

## International

# 'No more hope': Afghan Hazaras live in fear under Taleban rule

## Reports of abductions and murders amid repression of minorities

**BAMIYAN, Afghanistan:** A black and white Taleban flag flies over the blown-up statue of a revered Hazara chief at the entrance to Bamiyan in central Afghanistan. Since the radical Islamists swept to power seven weeks ago they have repeatedly promised a more moderate, inclusive brand of rule than during their last stint, when minorities were brutally persecuted. But members of the Hazara community here don't believe them. "Everyone is terrified," says Najwa, a 26-year-old local journalist now out of work. "It is impossible to believe them. For the Hazaras, and especially for us women, there is no more hope." She and other Hazaras fled into the mountains when they first heard the Taleban were coming, but a week later they returned. As a member of the Bamiyan Film Academy, Najwa could have been evacuated to France like many of her peers but, hidden in the wilderness, she missed a vital call. "And now it is too late," she says.

### 'Abductions, murders'

Afghanistan's new rulers have declared a general amnesty and promised reform. But fears abound that they will repeat the brutal repression of minorities and women seen during their former reign from 1996 to 2001. "We know that there have been abductions, murders," Najwa says.

The Hazara, who make up as much as a fifth of Afghanistan's around 38 million people, have been persecuted in the country for centuries. They have

suffered massacres during the rule of several Afghan governments in recent decades, but especially under the Taleban-Sunni hardliners who see the mainly Shiite ethnic minority as heretics. The Islamists have carried out several mass killings of Hazaras, including in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998, where Human Rights Watch says at least 2,000 mainly Hazara civilians were executed.

While nothing on that scale has been reported since the Taleban takeover on August 15, an Amnesty International investigation published this week found Taleban forces had killed 13 Hazaras, including nine surrendering former government soldiers, in Daykundi province on August 30, in what "appear to be war crimes".

### 'Not enemies'

But Musa Nasrat, Bamiyan's acting governor and new chief of police, insists Hazaras have nothing to fear. "It is true that in the beginning, people were afraid," he tells AFP, claiming that all those who initially fled had returned.

"We told them: 'Return to your normal life. We are here to protect you'," he says, insisting that "we are not enemies of the Shiites." The Taleban's enemy, he says, was "the corrupt government" of ousted president Ashraf Ghani. But now, "we have won. Peace will reign." In a bid to reassure the Hazaras, the new rulers have made a Shiite, Mahdi Mujahid, the intelligence chief in Bamiyan province. "My community



BAMIYAN, Afghanistan: Hazara ethnic children walk to a river from their village near the cliffs pockmarked by caves where people still live as they did centuries ago in Bamiyan. —AFP

has nothing to fear," he said, in his first statement on the job. But more than words will be needed to calm the community's fears.

"We cannot trust them," says Abdul Danesh Yar, a 33-year-old private school principal. "Our coun-

try's history is full of massacres and deportations of Hazaras." Yar, like so many others here, says he feels betrayed by the United States and its allies over their hasty withdrawal in August after 20 years of fighting. —AFP

## Peru president names environmentalist as new premier

**LIMA:** Peru swore in an environmental activist as prime minister Wednesday, replacing a controversial leftist figure in the politically tumultuous South American nation. The country's current leftist leader Pedro Castillo came to power in July facing a lengthy to-do list, including constitutional reform, but battled to get his cabinet approved and narrowly staved off political collapse earlier this year. He gave no reason over his decision to remove Guido Bellido—a hardline leftist and political novice, whose appointment was controversial from the start—and replace him with Mirtha Vasquez.

Hours later, Castillo swore in the environmental and human rights activist as his new PM, a move seen as a sop to the moderate wing of the informal leftist coalition that supports him. "For God, for this country of women and men who everyday fight to live with dignity, without discrimination, and who promote real changes, yes, I swear!" Vasquez, 46, said during the ceremony which was not attended by her predecessor. Under Peruvian law, the prime minister's resignation automatically triggers that of the entire cabinet. The president's reshuffled government brings together politicians across the political spectrum from the radical Peru Libre, to the more moderate Juntos por el Peru. Vasquez—who headed Con-



LIMA, Peru: Mirtha Vasquez, an environmental and human rights activist, posing for an official photograph after her swearing-in ceremony, in Lima, on Wednesday. —AFP

gress between November 2020 and July 2021 — belongs to the leftist Frente Amplio. Castillo, a former rural schoolteacher, called for "unity" from the country's economic, political and social sectors to "achieve common objectives"—such as reactivating the economy. He later tweeted, "The new stage in the #GobiernoDelPueblo seeks to promote dialogue, governance and teamwork. Our great objective is to fight for the most vulnerable and we are going to achieve it." Castillo's July appointment of electronic engineer Bellido was immediately tricky. Peruvian media reported the 41-year-old was investigated by prosecutors for allegedly defending terrorism with statements made shortly after taking up his seat in parliament in June. In comments to the Inka Vision online news outlet, he appeared to defend people who supported the Shining Path Maoist guerrilla group that fought the state between 1980-2000 and is designated a terrorist organization by Lima. —AFP

## Russia to invite Taleban to talks in Moscow Oct 20

**MOSCOW:** Russia will invite the Taleban to international talks on Afghanistan scheduled for October 20 in Moscow, the Kremlin's envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said yesterday. In response to a question from Russian journalists on whether representatives of the hardline group would be invited to negotiations involving China, India, Iran and Pakistan, Kabulov said: "Yes".

The talks will follow a G20 summit on Afghanistan on October 12 that will seek to help the country avoid a humanitarian catastrophe in the wake of the Taleban takeover. Kabulov was also asked whether Russia would deliver aid to Afghanistan, where the humanitarian crisis is growing worse, a top UN official warned Wednesday. Russia would do so, but the details were still being decided, Kabulov said.

"This is being worked out," he told journalists, saying "cargo" was being collected.

Moscow has moved to engage with the Taleban but stopped short of recognition of the group, which is banned as a terrorist organization in Russia. On Monday, Kabulov said Moscow would not "exclude" revising the UN sanctions regime against the Taleban. "But at this stage we believe it is not expedient to rush," he said.

The Kremlin has in recent years reached out to the Taleban and hosted its representatives in Moscow several times, most recently in July. Unlike Western countries that rushed to evacuate diplomats after the Taleban swept to power in August, Russia has kept its embassy in Kabul open.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has criticized the foreign involvement in domestic Afghan affairs and said Moscow had "learnt lessons" from the Soviet Union's invasion of the country. In the 1980s, Moscow fought a disastrous decade-long war in Afghanistan that killed up to two million Afghans, forced seven million more from their homes and led to the deaths of more than 14,000 Soviet troops.

Putin has also warned about members of extremist groups exploiting political turmoil in Afghanistan to cross into neighboring countries as refugees. In the wake of the Taleban takeover, Russia held military drills with ex-Soviet Tajikistan—where it operates a military base—and in Uzbekistan. Both countries share a border with Afghanistan. Moscow also said it received orders for new arms and weapons from the Central Asian nations.

While the Taleban has said it does not pose a threat to Central Asian countries, the ex-Soviet republics in the region have previously been targeted by attacks attributed to allies of Afghan Islamists.

The Taleban were initially in power in Afghanistan from 1996 until they were toppled by the 2001 US-led invasion following the September 11, 2001 attacks that were plotted by Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden from Afghan soil. —AFP