

A Fragile Ceasefire Lets Afghans Risk Travel for Eid

A 3-day cease-fire is violated, but Afghans brave dangerous roads to celebrate a holiday with families.

By Fatima Faizi and David Zucchino

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KABUL, Afghanistan — On Saturday, the final day of a three-day national cease-fire for Eid al-Fitr, the three-day Muslim celebration marking the end of fasting after the holy month of Ramadan, the killings in Afghanistan kept coming.

A Kabul traffic policeman was murdered Saturday morning, a day after a bombing at a Kabul mosque during Friday prayers killed 12 civilians, including the imam. A roadside bomb in Kandahar killed five civilians Thursday, among them three children. An explosion outside a shop in Kunduz that day killed two civilians, including a child.

But in this country, those scattered attacks represented a respite of sorts from the much more frequent and deadlier ones that have dominated for most of the year. Afghans took advantage, braving perilous city streets and provincial roadways to visit family members for sumptuous Eid al-Fitr feasts and celebrations.

This was the fourth such cease-fire since 2018, but the first with American and NATO troops withdrawing after two decades of war, leaving Afghans facing an ever more uncertain and unsettled future. The cease-fire came at a time of high anxiety, with terrified Afghans continuing to flee the country and Western embassies warning their own citizens to leave, too.

On Saturday, the American embassy reminded American nationals that violence typically intensifies following the Eid holiday.

“The U.S. Embassy strongly suggests that U.S. citizens make plans to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible,” the embassy said in a statement that advised Americans to keep a low profile and avoid public places. “The U.S. government remains concerned that insurgents are intent on targeting foreigners via kidnapping schemes and attacks.”

Many Afghans normally refrain from driving outside major cities, where the Taliban control long stretches of roadways, imposing taxes and sometimes executing anyone associated with the American-backed government in Kabul. Thieves and highwaymen also ply the same roads.



Security forces search a vehicle at a checkpoint in Jalalabad on Thursday. Ghulamullah Habibi/EPA, via Shutterstock

But the cease-fire, announced by the Taliban and quickly agreed to by the government, promised to reduce the risk of violence, if not guarantee safety.

Frishta Matin, 27, the mother of a six-month-old boy, weighed the odds. She decided to make a harrowing three-hour drive on a treacherous roadway from her Kabul home through Taliban-controlled areas to visit her parents in Bamian, in central Afghanistan.

Ms. Matin, her husband, baby and two young nephews returned safely to Kabul Saturday. But instead of a restful holiday, it had been a terrifying odyssey. She could not make herself forget that during the 2019 cease-fire a provincial director of an Afghan human rights commission was waylaid on the same highway and shot to death.

When Ms. Matin and her family approached the same area, Jalrez — known locally as “Death Valley” — she said she instructed her nephews, age 4 and 7, to stay absolutely quiet. The car radio was turned off.

“Everyone was silent — no one even breathed,” she said. She described Taliban gunmen on the roadside, “with their guns, long hair and eye makeup, they were everywhere.” But their car was allowed to pass in deference to the cease-fire, she said.

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Mohammad Damishyar, a schoolteacher who lives in Bamian, rebuffed warnings from relatives to stay off the roads, even during the cease-fire. On Thursday, the first day of the cease-fire, he rode in a crowded taxi on a daylong drive through Taliban-controlled areas to celebrate Eid with relatives in Baghlan Province in northern Afghanistan.



Eid al-Fitr celebrations in Herat on Friday. Jalil Rezayee/EPA, via Shutterstock

Two years ago, Mr. Damishyar said, a close friend was shot dead after his car was intercepted on the same highway. His friend’s death haunted him as he rode down the highway, Mr. Damishyar said, so he tried to focus on the breathtaking springtime mountain landscape. He survived the journey, but at a cost to his psyche.

“All the buildings, the streets, little roadside shops — all were all bombed out,” Mr. Damishayar said. “Destruction has overtaken the beauty of nature,” he said.

The cease-fire played out during a year in which the government and the Taliban were scheduled to engage in sustained peace talks in Doha, Qatar, aimed at agreeing on a road map for a future government and, ultimately, a lasting cease-fire.

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 talks were part of an agreement signed in February 2020 between the Trump administration and the Taliban, in which the United States agreed to withdraw all troops by May 1. But the Taliban have accused the Biden administration of violating the agreement, although President Biden has since said all troops will be out of Afghanistan by Sept. 11.

At the same time, the United States has accused the Taliban of failing to honor pledges to reduce violence and to cut ties in Afghanistan with jihadist groups like Al Qaeda. The United States invaded Afghanistan following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, with the stated goal of insuring that Afghanistan is never again used as a base for international terrorist attacks.

The militants refused to attend an international meeting on Afghanistan in Turkey scheduled to begin in April. Talks between the Taliban and the government have slowed to a near standstill.

At least 122 civilians and 107 pro-government forces were killed in Afghanistan from May 7 to May 13, a period that included the first day of the cease-fire, according to data compiled by The New York Times.

This year's Eid cease-fire was markedly different than the one observed in 2018, when Taliban fighters hugged and kissed government soldiers and police in jubilant scenes repeated in many parts of the country.



Prayers at the start of Eid al-Fitr at the Abdul Rahman Mosque in Kabul on Thursday. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

For the first time in months or even years, government security force members could visit families in Taliban-controlled areas. Similarly, an estimated 30,000 Taliban fighters were permitted to wander through government-controlled cities, embracing soldiers and police, visiting tourist spots and eating ice cream.

In announcing this year's cease-fire on May 9, the Taliban expressly forbade such encounters.

"The Mujahedeen must not visit enemy areas nor permit entrance of enemy personnel into Mujahedeen controlled areas," the Taliban statement said.

The Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani said its forces would comply with the cease-fire but reserved the right to defend against any enemy attack.