

Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan >

Taliban spokesman, in first news conference in Kabul, pledges no reprisals.



By Mujib Mashal

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For nearly two decades, Zabihullah Mujahid was the voice of the Taliban, but only on Tuesday did the world get its first look at his face, when he appeared before reporters in a jam-packed Kabul briefing room to discuss what the insurgents plan to do with their newly won country.

Mr. Mujahid appeared at pains to strike a conciliatory tone, repeating earlier Taliban assurances that they planned no vendetta against those who had opposed them in Afghanistan, even those who had worked with the American and NATO military forces.

The news conference was held days after the insurgents had marched into Kabul, the capital, and as Afghans — and the world — braced to see if they planned a brutal reprise of their earlier years in power. With Western powers and Afghans who helped them during the United States' 20-year war against the Taliban racing to get out of the country, the insurgents have been trying to recast themselves in a less menacing light.

Pressed by reporters Tuesday about what would happen next, Mr. Mujahid shied away from detail, saying “serious talks” were now underway about the shape of a new government.

“Give us time,” Mr. Mujahid asked.

He also offered assurances to Afghanistan's women, who were brutally repressed the last time the Taliban controlled the country, before the group was toppled by U.S. forces in 2001.

“We assure that there will be no violence against women,” he said, “no prejudice against women will be allowed, but the Islamic values are our framework.”

Again, the language was vague. Women, Mr. Mujahid said, will be active in society, allowed to work and study — but “within the bounds of Islamic law.”

But already there have been reports of women being ordered out of their offices and told to fully cover when out in public, as well as the Taliban taking away property. And the Taliban are also accused of a large number of revenge killings in the last stretch of the fighting, particularly in the southern province of Kandahar.

In Kabul on Tuesday, on the third day of the Taliban’s return, life appeared to be returning to some semblance of normalcy. Shops were opening and traffic was bustling again, though cars were occasionally stopped at checkpoints by ragtag fighters.

As more women appeared on the streets in some neighborhoods, there seemed little change in the way they dressed — just a bit more modesty, with baggier robes and tighter scarfs — and there was no sign that the Taliban was moving to reimpose the burqa, as they did in the 1990s. On television, female journalists could be seen reporting from the streets and interviewing Taliban members in the studio. Broadcasters seemed to be trading carefully when it came to music, banned under the previous Taliban regime, airing songs with a devotional leaning.

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The Taliban news conference Tuesday was held in the same room that the Afghan government once used to brief the media. As Mr. Mujahid took his seat in front of a roomful of reporters, the setting appeared identical. The same microphones, the same furniture, the same drapes. Only the flag was different; the white flag of the Taliban had replaced the Afghan one.

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.



Of course, the man doing the talking had also changed.

“We want a strong Islamic system,” Mr. Mujahid said.

But even on the question of whether they want the return of the Islamic Emirate — that is what their oppressive system was called in the 1990s — Mr. Mujahid was noncommittal. What the shape of the government will be, and what it is to be called, will be decided in ongoing discussions, he said.

Mr. Mujahid was asked about the Taliban’s long campaign of bombings, which took untold civilian lives.

“Do you think the people of Afghanistan will forgive you?” one Afghan reporter asked.

The Taliban spokesman said it had been a time of war — “our families also suffered,” he said — but allowed that the civilian deaths were “unfortunate.”

Mr. Mujahid was also asked about the man who had sat in his very seat only a week ago, a government spokesman assassinated by the Taliban.

He offered the same answer: It was war.