

Brac moves staffers out of Afghanistan

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Brac International is relocating 12 Bangladeshi and two other expatriate staff to safe locations outside Afghanistan amid escalating violence in the South Asian country where the Taliban is closing in to control the country.

Pul-e-Alam, 70km from Kabul, fell to rapid Taliban advance following the fall of key cities of Kandahar and Herat. The majority of Afghanistan is now under the control of the Taliban following the withdrawal of Nato forces, Reuters reported.

Under such a deteriorating situation, Brac is relocating the expatriate staff and ensuring the safety and security of its staff in Afghanistan, said Brac International in a statement yesterday.

It said of the 14 expatriate staff, five including three Bangladeshis, are

on leave and have been asked not to return to Afghanistan.

Of the rest, three Bangladeshis are currently on their way back home and the remaining six Bangladeshi nationals are expecting to leave Afghanistan by August 22.

There are about 3,000 staff engaged with Brac projects in ten Afghan provinces.

"Brac International is implementing mitigation measures to minimise the risks to the safety and security of our staff and the communities we serve, which is our highest concern," said Shameran Abed, executive director for Brac International.

Brac International has been working in Afghanistan for more than 19 years, providing underserved communities with services including education, healthcare, community development, Covid-19 related support, humanitarian and food security assistance.



An Afghan policeman speaks to a commuter in car at a checkpoint along the road in Kabul on yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Taliban sniff Kabul

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his administration was planning, with government control over Afghanistan all but collapsed.

Ghani's speech came as US Marines were sent in to oversee an evacuation of embassy employees and thousands of Afghans, and their families, who fear retribution for working for the United States during its 20-year occupation.

It also came as the Taliban yesterday captured the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, which held out for days, residents told AFP.

"They are parading on their vehicles and motorbikes, firing into the air in celebration," said Atiqullah Ghayor, who lives near the city's famed blue mosque.

Warlords Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor, who had led a militia resistance to support government forces, had fled to Uzbekistan, about 30 kilometres to the north, an aide said.

Asadabad, the capital of Kunar in the east, also fell yesterday, as the Taliban tightened the noose.

The only other cities of any significance not to be taken yet were

Jalalabad, and Khost -- Pashtun-dominated and unlikely to offer much resistance.

With the country's second- and third-largest cities having already fallen into Taliban hands, Kabul has effectively become the besieged last stand for government forces who have offered little or no resistance elsewhere.

According to Reuters, the militants have taken control of 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals since Aug 6. Al Jazeera says the militants control at least 19 provincial capitals.

As the Taliban closed in on Kabul, panicked residents formed long lines outside banks, hoping to withdraw their savings. Some branches appeared to have already run of cash.

Insurgent fighters are now camped just 50 kilometres (30 miles) away from Kabul, with the United States and other countries scrambling to airlift their nationals out of the Afghan capital ahead of a feared all-out assault.

In Kabul, US embassy staff were ordered to begin shredding and burning sensitive material, as the first American troops from a planned

3,000-strong re-deployment started arriving to secure the airport and oversee evacuations.

A host of European countries -- including Britain, Germany, Denmark and Spain -- all announced the withdrawal of personnel from their respective embassies on Friday.

For Kabul residents and the tens of thousands who have sought refuge there in recent weeks, the overwhelming mood was one of confusion and fear.

Muzhda, 35, a single woman who arrived in the capital with her two sisters after fleeing nearby Parwan, said she was terrified for the future.

"I am crying day and night," she told AFP. "I have turned down marriage proposals in the past... If the Taliban come and force me to marry, I will commit suicide."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday warned that "Afghanistan is spinning out of control" and urged all parties to do more to protect civilians.

Guterres said he was "deeply disturbed" by accounts of poor treatment of women in areas seized

by the Taliban, who imposed an ultra-austere brand of Islam on Afghanistan during their 1996-2001 rule.

The scale and speed of the Taliban advance have shocked Afghans and the US-led alliance that poured billions into the country after toppling the insurgents in the wake of the September 11 attacks nearly 20 years ago.

Days before a final US withdrawal ordered by President Joe Biden, individual Afghan soldiers, units and even whole divisions have surrendered -- handing the Taliban even more vehicles and military hardware for their lightning advance.

Despite the frantic evacuation efforts, the Biden administration continues to insist that a complete Taliban takeover is not inevitable.

