



US sanctions Eritrean army chief over Tigray rights abuses

US VP Harris accuses China of 'intimidation' in disputed seas

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PANJSHIR, Afghanistan: Afghan resistance movement and anti-Taliban uprising forces personnel stand guard at an outpost in Kotal-e Anjuman of Paryan district in Panjshir province Monday. —AFP

Panjshir resistance digs in to defend valley

Amrullah Saleh says a humanitarian disaster is brewing

PANJSHIR VALLEY, Pakistan: Atop a craggy mountain that has withstood foreign invaders for decades, anti-Taliban fighters fire a mounted heavy machine gun into a deep valley. They are members of the National Resistance Front (NRF) — the most prominent Afghan opposition group to emerge since the Taliban captured Kabul nine days ago.

With militia fighters and former government soldiers in its ranks, the NRF has set up machine gun nests, mortars and surveillance posts fortified with sandbags in anticipation of a Taliban assault on their bastion, the Panjshir Valley. Its fighters, many of them in military camouflage fatigues, patrol the area in US-made Humvees and technicals—pickup trucks with machine guns mounted on the back.

Many carry assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and walkie-talkies. Some pose on their vehicles with a dramatic background of snow-covered peaks in the valley, which begins around 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Kabul. "We are going to rub their faces in the ground," said one fighter at a position in the Panjshir heights, listing past victories against the Taliban.

His comrades then raise their fists and chanted "Allah-u Akbar" (God is great). The strategic valley-populated primarily by ethnic Tajiks—offers natural defense points, with narrow entrances in the shadow of high mountains. "If Taliban warlords launch an assault, they will of course face staunch resistance from us," Ahmad Massoud, one of the NRF leaders, said in a Washington Post op-ed last week. He is the son of the late guerrilla commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, revered for turning the Panjshir Valley into an anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban bastion.

The defensive preparations are familiar for Panjshir residents who saw Massoud thwart multiple Soviet assaults in the 1980s and Taliban attempts to take the area in the late 1990s. An NRF spokesman told AFP on the weekend that it is ready to resist any Taliban aggression but wants to negotiate with the Islamists about an inclusive government.

Taliban siege

The Taliban have also said they want to handle the situation peacefully, but they have bared their teeth by sending hundreds of fighters to the area. Panjshir was surrounded from three sides, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said Monday. Former vice president Amrullah Saleh, who headed to the valley after the fall of Kabul, said a humanitarian disaster was brewing.

"Talibs aren't allowing food & fuel to get into Andarab valley," he tweeted, referring to an area under Taliban control that abuts Panjshir from the northwest.

"Thousands of women & children have fled to mountains." There have been scattered reports of clashes

around Panjshir in recent days, with conflicting claims from both sides that have been impossible to independently verify. The NRF has said it is ready for battle, but it remains unclear if the force has the supplies and equipment to withstand a long siege by the Taliban.

Ahmad Massoud said in his op-ed that they have arms and ammunition stores, as well as the weapons brought to Panjshir by former Afghan forces. But he added that without help from the outside world, his fighters would not be able to withstand the Taliban's siege for long.

"We know that our military forces and logistics will not be sufficient," he wrote. "They will be rapidly depleted unless our friends in the West can find a way to supply us without delay."

Elders from the Panjshir Valley have reportedly been speaking with Taliban officials in the Afghan capital, but there has been no breakthrough yet. —AFP

Afghanistan's media enters the unknown

KABUL: Scores of journalists are among the tens of thousands of people trying to flee Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, fearful of violent reprisals from the militants. Despite their assurances, the Islamist group's return to power is seen as a serious blow to Afghan media, which saw explosive growth after the first Taliban regime was toppled in 2001.

What was the Afghan media like under the Taliban? - There was no Afghan media to speak of when the Islamists ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. They banned television, movies and most other forms of entertainment for being immoral. Some electronic products were outlawed as un-Islamic too.

People caught watching TV faced punishment, including having their set smashed. Ownership of a video player could lead to a public lashing. For a while, magnetic ribbon tape from destroyed cassettes could be seen fluttering from trees in some parts of the capital Kabul. There was only one radio station, Voice of Sharia, that broadcast propaganda and Islamic programming.

What happened after they were toppled?

Under the US-backed setup formed after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, there was massive growth in the Afghan media sector, including private TV and radio networks. And it was not just news-movies, soap operas, talent shows and music

videos were also produced.

Afghanistan now has more than 50 TV channels, 165 radio stations and dozens of publications, watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said this month, citing the national press federation. Internet and social media access, especially through smartphones, has proliferated in recent years too.

Most dramatically, the opening up of Afghan media allowed space and opportunities for the country's women, who were shut out from public life, education and workplaces by the Taliban. Hundreds of women around the country worked on and behind the screen as journalists, producers, hosts and performers. Dozens of Afghan journalists also worked for foreign media.

What have the Taliban promised now?

After the fall of Kabul, Taliban officials in Doha and Afghanistan stressed that the media could continue to operate freely and that journalists would not be harassed or harmed. They held a formal press conference where spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid took blunt questions. One Taliban official even sat down for a TV interview with a woman journalist, as if to press the point.

As with their promises about other issues such as women's rights and amnesty, however, there appears to be little trust among Afghanistan's journalists that the Islamists mean what they say.

In recent weeks, dozens of TV and radio outlets have stopped broadcasting or were seized by the Taliban as the militants rapidly captured territories on their way to Kabul. And despite the promises made by their top spokesmen, Taliban fighters have been reportedly going door-to-door in recent days searching for opponents—including journalists. In the

suspected rigging in favour of Lungu's party.

