



Malaysian king urges politicians to unite as new PM hunt starts

Fresh attack leaves 37 dead in western Niger



KABUL: Taliban fighters patrol along a street in Kabul yesterday, as the Taliban moved to quickly restart the Afghan capital following their stunning takeover of Kabul and told government staff to return to work. —AFP

US veterans watch Afghanistan fall

Lightning Taliban takeover has brought shock, anger, resignation and worry

WASHINGTON: A decade after returning from Afghanistan, Marc Silvestri was convinced it was time for his comrades to come home too. But watching the chaotic pullout unfold in real time has stunned the army veteran. "It's been a tough couple days," the 43-year-old head of veterans services in Revere, Massachusetts told AFP.

"I was in favor of the withdrawal, I thought it was time. Twenty-plus years, billions of dollars spent, I never expected the speed and the brazenness of the Taliban would be what it is," he said. "I never expected that the training and money we put into the Afghan army, that they would just lay down their weapons and turn the country over. That's been shocking to me." For US veterans of the 20-year war, the lightning Taliban takeover has variously brought shock, anger, resignation and worry, both for their Afghan allies left behind and compatriots at home reeling from the calamitous end to the US campaign.

In just days, the Afghan military and government disintegrated. On Sunday, Kabul fell without a fight as the Taliban entered the city and President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. The news spurred desperate scenes, as Afghans converged on the airport in a bid to escape and foreign governments scrambled to evacuate personnel.

For veteran Chad Fross, the withdrawal of US troops "was always going to be a mess" regardless of who was in charge, because of a failure to fully understand Afghanistan. "A lot of people are going to be asking, 'Why? It was pointless for me to be there. To watch friends die or lose body parts or

"I'm hearing so much anger"

lose their minds," said Fross. "But at the same time, I have to wonder how much more pointless it would be to stay the course when it would be the same outcome 20 years from now."

Leaving them in the lurch
The fate of women is a painful point of the

Taliban takeover for Fross and others. During their brutal 1996-2001 regime, the Islamist militants sharply curtailed women's liberty, keeping them behind closed doors and forbidding education.

But the US invasion of 2001 was meant to change that—and, in urban areas especially, for many women it did. All those hard-won gains are set to be eroded with the Taliban's return to power, however.

"These kind of ideals that we thought we were going over there to secure, these are the things that I think bother a lot of people," Fross said. "It bothers me too." Democratic President Joe Biden has stuck by his decision to push ahead with the withdrawal, even as he acknowledged the scenes were "gut-wrenching."

He also pledged that "thousands" of US citizens and Afghans who had worked with American forces and fear Taliban reprisals are to be evacuated. It is the promise that is perhaps under the greatest scrutiny in the United States. For many veterans, the idea of leaving Afghans who worked side by side with them to contend with the "very real" fear of Taliban revenge is unconscionable.

"They helped us and we're leaving them in the lurch. I just think that's wrong," Fross said, echoing sentiments of other veterans AFP spoke to. The

non-partisan Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, dedicated to post-9/11 veterans, in a statement Monday called on US authorities to "waste no additional time" in bringing Afghans who worked with Americans to the United States.

"We must keep our promises to those who have sacrificed so much on our behalf," Tom Porter, IAVA's Executive VP for Government Affairs said in the statement.

All for nothing?

"I'm hearing so much anger," Porter told AFP, adding it was not because of the withdrawal, but due to the "haphazard and chaotic way that we're taking them out right now." He pointed to the infamous images of the United States leaving Saigon that have since colored the US legacy in Vietnam, now circulating again as social media users draw parallels with the exit from Afghanistan.

Silvestri said one veteran of the Vietnam conflict reached out to him as the collapse unfolded, saying "I never thought I would see it again... it brings me right back to when I watched Saigon fall." The Massachusetts native said he's spoken to a number of vets and their families who are questioning now if their sacrifices were worthwhile. —AFP

Afghan exiles fear relatives trapped under Taliban

ROME: Afghans who have found sanctuary in France in recent years now fear the relatives they left behind will be permanently trapped and could face reprisals from the Taliban for their links to the West.

Several Afghan refugees told AFP they regretted not pressing their relatives to leave the country sooner, after the Taliban takeover caused chaos that has seen civilian flights suspended. French President Emmanuel Macron promised on Monday that France would "protect those who are most under threat in Afghanistan" while also vowing Europe would put together a "robust" initiative to thwart illegal migration and in particular people-smuggling networks.