"Kabul is not right now in an imminent threat environment," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Friday, while acknowledging that Taliban fighters were "trying to isolate" the city.

Last week, US intelligence assessments concluded that The Taliban could isolate Kabul within 30

days and take it over in 90.

Biden said this week he did not regret his decision to follow through with the withdrawal. He noted Washington has spent more than \$1 trillion and lost thousands of troops over two decades, and called on Afghanistan's army and leaders to step up.

The Taliban offensive has accelerated in recent days, with the capture of Herat in the north and, just hours later, the seizure of Kandahar -- the group's spiritual heartland in the south.

On Ghani's TV speech, Kabul-based analyst Sayed Naser Mosawi said it appeared the president was running out of options.

"The president's message was not definitive enough to say he is willing to fight on to the end, but rather to me it sounds that he may be willing to give into some sort of settlement -- if that doesn't mean surrender," he added.

Yesterday, helicopters flitted back and forth between Kabul's airport and the vast US diplomatic compound in the heavily fortified Green Zone -- 46 years after choppers evacuated Americans from Saigon, signalling the end of the Vietnam War.

In desperation, US scours for countries willing to house Afghan refugees

REUTERS, Washington

President Joe Biden's administration has been holding secret talks with more countries than previously known in a desperate attempt to secure deals to temporarily house at-risk Afghans who worked for the US government, four US officials told Reuters.

The previously unreported discussions with such countries as Kosovo and Albania underscore the administration's desire to protect US-affiliated Afghans from Taliban reprisals while safely completing the process of approving their US visas.

With the Taliban tightening their grip on Afghanistan at a shockingly swift pace, the United States on Thursday announced it would send 1,000 personnel to Qatar to accelerate the processing of applications for Special Immigrant Visas (SIV).

Afghans who served as interpreters

for the US government and in other jobs are entitled to apply for the SIV program.

So far, about 1,200 Afghans have been evacuated to the United States and that number is set to rise to 3,500 in the coming weeks under "Operation Allies Refuge," with some going to a U.S. military base in Virginia to finalize their paperwork and others directly to US hosts.

Fearful the Taliban's advances are raising the threat to SIV applicants still awaiting processing, Washington is seeking third countries to host them until their paperwork is done and they can fly to the United States.

"It is deeply troubling that there is no concrete plan in place to evacuate allies who are clearly in harm's way," said Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service resettlement organization.

"It is baffling why the administration has been taking so long in order to secure these agreements," she said.

While there still are no third country agreements, a State Department spokesperson said, "We are evaluating all available options."

Two US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said countries were hesitant to take in the Afghans because of concerns about the quality of security vetting and health screening for COVID-19 before they were allowed to fly.

The Biden administration was exploring having Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan take in thousands of applicants, but that effort has made little progress.

"There's concerns that you might expect: 'Who are these people? How do you know these people? Can you assure that these people will get visas to the United States? Who's going to care for and feed these people. What

happens if these people wander off this facility you've got them in?'" a senior State Department official said.

The official declined to confirm the countries in talks with the United States.

A deal to house about 8,000 Afghans in Qatar, which hosts a large U.S. military base, has been close for weeks, said a second U.S. official and another person familiar with the matter, but a formal agreement has yet to be announced.

Officials warn the pace of any potential agreements may be stymied by the rapidly changing Afghanistan situation.

U.S. Representative Jason Crow, who has led congressional efforts to speed SIV processing, said the administration should use a temporary U.S. troop deployment at Kabul airport for the drawdown of embassy staff to accelerate evacuations of SIV applicants irrespective of whether it has a third country deal.

Sharks survived

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Uppsala University, have shed light on how the dinosaur-killing extinction event transformed ecosystems and the kinds of marine organisms the change favoured. They found sharks to have maintained a constant diversity across the Earth's oceans during this time.

The researchers analysed the morphology of 1,239 fossil shark teeth pertaining to the K-Pg boundary, which is the period between the late Cretaceous 83.6 million years ago and the early Paleogene 56 million years ago. This is when the age of the dinosaurs came to an end.

Daily deaths

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Zahid Maleque told a discussion on the National Mourning Day at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) in the capital. The countrywide lockdown was enforced from July 23-August 11.

