

Officials in Washington are scrambling to keep up with the fast-moving events in Afghanistan.



By Lara Jakes, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper

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Confusion reigned in Washington early Sunday as the Taliban entered Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, with U.S. officials scrambling to determine how safe Americans still there would be.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken was expected to discuss the crisis on three television news shows on Sunday morning, hours after the American Embassy in Kabul closed and its small core of remaining diplomats fled to the capital's international airport for safety.

Embassy staff had begun a vigorous effort to destroy documents and other sensitive materials before leaving the sprawling compound. A fourth senior U.S. official would not say whether the chargé d'affaires, Ross Wilson, and his immediate circle of advisers would remain at a diplomatic facility at the Kabul airport or return to the United States with other Americans who were being evacuated.

The Biden administration has repeatedly warned the Taliban against taking Kabul by force or even entering the city while the immense evacuation effort is underway, a process that could take days or even weeks to complete. Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief American envoy who has been negotiating with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, has sought to broker a deal to reduce violence as the extremist group seized control of most of Afghanistan.

At the same time, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military's Central Command, has flown to the gulf region to oversee the military operations in Afghanistan. The Central Command's forward headquarters is in Qatar.

A Defense Department official said Sunday that Bagram Air Base, the headquarters of the 20-year American war effort in Afghanistan, had also fallen to the Taliban.

Taliban fighters entered the base — which the United States turned over last month to Afghan security forces — on Sunday, the official said. More ominously, Taliban forces have also taken nearby Parwan prison, where thousands of prisoners, including Qaeda fighters, had been housed.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, raced to the Pentagon on Sunday morning for meetings on the unfolding crisis.

Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska, who sits on the Intelligence Committee, called Afghanistan's rapid deterioration an "unmitigated disaster" and blamed President Biden and former President Donald J. Trump for the troop withdrawals that Mr. Sasse said caused the country's undoing.

"History must be clear about this: American troops didn't lose this war — Donald Trump and Joe Biden deliberately decided to lose," the senator said in a statement on Sunday morning.

"The looming defeat will badly hurt American intelligence and give jihadis a safe haven in Afghanistan, again," Mr. Sasse said. "America will regret this."

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