

## International

# Taleban supreme leader urges world to recognise government

## Blasts cut power to millions in Afghanistan ahead of Eid

**KABUL:** Afghanistan's supreme leader called again Friday for the international community to recognise the Taleban government, saying the world had become a "small village" and proper diplomatic relations would help solve the country's problems. No nation has formally recognised the regime installed by the Taleban after they seized power in August and reintroduced the hardline Islamist rule that is increasingly excluding women from public life. In a written message ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada did not mention international sticking points-including reopening secondary schools for girls.

Instead, he said recognition should come first "so that we may address our problems formally and within diplomatic norms and principles". "Undoubtedly, the world has transformed into a small village," said Akhundzada, who has not been seen in public for years and lives reclusively in Kandahar, the Taliban's spiritual heartland.

"Afghanistan has its role in world peace and stability. According to this need, the world should recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." His Eid message comes as the country has been rocked by a series of bomb blasts-some claimed by the jihadist Islamic State group and targeting the minority Shiite Hazara community. Akhundzada made no mention of insecurity, but said the country had been able to build "a strong Islamic and national army", as well as "a strong intelligence organisation".

### Link aid to rights

Many in the international community want humanitarian aid and recognition to be linked to

the restoration of women's rights. Tens of thousands of women lost their government jobs after the Taleban takeover, and they have also been barred from leaving the country-or even travelling between cities-unless accompanied by a male relative. In March, the Taleban prompted global outrage by shutting all secondary schools for girls just hours after allowing them to reopen for the first time since they seized power.

Several Taleban officials said the ban was personally ordered by Akhundzada. Akhundzada's Eid message didn't touch on girls' schools, but he did say authorities were opening new centres and madrassas for both "religious and modern education". "We respect and are committed to all the sharia rights of men and women in Afghanistan... do not use this humanitarian and emotional issue as a tool for political ends," he said.

But he said people should willingly embrace the Taleban ideals, and not be forced. "The relevant authorities should invite people towards sharia with wisdom and avoid extremism in this regard," he added.

He said also the government was committed to freedom of speech according to "Islamic values", although hundreds of news outlets have closed, public broadcasts of music banned, and movies and TV dramas featuring women taken off air. Akhundzada, believed to be in his 70s, has been the

spiritual leader of the hardline Islamist movement since 2016, but has remained in the shadows despite the Taleban enjoying largely uncontested power.

His absence from public life has fed speculation he may be dead and his edicts the product of a committee. Still, in October the Taleban released an audio recording they said was him addressing a madrassa in Kandahar.

Meanwhile, millions of people across 11 provinces in Afghanistan faced blackouts on Saturday after two power transmission towers were blown up just west of the capital Kabul, authorities said. The outages come ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday that marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Two pylons in the province of Parwan were bombed late on Friday, cutting off electricity to the capital and neighbouring provinces. "The enemies... have blown up two electricity pylons with bombs," Hekmatullah Maiwandi, a spokesman for the state-run DABS electricity company, said in a video statement.

Five teams from the firm have been deployed to carry out repairs, he added. "The pylons are installed on top of mountains and our teams are trying to fix them," Maiwandi said. Temporary repairs would be performed to partially restore power by Saturday night before a full restoration of the towers can be completed in two weeks, he added.



Hibatullah Akhundzada

Police said two suspects have been arrested over the explosions. Many residential buildings and businesses in Kabul, a city of about five million people, booted up private generators Saturday to ensure electricity supply ahead of Eid celebrations. Afghanistan is largely reliant on electricity imported from northern neighbours Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, making cross-country power lines a prime target for insurgents. During the Taleban's 20-year war with Afghanistan's former US-backed government the authorities in Kabul regularly accused the hardline Islamists of targeting transmission towers. —AFP

## China-Solomons deal upends Australia election

**SYDNEY:** Beijing's security deal with the Solomon Islands has transformed Australia's closely-fought election campaign into a foreign policy battle over Canberra's complicated relationship with the Pacific. Australia's Liberal government lobbied hard against the Solomons signing the pact, alongside ally the United States, but neither was successful in dissuading Honiara.

The final text is not public but a leaked draft sent shockwaves across the region last month, particularly sections that would allow Chinese naval deployments to the Solomons-less than 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) from Australia. On the campaign trail ahead of the May 21 polls, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has faced intense questioning about his handling of the pact and his government's "Pacific Step-Up" strategy to improve ties with the region.

