

Kabul falls to the Taliban as the Afghan government collapses and the president flees.

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The Taliban effectively sealed their control of Afghanistan on Sunday, pouring into the capital, Kabul, and meeting little resistance as President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, the government collapsed, and chaos and fear gripped the city, with tens of thousands of people trying to escape.

The insurgents' return to power, two decades after they were ousted, came despite years and hundreds of billions of dollars spent by the United States to build up the Afghan government and its defense forces. In a lightning offensive, the Taliban swallowed dozens of cities in a matter of days, leaving Kabul as the last major redoubt of government control.

On Sunday evening, former President Hamid Karzai announced on Twitter that he was forming a coordinating council together with Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the Afghan delegation to peace talks, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hesb-i-Islami party, to manage a peaceful transfer of power. Mr. Karzai called on both government and Taliban forces to act with restraint.

But the Taliban appeared to ignore his appeal and advanced into the city on its own terms.

The Taliban's lead negotiator in talks with the government, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, congratulated all of Afghanistan for the victory. "Now it will be shown how we can serve our nation," he said. "We can assure that our nation has a peaceful life and a better future."

Mr. Baradar made the comments in a video posted on social media, surrounded by other members of the Taliban delegation to the talks in Doha, Qatar.

“There was no expectation that we would achieve victory in this war,” he said. “But this came with the help of Allah, therefore we should be thankful to Him, be humble in front of Him, so that we do not act arrogantly.”

Al Jazeera reported that it had interviewed Taliban fighters who were holding a news conference in the presidential palace in Kabul. The fighters said they were working to secure Kabul so that leaders in Qatar and outside the capital could return safely. Al Jazeera reported that the fighters had taken down the flag of Afghanistan.

As it became clear that Taliban fighters were entering Kabul, thousands of Afghans who had sought refuge there after fleeing the insurgents’ brutal military offensive watched with growing alarm as the local police seemed to fade from their usual checkpoints.

The U.S. Embassy warned Americans to not head to the airport in Kabul after reports that the facility was taking fire, and said that the situation was “changing quickly.” Late Sunday, the U.S. State Department said that all embassy personnel had been evacuated.

President Ghani released a written statement on Facebook saying he had departed the country to save the capital from further bloodshed.

“If I had stayed, countless countrymen would have been martyred and Kabul city would have been ruined,” he wrote, “in which case a disaster would have been brought upon this city of five million.”

At 6:30 p.m. local time, the Taliban issued a statement that its forces were moving into police districts in order to maintain security in areas that had been abandoned by the government security forces. Taliban fighters, meeting no resistance, took up positions in the city, after Zabiullah Mujahid, spokesman for the Taliban, posted the statement on Twitter.

“The Islamic Emirates ordered its forces to enter the areas of Kabul city from which the enemy has left because there is risk of theft and robbery,” the statement said. The Taliban had been ordered not to harm civilians and not to enter individual homes, it added. “Our forces are entering Kabul city with all caution.”

As the sun set behind the mountains, the traffic was clogged as crowds grew bigger, with more and more Taliban fighters appearing on motorbikes, police pickups and even a Humvee that once belonged to the American-sponsored Afghan security forces.

Earlier in the afternoon, Interior Minister Abdul Sattar Mirzakwal announced that an agreement had been made for a peaceful transfer of power for greater Kabul, and that his forces were maintaining security.

Mr. Mirzakwal later announced a 9 p.m. curfew in the capital, and called on its residents to go home.

Mr. Ghani left Kabul in a plane with his wife, Rula Ghani, and two close aides, and arrived in Uzbekistan, according to a member of the Afghan delegation in Doha, Qatar, that has been in peace negotiations with the Taliban since last year. The official asked not to be named because he did not want to be identified speaking about the president's movements.

It could not be confirmed that Mr. Ghani was in Uzbekistan, and there were reports that he had gone to other countries. Muslem Hyatt, a former Afghan military attaché, said Mr. Ghani had traveled through Uzbekistan and landed in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

In negotiations being managed by Mr. Abdullah, Mr. Ghani had been set to travel to Doha on Sunday with a larger group to negotiate the transfer of power, but flew instead to Uzbekistan, the peace delegation member said.

With rumors rife and reliable information hard to come by, the streets were filled during the day with scenes of panic and desperation.

“Greetings, the Taliban have reached the city. We are escaping,” said Sahraa Karimi, the head of Afghan Film, in a post shared widely on Facebook. Filming herself as she fled on foot, out of breath and clutching at her head scarf, she shouted at others to escape while they could.

“Hey woman, girl, don’t go that way!” she called out. “Some people don’t know what is going on,” she went on. “Where are you going? Go quickly.”

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