

# 'Afghanistan is spinning out of control'

UN chief calls on Taliban to halt offensive, laments 'horrifying' curbs imposed on Afghan women

REUTERS, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called on the Taliban to immediately halt their offensive in Afghanistan, and warned that "Afghanistan is spinning out of control."



2001, women could not work, girls were not allowed to attend school and women had to cover their face and be accompanied by a male relative if they wanted to venture out of their homes.

The United Nations is evaluating the security situation in Afghanistan on "an hour-by-hour basis" and moving some staff to the capital Kabul, but is not evacuating anyone from the country, the UN spokesman said earlier on Friday.

The world body had "a very light footprint" in some areas taken by the Taliban, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters. It has about 3,000 national staff and about 300 international staff on the ground in Afghanistan.

The fighters have captured much of northern, western and southern Afghanistan in a breakneck military operation less than three weeks before the United States is set to withdraw its last troops, raising fears of a full takeover or another Afghan civil war.

"This is the moment to halt the offensive. This is the moment to start serious negotiation. This is the moment to avoid a prolonged civil war, or the isolation of Afghanistan," Guterres told reporters in New York on Friday.

Guterres called on all parties to do more to protect civilians.

He also said he was "deeply disturbed by early indications that the Taliban are imposing severe restrictions on human rights in the areas under their control, particularly targeting women and journalists."

"It is particularly horrifying and heartbreaking to see reports of the hard-won rights of Afghan girls and women being ripped away from them," he said.

Under Taliban rule between 1996 and

## Canada to accept 20,000 vulnerable Afghans

REUTERS, Ottawa

Canada plans to resettle more than 20,000 vulnerable Afghans including women leaders, human rights workers and reporters to protect them from Taliban reprisals, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said on Friday.

The effort is in addition to an earlier initiative to welcome thousands of Afghans who worked for the Canadian government, such as interpreters, embassy workers and their families, he told a news conference.

REUTERS, Beijing

A series of photos published last month by Chinese state media of Foreign Minister Wang Yi standing shoulder to shoulder with visiting Taliban official decked out in traditional tunic and turban raised eyebrows on the country's social media.

Since then, China's propaganda machinery has quietly begun preparing its people to accept an increasingly likely scenario that Beijing might have to recognize the Taliban, the hard line Islamist movement that is rapidly gaining territory in Afghanistan, as a legitimate regime.

On Friday, the Global Times, a major state-backed tabloid, published an interview with the leader of an Afghan opposition party who said "the transitional government must include the Taliban".

The Taliban's momentum as US forces withdraw is awkward for China, which has blamed religious extremism as a destabilizing force in its western Xinjiang region and has long worried that Taliban-controlled territory would be used to harbour separatist forces.

## Pragmatic China braces for awkward reality

But China also hews to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

It has also drastically tightened security in Xinjiang, hardening its borders and putting what UN experts and rights groups estimate were at least a million ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslims in detention centres that China describes as vocational training facilities to help stamp out Islamist extremism and separatism.

Last month's meeting in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin followed a similar visit by a Taliban delegation in 2019, but comes as the group is much more powerful, with Wang saying he hoped Afghanistan can have a "moderate Islamist policy".

"Isn't this the same Taliban that blew up the Buddhas of Bamian in front of world media? Shouldn't we have a bottom line?" a Chinese netizen commented on the Twitter-like Weibo below a news clip showing Wang standing next to a Taliban official.

In dealing with the Taliban, an increasingly powerful China may be able to leverage the fact that, unlike Russia or the



United States, it has never fought them.

When the Taliban were last in power between 1996-2001, China had already suspended relations with Afghanistan, having pulled out its diplomats in 1993 following the outbreak of civil war.

"This is us being pragmatic. How you want to rule your country is largely your own business, just don't let that affect

China," said Lin Minwang, a South Asia expert with Shanghai's Fudan University.

"When a major Asian power like China shows it recognizes Taliban's political legitimacy by meeting them so openly, it is giving the Taliban a big diplomatic win," Lin said.

State media published at least two analytical stories this week highlighting that Afghanistan had been the "graveyard of empires" and cautioning China not to be mired in the "Great Game", reinforcing a message that China harbours neither the intentions of sending troops into Afghanistan nor the illusion that it can fill the power vacuum left by the United States.

After their meeting with Wang, the Taliban said they hope China can play a bigger economic role.

"This shows that China might have dangled promises of economic aid and investment to a post-war Afghanistan as a carrot to encourage both sides to stop fighting and reach a political settlement," said Zhang Li, a professor of South Asian studies at Sichuan University.



A Taliban fighter looks on as he stands at the city of Ghazni, Afghanistan, yesterday. Under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, women could not work, girls were not allowed to attend school and women had to cover their face and be accompanied by a male relative if they wanted to venture out of their homes.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Abandoned weapons embolden Taliban

AFP, Kabul

The United States spent billions supplying the Afghan military with the tools to defeat the Taliban, but the rapid capitulation of the armed forces means that weaponry is now fuelling the insurgents' astonishing battlefield successes.

"We provided our Afghan partners with all the tools -- let me emphasise: all the tools," US President Joe Biden said when defending his decision to withdraw American forces and leave the fight to the locals.

But Afghan defence forces have shown little appetite for that fight and, in their tens of thousands, have been laying down their arms -- only for the Taliban to immediately pick them up.

The Taliban's social media is awash with videos of Taliban fighters seizing weapons caches -- the majority



supplied by Western powers.

Footage of Afghan soldiers surrendering in the northern city of Kunduz shows army vehicles loaded with heavy weapons and mounted with artillery guns safely in the hands of the insurgent rank and file.

While US forces took the "sophisticated" equipment with them when they withdrew, the Taliban

blitz has handed the group "vehicles, humvees, small arms and light weapons, as well as ammunition", Justine Fleischner of weapons-tracking group Conflict Armament Research, told AFP.

Experts say such hauls -- on top of unacknowledged support from regional allies such as Pakistan -- has given the Taliban a massive boost.

The weapons will not only help the Taliban's march on Kabul but "strengthen its authority" in the cities it has captured, said Raffaello Pantucci, senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

With US troops all but gone, the Taliban now find themselves flush with American-supplied tools, without having to raise a single penny.

"It is incredibly serious. It is clearly going to be a massive boon to them," he said.

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## 'They sold us out'

Afghans question forces' resolve as Taliban gain across country

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Residents in Herat and Kandahar say they cannot believe how quickly both cities fell after the Taliban's weeks-long effort to take two of Afghanistan's largest cities.

"They literally sold us out, there was no government resistance," one female resident of Kandahar told Al Jazeera, fighting back tears late on Thursday evening.

"I never imagined that Kandahar would be taken so easily," she said echoing a sentiment made by Afghans across the country when the Taliban was blazing through the districts since it stepped up an offensive in May after the United States began the final withdrawal of its forces from the country.

A supporter of a local anti-Taliban militia known as an "uprising force" in the western city of Herat agreed.

"The fact that all these places are being handed over, watch: Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif will be next," he said referring to two of the last remaining big cities still in government hands.

The Taliban has taken control of 18 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals since August 6.

For many people, the back-to-back falls on Thursday of Kandahar and Herat, the nation's second and third largest cities, was a turning point in an increasingly violent battle between the forces of the Kabul government and the Taliban.

There was also curiosity on the first official day of Taliban control in Herat and Kandahar. One resident in Herat said that early on Friday morning, people went out to "see the Taliban".

In Kandahar, a young man in his 20s said the group was in a celebratory mood, firing bullets into the air to signal its success. But a journalist in Kandahar said the celebrations did not last long, and the group soon started to harass residents and raid houses.

Kandahar residents speaking to Al Jazeera said the raids mostly focused on people suspected to be part of the government, but that people living nearby potential targets also feared having their homes searched.

"I feel they have very strong intelligence and an actual list," said one resident who did not leave their home in the city for fear of provoking the group's ire.

Another Kandahari youth put the group's actions much more simply: "They are the same Taliban I've been cursing all my life."

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## UK won't abandon Afghanistan

Say PM as criticism mounts over pullout

AFP, London

Britain will not abandon Afghanistan, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vowed on Friday, even as he confirmed the imminent withdrawal of most embassy staff in the face of a rapid Taliban onslaught.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw US troops, forcing Nato allies to follow suit, "leaves a very big problem on the ground" and handed momentum to the Taliban.

Johnson, however, said after convening crisis talks with senior cabinet colleagues that the West retained a strategic interest in backing the beleaguered Kabul government.

"I think we have got to be realistic about the power of the UK or any power to impose a military solution -- a combat solution -- in Afghanistan," he told reporters.

"What we certainly can do is work with all our partners in the region, around the world, who share an interest with us in preventing Afghanistan once again becoming a breeding ground for terror.

"What we must do now is not turn our backs on Afghanistan," he stressed, adding that Britain could be "extremely proud" of its role in the country, especially in advancing girls' education -- gains that are now imperilled by the Taliban advance.