

The Taliban seek to isolate Kabul, the Pentagon says.



By Jennifer Steinhauer

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After a bracing string of battlefield victories, Taliban forces are seeking to isolate Kabul, the Pentagon said Friday, taking over border crossings, highways and lines of revenue on its march through Afghanistan.

“You can see a certain effort to isolate Kabul,” said John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, at a news conference Friday. The move “is not unlike the way they’ve operated in other places of the country, isolating provincial capitals and sometimes being able to force surrender without necessarily much bloodshed.”

“We’re certainly concerned by the speed with which the Taliban has been moving,” he added. “And as we’ve said from the very beginning that this is it still is a moment for Afghan national security and defense forces, as well as their political leadership.”

The Taliban’s accelerated march toward Afghanistan’s capital underlies the urgency for American forces to assist with the evacuation of American and Afghan civilians, including State Department personnel and Afghans who have Special Immigrant Visas that permit them to leave the country for the United States. Three battalions of U.S. troops, or about 3,000 personnel, are being dispatched to Kabul for that effort.

“Nobody’s walking away from the fact that this is potentially dangerous,” Mr. Kirby said of the American mission, in which thousands of civilians are meant to move out of the country daily. “We’re all mindful of the perilous situation in Afghanistan.”

President Biden has vowed to end America’s longest war and withdraw its troops by the end of the month. And U.S. forces have sharply curtailed airstrikes in support of Afghan forces.

In spite of the rapid ascent of Taliban forces and the imminent danger to the capital Mr. Kirby said that the broader battle to secure Afghanistan would remain in the hands of the Afghan security forces.

“They have an air force, a capable Air Force,” he said. “They have organizational structure. They have the benefit of the training that we have provided them over 20 years. They have the material of physical that tangible advantages. It’s time now to use those advantages.”

Jennifer Steinhauer has been a Times reporter since 1994. She has worked on the Metro, Business and National desks, and served as City Hall bureau chief and Los Angeles bureau chief before moving to Washington in 2010. She is the author of a novel, two cookbooks and “The Firsts” the story of the women of the 116th Congress. @jestei

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