

AFGHANISTAN CRISIS

Basic services collapsing: UN

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations appealed for almost \$200 million in extra funding for life-saving aid in Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover sparked a host of new issues.

The UN humanitarian agency OCHA said the extra sum meant a total of \$606 million in aid was now needed for Afghanistan until the end of the year.

"Basic services in Afghanistan are collapsing and food and other life-saving aid is about to run out," said OCHA spokesman Jens Laerke.

The issue will be discussed next Monday at a ministerial meeting in Geneva hosted by UN chief Antonio Guterres.

OCHA voiced hope that countries would pledge generously at the conference, saying \$606 million was needed to provide critical food and livelihood assistance to nearly 11 million people, and essential health services to 3.4 million.

The funds would also go towards treatment for acute malnutrition for more than a million children and women, water, sanitation and hygiene interventions, and protection of children and survivors of gender-based violence.

Most of the requested funds had already been asked for at the end of last year as part of a \$1.3-billion humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan.

Even before the Taliban victory, Afghanistan was heavily aid-dependent .

The UN has warned 18 million people are facing a humanitarian disaster, and another 18 million could quickly join them.

AFGHANISTAN: FROM SOVIET OCCUPATION TO TALIBAN TAKEOVER AND US DEFEAT

Main developments

1979-1989 Soviet occupation

Moscow invades in December 1979 to support a communist regime. The Afghan mujahideen resistance, backed by the West, fights the Soviet Army for a decade until it withdraws in February 1989

1992-1996 Civil war

Nearly 100,000 killed in two years. The Taliban movement, supported by Pakistan, begins to emerge

1996-2001 Taliban rule

Hardline Islamic regime takes power. Led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, regime becomes close to Al-Qaeda, sheltering its leader Osama bin Laden. Women and girls mostly denied education and employment, unable to leave home without male companion and full face coverings

2001 Western intervention

US-led invasion topples Taliban. Hamid Karzai appointed to lead interim government. Up to 130,000 soldiers eventually deployed to help secure the country against the resisting Taliban

2004-2014 Karzai era

Karzai wins Afghanistan's first presidential election based on universal suffrage

Karzai is reelected in 2009 in a poll marred by massive fraud, low turnout and Taliban violence

2014-2016 US withdrawal

NATO completes handover of security to Afghan army and police. New Afghan President Ashraf Ghani signs deal allowing some US-NATO forces to stay on

Security degenerates. In July 2016 US President Barack Obama slows the planned withdrawal of US troops

2017 US reinforcements

New US President Donald Trump scraps pullout timetable and re-commits thousands of soldiers

Attacks on Afghan forces multiply while US steps up air strikes

2021

Kabul airport, Aug. 30

2021

Anti-Taliban fighter in Panjshir Valley, Sept. 2

1980

Afghan women attend a workplace literacy course in Kabul in the 80s

2021

Taliban fighters in Laghman province, Aug. 15, 2021

1988

Soviet soldier given flowers near Kabul, 1988

2001

Afghan Taliban militia soldiers stand near the dynamited Buddha statue, Bamiyan, 2001

2002

US soldiers arrive at Bagram airbase, 2002

2020

US-Taliban deal

The two sides sign a historic deal following talks that started in 2018, paving the way for the withdrawal of all foreign troops

Sept 6, 2021 Panjshir taken

Taliban say they have captured last pocket of resistance, in the Panjshir Valley. But National Resistance Front (NRF) says still in "strategic positions", call for "national uprising"

May-Aug 2021 US withdrawal, Taliban back in power

In May, US and NATO start the withdrawal of their 9,600 troops

The Taliban take the capital Kabul on Aug 15 after a rapid offensive.

President Ghani flees the country. The Afghan army, trained and equipped by the Americans, collapses.

Tens of thousands of Afghans and foreigners rush to the airport in a desperate bid to scramble into evacuation flights. A suicide bombing at the airport on Aug 26 killed over 100 people, including 13 US soldiers.

On Aug 30, the last US troops fly out of Kabul, putting an end to a 20-year war.



Segregation as Afghan universities reopen

AFP, Kabul

Universities in Kabul were almost empty on the first day of the Afghan school year, as professors and students wrestled with the Taliban's restrictive new rules for the classroom.

The Taliban have promised a softer rule than during their first stint in power from 1996-2001, when women's freedoms in Afghanistan were sharply curtailed and they were banned from higher education.

This time, the hardline Islamist group have said women will be allowed to go to private universities under the new regime, but they face tough restrictions on their clothing and movement.

Women can only attend class if they wear an abaya -- a flowing robe -- and a niqab -- a face veil with a small window to see through -- and are separated from men, the Taliban said.

