

## International

# 'Stop interfering in Afghanistan', says Taliban leader in rare appearance

## More than 3,000 clerics gather in Kabul

**KABUL:** The Taliban's reclusive supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada called Friday for the world to stop telling them how to run Afghanistan, insisting sharia law was the only model for a successful Islamic state.

Akhundzada, who has not been filmed or photographed in public since the Taliban returned to power in August, was addressing a major gathering of religious scholars in the Afghan capital called to rubber-stamp the hardline Islamist group's rule.

More than 3,000 clerics have gathered in Kabul since Thursday for the three-day men-only meeting, and Akhundzada's appearance had been rumoured for days—although media are barred from covering the event. "Why is the world interfering in our affairs?" he asked in an hour-long speech broadcast by state radio.

"They say 'why don't you do this, why don't you do that?' Why does the world interfere in our work?" Akhundzada rarely leaves Kandahar, the Taliban's birthplace and spiritual heartland, and apart from one undated photograph and several audio recordings of speeches, has almost no digital footprint.

But analysts say the former sharia court judge has an iron grip on the movement and he bears the title "Commander of the Faithful".

His arrival at the meeting hall was greeted with cheers and chants, including "Long live the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", the Taliban's name for the country.

Akhundzada's appearance comes a week after a powerful earthquake struck the east of the country, killing more than 1,000 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless.

No women are attending the clerics' meeting, but a Taliban source told AFP this week that thorny issues such as girls' education—which has divided opinion in the movement—would be discussed.

### No mention of girls' schooling

Akhundzada did not mention the subject in his speech, which was confined largely to telling the faithful to strictly observe Islamic principles in life and governance.

Since the Taliban's return, secondary school girls have been barred from education and women dismissed from government jobs, forbidden from travelling alone, and ordered to dress in clothing that covers everything but their faces.

The Taliban have also outlawed playing non-religious music, banned the portrayal of human figures in advertising, ordered TV channels to stop showing movies and soap operas featuring uncovered women, and told men they should dress in traditional garb and grow their beards.

In Geneva on Friday, the United Nations human rights chief urged the Taliban to look to other Muslim countries for inspiration on improving the rights of women in a religious context.

Addressing an urgent council debate on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, Michelle Bachelet said they were "experiencing the most significant and rapid roll-back in enjoyment of their rights across the board in decades".

"I strongly encourage the de facto authorities to engage with predominantly Muslim countries with experience in promoting women and girls' rights, as guaranteed in international law, in that religious context," she said.

Akhundzada said the Taliban had won victory for Afghanistan, but it was up to the "ulema"—the religious scholars—to advise the new rulers on how to properly implement sharia law.

"The sharia system comes under two parts—scholars and rulers," he said.

"If scholars do not advise authorities to do good, or the rulers close the doors against the scholars, then we will not have an Islamic system."

Believed to be in his 70s, Akhundzada spoke in strong measured tones, occasionally coughing or



Hibatullah Akhundzada

clearing his throat.

He warned that non-Muslim nations would always be opposed to a pure Islamic state, so the faithful had to endure hardships to get what they wanted. "You have to compete, you have to endure hardships... the present world will not easily accept you implementing the Islamic system," he said.

Women's rights activists have slammed their lack of participation. "Women should be part of the decisions about their fate," Razia Barakzai told AFP Thursday. "Life has been taken away from Afghan women." —AFP



### 'Why does the world interfere in our work?'

## Dozens missing in shipwreck during China Sea typhoon

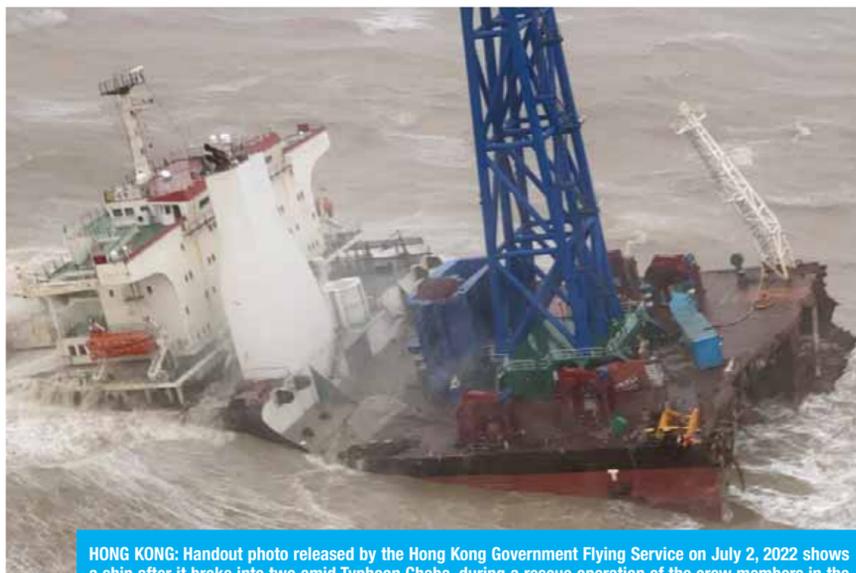
**HONG KONG:** More than two dozen crew members are unaccounted for after their ship broke into two during a typhoon in the South China Sea on Saturday, with rescuers scrambling to find them, officials say.

