

Taliban Capture Strategic Cities as Biden Speeds Troop Deployment to Afghanistan

With the collapse of Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad, the insurgents appeared to be on the verge of a full military takeover.



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Published Aug. 14, 2021 Updated Aug. 23, 2021

WASHINGTON — With the Afghan government collapsing to a surging Taliban, President Biden sought to project an image of resolve on Saturday, speeding the deployment of an additional 1,000 troops to Afghanistan as he announced a series of steps that he said would protect American interests.

The announcement came hours after the Taliban seized the last major city in northern Afghanistan, Mazar-i-Sharif, marking the complete loss of the country's north as they appeared on the verge of a full military takeover. A day earlier, two key cities in southern and western Afghanistan fell to the Taliban.

On Sunday, the insurgents took Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province in the east. With that, they essentially encircled the capital, Kabul, which is now the only major city left under government control.

Mr. Biden's statement on Saturday did little beyond asserting what the administration has already been doing: proclaiming support for the government of Afghanistan, warning the Taliban not to attack American troops and undertaking the intensive process of giving special immigrant visas to fleeing Afghans who worked for the United States over the past 20 years.

The president defended his decision to leave the country after two decades of war, a departure that has led to the near-disintegration of the Afghan military.

He also sought to spread the blame, accusing President Donald J. Trump of boxing him in by agreeing to a May 1 deadline to withdraw all American troops from the country.

"I faced a choice — follow through on the deal, with a brief extension to get our forces and our allies' forces out safely, or ramp up our presence and send more American troops to fight once again in another country's civil conflict," he said.

He added: "I was the fourth president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan — two Republicans, two Democrats. I would not, and will not, pass this war onto a fifth."

Mr. Trump himself has criticized Mr. Biden's decision to withdraw; in reality, both men promised to end America's longest war.

Mr. Biden's top national security aides were huddled in meetings at the White House all day Saturday, as an unrelenting stream of bad news came in from Afghanistan. The president, in his statement, directed his secretary of state, Antony J. Blinken, to support President Ashraf Ghani and other Afghan leaders as "they seek to prevent further bloodshed and pursue a political settlement." As part of the effort, Mr. Blinken will also contact top officials in the region, the White House said.

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An administration official said that the administration would also reach out to the Taliban in the next day. It was unclear whether the outreach would go further than the warning Mr. Biden reiterated on Saturday, "that any action on their part on the ground in Afghanistan that puts U.S. personnel or our mission at risk there will be met with a swift and strong U.S. military response."

Mr. Biden's decision on Saturday to accelerate the deployment of an additional 1,000 troops to Afghanistan brings the number of American troops on the ground to 5,000. The Pentagon had announced this week that 3,000 forces would join the 1,000 already in the country as part of the effort to evacuate Americans and their allies. In addition, the Pentagon said on Friday that it would send an additional 3,000 from the Army's 82nd Airborne to Kuwait as a sort of insurance policy, so they could be in the region if needed; the additional troops Mr. Biden ordered to Afghanistan on Saturday were among those bound for Kuwait.

A senior U.S. official said Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief American negotiator with the Taliban in peace talks in Doha, Qatar, has asked the extremist group to not enter Kabul until the United States concludes evacuating what could be more than 10,000 American citizens, including Afghan-Americans, embassy staff and translators and other Afghans who have worked with the American government. It was unclear how quickly the evacuations could be completed or if that was even possible.

Taliban officials have countered by asking that the United States cease airstrikes against its fighters as they take over cities across Afghanistan.



Afghans waiting for hours on Saturday at the passport office in Kabul, the capital. As of Sunday, the Taliban had essentially encircled the city. Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

As his army has all but collapsed and his government's control shrinks, Mr. Ghani is facing pressure to step down. Yet in a recorded speech televised early Saturday afternoon, he promised only to "prevent further instability" and did not resign. With Taliban forces having captured Pul-i-Alam, a provincial capital only 40 miles from Kabul, Mr. Ghani said he had begun "extensive consultations at home and abroad" and that the results would soon be shared. He said remobilizing Afghanistan's military forces was a priority.

Still, he has little apparent support at home, and thousands of his soldiers were surrendering. Mr. Ghani was not "worth fighting for," Omar Zakhilwal, a former finance minister, tweeted on Friday.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

With most of Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban, and with Kabul one of the last bastions held by government forces, many of the city's residents expressed fatalism and fear at the prospect of their home falling into the hands of the militant group.

The loss of the country's north — once the heart of the resistance to the Taliban's earlier rise to power in 1996 — offered a devastating blow to morale for a country gripped with panic.

The Taliban seized Mazar-i-Sharif barely an hour after breaking through the front lines at the city's edge. Soon after, government security forces and militias fled — including those led by the infamous warlords Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Noor — effectively handing control to the insurgents.

In the late 1990s, Mazar-i-Sharif was the site of pitched battles between the Taliban and northern militia groups that managed to push back the hard-line insurgents before the group took over the city in 1998. The victory followed infighting and defections among the militias and culminated with the Taliban's massacre of hundreds of militia fighters who had surrendered.

During the current Taliban military campaign, Mazar's defense was almost completely reliant on the reincarnations of some of those very same militias that have all but failed to hold their territory elsewhere in the north. Some are led by Mr. Dostum, a former Afghan vice president who has survived the past 40 years of war by cutting deals and switching sides.

Others were behind Mr. Noor, a longtime power broker and warlord in Balkh Province who fought the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s. During the civil war, he was a commander in Jamiat-i-Islami, an Islamist party in the country's north, and he was a leading figure in the Northern Alliance that supported the American invasion in 2001. Shortly afterward, he became Balkh's governor, deeply entrenched as the singular authority in the province. He refused to leave his position after Mr. Ghani fired him in 2017.

Helene Cooper reported from Washington, and Christina Goldbaum from Kabul, Afghanistan. Lara Jakes contributed reporting from Washington, and Najim Rahim and Sharif Hassan from Kabul. Adam Nossiter also contributed reporting.