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Afghan president flees country as US evacuating & Taliban take power

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Afghan president flees as country prepares for Taliban to take power

Ashraf Ghani reportedly leaves for Tajikistan following Taliban's swift takeover of country, reaching capital Kabul hours earlier; Islamist group says its awaiting 'peaceful transfer' as both sides, U.S. officials prepare to meet in Qatar to discuss handover  
Reuters| Published: 08.15.21, 17:47

As Afghan officials prepared to meet Sunday with Taliban representatives to discuss a transition of power, an official said President Ashraf Ghani had left the capital Kabul for Tajikistan, capping the militants' lightning push for power.

Representatives from the two sides were due to meet in Qatar on Sunday, Fawzi Koofi, a member of the Kabul negotiating team, told Reuters. A source familiar with the matter said U.S. officials would also be involved.

A senior Afghan Interior Ministry official said Ghani had left for Tajikistan, hours after the Taliban entered the outskirts of Kabul.

Asked for comment, the president's office it "cannot say anything about Ashraf Ghani's movement for security reasons."

A representative of the Taliban said the group was checking on Ghani's whereabouts. Taliban fighters were reaching the capital "from all sides," a senior Afghan interior ministry official s.

But there were no reports of fighting and the group's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said they were waiting on the outskirts and were in talks with the Western-backed government for a peaceful surrender.

"Taliban fighters are to be on standby on all entrances of Kabul until a peaceful and satisfactory transfer of power is agreed," he said.

American diplomats were evacuated from their embassy by chopper after a swift advance by the militants, who were poised to run Afghanistan again 20 years after they were toppled by U.S.-led forces following the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States. Known during their past rule for keeping girls out of school and hardline Islamic punishments such as amputation, stoning and hanging, the Taliban appeared to be trying to project a more modern face.

Another spokesman Suhail Shaheen said the group would protect the rights of women, as well as freedoms for media workers and diplomats.

"We assure the people, particularly in the city of Kabul, that their properties, their lives are safe," Shaheen told the BBC, saying a transfer of power was expected in days. The ease of the Taliban's advance, despite billions of dollars spent by the United States and others to build up local Afghan government forces, has stunned the world.

Just last week, a U.S. intelligence estimate said Kabul could hold out for at least three months.

Before news that Ghani had left Kabul, a palace official said he was in emergency talks with U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and officials from the NATO transatlantic alliance.

Power would be handed over to a transitional administration, the government's acting interior minister, Abdul Sattar Mirzakawal, tweeted on the Tolo news channel. "There won't be an attack on the city, it is agreed that there will be a peaceful handover," he said without elaborating.

A tweet from the Afghan presidential palace account said firing had been heard at a number of points around Kabul but that security forces, in coordination with international partners, had control of the city.

Many of Kabul's streets were choked by cars and people either trying to rush home or reach the airport, residents said.

"Some people have left their keys in the car and have started walking to the airport," one resident told Reuters by phone. Another said: "People are all going home in fear of fighting."

Afghans had fled the provinces to enter Kabul in recent days, fearing a return to hardline Islamist rule.

Early on Sunday, refugees from Taliban-controlled provinces were seen unloading belongings from taxis and families stood outside embassy gates, while the city's downtown was packed with people stocking up on supplies.

Choppers at the embassy

U.S. officials said diplomats were being ferried by helicopters to the airport from its embassy in the fortified Wazir Akbar Khan district, while a NATO official said several European Union staff had moved to a safer location in Kabul.

U.S. troops were still arriving at the airport, amid concern heavily armed Afghan security contractors could "mutiny" because they have not been assured the United States is committed to evacuating them, a person familiar with the issue said. The local U.S. mission staff did not know where they should report for evacuation or how that would happen, the source said, adding they believed a small residual security force comprised mostly of third country nationals remained at the embassy. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in Washington that the embassy was being moved to the airport deliberately and safely and has list of people to get out of harm's way.

A NATO official said the alliance was helping to secure the airport and that a political solution to the conflict was "now more urgent than ever".

Russia said it saw no need to evacuate its embassy for the time being.

