

INTERNATIONAL

Afghanistan

Taliban faces mounting protests in cities

Flag-waving crowds mark Independence Day as Kabul airlift continues

**BENJAMIN PARKIN — NEW DELHI
KATRINA HANSON — WASHINGTON**

The Taliban faced growing signs of dissent yesterday as Afghans carried the national flag in a second day of protests, provoking a crackdown that resulted in reports of at least two deaths.

Protesters marched in Kabul and other cities to celebrate Afghanistan's Independence Day, which commemorates the 1919 pact that ended British control of the country. Some carried

Afghanistan's black, red and green flag in an apparent show of defiance to the Taliban, which flies a white flag emblazoned with an Islamic oath.

At least two people were killed in the eastern city of Asadabad when the Taliban fired on the crowd and a Taliban fighter was stabbed, according to Al Jazeera. Reuters reported that it was not clear if the deaths were caused by shooting or a stampede.

The protests marked the strongest displays of popular opposition to the Islamists since they swept into Kabul unopposed on Sunday after the withdrawal of US troops.

Many cities in Afghanistan maintained an uneasy calm in the first days

after the Taliban took over as people — particularly professional women and those associated with the former government or military — stayed at home in fear of retribution.

A protest in the city of Jalalabad on Wednesday, at which at least three people were killed, marked one of the first public displays of dissent.

Demonstrations followed in several more cities.

The Taliban, which used brutal violence to suppress women's rights and punish dissenters when it ruled in the 1990s, has so far sought to present a more moderate image.

A spokesman for the group has said it would offer amnesty to opponents and

that women's rights would be protected within the limits of Islamic law. But observers are sceptical and some of those overtures have been contradicted by reports of beatings and killings at the hands of victorious militants.

Social media videos showed Taliban fighters firing into the air yesterday to disperse crowds around Kabul airport, which has been the scene of continued chaos as many Afghans try to escape the country.

The Pentagon said yesterday that more than 5,300 US troops were now on the ground to secure the airport and help to evacuate US nationals and Afghan allies.

The US military could evacuate 5,000

to 9,000 people a day, it said, but flew out only 2,000 yesterday. About 7000 have been airlifted so far. It added that US attack aircraft had been conducting "overwatch" flights above Kabul as a security measure.

President Joe Biden acknowledged on Wednesday that the rapid US withdrawal had resulted in "chaos ensue" but argued that it was inevitable.

He defended his handling of the crisis and decision to press ahead with the withdrawal even after it became clear that the Taliban would swiftly return to power.

The Islamists' remaining opponents will hope that the protests could signal the start of more sustained resistance.

Ousted leader

President says he fled to avoid chaos and execution

BENJAMIN PARKIN — NEW DELHI

Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's deposed president, has defended his decision to leave the country, saying his life was in danger, and he was in talks to return.

Resurfacing in the United Arab Emirates after days of speculation over his whereabouts, Ghani said in a video posted on Facebook on Wednesday night that he fled to avoid chaos as Taliban fighters swooped into Kabul at the weekend and toppled his government.

"I had to leave Afghanistan in order to prevent bloodshed, in order to make sure that a huge disaster is prevented," Ghani said, according to a translation provided by Al Jazeera. "I'm in consultation with others to return so that I can continue my efforts for justice."

The ousted president has been criticised by members of his erstwhile government, who have accused him of betrayal and allowing the Taliban to take over following the US troop withdrawal. Ghani was also accused of looting as he left, including allegations he



Ashraf Ghani denied allegations he fled to a helicopter full of cash

filled with a helicopter full of cash, he said they were "business lies" and that he left with only one change of clothes.

The TAP said it had taken in Ghani on humanitarian grounds.

The Taliban, which assumed control of the country after a lightning offensive last week, is preparing to set up its own government. The Islamist militants have sought to strike a more moderate tone since returning to power, claiming that former soldiers and government workers would be granted amnesty and that it would protect women's rights "within the limits of Islamic law."

The group, which ruled from 1996 to 2001, in talks with politicians such as Hamid Karzai, the former president, amid speculation that he and other non-Taliban leaders could participate in the new administration.

But some other political and militant leaders have pledged resistance. Amrullah Saleh, Ghani's former vice president, said he was the former caretaker president and this week met Ahmad Massoud, the son of an anti-Taliban warrior assassinated by al-Qaeda in 2001. Massoud said he was trying to gather resistance fighters in the mountainous province of Panjshir.

Observers are sceptical of the Taliban's efforts to present a more moderate face, arguing they expect militants to continue employing violence to consolidate power.

Ghani said he was warned he would meet the same fate as Mohammad Najibullah, a former president and communist who was murdered by the Taliban when they over-ran Kabul in 1996.

'Graveyard of empires' takes another scalp as exit follows that of Russians and British

BENJAMIN PARKIN — NEW DELHI

The US and its allies rushing to evacuate people from Kabul join a long list of the world's greatest powers whose missions in Afghanistan ended in failure.

Since the days of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, many have sought to conquer the territory now known as Afghanistan. The country has long been known as the "graveyard of empires", evoking its reputation for thwarting the expansionist ambitions of conquerors from Imperial Britain to Soviet Russia.

The US has spent an estimated \$1tn in the country since it invaded after the September 11 2001 attacks, toppling the al-Qaeda-linked Taliban regime.

Yet two decades later, the Islamists are once again in power after an offensive that within weeks unravelled the republic the US tried to install in its place.

Afghanistan is "a graveyard for colonialist, or neocolonialist foreign powers that aim to rule", said Ravshan Malejap, a political scientist and author of *Survival*, about state-building there.

