



(Left) US Army Major General Chris Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, steps on board a C-17 transport plane as the last US service member to leave Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan August 30, 2021 in a photograph taken using night vision optics. (Right) Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid (C, with shawl) speaks to the media at the airport in Kabul, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

## The ignoble end to America's longest war

AGENCIES

America's longest war ended ignobly, in the dead of night in Afghanistan.

A giant C-17 transport laden with troops and the US ambassador flew out of Kabul airport a minute before midnight local time on August 31, the deadline set by President Joe Biden.

Carrying his rifle down by his side, Major General Chris Donahue, commander of the storied 82nd Airborne Division, became the last US soldier to board the final flight out of Afghanistan, 20 years after they unseated Takiban from Power.

As a moment in history, the image of Donahue's departure could be cast alongside that of a Soviet general, who led an armoured column across the Friendship Bridge to Uzbekistan, when the Red Army made its final exit from Afghanistan in 1989.

The land that had brutally rebuffed the British empire and the Soviet Union delivered the same result to the modern world's superpower.

The image of President Joe Biden attending a ceremony where he received the bodies of 13 soldiers, who died in a blast around Kabul airport, flag-draped caskets Sunday at the air force base in Dover, Delaware, could well be the lasting one of America's war.

With great irony, the US exit depended heavily on trusting the Taliban to provide security around the airport against the



Islamic State threat.

The primary front of the "War on Terror" declared after the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan became almost an afterthought as the administration of George W Bush decided in 2003 to invade Iraq as well to oust then-leader Saddam Hussein.

Rather than exit either after victory, the US took on nation-building tasks which it had not prepared for.

Meanwhile the US-backed government in Kabul proved corrupt and ineffective at consolidating its power and the Taliban persisted as a potent insurgency.

But the costs to Washington were immense: 2,356 US military deaths, and an overall

financial cost of \$2.3 trillion, according to Brown University's Watson Institute.

The end began under president Trump, who came to office in 2016 promising to end the "Forever Wars."

After initially increasing troops to 16,000, with no lasting impact on the Taliban, he entered negotiations with the insurgents and reached a deal to withdraw troops.

After replacing Trump, Biden conducted a review and opted to proceed with the drawdown, though buying four months extra, to August 31, for what he hoped would be an orderly pullout.

Behind the scenes, he and his advisors concluded that the Afghans could not or would

not wage the fight themselves.

But the end came faster than Washington expected. They had planned an orderly evacuation, aiming to avoid the debacle of the US withdrawal from Vietnam, famously captured in a photo of scores of Vietnamese trying to climb aboard a helicopter atop the US embassy in Saigon.

"There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan," Biden said on July 8.

Five weeks later, when the Taliban marched into Kabul with no resistance, a surge of Chinook helicopters landed on the grounds of the US embassy to whisk American diplomats to safety. Meanwhile an arguably more harrowing scene erupted at the airport: tens of thousands of Afghans rushing there in a desperate bid to flee, a few even clinging to US planes as they took off -- only to fall from the sky.

The war began before smartphones and social media existed and ended with the viral video posted last week by a Marine lieutenant colonel, Stuart Scheller, calling for honesty over the war itself.

"People are upset because their senior leaders let them down. And none of them are raising their hands and accepting accountability or saying, 'We messed this up.'"

Scheller was removed from his duty, and no one offered to take the blame.

### AFGHAN 'INVASION'

#### A TIMELINE

**'WAR ON TERROR':** On October 7, 2001 -- less than a month after the September 11 attacks that killed around 3,000 people in the US -- President George W Bush launches "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan. The ruling Islamist Taliban had been sheltering Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda movement, which carried out the 9/11 attacks. The operation opens a military front in the US "war on terror" and within weeks, US-led forces overthrow the Taliban, in power since 1996.

**OVERSHADOWED BY IRAQ:** American attention is diverted from Afghanistan when US forces invade Iraq in March 2003, to oust dictator Saddam Hussein. The fragmented Taliban and other Islamist outfits regroup in their strongholds in southern and eastern Afghanistan, from where they travel between their bases in neighbouring Pakistan's tribal areas, and launch an insurgency.

**PEAK OF 100,000 US TROOPS:** In 2009, Barack Obama -- elected president after a campaign that promised to end the Iraq and Afghanistan wars -- boosts the US presence to around 68,000. In December, he sends another 30,000 troops. The objective is to stymie the growing Taliban insurgency and strengthen Afghan institutions. By 2010 about 150,000 foreign soldiers are deployed in Afghanistan, of which 100,000 are American.