The issue flared up again on Friday when Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare lambasted Australia over its AUKUS security deal with the United States and Britain, saying he only learned of the agreement through media reports.

He said the Pacific "should have been consulted to ensure this AUKUS treaty is transparent, since it will affect the Pacific family by allowing

nuclear submarines in Pacific waters".

### Banquets vs barbecues

Pacific expert Tess Newton Cain of Griffith University told AFP that Australia's leaders need to improve their understanding of the region's culture and customs. While Beijing tends to fete Pacific leaders with formal diplomacy and lush banquets, "the [Australian] prime minister invites the Pacific family round for a barbecue".

"I think the perception is that plays well to an Australian domestic audience. But in the Pacific, it can look a little disrespectful," she said. In 2019, Newton Cain led a research group who spoke to people across the Solomons, Vanuatu and Fiji where they found many wanted their relationship with Australia-still considered their most important-to be better.

"Some people said to us they felt the way Pacific Islanders were treated by Australians could be condescending, that they felt they weren't given sufficient agency," she said. Others expressed frustration over difficulties obtaining visas for Australia to visit family and friends.

Unlike travellers from many countries, Pacific Islanders are asked for "huge amounts of personal information" including a guarantee they will not overstay. "It's a really intrusive



HONIARA, Solomon Islands: Photo taken on April 22, 2022 shows China's ambassador to the Solomon Islands Li Ming (centre L) and Solomons prime minister Manasseh Sogavare (centre R) posing with other officials during the opening ceremony of a China-funded national stadium complex in Honiara. —AFP

process," Newton Cain said.

### 'Pacific stuff-up'

Australia's Labor opposition party has seized on the Solomons-China deal to argue the government's Pacific Step-Up-launched soon after its 2019 election win-has failed. "This is a massive foreign policy failure... This is a Pacific stuff-up," opposition leader Anthony Albanese said.

Labor announced a suite of Pacific-focused policies after the China pact was revealed, including an annual visa lottery offering permanent residency to 3,000 Pacific Islanders. For his part, Morrison has defended Pacific Step-Up, noting that "after the last election, the first place I went as prime minister was to the Solomon Islands".

He has said a Chinese military base in the Solomons is a "red line", while

acknowledging assurances from Sogavare that this will not happen. Asked Saturday about claims by Beijing that Australia's response to the deal "amounts to disinformation, defamation, coercion and intimidation and exposes a colonial mentality", Morrison was blunt.

"Well, the Chinese government would say that, wouldn't they?" he said. Newton Cain believes much can be done to improve Australia's ties with the Pacific. Deploying more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander emissaries across the region would be welcomed, she said.

But she added that Australian diplomats need to shift away from thinking about the Pacific as their "training ground". "This is where Australia lives... We need to be thinking about these relationships all the time, on an ongoing basis." —AFP

## Sharif scion takes charge of Pakistan's most powerful province

**ISLAMABAD:** The son of Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif took charge of Punjab province Saturday, the country's most politically important region, further bolstering the dynasty's grip on power. Nepotism and cronyism are deeply entrenched in the Muslim-majority nation of more than 220 million people, with power mostly shared between two families-the Sharifs and the Bhuttos-for much of Pakistan's history.

It comes weeks after cricket superstar turned politician Imran Khan was ousted from power in a no-confidence vote when the usually feuding families formed an opposition coalition. Hamza Shehbaz Sharif took over as chief minister of Punjab-the country's richest, most populous and politically influential province-after weeks of deadlock.

The region's governor and a Khan loyalist

refused to swear in the new chief, elected by the provincial assembly, forcing Lahore High Court to step in. "Today a month-long political crisis in Punjab has come to an end," the 47-year-old Sharif told reporters after he was sworn in.

"I will seek guidance from the prime minister Shehbaz Sharif and will take coalition partners into confidence." The Sharif family, including three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, the brother of the new prime minister, have been embroiled in countless corruption and money laundering allegations-and Hamza Sharif is no exception. The family deny the accusations and argue they are politically motivated. The younger Sharif's appointment as Punjab province's chief minister comes days after Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, was appointed as one of world's youngest foreign ministers at the age of 33.