"Our students don't accept this and we will have to close the university," said Noor Ali Rahmani, the director of Gharistan University in Kabul, on an almost empty campus on Monday. "Our students wear the hijab, not the niqab," he added, referring to a headscarf.

The Taliban education authority issued a lengthy document on Sunday outlining their measures for the classroom, which also ruled that men and women should be segregated -- or at least divided by a curtain if there are 15 students or less.

From now on at private colleges and universities, which have mushroomed since the Taliban's first rule ended, women must only be taught by other women, or "old men", and use a women-only entrance. They must also end their lessons five minutes earlier than men to stop them from mingling outside.

So far, the Taliban has said nothing about public universities.

For some students, however, it was a relief that women would still be able to attend university at all under a new Taliban regime.

Usually, campus corridors on the first day of the term would be packed with students catching up after the summer. But on Monday, there was a strikingly low turnout at Kabul's universities, leaving education leaders wondering just how many young, talented people have fled the country as part of the "brain drain".

Rahmani said only 10 to 20 percent of the 1,000 students who enrolled last year came to the university on Monday. He estimated up to 30 percent of the students left Afghanistan after the Taliban seized control.

MORE NEWS

Vietnam jails man for five years for spreading Covid

A Vietnamese man has been sentenced to five years in jail for spreading Covid-19 after he breached home quarantine rules. Le Van Tri was convicted of "spreading dangerous infectious diseases to other people" after he travelled to his home province Ca Mau from coronavirus hotspot Ho Chi Minh City in July, according to a report on the website of the provincial People's Court. The 28-year old was accused of breaching a 21-day home quarantine regulation in the southern province. State media said eight people became infected because of Tri.

Climate NGOs call for postponement of COP26

A global network of more than 1,500 climate NGOs called on Britain to postpone the upcoming COP26 climate summit, saying in a statement yesterday that a lack of Covid-19 vaccines risked sidelining developing countries. Rising cases, unequal global vaccine rollout and stringent quarantine requirements for some 60 "red list" nations and territories hoping to attend the 12-day UN climate talks mean that "a safe, inclusive and just global climate conference is impossible," the Climate Action Network (CAN) said.



Nasa confirms Mars rover got its first piece of rock

Nasa confirmed Monday that its Perseverance Mars rover succeeded in collecting its first rock sample for scientists to pore over when a future mission eventually brings it back to Earth. "I've got it!" the space agency tweeted, alongside a photograph of a rock core slightly thicker than a pencil inside a sample tube. The sample was collected on September 1, but Nasa was initially unsure whether the rover had successfully held onto its precious cargo, because initial images taken in poor light were unclear. Perseverance landed on an ancient lake bed called the Jezero Crater in February, on a mission to search for signs of ancient microbial life.

In world first, Cuba starts Covid jabs for toddlers

Cuba on Monday became the first country in the world to vaccinate children from the age of two against Covid-19, using home-grown jabs not recognized by the World Health Organization. The communist island of 11.2 million people aims to inoculate all its children before reopening schools that have been closed for the most part since March 2020. The new school year started on Monday, but from home via television programs, as most Cuban homes do not have internet access. Having completed clinical trials on minors with its Abdala and Soberana vaccines, Cuba kicked off its inoculation campaign for children on Friday, starting with those 12 and older like many other countries. On Monday, it started distributing jabs in the 2-11 age group in the central province of Cienfuegos.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Revolt against junta

Myanmar shadow govt calls for nationwide uprising

REUTERS

Myanmar's shadow government, formed by opponents of military rule, called for a revolt against the junta yesterday, setting out a strategy that included action by armed militias and ethnic forces and urging bureaucrats to leave their posts.

Duwa Lashi La, the acting president of the National Unity Government, said in a speech that the shadow government, which is made up of members in exile or in hiding, was declaring a state of emergency.

Myanmar's military toppled the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 1, triggering a wave of protests by pro-democracy supporters, and hundreds of deaths as security forces tried to quell the demonstrations.

Some opponents of military rule have formed armed groups, under the banner of the People's Defence Forces, and have forged alliances with some ethnic militias that have long seen Myanmar's army as their enemy.

Declaring it was launching a "defensive war", Duwa Lashi La called for a "revolt against the rule of the military terrorists led by Min Aung Hlaing in every corner of the country."

Myanmar's military ruler Min Aung Hlaing last month took on the role of prime minister in a newly formed caretaker government and pledged to hold new elections by 2023.

The junta has itself branded the NUG and People's Defence Forces as terrorist groups.

Military-appointed administrators should "immediately leave your positions", Duwa Lashi La said in his 14-point speech, in which he urged members of the security forces to join them and for ethnic forces in border areas to attack the military.

