

Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan >

Chaos spreads outside Kabul's airport as the Taliban try to control crowds.

By Jim Huylebroek and Marc Santora

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Chaos erupted outside Kabul's international airport on Wednesday as thousands of people tried to make their way there to flee Afghanistan. The sound of heavy gunfire echoed through the streets leading to the facility.

There were conflicting reports about what exactly was happening on the streets outside the airport, which the Taliban now control.

A NATO security official at the airport told Reuters that 17 people had been injured in a stampede at one gate to the airport.

People were still camping out near the airport's gates. Whole families sat under rows of pine trees lining the main airport road, while others, carrying sparse belongings, were still trying to gain entrance, to little avail. The Taliban still had their men stationed at the entrances. There were volleys of rifle fire, pushing, pulling and beating with wooden sticks, Kalashnikovs and pieces of cut hoses.

At one gate, Taliban members had positioned themselves on concrete road dividers overlooking the crowd. Their commander, Kalashnikov slung around the shoulder and megaphone in hand, told the people: "This gate is closed. Only foreigners and people with documents allowed."

Although the U.S. military has established control inside the airport and military flights have resumed, the situation outside on Wednesday was volatile.

The Taliban have sought to present a kinder and gentler image of an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to the world, but scenes near the airport offered a bloody counterpoint. Taliban members at times beat people with rifle butts and clubs to force back the crowd trying to get in.

Images taken on Tuesday by Marcus Yam, a photographer for the Los Angeles Times, were graphic: a man cradling a child with a bloodied forehead. A woman who appeared to be unconscious lying in the road a few feet away, blood streaming down her cheek.

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