Earlier on Sunday, the insurgents captured the eastern city of Jalalabad without a fight, giving them control of one of the main highways into landlocked Afghanistan. They also took over the nearby Torkham border post with Pakistan, leaving Kabul airport the only way out of Afghanistan still in government hands.

"Allowing passage to the Taliban was the only way to save civilian lives," a Jalalabad-based Afghan official told Reuters.

A video clip distributed by the Taliban showed people cheering and shouting "Allahu Akbar" - God is greatest - as a convoy of pickup trucks entered Jalalabad with fighters brandishing machine guns and the white Taliban flag.

Iran said it had set up camps along the Afghan border to provide temporary refuge to Afghans fleeing their country.

Transition leader

Three diplomatic sources said Ali Ahmad Jalali, a U.S.-based academic and former Afghan interior minister, could be named head of an interim administration in Kabul, though it was unclear whether the Taliban had agreed. In 2014, he was barred from running for president after refusing to give up his U.S. citizenship.

After U.S.-led forces withdrew the bulk of their remaining troops in the last month, the Taliban campaign accelerated as the Afghan military's defenses appeared to collapse.

U.S. President Joe Biden on Saturday authorized the deployment of 5,000 American troops to help evacuate citizens and ensure an "orderly and safe" drawdown of military personnel.

The Taliban said its rapid gains showed it was popularly accepted by the Afghan people. Biden said his administration had told Taliban officials in talks in Qatar that any action that put U.S. personnel at risk "will be met with a swift and strong U.S. military response."

He has faced rising domestic criticism after sticking to a plan, initiated by his Republican predecessor Donald Trump, to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan by Aug. 31.

"An endless American presence in the middle of another country's civil conflict was not acceptable to me," Biden said on Saturday.

08.15.21

US & EU officials ferried by helicopter, President fled, as Taliban seizes Afghanistan

08.15.21

Taliban enter Afghan capital as U.S. diplomats evacuate by chopper

Hundreds of refugees escaping the terror group's massive blitz across the country were seen unloading belongings from taxis and families standing outside embassy gates, while Kabul's downtown is packed with people stocking up on supplies

Reuters| Published: 08.15.21, 11:51

Taliban insurgents entered the Afghanistan capital Kabul on Sunday, an interior ministry official said, as the United States evacuated diplomats from its embassy by helicopter.

The senior official told Reuters the Taliban were coming in "from all sides" but gave no further details.

There were no reports of fighting. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement that the group was in talks with the government for a peaceful surrender of Kabul.

The entry into the capital caps a lightning advance by the Islamist militants, who were ousted 20 years ago by the United States after the Sept. 11 attacks. The collapse of the Afghan government defense has stunned diplomats - just last week, a U.S. intelligence estimate Kabul could hold out for at least three months.

"Taliban fighters are to be on standby on all entrances of Kabul until a peaceful and satisfactory transfer of power is agreed," the statement said.

A tweet from the Afghan Presidential palace account said firing had been heard at a number of points around Kabul but that security forces, in coordination with international partners, had control of the city.

There was no immediate word on the situation from President Ashraf Ghani. A palace official said he was in emergency talks with U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and top NATO officials.

Many of Kabul's streets were choked by cars and people either trying to rush home or reach the airport, residents said.

"Some people have left their keys in the car and have started walking to the airport," one resident told Reuters by phone. Another said: "People are all going home in fear of fighting."

U.S. officials said diplomats were being ferried by helicopter to the airport from its embassy in the fortified Wazir Akbar Khan district. More American troops were being sent to help in the evacuations after the Taliban's lightning advances brought the Islamist group to Kabul in a matter of days.

"Core" U.S. team members were working from the Kabul airport, a U.S. official said, while a NATO official said several EU staff had moved to a safer, undisclosed location in the capital.

Earlier on Sunday, the insurgents captured the eastern city of Jalalabad without a fight, giving them control of one of the main highways into landlocked Afghanistan. They also took over the nearby Torkham border post with Pakistan, leaving Kabul airport the only way out of Afghanistan that is still in government hands.

The capture of Jalalabad followed the **Taliban's seizure** of the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif late on Saturday, also with little fighting.