Soon after February's coup, a civil disobedience movement was set up in a bid to undermine military rule.

Hastily formed militias have also been involved in regular skirmishes with the army though often appear to operate independently, while it is also unclear how much coordination there is among ethnic forces that have been fighting the army on and off for decades.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) has been leading diplomatic efforts to end the violence and open a dialogue between the military rulers and their opponents.

Asean's envoy to Myanmar, Erywan Yusof, said in an interview with Kyodo news agency that the military had accepted his proposal for a ceasefire until the end of the year to ensure distribution of humanitarian aid.

A pro-democracy activist and another member of the NUG said the junta could not be trusted to honour such a deal.

A military spokesman did not answer calls from Reuters to seek comment on the reported ceasefire or the speech by the NUG.



3-year-old survives 3-day Australia outback ordeal

AFP, Sydney

An Australian mother yesterday said she felt "blessed" after her three-year-old son with autism was found alive and sound, scooping muddy water from a creek in dense outback terrain after a three-day hunt that gripped the country.

Police sent a helicopter with thermal imaging equipment but failed to spot the little boy in the hours after he was first reported missing on Friday morning at his family's remote property in the eastern state of New South Wales, 150 kilometres (90 miles) northwest of Sydney.

Rescue workers and police, including some on horseback, searched through the weekend before finally spotting the boy, AJ Elfalak, during a helicopter sweep of the area on Monday.

AJ had a few scratches and bruises, the mother said. "Other than that he is perfect."

Police said dense terrain complicated the search for the boy, who was spotted within a few hundred metres (yards) of his home.

"The young fellow was sitting in a small creek and was drinking water. He was able to catch the eye of the pilot and the crewman," New South Wales Police superintendent Brad Monk told reporters after the rescue on Monday.

Video images taken from the police helicopter showed the child sitting in a pool of murky water in a rocky creek, wearing a light-coloured top and using his hands to scoop water to his mouth and face.

The hunt for the boy, who police said has autism and does not speak, grabbed the headlines across Australia.

"What a relief. I can't imagine how traumatic this experience has been for AJ and his parents," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said in a message on Twitter Monday.

'Accelerating' Iran strike plans: Israel

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Military plans dealing with Iran's nuclear programme have been "greatly accelerated", Israel's military chief warned, as questions on the ability to revive a landmark accord limiting Tehran's weapons development continue to grow.

Preparations for possible action against Iran are being intensified, Chief of General Staff Aviv Kohavi said in an interview published on Monday, adding "a significant chunk of the boost to the defence budget, as was recently agreed, was intended for this purpose".

He also said efforts were under way throughout the Middle East to check Iran's allies. The main objective is "minimising Iranian presence in the Middle East with an emphasis on Syria ... But these operations take place throughout the Middle East. They're also against Hamas, against Hezbollah", said Kohavi.

US defence chief Lloyd Austin, speaking in Qatar yesterday, said Iranian military activity in the Middle East continued to ramp up tensions.



POSSIBLE COVID-19 THIRD WAVE

India readies 'for the worst'

REUTERS, New Delhi

As Covid-19 cases and deaths exploded in India in April and May, New Delhi's premier Sir Ganga Ram Hospital and several others ran so short of oxygen that many patients in the capital suffocated.

When Reuters visited the hospital on Friday, its last coronavirus patient was readying to leave after recovery - a remarkable turnaround health experts attribute to growing levels of immunity from natural infection and vaccinations.

But hospitals have learned from bitter experience during the second Covid wave, as India braces for another possible surge in infections around its September-November festival season.

"In light of the possibility of the emergence of coronavirus mutants, with higher transmissibility and immune escape, the hospital continues to prepare for the worst," said Satendra Katoch, medical director of Ganga Ram hospital.

Nationally, India has added many more hospital beds in the past few months and imported more than 100 oxygen carriers to raise the total to about 1,250. Companies such as Linde are planning to lift the country's overall output of the gas by 50% to 15,000 tonnes a day.

The federal government, meanwhile, has approved the construction of nearly 1,600 oxygen-generation plants at hospitals, though fewer than 300 had been set up as of early last month as imports take time.

Almost all states are readying special paediatric wards as some experts warn unvaccinated children could be vulnerable to any new virus mutations.

But with a government survey estimating as many as two-thirds of Indians already have Covid-fighting antibodies through natural infection, and 57% of its adults with at least an initial vaccine dose, many health experts believe any new outbreak of infections could be much less devastating than the second wave.

However, both government and hospitals aren't leaving it to chance this time.



Sikh youth shout slogans during a religious procession on the occasion of the 417th anniversary of the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib, at the Gurudwara Ramsar in Amritsar, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP