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In abode of love and grief



PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

Amidst the grand public arrangements made across the country on the National Mourning Day, it is easy to forget that for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, it is an immensely personal occasion, the intensity of which many cannot even begin to fathom.

While the nation commemorated outside, she spent most of her time at her home on Dhanmondi 32, in the room she shared with her sister Sheikh Rehana when they were growing up.

The room is kept under lock and key, even as the rest of the house has been turned into a museum. This is the room Hasina chooses to spend her time in whenever she visits the house.

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"One more year, or five more years, of US military presence would not have made a difference if the Afghan military cannot or will not hold its own country."
US PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN



"The Afghan people should not worry... there will be no attack on the city [Kabul] and there will be a peaceful transfer of power to the transitional government."
AFGHAN INTERIOR MINISTER ABDUL SATTAR MIRZAKWAL

Taliban enter Kabul

Eye full power, say no to transitional govt; president Ghani flees 'to avoid bloodshed'; 'Kabul airport fired at'; countries hurry to get citizens out; UK urges united front against insurgents; UNSC to meet



Taliban fighters and local people sit on an Afghan National Army humvee vehicle on a street in Jalalabad province yesterday. People, right top, wait to cross the Friendship Gate crossing point at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border town of Chaman. The entrance gate of the green zone is pictured after the evacuation in Kabul. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

AGENCIES

Taliban insurgents entered Kabul unopposed and President Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan yesterday, bringing the Islamist militants close to taking over the country two decades after they were overthrown by a US-led invasion.

It was not yet clear where Ghani was headed or how exactly power would be transferred following the Taliban's lightning sweep in recent weeks across Afghanistan. Their advance accelerated as US and other foreign troops withdrew in line with President Joe Biden's desire to end America's longest war, launched in the wake of the Sept 11, 2001 attacks.

By evening, the Taliban said they had taken control of most of the districts around the outskirts of the capital to fill void left by Afghan security forces.

Insurgents entered the presidential palace and took control of it, two senior Taliban commanders in Kabul said. The Afghan government did not confirm this.

The US Embassy said there were reports the capital's airport, where diplomats of many countries, officials and other Afghans had fled, had come under fire.

"The security situation in Kabul is changing quickly including at the airport. There are reports of the airport taking fire; therefore we are instructing US citizens to shelter in place," an embassy security alert said.

Hundreds of Afghans, some of them government ministers and

government employees and also other civilians including many women and children, crowded in the terminal desperately waiting for flights out.

"The airport is out of control... the (Afghan) government just sold us out," said an official at the scene who declined to be named for security reasons.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the Western alliance was working to keep the airport running "to facilitate and coordinate evacuations."



President Ashraf Ghani

UN Security Council will meet today to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, diplomats told Reuters.

Ghani's destination was uncertain: a senior Interior Ministry official said he had left for Tajikistan, while a Foreign Ministry official said his location was unknown and the Taliban said it was checking his whereabouts.

Ghani's departure from office was one of the key demands of the Taliban in months of peace talks with the government, but he had

stubbornly clung to power.

Early today, from an undisclosed location, Ghani said he fled the country to 'avoid bloodshed,' reported AFP.

Earlier yesterday, Taliban fighters reached Kabul "from all sides", Interior Ministry officials told Reuters and there were some reports of sporadic gunfire around the city.

A Kabul hospital said more than 40 people wounded in clashes on the outskirts were being treated, but there did not appear to be major fighting.

It came despite the government's acting interior minister, Abdul Sattar Mirzakawal, said power would be handed over to a transitional administration. He tweeted: "There won't be an attack on the city, it is agreed that there will be a peaceful handover."

Three diplomatic sources said Ali Ahmad Jalali, a US-based academic and former Afghan interior minister, could be named head of an interim administration in Kabul. In 2009, he was barred from running for president after refusing to give up his US citizenship.

However, two Taliban officials told Reuters there would be no transitional government. The Taliban said earlier it was waiting for Ghani's Western-backed government to surrender peacefully.