About the current vaccination campaign, the minister said, "We will get six crore doses from China by November. Vaccines are coming from other sources as well. Mass inoculation will accelerate if vaccine supplies remain stable.

"However, everyone must continue to follow the health guidelines like wearing masks and maintaining social distance."

As of yesterday, 23,988 confirmed patients of Covid-19 had died since the first cases were reported and the total number of officially acknowledged cases was 14,12,218.

In tests done during the 24 hours preceding 8:00am, 20.66 percent turned out to be positive, said a statement from the Directorate General of Health Services.

Meanwhile, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 urged the government on Friday to reconsider its decision of lifting most of the coronavirus restrictions from Wednesday.

NTAC chief Mohammad Shahidullah in a press release said if the lockdown could continue for another couple weeks, the benefits of the prior lockdown could be fully reaped.

The NTAC recommended that meetings, gatherings, social events, tourist attractions, and community centres be restricted for longer.

It also recommended restaurants to sell takeouts only and public transport to operate with half the seats empty.

The committee also urged continuing working from home where possible and recommended the drug administration to ensure that the three-layer fabric masks are produced maintaining the standard.

The NTAC recommended reopening classes for certain medical students maintaining the health safety protocols.

Naval operation that shook Pakistan

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back Pak army fired on us. The bullet passed right past my ears but fortunately it did not hit me."

Fortunately, all the naval commandos safely reached shelter.

The operation had successfully disrupted the arms and ammunition supply line of the Pakistanis. It cut the lifeline of the Pakistan army. The operation got wide publicity in the world media and, after these successful operations, no foreign ship agreed to anchor in the ports of the then East Pakistan.

INDIA DOESN'T WANT WAR:

INDIRA

Referring to Pakistani President Yahya

Khan's threats of war, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi today said, "We do not want war with any one nor do we indulge in sabre rattling. We also do not shout war slogans. We are also not afraid of any threats. We shall face the challenge when they come."

Indira Gandhi was addressing a mammoth gathering at the Red Fort on the occasion of the 24th anniversary of India's independence.

Apparently referring to the demand for early recognition of Bangladesh, she said, "We must think whether by asking certain steps we strengthen the current struggle in Bangladesh. I can assure that whatever we do will be with this end in view."

1971'S CRUDEST JOKE

Commenting on a news report from Islamabad that Tikka Khan had been decorated by Yahya with the civil award of Hilal-e-Quaid-i-Azam, Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra today commented that it was the crudest joke of 1971.

The clandestine radio operated by the Bangladesh government-in-exile added, "This shows that, in some peculiar way, history does repeat itself sometime. General Dyer who massacred within minutes a peaceful crowd at Jalianwalabag was honoured by London's Daily Express with the Silver Sword of Valour on his arrival from India. Of course,

the crimes of Tikka Khan against humanity dating from the massacre of Baluch people in the midst of their Eid day prayer until today are of a much grislier order than that of Dyer. This unconscious disciple of Marquis de Sade is really in the class of Eichman and Dr Mengele and the commandants of Hitler's extermination camps at Auswitz, Belsen and Dachau. Hitler decorated them with some of the highest orders of the Nazi Reich-needless to say, in the name of their services to German people and state."

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Powerful quake kills 29 in Haiti

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witnesses, meaning there will likely be fewer fatalities than the devastating 2010 disaster.

The nearest big town was Les Cayes, with a population of around 126,000, where many buildings collapsed or suffered major damage, according to authorities, who said they were searching for survivors in the rubble.

"We've counted a total of 29 fatalities to date and an important number of injured," Civil Protection Director Jerry Chandler told a news conference.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry declared a month-long state of emergency.

In Les Cayes, locals said water had briefly flooded the coastal town, causing panic amid fear of a tsunami, but then appeared to retreat. Haitian media outlets reported some people

along the coast had already fled to the mountains.

The US Tsunami Warning System issued a tsunami warning after the quake, lifting it shortly thereafter.

US President Joe Biden authorized an immediate US response to the earthquake and named Samantha Power, administrator of the US Agency for International Development, coordinator of the effort.

The earthquake comes just over a month after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, who had been ruling by decree, which deepened the country's political turmoil.

Meanwhile, swaths of Haiti are facing growing hunger and healthcare services are overwhelmed by Covid-19. Access to the southern region, where

the quake struck, has been restricted by gang control of key areas.