Khan was voted in by an electorate weary of two-party dynasties in 2018 on a promise of sweeping away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism. But he struggled to maintain support with soaring inflation, a feeble rupee and crippling debt.

Since his ouster Khan has taken to the streets



LAHORE: Photograph released by Punjab Press Information Department on April 30, 2022 shows Ashraf (L) administering the oath to Hamza Shehbaz Sharif (C), son of Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif as the chief minister of Punjab province in Lahore. —AFP

and held massive rallies that attract thousands in the hope of forcing an early election before the next October 2023 poll. —AFP

## N Korea warns of 'preemptive' use of nuclear force

**SEOUL:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has repeated his warning that Pyongyang could "preemptively" use its nuclear weaponry to counter hostile forces, state media reported Saturday.

Kim told top military officers that to "maintain the absolute superiority" of North Korea's armed forces, the country should be able to "preemptively and thoroughly contain and frustrate all dangerous attempts and threatening moves... if necessary," the official KCNA news agency reported.

Pyongyang should continue to build up its arsenal so that it can have the "overwhelming military muscle that no force in the world can provoke," Kim said, calling it the "lifeline guaranteeing the security of our country".

The leader's comments followed similar remarks at a

military parade on Monday, when he said he could use his atomic arsenal if North Korea's "fundamental interests" were threatened. Kim made his latest comments at a meeting with top brass to praise their work on Monday's parade, which commemorated the 90th anniversary of the country's armed forces and showcased its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Despite biting sanctions, North Korea has doubled down on Kim's military modernisation drive, test-firing a slew of banned weapons this year while ignoring US offers of talks. Last month Pyongyang test-fired an ICBM at full range for the first time since 2017, and

## Power cuts, forest fires in South Asia heatwave

**LAHORE:** Power outages compounded the misery of millions of people wilting in a heatwave across India and Pakistan on Friday, with experts blaming climate change for an early onset of roasting summer temperatures.

In the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh hundreds of forest fires have broken out in recent weeks, eating up tinder-dry pine forests including around Dharamsala, home of the Dalai Lama. Himachal Pradesh normally sees rain, hail and even snow in higher areas at this time of year but many parts have seen no precipitation in two months, sparking more and bigger blazes than normal. "Teams of firefighters are working hard to put out these fires and also to save wild animals," state forest chief Ajay Srivastava told AFP. Power cuts in both India and Pakistan were partly blamed on shortages of coal after an unusually hot March and April pushed up power demand and ate up stockpiles.

Over the past week, Pakistani cities have been cut off for up to eight hours a day, while in some rural areas people have power for only half of the day. "There is a power crisis and load shedding taking place across the country," said Energy Minister Khurram Dastgir Khan, blaming fuel shortages and "technical faults".

Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority warned of the potential for flash floods in northern areas, with the soaring temperatures likely to accelerate snow and ice melt. In Lahore, Pakistan's second city, families flocked to the canals to cool off. "This is the only way to beat the heat, what else is there to do? It's already so warm... what will happen later in summer?" said Abbas Ali, who was with his young son.

### One day of coal

In the teeming Indian megacity of New Delhi, which hit 43 degrees Celsius (110 Fahrenheit) on Friday, authorities said many power stations had "less than a day's coal left". "The situation in entire India is dire," said Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's chief minister, warning of potential power cuts to hospitals and the city's metro.

A fire at a landfill 60 metres (almost 200 feet) high in Delhi was still smouldering on Friday for a fourth day. Indian states including Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh have cut back power supply to industrial areas because of coal shortages at power stations. India also cancelled some passenger trains to allow for faster movement of coal at power plants in a bid to avoid a full-blown crisis, Bloomberg News reported. In Kolkata, drooping public transport passengers were being given glucose water after a spate of cases of heatstroke in recent days. —AFP

satellite imagery has shown signs of activity at a nuclear testing site. The string of weapons tests comes as South Korea prepares for an incoming president, Yoon Suk-yeol, who takes a more hawkish approach to Pyongyang and has not ruled out a preemptive strike if necessary. Analysts say Kim's warning shows he is not open to dialogue with Seoul's new government.

"Kim's remarks demonstrate no interest in engaging with the incoming Yoon administration in South Korea or restarting denuclearisation talks with the United States," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor of international studies at Ewha University in Seoul. —AFP