

TALIBAN'S VICTORY MARCH

Warlords decry 'conspiracy'

REUTERS, Kabul

Two of Afghanistan's most notorious regional warlords fled on Saturday as the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif fell to the Taliban and security forces abandoned the city in a headlong rush up the highway to the safety of neighbouring Uzbekistan.

Atta Mohammad Noor, the former governor of Balkh province and the ethnic Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum have been involved in wars in Afghanistan since the days of the Soviet invasion and had been among the Taliban's fiercest enemies.

Noor, who had been commanding local militia forces when Mazar-i-Sharif fell to the Taliban, said both he and Dostum were safe and blamed the fall of the city on a "conspiracy".

Taliban forces entered the city virtually unopposed as security forces escaped up the highway to Uzbekistan, officials said.

"Despite our firm resistance, sadly, all the government and the #ANDSF equipments were handed over to the #Taliban as a result of a big organised & cowardly plot," Noor wrote on Twitter. "They had orchestrated the plot to trap Marshal Dostum and myself too, but they didn't succeed."

Earlier in the week, Ismail Khan, one of the leaders of the original uprising that triggered the 1979 Soviet invasion, was captured by the Taliban in the western city of Herat and photographed surrounded by grinning insurgent fighters.



Taliban fighters sit over a vehicle on a street in Laghman province, yesterday. Taliban insurgents entered Afghanistan's capital Kabul yesterday and an official said President Ashraf Ghani had left the country, capping the militants' lightning push for power.

PHOTO: AFP

TALIBAN MOVEMENT

WHO ARE THEY?

RELIGIOUS STUDENTS: The Taliban originated among young Afghans who studied in Sunni Islamic schools called madrassas in Pakistan after fleeing Afghanistan during the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation. They take their name from talib, the Arabic word for student. In the early 1990s, with Afghanistan in the chaos and corruption of civil war, the Taliban was formed in the southern province of Kandahar under the leadership of one-eyed warrior-cleric Mullah Omar. Omar, who led them until his death in 2013, was from a stronghold of the powerful Pashtun ethnic group from which most Taliban fighters come. Haibatullah Akhundzada is now the top leader, while Taliban co-founder Mullah Baradar heads the political wing.

DRAMATIC RISE TO POWER: Promising to restore order and justice, after the Soviet occupation, the Taliban rose dramatically. They drew substantial support from Pakistan and initially had the tacit approval of the United States. In 1994 they seized the city of Kandahar almost without a fight. Equipped with tanks, heavy weapons and the cash to buy the support of local commanders, they steadily moved north, before capturing the capital Kabul on September 27, 1996. President Burhanuddin Rabbani had already fled. Taliban fighters dragged former communist president Mohammed Najibullah from a United Nations office where he had been sheltering, and hanged him in a public street after torturing him.

REIGN OF TERROR: The Taliban government imposed the strictest interpretations of sharia, establishing religious police for the suppression of "vice". Music, television and popular pastimes such as kite-flying were banned. Girls' schools were closed, while women were prevented from working and forced to wear an all-covering burqa in public. Taliban courts handed out extreme punishments including chopping off the hands of thieves and stoning to death women accused of adultery. By 1998, they had control of 80 percent of the country, but were only recognised as the legal government by Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. The Taliban allowed Afghanistan to become a sanctuary for Al-Qaeda, which set up training camps.

TALIBAN TOPPLED: The September 11, 2001 attacks that killed around 3,000 people in the US were immediately blamed on al-Qaeda. Accusing the Taliban of refusing to hand over Bin Laden, the US and allies launched air strikes on Afghanistan in October. By early December the Taliban government had fallen, its leaders fleeing to their strongholds in the south and east, or across the border into Pakistan's tribal zone.

BLOODY INSURGENCE: At first written off as a spent force, the Taliban rebuilt to lead an insurgency against the new Western-backed government. Making heavy use of improvised bombings and suicide attacks, they labelled as "crusaders" the tens of thousands of foreign troops who deployed into the country as part of a US-dominated NATO force. The NATO combat mission ended in December 2014 and the bulk of Western forces withdrew.

US EXIT, TALIBAN OFFENSIVE: In 2018 the US and Taliban began discreet talks in Doha, that were interrupted several times after attacks against American troops. A historic deal was signed by the US with the Taliban in Doha on February 29, 2020, laying out a timetable for a full American troop withdrawal. On July 6, 2021, the US military said it had completed 90 percent of its retreat from Afghanistan. Five weeks later, the Taliban are on the outskirts of the capital Kabul, and the government has conceded it is preparing for a "transfer of power".

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

\$89 billion gone to waste

Taliban offensive exposes failure of US efforts to build Afghan army

REUTERS, Kabul/Washington

The rout of Afghan forces as Taliban fighters take one provincial city after another provides a stark answer to anyone wondering about the success of two decades of US-led efforts to build a local army.

Despite about \$89 billion budgeted for training the Afghan army, it took the Taliban little more than a month to brush it aside. Over the last few days, the insurgents have seized every major city in Afghanistan - from Kandahar in the south to Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, Herat in the west to Jalalabad in the east.

They now stand at the gates of Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani praised Afghan security and defense forces in a brief televised address on Saturday, saying they had "a strong spirit to defend their people and country."

But still, there has been shock at the lack of resistance put up by many Afghan army units. Some abandoned their posts and others reached agreements with the Taliban to stop fighting and hand over their weapons and equipment.

In some instances, US officials say, provincial governors asked security forces to surrender or escape, perhaps in order to avoid further bloodshed because they believed defeat was unavoidable.

Where deals were not cut, Afghan forces still appear to have melted away.

"Once morale goes, it spreads very quickly,

and that is at least partly to blame," a US official said.

American officers have long worried that rampant corruption, well documented in parts of Afghanistan's military and political leadership, would undermine the resolve of badly paid, ill-fed and erratically supplied front-line soldiers - some of whom have been left for months or even years on end in isolated outposts, where they could be picked off by the Taliban.

Over many years, hundreds of Afghan soldiers were killed each month. But the army fought on, without any of the airborne evacuation of casualties and expert surgical care standard in Western armies, as long as international backing was there. Once that went, their resolve evaporated.

"Would you give your life for leaders who don't pay you on time and are more interested in their own future?" a second US official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, asked.

It is an analysis shared by some in the Taliban movement itself.

One Taliban commander in the central province of Ghazni said the government forces' collapse started as soon as US forces started withdrawing "as they didn't have any ideology except fleeing the Americans."

"The only reason for this unexpected fall of provinces was our commitment and the withdrawal of US troops," he said.



The defeat highlights the failure of the United States to create a fighting force in the image of its own highly professional military with a motivated, well-trained leadership, high-tech weaponry and seamless logistical support.

On paper, Afghan security forces numbered around 300,000 soldiers. In reality, the numbers were never that high.

Dependent on a small number of elite Special Forces units that were shunted from province to province as more cities fell to the Taliban, the already high rate of desertion in the regular army soared.

As government forces started to fall apart, hastily recruited local militias, loyal to prominent regional leaders such as Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum in the northern province of Faryab or Ismail Khan in Herat,

also rushed in to fight.

Western countries had long been wary of such militias. Though more in line with the realities of traditional Afghan politics where personal, local or ethnic ties outweigh loyalty to the state, they were also open to corruption and abuse and ultimately proved no more effective than conventional forces.

Dostum fled to Uzbekistan as the Taliban advanced and Khan surrendered to the insurgents.

Richard Armitage, the former US diplomat who organized a flotilla of South Vietnamese Navy ships to carry some 30,000 refugees out of Saigon before it fell in April 1975, has watched as the threat of a similar disaster unfolds in Kabul.

As deputy Secretary of State under former President George W. Bush when the United States invaded in 2001, he was deeply involved in Afghanistan diplomacy. He said the Afghan army's collapse pointed to the wider failures of two decades of international efforts.

"I hear people expressing frustration in the press that the Afghan army can't fight a long fight," he said. "I can assure you the Afghan army has fought, can fight and if it's got a trigger and something comes out of the barrel, they can use it."

"The question is, is this government worth fighting for?" he said.



A demonstrator releases a firework towards police during a protest in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday. Thai police clashed with protesters near the residence of PM Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday for a fifth time in the past week, with officers using water cannon and teargas against demonstrators hurling projectiles towards them. A separate "car mob" convoy of thousands of cars and motorcycles urging Prayuth to resign amid anger over his government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic had earlier passed through Bangkok peacefully.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Malaysia PM Muhyiddin to offer resignation today

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's embattled leader will offer his resignation to the king today, a minister said, potentially spelling an end to his 17-month-old government and plunging the country into fresh turmoil.

Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has faced mounting pressure to step aside after losing his parliamentary majority, and over his administration's handling of a worsening coronavirus outbreak.

He made a last-ditch attempt to cling to power Friday by urging opposition MPs to support him in exchange for institutional reforms -- but his offer was rejected.

Minister Mohamad Redzuan Yusof told AFP that Muhyiddin informed lawmakers from his party during a meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday that he would tender his resignation.

Muhyiddin told the meeting it would be up to the king -- who has publicly criticised his government -- to accept his resignation or not, the minister added.

There has been speculation that, should he step down, a new government

will be formed without elections due to concerns that polls could worsen the virus outbreak.

But, with no clear successor as prime minister, there are likely to be days of political horse-trading ahead as MPs seek to form a workable coalition.

Muhyiddin came to power in March last year without an election at the head of a scandal-plagued coalition following the collapse of a two-year-old, reformist government led by Mahathir Mohamad.