Many Afghans fear the Taliban will return to past harsh practices in their imposition of sharia, or Islamic religious law. During their

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TIMELINE OF TALIBAN'S LIGHTNING OFFENSIVE

Taliban insurgents began entering Kabul yesterday after taking control of all of Afghanistan's major cities apart from the capital. Following are some of the major milestones in the Islamist militant movement's advance in recent months.

APRIL 14 - President Joe Biden announces US troops will withdraw from Afghanistan starting on May 1 and ending on Sept 11, bringing America's longest war to a close.

MAY 4 - Taliban fighters launch a major offensive on Afghan forces in southern Helmand province. They also attack in at least six other provinces.

MAY 11 - The Taliban capture Nerkh district just outside the capital Kabul as violence intensifies across the country.

JUNE 7 - Senior government officials say more than 150 Afghan soldiers are killed in 24 hours as fighting worsens. They add that fighting is raging in 26 of the country's 34 provinces.

JUNE 22 - Taliban fighters launch a series of attacks in the north of the country, far from their traditional strongholds in the south. The UN envoy for Afghanistan says they have taken more than 50 of 370 districts.

JULY 2 - American troops quietly pull out of their main military base in Afghanistan - Bagram Air Base, an hour's drive from Kabul. It effectively ends US involvement in the war.

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SPECIAL MASS VACCINATION Not happening anytime soon

Says health minister citing shortage of shots

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Due to the shortage of Covid-19 vaccine doses, the government will not be able to launch the planned special mass vaccination campaign anytime soon, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said yesterday.

"We inoculated 34 lakh people in a day during the [special] mass inoculation. We will run such a campaign again after we get enough doses," Zahid told journalists after a discussion on the National Mourning Day.

A few days ago, the director general of the health directorate, Prof Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam, said the government had plans to launch a special campaign from August 17.

"The duration of the special campaign will depend on the availability of vaccine doses," he told this newspaper on Thursday.

The pilot six-day special vaccination drive ended on Thursday with 55 lakh people receiving their first shot, according to the DGHS. The target at the outset was to vaccinate 32 lakh people. But the number was raised due to overwhelming demand for the vaccines.

However, the six-day drive, was mired by irregularities. People stood in mile-long queues on roads, crowds jammed themselves into vaccination centres and brawls broke out, turning into potential superspreading events. Besides, thousands returned home without jabs due to shortage of vaccine doses.

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13 killed in two road crashes

STAR REPORT

At least 13 people were killed in two road accidents in Mymensingh and Cox's Bazar between Saturday night and yesterday morning.

Seven of them died when a microbus fell into a roadside ditch around 10:00am yesterday, after the driver of a microbus lost control of the vehicle while trying to avoid hitting a pedestrian on the Cox's Bazar-Chattoogram highway.

The pedestrian was also among those killed in the accident.

The incident took place in Fasiakhali area of Cox's Bazar's Chakaria upazila, said Md Zubair, officer-in-charge of Chakaria Police Station.

Quoting locals, the OC said while attempting to avoid hitting a pedestrian, the driver microbus lost control and the vehicle then crashed into an electric pole and fell into the ditch.

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IN SILENCE, SHE REMEMBERS



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina praying for the departed soul of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Bangabandhu Memorial Museum yesterday, the National Mourning Day.

PHOTO: PMO

REOPENING SCHOOLS Universities to lead way

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The government is considering reopening educational institutions in phases with universities set to be the first to resume in-person classes amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a large number of university teachers and students have either been fully vaccinated or will get both doses of Covid-19 vaccine soon, in-person classes will begin in universities first. Colleges and schools will also reopen following universities, said senior education ministry officials.

"The Prime Minister's Office has ordered to begin work with an aim to reopen educational institutions from September in phases after reviewing the Covid-19 situation," said a top education ministry official.

Education Minister Dipu Moni yesterday said the government was taking all kinds of preparation to reopen educational institutions.

"If the Covid-19 infection rate drops to the lowest level, we can have a situation to reopen all educational institutions," she said while talking to reporters after paying homage to the portrait of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the International

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