

International

Afghan amputees recover alongside former enemies

‘The problems between us belong to the past’

KABUL: Just months ago they were fighting each other as mortal enemies, but today they are amputees dealing with their new disabilities, together. At this Red Cross-run rehabilitation centre in Kabul, former Afghan government soldiers and Taliban fighters adjust their new prostheses, living side by side.

Khair Mohammad, a 32-year-old sergeant in the ousted government army who saw both his legs amputated in February, rests after taking his first hesitant steps between two parallel metal bars. “The Taliban were our enemies, and I fought them when I was healthy,” said the sergeant with a neatly trimmed beard and a Real Madrid T-shirt. “But the situation has changed,” he told AFP in the long, narrow room equipped for walk training. “The problems between us belong to the past.”

Just a few meters away sits Mullah Yacoub, a 44-year-old Taliban fighter who lost his left leg before being shipped off to Guantanamo two decades ago. Wearing a jet-black turban and with a face mask over his disheveled, henna-dyed beard, the Islamist insisted he was mistaken for someone else when he was sent to the US prison base in Cuba, where he spent more than four years. Upon his return, he spent several more years in an Afghan jail. Here, he is getting fitted for a new artificial leg.

‘All equal’

Despite the hardship he has endured, Yacoub

told AFP the Taliban “have no beef with anyone” since the movement seized control of the country on August 15. “We have forgiven everyone and no longer consider anyone an enemy.” The International Committee of the Red Cross, which has run this centre for more than three decades, has never questioned the affiliations of the amputees it welcomes for rehabilitation. In a country with poor health services and where the disabled typically become heavy burdens on their families, being equipped with new limbs and learning to walk again is a privilege.

“This is an international clinic open to all,” said Mohammad, the ex-government soldier. “We all have the same problem, so we get along.” Fahd, a 20-year-old former Taliban fighter who did not provide his last name, lost both of his lower legs in an explosion four months ago in the eastern province of Paktiya. Wearing a traditional, embroidered cap and shawl and with a friend in tow for support, he has come to try his prostheses for the first time. “Here, we are all equal,” he said. “There is now peace in our country.”

‘Magic’

The Kabul centre - one of seven run by the ICRC across the country - is headed by Alberto Cairo, a charismatic 69-year-old Italian physiotherapist who arrived in Afghanistan more than 30 years ago and never left. With his hands

and tickets difficult to purchase for ordinary passengers. But the airline said the flight operation was “not very lucrative financially” and it was only operating flights on “humanitarian grounds”. “We would pay more than \$400,000 as insurance premium which could only be possible if 300 passengers are available,” Khan said.

The price was around \$150 before the Taliban takeover. The Taliban had earlier threatened to block half of the airline’s flights if the ticket price was not slashed. But Afghanistan’s own Kam Air has been charging up to \$1,600 for a single ticket. Facilities at Kabul airport were badly damaged in the chaotic evacuation of more than 120,000 people that ended on August 30 with the withdrawal of the last US troops. Pakistan was the chief backer of the Taliban’s 1996-2001 regime and has long faced US allegations that its intelligence service fuelled the Islamist insurgents.

Prime Minister’s Imran Khan’s government has called on the world to engage with the Taliban and provide economic support to the aid-dependent country which has seen funding frozen by Western donors since the takeover. Pakistan, however, has stopped short of recognizing the Taliban government - a step opposed by Western countries. The Taliban last week closed one of its border crossings with Pakistan over the allegation that Afghan citizens were being mistreated by the Pakistani border officials.— AFP



KABUL: A man helps a boy put on shoes on his new prosthetic leg at the International Committee of Red Cross Rehabilitation Centre in Kabul. — AFP

plunged into the pockets of his white lab coat with “Alberto” embroidered on the front, he smiles warmly at the new arrivals. “Former soldiers, Taliban, old communists, they are all together,” he said, adding: “They talk, sit, drink tea,

sometimes they take selfies together.” Cairo, who has been mentioned in the past as a possible Nobel Peace Prize candidate for his work teaching some 200,000 Afghan amputees to walk again, said the centre was “magic”. — AFP

PIA suspends flights over ‘unprofessional’ Taliban

KARACHI: Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) said yesterday it had suspended flights to Kabul over the “unprofessional attitude” of Taliban authorities. PIA resumed special flights to the country after the Taliban seized power in mid-August, and was a lifeline for many Afghans trying to flee the new regime and economic crisis.

“Our flights frequently faced undue delays because of the unprofessional attitude of the Kabul aviation authorities,” Abdullah Hafeez Khan, the PIA spokesman told AFP. The route will remain suspended until “the situation becomes conducive,” he added. A source at the airline told AFP Taliban officials were often “derogatory” and on one occasion “physically manhandled” a staff member. PIA had faced criticism for charging more than \$1,200 for a one-way, 40-minute flight from Kabul to Islamabad.

The special flights have been used mostly by NGOs and charities, some of which have helped at-risk Afghans to flee, but have been irregular

Over 100 Yemen rebels killed south of Marib

RIYADH: More than 100 Yemeni rebels have been killed south of Marib, the Saudi-led coalition said on Wednesday, reporting a heavy toll for the third straight day in fighting for the strategic city. The Iran-backed Houthis’ latest casualties in the Abdiya district “exceeded 108”, the coalition said, after announcing more than 156 dead on Monday and over 134 on Tuesday. That brought the unconfirmed toll to about 400 in the area this week as an analyst said the rebels have made significant advances.

The coalition, which relies heavily on air strikes to combat the Shiite Houthis, did not reveal how it arrived at those figures. They could not be independently verified by AFP. “We have conducted 19 operations targeting (Houthi) militia members in the past 24 hours in Abdiya, destroying 12 of their military vehicles and their losses exceeded 108 members,” the coalition said in a statement carried by state-run Al-Ekhabariya television.

Fighting for Marib, the internationally recognized government’s last bastion in oil-rich northern Yemen, has left heavy casualties since the

rebels renewed their campaign to seize Marib last month. The Houthis said they were “on the edges of the city” in a video statement on Tuesday. Adam Baron, a political analyst focused on Yemen and the wider region, said the rebels had made “significant” territorial gains. “The advances are quite significant on both a strategic and psychological level — these are areas that were seen as quite secure just a year or two ago,” he told AFP.

Yemen has been devastated by a seven-year war pitting the rebels against the government supported by a Saudi-led military coalition. The rebels overran the capital Sanaa, just 120 kilometers to the west of Marib, in 2014, prompting the Saudi-led intervention to prop up the government the following year. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and millions have been displaced since then. Many fled to Marib, whose population has ballooned since the war began.

As well as the deaths in Abdiya, six people were killed in a car-bombing on Sunday that targeted the governor of Aden, the government’s provisional seat of power. He survived the attack. Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalek Saeed called the Aden blast an “escalation” by the rebels. Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of supporting the Houthis with weapons and drones, but Tehran says it only provides political support to the rebels. The Houthi insurgents have also repeatedly targeted Saudi Arabia in cross-border attacks, using drones and missiles.— AFP