That region had only recently recovered from Hurricane Matthew, which struck in 2016, killing hundreds and causing widespread devastation. Haiti is now in the cone of Tropical Storm Grace which could bring heavy rains early next week.

"This country just never finds a break! Each year of mismanagement did not hurt but the cumulative effects made us vulnerable to everything," said Haitian entrepreneur Marc Alain Boucicault on Twitter.

"Its going to take years to fix things and we have not even started!"

In Port-au-Prince, residents traumatized by the 2010 quake rushed, screaming, into the streets and stayed there as the aftershocks rumbled on.

20 Rohingyas missing as boat sinks in Bay

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

At least 20 Rohingyas went missing after a boat, carrying 30 of the community, capsized in the Bay of Bengal early yesterday.

The Rohingyas were fleeing Bhasan Char at midnight, said members of Bangladesh Coast Guard.

Captain Kazi Shah Alam, zonal commander of Coast Guard (East), said the boat capsized in the middle of the sea, around 10 to 15 kilometres off Bhasan Char.

"Our rescue vessels have already reached the spot and our team conducting a rescue mission there to find the missing Rohingyas," he added.

According to sources in Bangladesh Coast Guard, around 30 Rohingyas fled Bhasan Char that night by boat. Travelling for around two and a half hours at the Bay, the boat capsized.

A nearby fishing trawler rescued around 10 to 11 Rohingyas from the sea and later dropped them at Bhasan Char. Only then, the authorities got information about the boat capsize and conducted a rescue operation, sources added.

Two patrol boats of Bangladesh Coast Guard, from Sandwip and Bhasan Char, started a search operation. Two more vessels later joined the operation to identify the exact location where the boat capsized, sources said.

Meanwhile, over 100 Rohingyas, including women and children, were detained in Chattogram after they fled Bhasan Char via boat.

According to police, the Rohingyas managed to flee the island with the help of local brokers.

Court orders

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According to the reports cited by the court, Aynal Haque, 52, and his wife Jamiran, 42, had been suffering isolation for almost four months at Chhalimpur village in Debagani, Panchagarh, after a local Islamic leader said Jamiran must marry another man, get a divorce from that man, and then remarry Aynal.

She must do this because Aynal uttered the word talaq three times in a row when he and his wife were fighting.

As the couple didn't obey the order, the village elders ordered everyone in the neighbourhood to isolate them and not even talk to them.

The villagers didn't even allow Aynal and Jamiran to see their children.

In the order, the court said those involved in imposing the fatwa and forcing the couple into isolation committed serious offences as per the law.

On Monday, Aynal and Jamiran submitted a complaint to Upazila Nirbahi Officer Prottoy Hasan.

On Thursday afternoon, the local administration officials held a meeting with the villagers and negotiated an end to the isolation, the officer told The Daily Star.

My boy

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over by a lorry. Shamsuddin also alleged that Riazuddin somehow got an officer of the police station to register the false case after killing his 15-year-old son, Shanta Sajeeb Joy. The case falsely stated that he was 18.

The grieving father demanded immediate intervention from the prime minister, home minister, and the inspector general of police for a proper investigation into his son's death.

He also demanded exemplary punishment to those involved in the killing and the policemen who helped Riaz file the "false case."

The aggrieved father said after his son Joy used to work at a shoe factory in Islambagh after education in a madrasa stopped amid the pandemic.

Joy, his cousin and some other boys were hanging around Janata Bank on Urdu Road around 8:30pm on August 8 when Riaz, 55, known in the neighbourhood as an addict, had an altercation with Joy. "Following the altercation, Riaz killed my son by throwing him under a lorry." After killing him, Riaz filed the false case.

"Riaz used to live in our neighbourhood and Joy knew him well. How does it make sense that my son would snatch money from him?" he asked.

Elias Hossain, assistant commissioner (Chawkbazar) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said a journalist has partial video footage of what happened. "We have collected CCTV footage. The footage before the scuffle and the death of the boy shows that five to six boys are forcing the complainant of the case into an alley," he said.

The next footage shows Riaz and Joy scuffling and at one stage Joy falling under the rear wheel of a lorry, he added.

He added that one of the accused had confessed to a magistrate that they robbed Riaz.

Police are also investigating the claim that it was a planned murder, he said, "We are also looking into the matter with importance."