

International

Exhausted and abandoned: Why Afghanistan military collapsed

A crushing 'betrayal' by US-led forces with their hasty pullout

PARIS: When the Taliban swept into Kabul last month, capturing Afghanistan's capital without a fight, the sheer speed of the collapse of the Western-backed and trained army stunned the world. But senior officials in the former Afghan administration said that the lightning victory was not entirely unexpected, and the consequence of fundamental leadership failures, rampant corruption, slick Taliban propaganda - and a crushing "betrayal" by US-led forces with their hasty pullout.



Sheer speed of collapse stunned the world



DASHTAK: A burned down Humvee vehicle is seen along a road in Dashtak area in Panjshir province, after the Taliban claimed total control over Afghanistan. — AFP

One top official close to the centre of power said that just two days before Taliban forces entered Kabul on August 15, he was present as former president Ashraf Ghani held an emergency meeting with his senior ministers, and military and spy chiefs. "It was said that we had enough weapons, ammunition, and financial resources to hold Kabul for two years," said the official, who claimed \$100 million in cash was available to secure Kabul. "It didn't protect the city for two days," he said.

'Lying'

The official, who like most sources AFP spoke to for this article did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, said he was not surprised by the capitulation. "Ministers were lying to Ghani, telling him that every-

thing was fine, so they could keep their jobs and their privileges," he said. As the Taliban raced through the country, the inner circle debated policy reforms. "We didn't get our priorities right," he added. "As the cities fell, one after the other, the National Security Council met to talk about recruitment and institutional reforms."

Taliban forces swept across the country in just two weeks, seizing provincial capitals often without a bullet being fired. Another top ex-government official said nobody at the top showed leadership. "None of them spoke to the media to reassure our men. None of them went into the field," he said. Ghani also made basic strategic mistakes, the close adviser added. "I suggested we leave the south, as we didn't have enough manpower to defend it in the long term. "But the president dis-

agreed. He said that all Afghanistan belonged to the government," he said.

Corruption

But for the Afghan army, holding everywhere against the Taliban was an impossible task. Despite the billions of dollars of US-led military support, equipment and training, the army's capacity had been hollowed out by years of rampant corruption. Senior officers creamed off what they could, stealing salaries from lower ranks, as well as selling fuel and ammunition supplies.

The situation worsened after Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 for a troop withdrawal agreement. "We were betrayed," said Sami Sadat, a general recognized for his bravery against the Taliban,

who was brought in to lead the special forces in Kabul just days before its fall. Without the critical protection of US air support - and with the former government's own air force grounded after foreign contractors maintaining the fleet were pulled out by Washington - the army lost its strategic advantage.

'Surreal'

"The Taliban were emboldened," Sadat said, writing in the New York Times. "They could sense victory... Before that deal, the Taliban had not won any significant battles against the Afghan Army. After the agreement? We were losing dozens of soldiers a day." The final days of fighting were "surreal", Sadat added. "We engaged in intense firefights on the ground against the Taliban as US fighter jets circled overhead, effectively spectators," he wrote. Sadat dismissed the claim by US President Joe Biden that the Afghan had collapsed sometimes "without trying" to fight. "We fought, bravely, until the end," Sadat said. "We lost 66,000 troops over the past 20 years; that's one-fifth of our estimated fighting force." For the soldiers on the frontlines, they saw little reason to die when top leaders were fleeing. "When the Taliban got to the gates of Kabul, the soldiers knew the president was leaving - that's why they didn't fight," said a former senior army officer who asked not to be named.

At the same time, the Taliban deployed a savvy use of media messages to persuade soldiers to surrender, undermining morale even further. "We had already lost the social media war," the first presidential confidante said. "The Taliban were telling the soldiers that they were fighting needlessly, because at a higher level an agreement had already been signed." Abandoned and exhausted, soldiers saw little point in fighting on. On August 15, 2021, Kabul fell without a fight. — AFP



GEOJE: This handout photo provided by South Korea's Defense Ministry shows the locally-developed, diesel-powered 3,000-ton submarine, named after revered independence activist Ahn Chang-ho, during its commissioning ceremony on the southern island of Geoje. — AFP

S Korea launches a ballistic missile

SEOUL: South Korea has test-fired a homegrown submarine-launched ballistic missile, a report said yesterday, as it seeks to build up its forces to defend itself from the nuclear-armed North. Pyongyang has long sought to develop submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) technology, and showed off four such devices at a military parade overseen by leader Kim Jong Un in January, with state media KCNA calling them "the world's most powerful weapon". But while North Korea has released pictures of underwater launches, most recently in 2019, analysts believe that was from a fixed platform or submersible barge, rather than a submarine.