An engineering vessel that was 160 nautical miles southwest of Hong Kong "suffered substantial damage and broke into two pieces" and the 30-member crew abandoned ship, according to the Hong Kong Government Flying Service.

Three people had been rescued as of 3:00pm local time (0700 GMT) and were taken to hospital for treatment, authorities said. Dramatic footage provided by Hong Kong authorities showed a person being airlifted onto a helicopter while waves crashed over the deck of the semi-submerged ship below.

The three survivors said other crew members may have been swept away by waves before the first helicopter arrived, according to a government statement. Typhoon Chaba earlier formed in the central part of the South China Sea and on Saturday afternoon made landfall in Guangdong province in southern China.

Rescuers in Hong Kong were notified of the incident at 7:25am local time (2325 GMT on Friday) and found the ship near Chaba's centre, where harsh weather conditions and nearby wind



**HONG KONG:** Handout photo released by the Hong Kong Government Flying Service on July 2, 2022 shows a ship after it broke into two amid Typhoon Chaba, during a rescue operation of the crew members in the South China Sea. —AFP

farms made the operation "more difficult and dangerous".

The ship's location recorded wind speeds of 144 kilometres per hour and waves that were 10 metres high, authorities said. The Government Flying Service dispatched two sorties of fixed-wing air-

craft and four helicopter sorties, with mainland Chinese authorities also dispatching a rescue boat.

Rescuers said they would increase the search area "due to the large number of people missing" and extend the operation into the night if conditions allowed. —AFP

## Indian landslide search enters third day, 25 dead

**GUWAHATI, India:** The search for survivors buried under a landslide in India's northeast entered its third day Saturday with 25 bodies pulled from the rubble and nearly 40 people still missing. Security forces and disaster relief teams raced against the clock to find any more survivors trapped under the debris at a railway construction camp in Manipur state.

Most of the victims were reserve soldiers from the Territorial Army who had been working on the railway project. Eighteen people have so far been pulled alive from the earth with no more

rescued overnight, an army statement said, while 12 reservists and 26 civilians remain missing.

The situation at the scene of the landslide was "still serious" with rainfall and bad weather hampering rescue efforts, Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh said. India's remote northeast has been pummeled by heavy rainfall in recent weeks, triggering landslides and floods.

Dozens were killed in the region after flooding last month, with relentless rains causing landslides and inundating homes. Earlier this year, at least 10 people, including a four-year-old child, were killed in floods and landslides after unusually heavy rains hit several parts of India.

Experts say climate change is increasing the number of extreme weather events around the world, with damming, deforestation and development projects in India exacerbating the human toll. —AFP



**IMPHAL, India:** Soldiers carry the body of a victim during rescue efforts after a landslide in Noney district in Manipur on July 2, 2022. —AFP

## Snap ballot likely in Greece ahead of tough winter

**ATHENS:** Each time Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis faces the media these days, there is one question he cannot escape. When will he call an early election? The conservative premier has been in power since July 2019 and still has 12 months left of his four-year term.

But soaring energy prices, a three-decade high in inflation, the war in Ukraine and rising tension with Turkey are setting up a daunting scene for the end of the year. Public desperation over the rising cost of fuel and food led the government in recent weeks to roll out fuel and electricity support for poorer households. But even this money has now run out.

"The winter is going to be difficult," noted Nikos Konstandaras, a veteran columnist for Greek liberal daily Kathimerini. Natassa Tsoumbou, a 56-year-old gardener, said she has had major trouble keeping up with the mounting cost of living.

"These past two months, I've only been able to pay part of my bills," said Tsoumbou, who lives in a 70-square-metre (453-square-foot) apartment in north Athens. "You can barely get anything for 20 euros (\$21) at the supermarket," she added.

