

International

Islamic State group's menace rebounds in troubled Afghanistan amid concerns

IS strikes, sowing mayhem with a bloody airport attack

DOHA: The Taliban had barely completed their takeover of the Afghan capital Kabul when the local affiliate of the Islamic State group struck, sowing mayhem with a bloody airport attack. It was a symbolic strike for the jihadist organization, highlighting its longevity and sparking concern in the West. More than 100 Afghan civilians and 13 US servicemen were killed in the August 26 attack on Kabul airport - the deadliest violence against US forces in Afghanistan since 2011, shattering morale and complicating evacuation efforts.



Deadly violence shattering morale complicates efforts

It was also the bloodiest attack against the US claimed by an IS group affiliate, namely the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), coming at an acutely sensitive moment for the withdrawing forces. It coincided as well with the beginning of the trial of those accused of orchestrating the November 13, 2015 attacks on Paris claimed by IS which resulted in 130 deaths.

The bloody carnage in the French capital marked the peak of the group's so-called "caliphate" which straddled Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2019. At the end of the week, the world will also mark the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks which were the largest terror attacks on the West in recent times, claimed by the IS group's rival Al-Qaeda. The resurgence of IS in Afghanistan now looks set to inspire radical jihadists of all stripes.

'More attacks'

"Western intelligence agencies should already be on high alert given the upcoming anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, always a period for inspired attacks, and the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan," Katherine Zimmerman,



JALALABAD: Taliban commander Mullah Neda Mohammad watches during an interview with AFP at his office in Jalalabad. As a Taliban commander, he spent years battling the former Afghan government. Now, with his hardline movement back in power, Mohammad vows to continue fighting against rival jihadists, the Islamic State (IS) group. — AFP

an analyst at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington said. "Jihadists have already called for more attacks on the West." Since the collapse of the so-called caliphate following a multinational military assault, the jihadist threat has shifted considerably with IS now probably lacking the capacity to strike in the heart of Europe as in 2015, analysts said.

But the group's reach has continued to be felt through affiliates in Yemen, Nigeria and Mali among others which continue to plot attacks, while remaining hyperactive on social media, drawing in followers. Western intelligence agencies from Langley to Whitehall to Auckland have proved unable to eradicate the threat of lone wolf attackers, radicalized online, who strike with improvised weapons such as knives or vehicles.

Philippines lifts lockdown in capital as COVID surges

MANILA: The Philippines will lift a stay-at-home order in the capital Manila this week as it trials "granular lockdowns", an official said yesterday, in a bid to rein in coronavirus cases and revive the economy. More than 13 million people in the national capital region—the country's economic heartland—have been in lockdown since August 6 amid record infections fuelled by the hyper-contagious Delta variant.

The move to ease restrictions from tomorrow comes after nationwide daily cases exceeded 20,000 for the past three days—double the number at the start of the latest lockdown—straining hospitals as they grapple with a nurses shortage. "Localized lockdowns will be piloted in Metro Manila," said presidential

spokesman Harry Roque, explaining that a household, building or street could be targeted. "It will be literally a complete lockdown if you are subject to granular lockdown—even the food will be delivered to you." There were no further details about how the more targeted measures would be enforced. The lighter restrictions in the national capital region, which accounts for about a third of the country's economy, will enable many hard-hit businesses to reopen and spur local tourism. Based on previous guidelines, restaurants will be allowed to accept diners and beauty salons permitted to operate—albeit at reduced capacity.

Limited numbers of faithful will be allowed to attend in-person church services. President Rodrigo Duterte said recently the country could not afford more lockdowns, after previous measures shattered the economy and left millions out of work. But with only about 19 percent of the targeted population fully vaccinated and hospitals filling up fast, authorities have had few options to slow the spread of the virus. The country's infection caseload has passed two million, with over 34,000 deaths. — AFP

As recently as Friday, a Sri Lankan attacker who had been known to police since 2016 and had IS propaganda at his home, injured seven people in Auckland, New Zealand. The IS attack on Kabul airport was all the more shocking because it succeeded despite US President Joe Biden's specific prior warning that intelligence agencies were aware of the plot. "Washington's inability to prevent an attack that was so publicly announced has allowed IS-K to amplify its bloody effectiveness," said Jean-Pierre Filiu, a professor at Paris's Institute of Political Studies.