"There are no clashes taking place right now in Jalalabad because the governor has surrendered to the Taliban," a Jalalabad-based Afghan official told Reuters. "Allowing passage to the Taliban was the only way to save civilian lives."

A video clip distributed by the Taliban showed people cheering and shout Allahu Akbar - God is greatest - as a convoy of pick-up trucks entered the city with fighters brandishing machine guns and the white Taliban flag.

After U.S.-led forces withdrew the bulk of their remaining troops in the last month, the Taliban campaign accelerated as the Afghan military's defenses appeared to collapse. President Joe Biden on Saturday authorized the deployment of 5,000 U.S. troops to help evacuate citizens and ensure an "orderly and safe" drawdown of military personnel. A U.S. defense official said that included 1,000 newly approved troops from the 82nd Airborne Division.

Taliban fighters entered Mazar-i-Sharif virtually unopposed as security forces escaped up the highway to Uzbekistan, about 80 km (50 miles) to the north, provincial officials said. Unverified video on social media showed Afghan army vehicles and men in uniforms crowding the iron bridge between the Afghan town of Hairatan and Uzbekistan.

Two influential militia leaders supporting the government - Atta Mohammad Noor and Abdul Rashid Dostum - also fled. Noor said on social media that the **Taliban had been handed control of Balkh province**, where Mazar-i-Sharif is located, due to a "conspiracy." Popularly accepted

In a statement late on Saturday, the Taliban said its rapid gains showed it was popularly accepted by the Afghan people and reassured both Afghans and foreigners that they would be safe.

The Islamic Emirate, as the Taliban calls itself, "will, as always, protect their life, property and honor, and create a peaceful and secure environment for its beloved nation," it said, adding that diplomats and aid workers would also face no problems.

Afghans have fled the provinces to enter Kabul in recent days, fearing a return to hardline Islamist rule.

**Early on Sunday**, refugees from **Taliban-controlled provinces** were seen **unloading** belongings from **taxis** and families stood outside embassy gates, while the city's downtown was packed with people stocking up on supplies.

Hundreds of people slept huddled in tents or in the open in the city, by roadsides or in car parks, a resident said on Saturday night. "You can see the fear in their faces," he said. Biden said his administration had told Taliban officials in talks in Qatar that any action that put U.S. personnel at risk "will be met with a swift and strong U.S. military response."

He has faced rising domestic criticism as the Taliban have taken city after city far more quickly than predicted. The president has stuck to a plan, initiated by his Republican predecessor, Donald Trump, to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan by Aug. 31. Biden said it is up to the Afghan military to hold its own territory. "An endless American presence in the middle of another country's civil conflict was not acceptable to me," Biden said on Saturday.

Qatar, which has been hosting so-far inconclusive peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, said it had urged the insurgents to ceasefire. Ghani has given no sign of responding to a Taliban demand that he resign as a condition for any ceasefire.

08.15.21

Massive wildfire blocks out sun near Jerusalem, forces residents to evacuate

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Massive wildfire near Jerusalem forces residents to evacuate

Firefighters working to contain blaze but say it is advancing quickly amid strong winds, causing a massive black cloud to completely block out sun near the capital

Gilad Cohen ,Haim Golditch| Published: 08.15.21, 18:00

An abnormally massive wildfire near Jerusalem on Sunday forced residents in several small outlying communities to evacuate.

Some homes in the communities of Kiryat Ye'arim and Sho'eva were evacuated as all residents in Ramat Raziel were ordered to leave immediately.

Firefighters were trying to contain the blaze but said it was advancing quickly amid strong winds, causing a massive black cloud that blocked out the sun near the capital. Teams were also working to fend off the flames from the nearby Eitanim Psychiatric Facility.

Ten firefighting planes scrambled to aid in the efforts to extinguish the fire on top of reservist firefighters that were called to the scene.

"We are quickly working together with security and rescue services to control the flame," said the head of the Mateh Yehuda Regional Council Niv Vziel. "Council officials are at the scene and are in contact with local communities. We urge all residents and visitors to comply with police so we can get the situation under control as soon as possible."