Greece has spent over 10 billion euros in pandemic relief over the last three years. Another 6.5 billion euros have been set aside for energy and fuel benefits in 2022. The government hopes to replenish state coffers with tourism revenue.

So far, increased visitor traffic from Europe and the United States points to a record year, topping even Greece's last pre-pandemic season in 2019. But for now, Finance Minister Christos Staikouras is fresh out of cash handouts. "Right now there isn't a single euro left in fiscal space," Staikouras told Mega TV over the weekend.

### Toxic campaign

Mitsotakis has repeatedly insisted he intends to see out his four-year term. But he has also suggested this could change if Greece looks set to face a long and "toxic" general election campaign. "I know it's extremely hard to persuade you that elections or a reshuffle aren't going to be held," Mitsotakis told reporters in Brussels last week.

His main opponent, left-wing former prime min-

ister Alexis Tsipras, isn't pulling any punches. Tsipras accuses the government of mismanaging the COVID-19 pandemic, which killed more than 30,000 people, coddling big business and failing to shield Greeks from soaring energy prices.

Last week, he noted with disdain that Mitsotakis and his ministers between them owed 13 million euros in personal debt, despite possessing a portfolio of over 800 properties and 17 million in deposits. "Can these people feel the agony of citizens unable to pay their bills?" Tsipras, who preceded Mitsotakis as premier from 2015 to 2019, tweeted on June 25. "After the election, the party will be over," Tsipras said.

"The country's resources will no longer be exploited by 10 large business groups and an equivalent number of families. No more pimps," he said. Many analysts believe a snap ballot is likely in the autumn, with announcements by Mitsotakis possibly after mid-August. Tsipras said this week he expected an election in September. "All parties are currently on pre-election footing," said Antonis Papargiris, the research director of polling firm GPO.

### Soaring prices dominate

"Rising prices in energy, electricity, fuel... are the dominant issues," he told AFP. The next general

## India's court slams spokeswoman who sparked Prophet row

**NEW DELHI:** A ruling party spokeswoman whose remarks on Islam embroiled India in a diplomatic row and sparked huge protests should apologise for having "set the country on fire", New Delhi's top court said Friday.

Anger engulfed the Islamic world last month after Nupur Sharma's incendiary comments during a TV debate on the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his youngest wife, with nearly 20 countries calling in their Indian ambassadors for an explanation.

Rallies also erupted around South Asia, with police killing two demonstrators in India, while this week two Muslim men were accused of the grisly murder of a Hindu tailor who had posted in support of Sharma on Facebook. "She and her loose tongue have set the country on fire," India's Supreme Court said during a procedural hearing on several criminal complaints filed against Sharma.

"This lady is single-handedly responsible for what is happening in the country," it added. "She should apologise to the whole nation." Since her comments, Sharma has been subjected to multiple police complaints filed against her across India by members of the public.

While the 37-year-old's whereabouts are unknown, her lawyer was in court asking that the cases be consolidated in New Delhi, a request denied Friday. Sharma was at one time seen as a rising star in the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but her remarks forced it into damage control.

The party soon suspended the spokeswoman from her post and issued a statement insisting it respected all religions. Since coming to power nationally in 2014, the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been accused of championing discriminatory policies towards followers of the Islamic faith. Critics also say the government has presided over a crackdown on free speech and rights activists.

This week police arrested the Muslim journalist Mohammed Zubair, a vocal critic of the government who had helped draw attention to Sharma's remarks. He was arrested on Monday and remains in custody over a four-year-old tweet about a Hindu god that police said had been the subject of complaints by Hindu groups. —AFP

election will be held under a proportional representation system introduced by Tsipras' left-wing administration.

But Mitsotakis said last month that "double elections" were likely to be needed to produce a stable government. To this end, Mitsotakis passed a new law in 2020 giving the winning party between 20 and 50 additional seats in parliament, depending on its final percentage in votes.

But this new system only comes into effect if no government emerges from the proportional representation vote. A poll for Ant1 TV earlier this week gave Mitsotakis' right-wing New Democracy party 32.5 percent, a 10-point lead over Tsipras' left-wing Syriza. Centre-left party KINAL was third on 12.8 percent.

But one in 10 respondents remains undecided, the poll conducted by MARC showed. To secure a majority of 151 seats in the 300-seat parliament, a party will need to secure around 38.5 percent of the vote, Papargiris said. Under proportional representation, acquiring the same number of seats would require a voting result of well over 40 percent. Mitsotakis remains the country's choice for prime minister over Tsipras, with approval ratings of around 40 percent compared to his rival's score of around 30 percent. —AFP