"We showed the world the resilience of our democracy," Hichilema exclaimed in a face mask, dark suit and bright red tie. He recalled that his victory marked Zambia's third peaceful "transition of leadership" since multi-party democracy was adopted in 1990 — an example for "Africa and the global world".

'New dawn'

Lungu and his rival were neck-and-neck in both a snap election in 2015 and in polls in 2016. But the incumbent's popularity was sapped by unsustainable infrastructure spending that plunged the copper-rich southern African nation of over 18 million into debt default. The local kwacha currency plummeted and inflation rose to more than 24 percent, rendering basic goods unaffordable in a country where more than half the population lived in poverty before the pandemic.

Hichilema, fondly known as "Hii" or "Bally"—an informal term for father—has vowed to clean up the mess and woo back spooked investors. "The erosion of our economy, the debt situation has become unsustainable," he said, stressing that "no Zambians should go to bed hungry" in a country so rich in natural resources. He announced plans to boost and diversify the mining industry in



CHAMAN, Pakistan: Afghans walk along fences as they arrive in Pakistan through the Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossing point in Chaman yesterday following Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan. —AFP

northern province of Jawzjan, local radio station Salam Watandar said Monday that it will be allowed to broadcast content after it has been reviewed by the local Taliban office. What are Afghan journalists saying? -

There is strong basis for the fear and mistrust among Afghan journalists. Despite the growth of the sector, Afghanistan has been one of the most dangerous countries in the world for reporters, with at least 53 killed since 2001 according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Media workers have been targeted with impunity for years by militant groups, a major factor in Afghanistan's low ranking on press freedom indices. A high-profile woman journalist at state-run broadcaster RTA said last week that she was told to go home because "the system has been changed". —AFP



LUSAKA: Newly elected Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema (center left) is congratulated by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta (center right) after taking oath at the Heroes Stadium in Lusaka yesterday. —AFP

Africa's number-two copper producer and "facilitate local ownership".

He also promised to crack down on political "thuggery" and repression of dissent under Lungu, reassuring independent media that they would no longer face tear gas or shutdowns.

Hichilema himself has run foul of the authorities on numerous occasions, and regularly mentions that he has been arrested 15 times since getting into politics. "It's a new dawn," he said. "The time has come for all Zambians to feel fully free." —AFP

UK says extending Kabul evacuations deadline 'unlikely'

LONDON: Britain's Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said yesterday it is "unlikely" evacuations from Afghanistan will be extended beyond August 31, as G7 leaders prepare to meet virtually to discuss the crisis. The UK will chair the emergency talks among the group of wealthy countries later Tuesday, and has said it will urge the United States to extend the end-of-the-month deadline to complete the Afghan airlifts.

France has also called on Washington to push back the timeline. But hours before the summit, Wallace acknowledged that both US President Joe Biden and Taliban leaders now in power in Kabul had cast serious doubt on evacuations continuing into September. "I think it is unlikely," he told Sky News. "Not only because of what the Taliban has said, but if you look at the public statements of President Biden I think it is unlikely."

"It is definitely worth us all trying, and we will." Biden has set an August 31 deadline to finish the chaotic airlift organized by thousands of temporarily deployed US and UK troops, but has left the door open to an extension if needed. However, a spokesman for the Taliban warned Monday the hard-line Islamist group would not agree to any extension, calling the issue a "red line", with any delay viewed as "extending occupation". "If the US or UK were to seek additional time to continue evacuations—the answer is no. Or there would be consequences," Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen told Sky News.

'Next phase'

Britain has continued to evacuate Western citizens and some Afghans from the capital, with Wallace warning the security situation was getting "more and more dangerous" as August 31 approaches. The defense ministry said 8,458 people have been evacuated by the UK since August 13, with nine military flights leaving Kabul in the last 24 hours. More than half — 5,171 — are Afghans eligible to relocate to Britain under its program to protect those who aided its military and civilian officials during their two-decade involvement in Afghanistan. An individual on the UK's no-fly anti-terrorism watchlist arrived as part of the evacuation, the interior ministry confirmed. A spokesman said the individual was identified "as part of the rigorous checks process" and that after further investigation was deemed "not a person of interest to the security agencies or law enforcement".

Meanwhile, on the eve of the G7 meeting, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the leaders of the world's top economies should also have an eye on the "next phase" for Afghanistan. His office said he will urge fellow leaders to step up support for refugees and to restate their "commitment to safeguarding the gains made in Afghanistan over the last 20 years—in particular on girls' education and the rights of women and minorities". —AFP

Zambia's new president sworn in

LUSAKA: Zambia's newly-elected president Hakainde Hichilema yesterday promised to rebuild the ailing economy and alleviate poverty as he was sworn in following an election hailed as a milestone for African opposition movements. "We will grow our economy so we can lift more people out of poverty than ever before," 59-year-old Hichilema told thousands of jubilant supporters—sporting the red and yellow colours of his United Party for National Development—in the Heroes Stadium in Lusaka. Hichilema also vowed to restore respect for human rights and liberties eroded under his predecessor.

In his sixth bid for the presidency, Hichilema defeated the incumbent Edgar Lungu, 64, by almost one million votes—a landslide spurred by economic hardship and restricted freedoms under the previous regime. The victory is the 17th opposition win in sub-Saharan Africa since 2015 and was achieved despite restricted campaigning and