In his 2010 history of the country, anthropologist Thomas Barfield wrote that "Afghanistan got rid of foreign occupiers by making the country so ungovernable that they wanted to leave".

Yet, he laments, this strategy "came to haunt the Afghans themselves" as each conflict left state institutions weaker and sectarian groups more brutal.

Anglo-Afghan wars, 1839-1919

Imperial Britain viewed Afghanistan, a landlocked country along the ancient Silk Road trade route, as a vital buffer between its Indian colony and Russia.

Fearing the Russians would use Afghanistan to attack South Asia, the British moved first, invading in 1839 and installing a pliant local ruler. This ended in what historian and author William Dalrymple dubbed Britain's "greatest imperial disaster".

Rebellions forced a British retreat in 1842. They marched a force of nearly 20,000 out of Kabul only to be picked off by tribal forces along the way. One British survivor made it back unscathed.

Britain continued trying to bring



Pulling out: Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan in May 1988.

Below: an engraving of a battle from the second Anglo-Afghan war

Illustration by the Universal News Service



Afghanistan into its empire, fighting two more wars, in 1878 and in 1919, before ending its ambitions.

Soviet invasion, 1979-89

Afghanistan became a battleground in the cold war after a communist coup in 1978. The regime's brutality provoked fierce local resistance, with more uprisings prompting an invasion by Soviet Union troops the following year.

With the backing of the US and Pakistan, loosely organised factions of local insurgents known as mujahideen waged

jihad against the Soviets and the Afghan communists.

The ensuing civil war was devastating for Afghanistan. Yet the Soviets' vast resources proved insufficient to crush the mujahideen, with their guerrilla tactics resulting in a painful, costly stalemate. One million Afghans were killed and another six displaced.

"The Soviets came to the same conclusion that the British had reached a century earlier: the direct occupation of Afghanistan had a high cost for few benefits," Barfield wrote.

After the Soviets left, mujahideen factions turned on each other. Ultimately, this chaos gave rise to the Taliban, ethnic Pashtuns who vowed to impose their dogmatic interpretation of Islamist order on the war-weary population.

US and Nato invasion, 2001-21

The Taliban regime provoked international opprobrium as it acted with cruelty, erased women's rights and meted out punishment while offering shelter to Islamist extremists.

But harbouring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda ahead of 9/11 proved too much. Within a month of the Twin Tou-

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ers attacks, the US began bombing the country, rallying local warlords to rout the Taliban and of an invasion.

By December 2001, the Taliban had collapsed, fleeing alongside bin Laden to the mountains. US president George W. Bush announced plans to reconstruct the country, while in 2003 his defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that "major combat" was over.

But the insurgency gained momentum, prompting the next US president Barack Obama to raise the US military presence to more than 100,000 troops. Withdrawal plans were delayed. The Taliban gathered strength. This erupted into violence under the next US president Barack Obama, who agreed to an exit in February 2020 peace deal.

Now president Joe Biden, mindful of domestic exhaustion at the so-called forever war, said that the US would leave by the end of this month, but the Taliban over-ran all resistance last week.

Malejap argues that like other powers before, the US mistakenly believed it could remodel the country using force. "The whole point of this intervention was not to build a state, a democracy ... It was about counter-terrorism."

Greece

Athens heat chief blames 'criminal lack' of readiness for fires

**DONATO PAOLO FRANCIOSI AND
ELENI MYRIVILLI — ATHENS**

The official charged with protecting Greece's capital from the effects of rising temperatures has criticised the "criminal lack of preparedness" by the world's political leaders, as the Mediterranean region endures one of the hottest summers on record.

Athens is among a small group of the world's cities that have appointed a dedicated chief heat officer to provide a focal point for the response to rising temperatures, along with Miami-Dade County in the US and Freetown, capital of Sierra Leone.

Myrivilli serves as mayor's adviser and chief resilience officer for Athens as well as interim chief heat officer, preparing the city's hottest capital city for the heatwaves, which have become more frequent.

Fires have raged at the edges of Athens, a city of almost 4m inhabitants, for several weeks, and continued to threaten the capital on Wednesday. Severe wildfires have also destroyed properties and livelihoods on Evia, Greece's second-largest island.

While extreme heat was the biggest threat that accompanied climate

change, "there's very little preparation ... nobody has been preparing cities for global warming", Myrivilli warned.

At the same time, the scale of this summer's fires has given an opportunity for policymakers to respond. "If it wasn't for the fires, we wouldn't have things the media could report on," Myrivilli said.

She pointed out that other effects, such as heat-related deaths, were less visible yet often more drawn out. "Heatwaves need to be more specific in the minds of people — they're not visible."

More than 970 cities worldwide will experience average summertime highs of 55C by 2050, according to the C40 coalition of world cities, a network committed to addressing climate change.

This compared with a little more than a third of that number today. The number of the world's population exposed to such temperatures is also set to rise to 1.6bn, a jump of 800 per cent.

"We're in a crisis, we saw it this summer, and people are suffering," Myrivilli said. "We have to make sure we protect the most vulnerable. It's always the most vulnerable that have to deal with it."

Kyrkos Mitsotakis, Greece's prime minister, has authorised a €300m relief package after initially having to apologise for delays in the firefighting efforts. He has also appointed a new minister in charge of recovery from natural disasters.

He told CNN last weekend that the recent fires in Greece were "a wake-up call" to drastically change electricity production, construction, farming and transport.

This has to happen and we need to start now," he added.

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waves exacerbated by climate change are the main reason, although several people have also been arrested on suspicion of arson in relation to the blazes in Greece.

The record hottest temperature for Europe of 48.8C was registered in Sicily last week.

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Volunteers try to extinguish a fire in woods north of Athens this month