**BIN LADEN KILLED:** Osama bin Laden is killed on May 2, 2011 in a US special forces operation in Pakistan. The Nato alliance ends its combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014, but around 12,500 foreign soldiers -- of which 9,800 are American -- remain to train Afghan troops and conduct anti-terrorist operations.

**DOHA PEACE TALKS:** In 2018, Washington and Taliban representatives discreetly open talks in Doha focused on slashing the American military footprint in Afghanistan. In return, Washington demands that the Taliban prevent the country from being used as a haven for jihadist groups. On February 29, 2020 the US and Taliban sign a historic deal paving the way for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan by May 2021. The insurgents in return offer some security guarantees, and agree to hold peace talks with the Afghan government.

**TALIBAN SWEEP TO POWER:** Troop numbers by the end of Trump's presidency in January 2021 fall to 2,500 as support for military action wanes. At the end of April Nato begins a concurrent withdrawal of its mission involving 9,600 soldiers. President Joe Biden says he will stick to the agreement with Kabul, but delays the drawdown deadline until September 11. Officials on June 2 announce the departure of all US and Nato troops from Bagram, Afghanistan's biggest air base. On August 15, the Taliban sweep into Kabul, with tens of thousands of Afghans and foreigners rushing to the airport in a desperate bid to scramble onto evacuation flights. More than 123,000 people are airlifted out of Kabul. Just hours before the August 31 deadline, the remaining American troops fly out.

SOURCE: AFP

### MORE NEWS

#### Japan defence ministry seeks \$50 billion budget

Japan's defence ministry is seeking an annual budget increase that will add to past hikes to expand military spending over a decade by almost a sixth, as it looks to counter the growing strength of neighbouring China. Since last year, Japan has identified China as its main national security threat, pointing in a July policy paper to a "sense of crisis" over Beijing's threat to Taiwan, which lies close to Japanese islands along the edge of the East China Sea. The ministry's budget proposal, released yesterday, seeks an increase of 2.6 percent in spending, to a record 5.48 trillion yen (\$49.93 billion), for the year starting April 1. However, Japan's defence spending increases are not enough to keep pace with China's expanding military budget, which increased 6.8% this year and is already about four times more than Japan's, and second only to the United States in size.

#### Forex crisis forces Lanka to declare food emergency

Sri Lanka yesterday declared a state of emergency over food shortages as private banks ran out of foreign exchange to finance imports. With the country suffering a hard-hitting economic crisis, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said he ordered emergency regulations to counter the hoarding of sugar, rice and other essential foods. Rajapaksa has named a top army officer as "Commissioner General of Essential Services to coordinate the supply of paddy, rice, sugar and other consumer goods". The move followed sharp price rises for sugar, rice, onions and potatoes, while long queues have formed outside stores because of shortages of milk powder, kerosene oil and cooking gas. The economy shrank by a record 3.6 percent in 2020 because of the pandemic. Sri Lanka's foreign reserves fell to \$2.8 billion at the end of July, from \$7.5 billion in November 2019.

#### Hate crimes rose against Black, Asian Americans in 2020: FBI

Reported hate crimes in the US, in particular targeting African Americans and Asian Americans, surged in 2020, according to statistics released Monday by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In a year that saw huge Black Lives Matter protests which helped force a reckoning on racism, reports of hate crimes against Black Americans rose 40 percent, from 1,972 to 2,755, the data showed. Meanwhile, attacks against Americans of Asian heritage surged 70 percent with 274 incidents in 2020 against 161 in 2019, seemingly confirming a trend reported by the community since the start of the Covid pandemic. The statistics spotlight the urgent need for a comprehensive response, Attorney General Merrick Garland said. In the United States, "hate-motivated crime" usually refers to an act directed against a person because of certain characteristics of their identity.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Supporters of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) take part in a demonstration held in Amritsar, India yesterday, against the reported baton charge by the police earlier on the farmers in the town of Karnal who were protesting against the central government's agricultural reforms.

PHOTO: AFP

## India holds first talks with Taliban

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's ambassador to Qatar held talks with a top Taliban leader yesterday, the Indian foreign ministry said, the first formal diplomatic engagement since the hardline Islamist group took over Afghanistan.