But his government was beset by turmoil from day one -- it had weak parliamentary support, its legitimacy was constantly questioned, and Muhyiddin faced a serious challenge from opposition chief Anwar Ibrahim.

Pressure mounted after a group of MPs from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the biggest party backing Muhyiddin, publicly withdrew support.

The leader claimed some among them were angered because he refused to use his position to influence corruption cases against them.



Japan PM Suga pledges not to wage war again

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan will never wage war again, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga pledged on Sunday, as he commemorated the end of World War Two while members of his cabinet visited a shrine seen by critics as a symbol of the country's past militarism.

Nearly eight decades since the end of the war, the conflict remains a source of tension between Japan and its neighbours, particularly China and North and South Korea, with the Yasukuni shrine in central Tokyo a focal point for the strain.

"Since the end of the war, Japan has consistently walked the path of a country that values peace," Suga said in a speech at a memorial ceremony in Tokyo. "We must never again repeat the devastation of war. We will continue to remain committed to this conviction."

Yasukuni honours Japan's war dead, including 14 World War Two leaders convicted as "Class A" war criminals, making it a flashpoint for tension. Koreans still chafe over Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945, while the Chinese continue to resent Japan's invasion and brutal occupation of parts of China from 1931 to 1945.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Hong Kong group behind huge democracy rallies disbands

The Hong Kong protest coalition that organised record-breaking democracy rallies two years ago yesterday said it was disbanding in the face of China's sweeping clampdown on dissent in the city. The dissolution comes as China remoulds Hong Kong in its own authoritarian image and purges the city of any person or group deemed disloyal or unpatriotic. The Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) was a major player in the months of democracy protests that convulsed Hong Kong in 2019. But the group said Beijing's subsequent crackdown on democracy supporters and a de facto ban on protests had left it with little future. The 2019 protests began in response to a deeply unpopular law that would have allowed extraditions from the semi-autonomous city to authoritarian mainland China. But they soon morphed into calls for greater democracy and police accountability after huge crowds were dispersed with tear gas and rubber bullets. But the deliberately leaderless democracy movement became increasingly fierce as clashes escalated between riot police and smaller groups of more hardcore, often young, protesters. China's response to protesters has been to dismiss their demands and portray them as part of a foreign plot to destabilise the motherland. A sweeping national security law was imposed on the city last year that criminalised much dissent and has seen many of the city's democracy leaders jailed or fled overseas. More than 30 civil society groups have already disbanded, fearful that national security police will come for them next, according to an AFP tally.

S Korea, US to begin joint military drills despite North Korea rebuke

South Korea and the United States will begin their annual joint military drills today, the South's military said yesterday, amid North Korea's warnings of a diplomatic and security crisis. South Korea and the United States regularly stage military exercises, mainly in the spring and summer, but North Korea has for decades reacted angrily, calling them a rehearsal for war. The exercises will continue for nine days, mostly consisting of defensive, computer-simulated command post training with minimum personnel but no live field training, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said. A day after the allies kicked off preliminary training last week, North Korea did not answer routine calls on an inter-Korean hotline, which were only reactivated on July 28 after the North severed them a year ago amid strained ties. Kim Yo Jong, the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, accused the South of "perfidious behaviour" for going ahead with the exercises. Another senior official said on Wednesday that Seoul and Washington are risking a "serious security crisis" by choosing to escalate tensions, instead of improving relations. The United States keeps around 28,500 soldiers in South Korea - a legacy of the 1950-53 Korean War, which ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty, leaving the peninsula in a technical state of war. Joint military drills were scaled back in recent years to facilitate talks aimed at persuading Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear and missile programmes in return for US sanctions relief. The negotiations fell apart in 2019, and South Korean President has been hoping that the reopening of hotlines would help resume the talks.

At least 28 killed in Lebanon fuel tank explosion

At least 28 people were killed and 79 injured when a fuel tank exploded in northern Lebanon early yesterday, the health ministry said. Military and security sources said that the army had seized a fuel storage tank hidden by black marketers and was handing out gasoline to residents when the explosion occurred. Lebanon is suffering from a severe fuel shortage, leading to long lines at gas stations and extended blackouts. The disaster happened in the town of Altalil, in the Akkar region that is one of Lebanon's poorest areas. About 200 people were nearby at the time of the explosion, eyewitnesses said. Caretaker Health Minister Hamad Hassan said the worst cases of burns probably needed quick treatment abroad to save their lives. Army and security forces personnel were among the casualties, sources said. Accounts varied as to what caused the explosion. Some said gunshots and others said a lighter ignited the fire. With Lebanon deep in economic crisis, hospitals have warned that fuel shortages may force them to shut down in coming days, and have also reported low supplies of medicines and other essentials.



SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS