karzai's government, though in recent years he was known for running Herat as his own territory.

Last month he was voicing defiance and anger as he vowed to defeat the Taliban. "We will soon go to the frontlines and with the help of God change the situation," Khan told a news conference. "We hope that men and women of Herat decide at this moment to support the resistance front to defend their freedom and safeguard their honor," Khan said. He blamed the government for the rapidly deteriorating situation and urged the military to show more backbone.

"We demand all the remaining security forces resist with courage." But on Friday morning, the people of Herat woke to new rulers, with no visible signs of battle in the streets and no more defiance from Khan. A group of insurgents pulled down an Afghan flag



KABUL: Afghan policemen stand guard at a checkpoint along the road in Kabul yesterday. —AFP

from a police station as cars and bicycles passed in seemingly normal traffic.

Others stood on the bonnet of a humvee vehicle that had been abandoned by retreating government troops. One insurgent gave the hint of a smile while looking into a camera, with a rocket-propelled grenade on his shoulder. The white flag of the Taliban waved through the air on a pole

pegged to a motorcycle. Like in other cities lost to the Taliban over the past week, authorities claimed they gave up to avoid bloodshed among civilians.

"We had to leave the city in order to prevent further destruction," a senior security source from Herat told AFP, adding that troops and city officials had retreated to army barracks outside Herat. —AFP

Biden faces blame for Afghan debacle

WASHINGTON: The Taliban's stunning advances in Afghanistan threaten to be a stain on President Joe Biden's record, but he has stood firm on withdrawing US troops and believes the public is with him. Twenty years of investment that cost \$2 trillion and nearly 2,500 US lives were disintegrating within days as the Islamist insurgents seized two of the largest cities with little resistance and closed in on the capital Kabul.

Republican rivals predictably attacked Biden but he also faced the most critical coverage of his presidency, with television networks juxtaposing images of Afghanistan's collapse with his remarks a little more than a month ago that "the Taliban overrun-

ning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely." In a scathing editorial, The Washington Post said that Biden had put at risk the real progress in Afghanistan since 2001 including education for girls, banned by the Taliban when they last ruled.

"Afghan lives ruined or lost will belong to Mr. Biden's legacy just as surely as any US dollars and lives his decision may save," the newspaper wrote. The United States was rushing back 3,000 troops—roughly the same number removed in this month's final withdrawal—to evacuate embassy staff and was flying out Afghans whose work with US forces puts them at risk.

But Biden, who through his decades in public life earned a reputation for empathy, has been unmoved when asked about Afghan losses and instead speaks of protecting US troops, a deeply personal matter as his late son Beau served in Iraq. Both the former vice president and US opinion polls have shared his

view for years. VoteVets, an advocacy group, hailed Biden for finally "having the strength to stand up to those who want endless war."

Biden argues that the United States long ago achieved its main goal of defeating Al-Qaeda after the September 11, 2001 attacks and had done more than enough by training 300,000 Afghan troops.

"They've got to fight for themselves, fight for their nation," Biden said Tuesday. Administration officials say that delaying the pullout was only prolonging the inevitable. But Andrew Wilder, an Afghanistan expert who visited in June, said the administration could have devoted more time to preparing for the expected effects and that it was not "an orderly and responsible withdrawal."

"I think it's hard not to conclude that, not the US withdrawal, but the way in which we withdrew had a critical role to play in this," said Wilder, vice president for Asia studies at the US Institute of Peace. —AFP

Canada to take in 20,000 refugees targeted by Taliban

OTTAWA: Canada said Friday it will take in up to 20,000 Afghan refugees, including women leaders, government workers and others facing threats from the Taliban, as insurgents advanced across the country seizing major cities. "The situation in Afghanistan is heartbreaking and Canada will not stand idly by," Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino told a news conference.

The refugees will include "particularly vulnerable" Afghans still in the country or who've already fled to neighboring states, which in addition to female leaders and government employees also comprises human rights defenders, persecuted minorities and journalists.

Several plane-loads of asylum seekers have already departed with the first one landing Friday in Toronto, Mendicino said. As the Taliban advances on the capital Kabul, officials said Canadian special forces form part of a contingency plan to airlift Canadian embassy staff, but details were not provided due to the sensitive nature of the security operation.

Earlier Friday, many countries including Spain, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands announced the withdrawal of staff from their respective embassies. Canada has said it is monitoring the situation in Afghanistan "very closely" and working with its allies on the ground.

"Protecting the Canadian Embassy and our staff is our top priority," said Foreign Minister Marc Garneau. On Twitter, he said that Canada "owes Afghans a debt of gratitude and we will continue our efforts to bring them to safety." —AFP