

As world leaders craft strategies, Afghans endure an arduous transition.

By Daniel Victor, Norimitsu Onishi and Sharif Hassan

Aug. 25, 2021

As President Biden navigates the thorny domestic and international politics of meeting an Aug. 31 withdrawal deadline from Afghanistan, and as Taliban leaders keep the world guessing about how they intend to govern, Afghans are enduring a terrifying transitional period: Hundreds of thousands of people fear for their lives, feeding families is becoming more difficult and countless people are afraid to appear in public.

The people of Afghanistan have been largely powerless as the leaders sort their fates. And they are increasingly living through brutal conditions, whether or not they are desperately trying to escape.

Residents are struggling to lead their daily lives in an economy that, propped up for the past generation by American aid, is now in free fall. Banks are closed. Cash is growing scarce, and food prices are rising. Fuel is becoming harder to find. Government services have stalled as civil servants avoid work, fearing retribution by the Taliban.

Despite the Taliban's efforts to reassure Afghans that they will ensure people's safety, signals that they will maintain the brutal tactics of their previous rule have added up. On Tuesday, the United Nations' top human rights official cited "harrowing and credible" reports that the Taliban had executed civilians and noncombatant soldiers.

A Taliban spokesman said on Tuesday that women should not leave their homes because militants had not yet been trained to refrain from harming them. The spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, called it a "temporary" policy intended to protect women until the Taliban could ensure their safety.

"We are worried our forces who are new and have not been yet trained very well may mistreat women," Mr. Mujahid said. "We don't want our forces, God forbid, to harm or harass women."

People trying to flee, if they make it past Taliban checkpoints, have been met with chaotic scenes outside Kabul's airport. At least seven Afghan civilians, including a toddler, have been trampled to death. On Tuesday, the Taliban said they would block Afghans trying to leave the country from traveling to the airport, and President Biden warned that the risk of a terrorist attack in that area increased each day.

But apart from the area around the airport, a relative calm has reigned over Kabul as many residents hide in their homes or venture out only cautiously to see what life might be like under the new rulers. Even residents who said they feared the Taliban were struck by the relative order and quiet on the streets — a sharp contrast to years of rising crime and violence that had become a daily facet of life in the capital.

A resident named Mohib said that streets were deserted in his section of the city, with people hunkering down in their homes "scared and terrorized."

"People feel the Taliban may come any moment to take away everything from them," he said.

Six days remain until the United States' withdrawal deadline, which world leaders unsuccessfully lobbied Mr. Biden on Tuesday to ease. In addition to international pressure, the president faces skepticism from both political parties at home that the evacuation can be completed in time.

About 19,000 people were evacuated from Kabul in the previous 24 hours, Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House deputy press secretary, said on Twitter in the early hours of Wednesday. Since Aug. 14, the United States has evacuated or facilitated the evacuation of about 82,300 people on military and coalition flights.

The United States has not specified how many people remain in need of evacuation, but U.S. officials believe that thousands of Americans remain in Afghanistan, including some far beyond Kabul. Tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for the U.S. government over the last two decades are among those desperate to leave.

And refugee and resettlement experts estimate that at least 300,000 Afghans are in imminent danger of being targeted by the Taliban for their associations with Americans.