

International

Over 1,000 Afghan troops flee Taleban into Tajikistan

Afghan govt has vowed to launch counteroffensive in north

KABUL: More than 1,000 Afghan troops fled into neighboring Tajikistan yesterday following clashes with the Taleban, as the insurgents amassed momentum on the battlefield. The exodus of troops followed another weekend of fighting across much of the northern countryside where the Taleban have overrun dozens of districts, spurring fears that Afghan forces are in crisis.

"They did not want to surrender. They had asked for reinforcements but their call was ignored," said Abdul Basir, a soldier based with a battalion in Badakhshan province that had members flee over the border. The United States announced Friday that it had handed over Bagram Air Base - the center of its operations - to Afghan security forces, effectively wrapping up operations in the country following nearly two decades of fighting.

Tajikistan's national security committee said that 1,037 Afghan government troops had fled into the ex-Soviet country "to save their lives" after clashes with the Taleban during the night. "Taking into account the principle of good neighborliness and adhering to the position of non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, the military personnel of the Afghan government forces were allowed to enter Tajik territory," said the statement, published by Tajikistan's state information agency.

Afghan troops had already crossed into Tajikistan following earlier clashes that saw the Taleban take control of a major border crossing between the countries. The Afghan government has vowed to launch a counteroffensive in the north. Hamdullah Mohib, the country's national security advisor, told Russia's RIA news agency that an operation was "absolutely" in the works.

'Emergency situation'

Already thinly stretched with supply lines strained, Afghan security forces have been crumbling in the face of the Taleban onslaught, with several bases and outposts surrendering to the insurgents without firing a shot. "Afghan forces have lost their morale," said analyst Atta Noori in Kabul. "They are confused - in almost every district that the Taleban capture, they send a team of elders to talk to the soldiers and get them to surrender."

"It is an emergency situation for the Afghan government. They need to step up their counteroffensive as soon as possible," he added. With vital air cover from the Americans massively curtailed by the closure of Bagram air base, the Taleban pressed on with their offensive across the north over the weekend, seizing most of Badakhshan and Takhar provinces with government forces holding little more than the provincial capitals.

The speed and ease of the Taleban's effective takeover of the provinces represent a massive psychological blow to the Afghan government. Both provinces had once served as the strongholds for the anti-Taleban Northern Alliance during the gruesome civil war in the 1990s and were never routed by the militants.

The dire situation in the north was accompanied by reports that the Taleban were also inching closer to the provincial capitals in their southern strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand, with key districts on the outskirts of both cities taken by the group. "We are so tired of this war. At least today the right thing was done, and one side should take control," said Shir Mohammad Barezai, a resident of Helmand's Nawa district that was seized by the



Afghan policemen sit on an armored vehicle at a checkpoint in Panjwai district of Kandahar province on Sunday after the Taleban captured a key district in their former bastion of Kandahar. —AFP

Taleban early yesterday.

Since May 1 when the US military began its final withdrawal of about 2,500 troops, Afghan troops and the Taleban have clashed fiercely across the rugged countryside as peace talks in Doha stalled.

Despite the Taleban's rapid gains, the United States has pressed ahead with its withdrawal in accordance with President Joe Biden's decision to pull all forces from Afghanistan by this year's 20th anniversary of the Sept 11 attacks. —AFP

Death toll in Philippines plane crash rises to 52

PATIKUL, Philippines: Philippine security forces searched among coconut trees on a remote southern island yesterday for the flight data boxes of an aircraft that crashed and killed 52 people in one of the country's worst military air disasters. The C-130 Hercules transport plane was carrying 96 people, most of them recent army graduates, when it overshot the runway on Sunday while trying to land on Jolo island in Sulu province - a haven for Islamist militants.

The plane "skidded" and burst into flames in a village, killing 52 people including 49 military personnel and three civilians, said military spokesman Major General Edgard Arevalo. Another 51 were injured, most of them soldiers. It was not clear if the pilots were among the survivors. "This is one of the worst tragic incidents that happened in our armed forces," Arevalo said.