"My father and brother worked for the Americans for three years. They left Kabul to hide a few miles away because the Taliban are looking for those who have helped the West," said Nosar, 24, a refugee in France since 2018.

His father and brother filed visa applications with the American embassy several weeks ago but these have — for the moment — remained unanswered, he said. "Now that the diplomats are evacuated, I fear that it is too late," said Nosar. "In Kabul, everyone is in shock, it happened so quickly."

"The president is gone, it's all over," he added, referring to president Ashraf Ghani who flew out of Kabul for an unknown destination as the Taliban took control. Many Western diplomats have already been flown out of Kabul although some embassies are retaining a skeleton staff around the airport to process visa applications.

'Waited too long'

Like many Afghans, Nosar fears that the Taliban will once again impose the extremist vision of Islamic law that was in effect when they ruled the country between 1996 and 2001.

"The Taliban claim they are more moderate than before. But no one is fooled. With them in power, the Afghans will be deprived of their fundamental rights," said Nosar.

Images of Afghans crowding planes on the tarmac of Kabul airport and even clinging onto the undercarriages of aircraft have shocked the world and underlined the desperation of many to leave.

"It is their last chance before the airport comes



BERLIN: Participants hold the Afghan national flag as they demonstrate in Berlin yesterday to demand the safe passage and airlift out of Afghanistan, where people try flee the country after the Taliban swept back to power. —AFP

under the control of the Taliban," said Afghan exile Reza Jafari, who heads the Paris-based organisation Children of Afghanistan and Elsewhere.

Sonila, who left Afghanistan in 2017 and asked for asylum in France, fears for her husband who stayed in the country to work for the United States and planned to join her at a later date. "He waited too long," said Sonila, 28, adding that poor Internet connections make any contact with him difficult.

"Maybe he will try to find sanctuary in a refugee camp in (neighbouring) Tajikistan for a while. He would be safer there. But we will always be separated," she said, her voice trembling.

'For how long?'

Hashon Hassani, 21, a refugee in France since 2019, had hoped up until Sunday that his sister, 20, would get a visa allowing her to join him. But he fears she will now suffer ahead of an expected clampdown by the Taliban on women's rights.

"Wherever they go, the Taliban take girls and

women. From the age of 12, they can be married. What if my sister was forcibly married?" said the psychology student from the University of Villetaneuse, in the Paris region.

Like hundreds of Afghans worried about the advance of the Taliban, his sister applied for a passport in Kabul two weeks ago, "but she did not receive it in time." "Now the roads are cut, the embassies evacuated. For the moment, French diplomats are still issuing visas, but for how long?" asked Hassani. France, like several other European countries, has suspended the expulsion of Afghan asylum seekers. More Afghans applied for asylum in France in 2020 than from any other nation.

Macron also said France was ready to help Afghan activists, artists and journalists who risk being targeted because of their work but it is not immediately clear what numbers this will entail.

"It is not enough," said Jafari. "What is needed is that the government says all Afghan citizens can have asylum." —AFP

Taliban takeover leaves Iran, Turkey fearing refugee influx

TEHRAN: The Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan has left regional heavyweights Iran and Turkey with a headache — both countries may see an opportunity to boost their influence but neither wants a further influx of refugees.

This is especially the case right now as both countries are battling the coronavirus pandemic and facing economic difficulties.

Analysts say everything depends on the unknown factor — whether the Taliban present a more moderate stance that allows for international cooperation or they return to the unbridled extremism that led to their overthrow in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

"The situation is a huge risk for Turkey, there is no doubt. Iran will also stand to lose if the Taliban returns to its old ways and provides a safe haven" for Islamist extremists, Asli Aydintasbas, senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), told AFP. Iran and Turkey both risk seeing substantial inflows of refugees, many of whom cross from Iran into Turkey in the hope of reaching Europe. Both already host large refugee populations — 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey and 3.5 million Afghans in Iran — and tolerance at home is running out.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Iran hard, pushing the sanctions-battered country further into crisis, while in Turkey the economic growth that was always the bulwark of Erdogan's popularity has faded away.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said last week that he was prepared to meet the Taliban leadership in a bid to secure peace while Iran's new hardline President Ebrahim Rasi said the US military "defeat" in Afghanistan was a chance to bring peace to the country. Yesterday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu talked of "positive messages" coming from the Taliban on protection for civilians and foreigners, expressing hope they would follow through with positive actions. —AFP