

## ***U.S. General Won't Commit to Ending Airstrikes on Taliban***

With the militants making advances across Afghanistan, the top American general there suggested that airstrikes may continue, even with the U.S. troop pullout largely completed.



By Adam Nossiter

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The top American general overseeing operations in Afghanistan declined to say Sunday night whether U.S. airstrikes against the Taliban would end Aug. 31, the date previously given by officials as a cutoff for such attacks.

Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of United States Central Command, refused to commit to ending the United States last remaining military leverage over the Taliban: airstrikes.

The insurgents' recent advance across Afghanistan has resulted in the capture of over half the country's districts, and now threatens its major cities.

Afghan forces have so far not been able to contain the Taliban since it intensified its military campaign May 1, with the country's military ceding large swathes of territory, at times without a fight.

But a series of airstrikes by the Americans last week demonstrated to the insurgents that the U.S. military was still a potent threat on the battlefield, despite the all-but-completed troop departure.

The Taliban reacted furiously to the strikes, saying they were in breach of the 2020 agreement negotiated between the militant group and the United States.

The concentration of strikes against the Taliban reflected a new sense of urgency in Washington about the imperiled Afghan government.

"I'm just not going to be able to comment about the future of U.S. airstrikes after Aug. 31," General McKenzie told reporters after meeting with Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, and his aides earlier in the day.

General McKenzie said, "I'm concentrating on the here and now," but also said "logistical support" would continue beyond this month.

"For the days and weeks ahead, we will continue with our airstrikes in support of our Afghan partners, and that's all I'll be able to give you," he said, speaking at the headquarters of the U.S.-led advisory mission that remains only in name, Resolute Support. The headquarters is now officially part of the U.S. Embassy.

In recent days, American strikes on Taliban positions around the key southern provincial capital of Kandahar appear to have helped slow the insurgents' advance and at the least give beleaguered Afghan forces time to regroup and rearm.

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But, several parts of the city remain under Taliban control, and little has changed on the ground in terms of retaking neighborhoods that have been captured in past weeks.

General McKenzie acknowledged Sunday that "the U.S. has increased airstrikes" and said that the military would continue with its "heightened level of support in the coming weeks if the Taliban continue their attacks."



As the Taliban captures districts across the country, thousands of Afghans are applying for passports to attempt to emigrate. Sajjad Hussain/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“We’re taking airstrikes as we need to take them,” he said. “We’re still carrying them out. I think we’re having good effect in support of Afghan forces that are engaged in close fighting with the Taliban,” he said.

General McKenzie’s comments seemed to go beyond what other senior Pentagon officials have said when asked about conducting airstrikes against the Taliban after Aug. 31.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III told reporters last week that after August, the military’s focus would be on counterterrorism strikes against fighters for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. “That’s currently where we stand,” Mr. Austin said. “We have not changed that.”

### 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.

The American airstrikes may have given Afghan forces a boost in morale or achieved some tactical gains, but they have also increased the risk of civilian casualties, especially in the urban areas where the Taliban have been entrenching themselves.

The general acknowledged that, with no more combat aircraft based in Afghanistan, “it will be far more difficult than it was” to support the country with airstrikes. The United States has substantial air assets in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, where the current missions are flown from.

“We are limited,” the general said.

The Afghan Air Force has tried to compensate for the dwindling reach of American air power, carrying out dozens of strikes a day. But the force is racked with ever increasing maintenance issues, as foreign contractors responsible for maintaining its combat aircraft have all but left the country. And its pilots are exhausted from the never-ending requests from besieged Afghan forces on the ground.

There have also been reports from local officials of civilians being killed in strikes by the Afghan Air Force.

However dominant the Taliban are on the battlefield now, General McKenzie pushed back against predictions that the militants will probably overcome government forces sooner rather than later. Indeed, some American intelligence estimates have said Kabul, the capital, might fall in as little as six months.

“The Taliban is attempting to create a sense of inevitability,” General McKenzie said. But, he said: “It is not a foregone conclusion that they will be able to take these urban areas. It’s hard to know exactly what the Taliban plan is.”

With the American troop pullout largely completed, the United States is maintaining a small force of some 650, largely to protect the embassy here, officials say.

Fahim Abed, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt contributed reporting.