The envoy, Deepak Mittal, met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the head of the Taliban's Political Office in Doha, at the request of the Taliban, the foreign ministry said.

India has long had concerns about the Taliban because of the group's close ties to arch rival Pakistan. The foreign ministry said the two sides discussed the safety of Indians left behind in Afghanistan.

Mittal also conveyed India's fears that anti-India militants could use Afghanistan's soil to mount attacks, the foreign ministry said.

"The Taliban representative assured the ambassador that these issues would be positively addressed," the foreign ministry said.

The talks come days after Stanekzai was quoted in the local press as saying that the Taliban wanted political and economic ties with India.

India invested more than \$3 billion in development work in Afghanistan and had built close ties with the US-backed Kabul government. But with the rapid advance of the Taliban, the Indian government was facing criticism at home for not opening a channel of communication to the militants.

In June, informal contacts were established with Taliban political leaders in Doha, government sources said. The big fear is that militant groups fighting Indian rule in Muslim-majority Kashmir will become emboldened with the victory of the Taliban over foreign forces, one of the sources said.

## 70pc of adults in EU fully vaccinated

S Africa scientists monitoring new deadly variant; EU removes US from Covid safe list

AGENCIES

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said yesterday 70 percent of adults in the European Union were now fully vaccinated against Covid-19, hitting an end-of-summer target the bloc set for itself in January.

"Today we reached an important milestone in our vaccination campaign. Seventy percent of adults in the EU are now fully vaccinated and that means 250 million people are fully immunised," Von der Leyen said in a video posted online.

Von der Leyen heads the European Commission, which is responsible for ordering vaccines for the EU's 27 member states, and had already announced in July that 70 percent of the adult population of the EU had received at least one dose.

The global fight against the coronavirus pandemic is now dominated by the battle against the Delta variant, a more contagious version of the Covid-19 coronavirus.

The coronavirus has killed at least 4,507,823 people since the outbreak

emerged in China in December 2019, according to an AFP compilation of official data.

Meanwhile, EU governments on Monday agreed to remove the United States from the EU's safe travel list, meaning US visitors and those from five other countries are likely to face tighter controls, such as Covid-19 tests and quarantines. Israel, Kosovo, Lebanon, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have also been taken off.

Scientists in South Africa are monitoring a new coronavirus variant with an unusually high mutation rate, and whose frequency has gradually increased in recent months, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) said Monday.

The variant, known as C.1.2., was flagged last week by the KwaZulu-Natal Research and Innovation and Sequencing Platform in a preprint study that has yet to be peer reviewed.

NICD scientists said C.1.2. was only "present at very low levels" and that it was too early to predict how it might evolve.

## 'Do they all think our children are terrorists?'

Distraught relatives ask as US strike wipes out Kabul family

AFP, Kabul

When Ezmarai Ahmadi returned home from work on Sunday evening in Kabul, the usual gaggle of squealing children were waiting to greet him -- his sons and daughters, and a slew of nieces and nephews.

He pulled his white sedan into the driveway of a modest house in Kwaja Burga, a densely populated neighbourhood in the northwest of the Afghan capital, and handed the keys to his eldest son to park.

Youngsters piled into the vehicle -- pretending the parking routine was an adventure -- while Ezmarai watched from the side.

Then out of the blue Afghan sky, a missile came screeching down -- striking the car with a terrible force and obliterating the lives of 10 people in an instant.

The United States said Sunday it had destroyed an explosive-laden vehicle in an air strike, thwarting a bid by the Islamic State to detonate a car bomb at Kabul airport.

On Monday, it looked as if they could have made a terrible mistake.

"The rocket came and hit the car full of kids inside our house," said Aimal Ahmadi, Ezmarai's brother. "It killed all of them."

Aimal said 10 members of the family died in



the air strike -- including his own daughter and five other children.

Aimal can scarcely believe his brother could be mistaken for an Islamic State sympathiser, let alone an operative planning a deadly car bomb attack.

Ezmarai was an engineer working with a non-governmental organisation -- an ordinary Afghan trying to make ends meet in a turbulent time.

"We would be deeply saddened by any potential loss of innocent life," a US spokesman said in the statement.

But those words rang hollow for another neighbour, Rashid Noori.

"The Taliban kill us, IS kill us and the Americans kill us," he said. "Do they all think our children are terrorists?"