South Korea's Agency for Defense Development last week carried out underwater ejection tests of the SLBM from a new, locally developed 3,000-tonne class submarine fitted with six vertical launching tubes, Yonhap reported, citing unnamed military sources. The SLBM is believed to be a variant of the country's

Hyunmoo-2B ballistic missile, with a range of around 500 kilometers, and will be mass produced for deployment after another round of tests, it added.

South Korea joins only a handful of countries to have successfully developed an SLBM. Seoul on Monday allocated nearly 1.5 trillion won (\$1.3 billion) for defense technology research and development next year in a budget request submitted to parliament. If approved, it will represent a 76 percent jump in the research budget of the Defense Acquisition Program Administration, which will be used to "actively develop cutting-edge, future technologies", according to a press release. Pyongyang is also looking to further enhance its submarine forces.

In January, Kim told a congress of his ruling Workers' Party that the North had completed plans for a nuclear-powered submarine. Any such vessel is likely to be years away from going into service, but analysts say it could be a strategic game-changer, enabling Pyongyang to launch a surprise strike underwater even if its land-based forces had been destroyed. Kim inspected a newly built submarine in 2019, when pictures showed him standing next to a gigantic vessel accompanied by officials. State media said it would soon be deployed for operations, without giving details of its capabilities. — AFP

84 million now hosts five million migrants and refugees - an estimated 3.7 million of them from Syria and up to 420,000 from Afghanistan. But economic instability exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic has engendered public fear of migrants to levels rarely recorded before.

A survey by the Aksoy pollster showed 85 percent of respondents were "worried" by the prospects of a mass arrival of Afghans fleeing Taliban fundamental-

Turkey: 'No need to rush' recognizing Taliban

ISTANBUL: Turkey said yesterday there was "no need to rush" in recognizing the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, adding that Ankara was still holding discussions about operating Kabul's strategic airport. In a wide-ranging television interview, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu sounded a cautious note about Turkey's future relations with the fundamentalist Islamist group. He said Afghanistan's new government needed to be "inclusive", adding that women and a range of ethnic groups should be given ministerial posts.

The Taliban on Monday claimed total control over Afghanistan, saying they had won the key battle for the Panjshir Valley, the last remaining holdout of resistance against their rule. But Cavusoglu said the international community should take a wait-and-see approach before recognizing its rule, sounding a similar tone to one adopted by the European Union at a meeting last Friday. "There is no need to rush," he said. "This is our advice to the entire world. We should act together with the international community."

Turkey has been holding talks with the Taliban in Kabul, where it still has a diplomatic presence, about the conditions under which it could help operate the Afghan capital's airport. US officials say they no longer control the airspace in Afghanistan and that the main airport in Kabul, which the US military seized in August for evacuations, is in disrepair. Cavusoglu said Turkey was working with Qatar and the US on the terms under which the airport could reopen to regular flights needed to deliver humanitarian aid, evacuate stranded civilians and re-establish diplomatic missions in Kabul.

But he said security remained a key sticking point, stressing that commercial flights could never resume until airlines-and their insurers-felt that conditions were sufficiently safe. "In my view, the Taliban or Afghan forces could ensure security outside the airport," Cavusoglu said. "But inside, there could be a security company trusted by the international community or all other companies," he said. "Even if airlines, including Turkish Airlines, are keen to fly there, insurance companies would not allow it." — AFP

'We live in fear': Once embracing, Turkey turns on migrants

ISTANBUL: Ghawsuddin Mubariz was already spending restless nights worrying about being sent back to Afghanistan when a stadium full of Turkish football supporters broke into a chant calling for migrants to go home. The 20-year-old had felt welcomed when he fled the northeastern Afghan city of Kunduz and crossed into Turkey after a three-week trek across Pakistan and Iran nearly two years ago. He eventually found a job at a fast-food joint in Istanbul and sent half his earnings to his Afghan relatives so they can better cope with poverty and endless war.

But things changed when the police began rounding up Afghans and placing them in deportation centres in response to growing public anger at migrants that coincides with a new spell of Turkish economic malaise. "When I first came to Turkey, it was easy," Mubariz said at his restaurant outside Istanbul's ancient city walls serving Afghan customers. "Now it's quite tough. Wherever we go, we live in fear," he said. "We are illegals. We are scared of being caught and sent back to Afghanistan."

'Refugee warehouse'

Turkey turned into the home of one of the world's largest migrant populations when it struck a deal with Brussels to help resolve Europe's 2015-16 refugee crisis. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says the nation of



ISTANBUL: Ghawsuddin Mubariz, 20-year-old, who came from Afghanistan 2 years ago, works in a fast food restaurant in Istanbul's Zeytinburnu district. — AFP

ists who retook the country after 20 years of war. Erdogan has responded by telling Western states - just as anxious about a destabilizing new wave of migration - that Turkey was not about to become their "refugee warehouse". The public resentment spilled over onto national television screens when thousands of football fans began chanting "we don't want any refugees in our country" during a World Cup qualifying match last week.

'The Afghans are here'

Mubariz has more immediate reasons to be alarmed. The Istanbul governor's office is reporting almost daily roundups of Afghans and other irregular migrants it then places in holding centers. The staunchly anti-migrants CHP party - in control of big cities such as Istanbul and Ankara - has also hung banners on buildings showing their leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu declaring: "The border is our honor." Convenience store owner Habib Uzbek feels the pressure even though he received Turkish citizenship in 1993. "Whether it's on a bus or on the street, people point and say: 'The Afghans are here,'" the 69-year-old said. Mubariz said he hears many of the same things. "I have sleepless nights thinking about what I'll do if I'm caught and deported," he said. "The Taliban have seized whatever we have," he said. "We are desperate." This fear has forced many Afghans to keep as low a profile as they can. A field locals had used to play cricket matches against their Pakistani neighbors on Sundays has stood empty for months.

The CHP's Istanbul branch deputy chairman Burak Duzce defended his party's rhetoric in the runup to a general election, due no later than June 2023. "We aren't saying these people should be delivered to the Taliban," Duzce said. — AFP

News in brief

Man jailed for spreading COVID

HANOI: A Vietnamese man has been sentenced to five years in jail for spreading COVID-19 after he breached home quarantine rules. Le Van Tri was convicted of "spreading dangerous infectious diseases to other people" after he travelled to his home province Ca Mau from coronavirus hotspot Ho Chi Minh City in July, according to a report on the website of the provincial People's Court. The 28-year old was accused of breaching a 21-day home quarantine regulation in the southern province, which had a lower case rate than Ho Chi Minh City, and he tested positive for COVID-19 on July 7. "Tri's breach of the home medical quarantine regulation led to many people becoming infected with COVID-19 and one person died on 7 August 2021," according to the court report. State media said eight people became infected because of Tri. — AFP

Bus plunges off cliff; 23 dead

LA PAZ: At least 23 people, including three children, were killed after a bus plunged off a cliff in central Bolivia, police and witnesses said. The bus, carrying 33 people, plummeted 400 meters down a cliff in Cochabamba state at around 11 am Monday. "I stepped on the brake and there was no brake," said the driver, whose wife died in the accident. The dead also included three children aged one, two and six, according to the police Facebook statement. Five other victims remain to be identified, it added. The 13 people injured in the incident, which occurred about 50 kilometers from the regional capital, were taken to nearby hospitals. Police said the cause of the accident was being investigated. Bolivia has a poor road safety record. — AFP

Women linked to IS nabbed

STOCKHOLM: Swedish police said Monday they had arrested two women linked to the Islamic State group after they flew back from Syria, as media reported that one was being investigated for war crimes. Stockholm police spokesman Ola Osterling said the prosecutor leading the investigation into the two women had ordered their arrest. "We executed that decision when the plane arrived in Stockholm in the afternoon," Osterling told AFP. A third woman had been taken in for questioning, he added. A statement from the Prosecution Authority Monday said multiple investigations were underway against men and women returning from areas that had been controlled by the Islamic State group (IS). "The international crimes that are relevant for people for people returning from IS-controlled areas are war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity," public prosecutor Reena Devgun said in the statement. — AFP

Nine miners plummet to death

KIEV: Nine miners plummeted to their deaths and another 19 received injuries when a steel rope of a cage broke at a coal mine in Ukraine's separatist-controlled east, local authorities said yesterday. The workers were descending into the mine shaft in the town of Voznesenivka in the eastern Lugansk region on Monday when the accident occurred. "The rope of a cage which was lowering the miners to their workplaces broke," the emergency service of the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic said in a statement. The emergency service said that the bodies of nine people were brought up to the surface, while 19 people were hospitalized. "A government commission that will investigate the accident has been put together," the statement added. Deadly accidents are common in Ukrainian mines, most of which are located in the country's industrial east. — AFP