

Blinken says the Taliban moved faster than expected and defends the removal of U.S. troops.



By Lara Jakes

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Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said on Sunday that the defeat of Afghan security forces that has led to the Taliban's takeover "happened more quickly than we anticipated," although he maintained the Biden administration's position that keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan was not in American interests.

"This is heart-wrenching stuff," said Mr. Blinken, who looked shaken, in an interview on CNN after a night that saw members of the Taliban enter the Afghan capital, Kabul, and the shuttering of the U.S. Embassy as the last remaining American diplomats in Afghanistan were moved to a facility at the city's airport for better protection.

Mr. Blinken stopped short of saying that all American diplomats would return to the United States, repeating an intent to maintain a small core of officials in Kabul.

But he forcefully defended the administration's decision to withdraw the military from Afghanistan after 20 years of war, saying it could have been vulnerable to Taliban attacks had the United States reneged on an agreement brokered under President Donald J. Trump for all foreign forces to leave the country.

"We would have been back at war with the Taliban," Mr. Blinken said, calling that "something the American people simply can't support — that is the reality."

He said it was not in American interests to devote more time, money and, potentially, casualties, to Afghanistan at a time that the United States was also facing long-term strategic challenges from China and Russia. But, Mr. Blinken said, American forces will remain in the region to confront any terrorist threat against the United States at home that might arise from Afghanistan.

He also appeared to demand more conditions for the prospect of recognizing the Taliban as a legitimate government or establishing a formal diplomatic relationship with them.

Earlier, the Biden administration had said the Taliban, in order to acquire international financial support, must never allow terrorists to use Afghanistan as a haven, must not take Kabul by force and must not attack Americans.

On Sunday, Mr. Blinken said the Taliban must also uphold basic rights of citizens, particularly women who gained new freedoms to go to work and school after the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001.

There will be no recognition of a Taliban government "if they're not sustaining the basic rights of the Afghan people, and if they revert to supporting or harboring terrorists who might strike us," the secretary of state said.

Mr. Blinken's comments were swiftly criticized by the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, who said the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan "is going to be a stain on this president and his presidency."

"They totally blew this one," Mr. McCaul said. "They completely underestimated the strength of the Taliban."

"I hate to say this: I hope we don't have to go back there," he said. "But it will be a threat to the homeland in a matter of time."