'Terror threat could grow'

"The face-to-face confrontation of American troops and the Taliban opened a gap in security which the jihadist commandos could exploit." IS sympathizers were quick to capitalize on the attack and its aftermath. "Kabul is ours," proclaimed the pro-IS Hadm Al-Aswar foundation, dismissing Americans and "Taliban apostates" with equal vigor. IS-K has become the fourth most active Islamic State group affiliate globally since the start of the year, according to an expert on the organization known on Twitter only as Mr Q.

The Kabul attack "propelled IS-K into the political and media spotlight", he told AFP. Former US diplomat James Jeffrey said that IS began training jihadists for similar attacks outside Iraq and Syria, and possibly beyond the Middle East, between 2019 and 2020. "Certainly there is at least some risk of a repeat of attacks in Europe organized by ISIS and, as always, attacks by individuals inspired by ISIS," added Jeffrey who was Special Envoy to the international military intervention against IS. Western governments are now warning against complacency. During a visit to Iraq at the end of August, French President Emmanuel Macron called for nations threatened by IS to "not lower our guard, because Daesh (IS) remains a threat". Following the attack on US forces in Kabul, and after US forces killed just three IS fighters, Biden pointedly told the group: "We are not done with you". Analyst Zimmerman warned that left unchecked "it's not hard to imagine how the terror threat could grow in Afghanistan and spill over into the region and even the West". — AFP



KWAZULU-NATAL: In this file photo, former South African president Jacob Zuma removes his eyeglasses as he addresses the media in his home in Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal. — AFP

S Africa's jailed ex-leader Zuma granted parole

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's former president Jacob Zuma, jailed for 15 months in July for contempt of court after snubbing graft investigators, was placed on medical parole Sunday just two months into his term, prison authorities announced. Zuma, 79, has been hospitalized since August 6 at a health facility outside the prison where he had been incarcerated for ignoring a court order to testify before a judicial panel probing corruption during his nine-year tenure, which lasted until 2018. The Department of Correctional Services said in a statement on Sunday that Zuma's "medical parole" took effect on Sunday and he will serve the rest of the 15-month prison sentence outside jail.

Zuma "will complete the remainder of the sentence in the system of community corrections, whereby he must comply with a specific set of conditions and will be subjected to supervision until his sentence expires," the statement said. The decision was motivated "by a medical report" the department received, it said. Zuma was admitted to hospital for observation on August 6 for an undisclosed condition, and underwent a surgical procedure on August 14. He remains hospitalized.

'Dignity'

The prison authorities appealed to South Africans to "afford Mr Zuma dignity as he continues to receive medical treatment". He started serving his sentence on July 8 at the Estcourt prison, around 180 kilometers northwest of Durban. Two weeks later, he was allowed to leave prison to attend his brother's funeral at his rural home in the town of Nkandla.

His jailing sparked a spree of unprecedented violence and looting of businesses and shops in post-apartheid South Africa, resulting in millions of dollars worth of damage and losses. His successor Cyril Ramaphosa described the unrest as an orchestrated attempt to destabilise the country and vowed to crack down on alleged instigators.

Earlier on Sunday a handful of veterans of the ruling ANC's armed struggle wing Umkhonto we Sizwe, who have staunchly stood behind Zuma in recent years, disrupted a eulogy by party chairman Gwede Mantashe at a funeral of one of group's leaders, chanting for Zuma to be freed from jail. Zuma's spokesman Mzwanele Manyi told AFP that while he had not spoken to the former president since the news broke, "he should have been relieved, anyone can only be elated when this happens". He said Zuma's "unconstitutional" imprisonment had worsened his health. "It (has) had an exponential impact in terms of deteriorating his condition," he said, while refusing to divulge the illness. — AFP



BINAN: A nurse wearing a personal protective suit walks past suspected COVID-19 patients resting in a parking lot turned into a COVID ward outside a hospital in Binan town, Laguna province south of Manila yesterday. — AFP

Thousands of farmers vow defiance over Indian laws

MUZAFFARNAGAR: Tens of thousands of farmers rallied near India's capital on Sunday, vowing to remain defiant against the government over controversial agriculture laws they say will destroy their livelihoods. Chanting "Farmer, labourer, unity!", the men and women wore yellow and green scarves signifying harvest and mustard fields while waving national and farmer union flags in Uttar Pradesh state's Muzaffarnagar district. The farmers have been camped out on the borders of Delhi since late November in one of the biggest challenges to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

Farmers and union leaders reaffirmed at the gathering that they would fight for their rights and continue their sit-in along major highways into Delhi until the legislation is revoked. They also called for a nationwide strike on September 27 to protest against the

laws. "It's like the whole city and the roads are full of farmers," lawyer and farmer's son Amit Chaudhary told AFP from the gathering. "Farmers are not the sort of people to be tired. We work day and night, irrespective of rains or harsh sun. We won't go back till the laws are taken back," he added.