The three civilians killed were not on the flight and had been working in a quarry, village leader Tanda Hailid told AFP. They were relatives of Agga Ahaddi, who was lucky to survive the crash. He and

his child were outside when the plane ploughed through their house and then a neighbor's home. "We ran away, we just left," Ahaddi told AFP.

Photos of the scene released by the military's Joint Task Force-Sulu showed the damaged tail and smoking wreckage scattered in a coconut grove. "We have people on the ground to make sure the integrity of the pieces of the evidence that we will retrieve, most particularly the flight data recorder," Arevalo said. "Aside from eyewitness accounts, we are also looking for recordings, radio conversation recordings between the pilot and the control tower."

Arevalo said the military had secured the crash site and would ensure militants on the island do not disrupt search efforts. Dental records were being used to help identify the charred remains of victims. Most of the passengers recently graduated from basic military training and were being deployed to the restive island as part of a counter-insurgency effort in the Muslim-majority region. The military has a heavy presence in the southern Philippines where militant groups, including the kidnap-for-ransom outfit Abu Sayyaf, operate.

'Worst crash'

C-130s have been the workhorses of air forces around the world for decades, used to transport troops, supplies, and vehicles. The second-hand Hercules that crashed Sunday was acquired from the United States and delivered to the Philippines



Philippine military personnel inspect the wreckage of the ill-fated Philippine Air Force C-130 transport plane that crashed near the airport in Jolo town, Sulu province during search and retrieval operations yesterday. —AFP

earlier this year. It was one of four in the country's fleet and was in "very good condition", the military said. Two others are being repaired while the third has been grounded following the crash.

"These are all seasoned and experienced pilots, that's why we are also unable to immediately say how this... (happened)," said Arevalo. "Even if these (military assets) are not brand new... these are airworthy." "This ranks as the worst crash of a Philippine military aircraft," Jose Antonio Custodio, a military historian and analyst, told AFP. —AFP

One dead, 29 injured in Bangkok factory explosion

BANGKOK: An explosion near Thai capital Bangkok's international airport yesterday left a plastics factory in flames, killing at least one firefighter and wounding 29 people, officials said. Heavy plumes of black smoke could be seen rising up to the sky from the city's downtown 35 km away, as helicopters continued to dump fire suppression foam from the air on the site.

The blast occurred around 3 am at Taiwan-based Ming Dih Chemical Co, located on the outskirts of Bangkok near Suvarnabhumi airport. By noon, 500 residents near the area were moved to two shelters, including a nearby school about 9 km away, where elderly residents in wheelchairs waited to return to their homes.

Rescue workers drove around surrounding neighborhoods in emergency vans, telling thousands of residents via loudspeakers to leave for their safety. The public have been ordered to stay away from a radius of at least 500 m around the blast site, said

Lieutenant General Ampon Buarubporn. "We do not know if there is anything left to explode," he said, adding that authorities are still working to get the fire under control. The cause of the explosion is still unknown.

Air quality

According to officials, Ming Dih Chemical Co produces expanded polystyrene - colloquially known as Styrofoam - and has been in operation since 1985 in Bang Pli district. Besides being the site of Suvarnabhumi airport - which saw massive black clouds above its airport runways yesterday - the 500-metre radius around the factory is also home to some 300 factories and residential neighborhoods housing 240 communities.

"We have sent air quality vehicles to check the air around the area and will work together with the pollution control department," said Industrial Minister Suriya Juangroongruangkit. Around 5 pm - 15 hours after the pre-dawn explosion - the fire was still raging and sending billowing clouds of smoke into the sky. Multiple fire trucks, water trucks and two helicopters were deployed to quell the blaze, which left a wreckage of debris and gnarled metal beams.

"Two flights carried 6,000 tons of firefighting foam to put out the fire," said deputy interior minister Nipon Boonyamane. "We are supporting the oper-

still have not seen the peak yet," he told AFP.

Bangkok has so far reported nearly 950,000 infections and more than 15,000 deaths, figures experts say are likely to be three to four times less than the actual caseload and fatalities. Under the lockdown imposed at the start of the month, and now extended until July 14, Bangladesh's 168 million people can only leave home for emergencies and to buy essentials. The army and police are patrolling the streets, there is no public transport and shops and offices are shut. Food markets can open for a few hours a day.

In the capital Dhaka, home to some 20 million people, authorities have arrested more than 2,000 people for breaching lockdown rules. Garment factories, a key pillar of Bangladesh's export-oriented economy, are exempted from the shutdown. The health department said some 50 percent of infections are occurring outside the cities, with districts bordering India, where the Delta variant first originated, worst hit. "The situation is worsening every day. The lockdown



BANGKOK: A helicopter dumps water onto the site of an explosion and fire at a plastics factory yesterday. —AFP

ation with our full capacity so the situation will be in control as soon as possible." Traffic around the area was thrown into chaos as authorities closed a main road running parallel to the airport, while strong fumes of burning plastic permeated the area.

Thitipong Choke-umnuay, whose workplace is about 10 km away from the factory and escaped the impact, said his family members living closer were not so lucky. His aunt had evacuated to his office after the impact of the explosion caused severe damage to her home. —AFP



DHAKA: Passenger ferries are seen parked during a strict weeklong nationwide lockdown patrolled by police and troops as a preventive measure against COVID-19 yesterday. —AFP

seems to be working. We hope the extension of the lockdown will improve the situation," a spokesman of the health department said. —AFP

Virus-hit Indonesia orders oxygen for jammed hospitals

JAKARTA: Indonesia yesterday called for the nation's oxygen supplies to be sent to hospitals overflowing with coronavirus patients as fresh cases and deaths hit new records. Oxygen producers had been told to allocate their stocks to the medical sector as the country is battered by an unprecedented wave of infections driven by the highly contagious Delta variant, said senior minister Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan.

"We have enough oxygen supply, but demand is up three-to-four fold so there have been distribution gridlocks," he said. "There's supply from five oxygen producers and we've asked them to allocate 100 percent of their oxygen to the health sector," he added. Southeast Asia's worst-hit nation may turn to imports if supplies dry up, he added.

Apart from hospitals, the steel and mining industries are major buyers of mineral-rich Indonesia's oxygen supplies. An emergency refilling station was set up in central Jakarta, while rickshaw drivers in the city of Bandung delivered tanks to homes where virus patients were isolating. Yesterday, the country reported 29,745 new infections and 558 deaths, both daily records, after the government last week ordered fresh virus curbs in the hard-hit capital Jakarta, across Java and on holiday island Bali.

Mosques, parks, shopping malls and restaurants were shut in hotspot areas, while non-essential employees were ordered to work from home. Dozens in Jakarta were arrested yesterday for operating cafes and entertainment venues in violation of the new rules. In Java's Semarang city, authorities sprayed water hoses at street-side restaurants still serving customers.

The world's fourth most populous nation has seen its daily caseload more than quadruple in less than a month and its tally stands at 2.3 million cases and 61,140 deaths. But that figure is widely believed to be a severe undercount due to low testing and poor tracing measures. Indonesia's overwhelmed healthcare system has been teetering on the brink of collapse as jammed hospitals turned away patients, forcing desperate families to hunt for oxygen tanks to treat the sick and dying at home.

Daily COVID burials in the hard-hit capital Jakarta are up 10-fold since May, the government has said, and patients are increasingly dying in isolation at home. Independent virus data group LaporCovid has said at least 269 people in 10 provinces have died while in self-isolation. Jakarta's health agency said 45 people had died at home on Friday alone. There are no official national statistics on the number of COVID deaths at home. —AFP



BEKASI, Indonesia: Gravediggers bury a coffin of a COVID-19 victim at a cemetery on Sunday. —AFP

Bangladesh extends lockdown as cases hit new record

DHAKA: Bangladesh yesterday extended a strict nationwide lockdown, confining people to their homes for another week as coronavirus cases and deaths both hit new records. Authorities said a record 164 people had died in the previous 24 hours, while almost 1,000 tested positive - the most single day-infections since the first case was detected in March last year.

Nazrul Islam, a top virologist and member of a high-powered national technical committee that asked the government to extend the lockdown, said the situation is "extremely bad". "The Delta variant is responsible for 70 percent of the infections. This variant is highly transmissible. And we