An AFP photographer at the site said at least 50,000 farmers and supporters took part. An umbrella body representing farmer unions said people from 15 states were there. Modi's government says the industry is massively inefficient and in need of reform. But protesters fear the laws deregulating the sector will leave them at the mercy of big corporations. Several rounds of negotiations between the government and ministers have failed to resolve the stand-off.

About two-thirds of India's 1.3 billion population draw their livelihood from farming and the sector has long been a political minefield. The massive gathering comes ahead of crucial polls next year in India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh, home to 200 million people and governed by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party. The farmer agitation took a violent turn in January when a tractor rally transformed into a rampage in Delhi that left one farmer dead and hundreds of police officers injured. — AFP

News in brief

Weapons seized in Sudan 'legal'

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopian Airlines said yesterday its transport of weapons to Sudan was a "legal and commercial" shipment of hunting guns, after reports the cargo had been confiscated by the authorities in Khartoum. Sudan's SUNA news agency had said Sunday that the weapons were seized by customs and an investigation launched after they were flown in on an Ethiopian Airlines passenger flight. SUNA quoted officials as saying the weapons had originally been sent from Russia to Ethiopia in May 2019 and were held by authorities there for two years. — AFP

Uganda building collapse kills 6

KAMPALA: Rescuers in Kampala called off the search for survivors yesterday after six people were killed in a building collapse during a heavy rainstorm, police said, following an emergency effort that saw eight people including two children pulled to safety. Images posted on social media on Sunday showed construction workers and passers-by digging through debris with their bare hands and firefighters using cutting equipment to saw through buckled metal in a bid to reach people feared trapped. Six bodies were pulled from the rubble of the four-storey building under construction, while two girls aged five and nine were found alive and taken to Kampala's main hospital. — AFP

Crews work to contain oil spill

WASHINGTON: Workers have deployed containment booms and skimmer devices as they attempt to contain a sizable oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico discovered after Hurricane Ida roared through the area, the US Coast Guard said Sunday. The spill is in waters off Port Fourchon, Louisiana - near where Ida made landfall - in a region that is a major hub of the US petrochemical industry. An oil slick now extends more than a dozen miles through the warm waters of the Gulf but has yet to reach shore, the Houston Chronicle reported. The Coast Guard in Louisiana said it had been informed of a spill in that area and was responding, but provided few details. Talos Energy, a Texas firm specializing in offshore oil and gas exploration, has dispatched clean-up vessels and divers to the site. — AFP

Blinken heads to Qatar

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken headed Sunday to Qatar on his first trip since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as he seeks a united front with allies shaken by the chaos. Qatar, a major US military base, has been the gateway for 55,000 people airlifted out of Afghanistan, nearly half the total evacuated by US-led forces after the Taliban's stunningly swift victory amid a US withdrawal. Blinken will then head Wednesday to the US air base of Ramstein in Germany, a temporary home for thousands of Afghans moving to the United States, from which he will hold a virtual 20-nation ministerial meeting on the crisis alongside German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. — AFP

Irish gang on trial

RENNES: Nine alleged members of an international network of rhino horn and ivory traffickers went on trial in France yesterday after an investigation that shed light on illicit trade links between Europe and east Asia. French prosecutors started their probe after a random motorway traffic inspection by police in September 2015 that led to the discovery of several elephant tusks and 32,800 euros (\$38,900) in cash in a BMW. The occupants of the car, who claimed they were antique dealers, were allegedly members of the Rathkeale Rovers, an Irish crime gang with roots in the Traveler community. The nine defendants on trial in the town of Rennes, which include alleged traders of Chinese and Vietnamese origin, face up to 10 years in jail and heavy fines, although two of them are on the run. — AFP



MUZAFFARNAGAR: Farmers and supporters representing various unions listen to a speaker as they attend a Mahapanchayat or a huge gathering in Muzaffarnagar against the central government's agricultural reforms. — AFP