

## International

## Taleban push deep into Panjshir Valley holdout

## Afghan civil war 'likely': Top US general



PANJSHIR: An Afghan resistance movement and anti-Taleban uprising forces personnel takes part in a military training at Malimah area of Dara district in Panjshir province as the valley remains the last major holdout of anti-Taleban forces. - AFP

KABUL: Taleban fighters have advanced deep into Afghanistan's holdout Panjshir Valley, with resistance fighters saying they are keeping the Islamists at bay, but analysts warned they are struggling. Italian aid agency Emergency, which runs a hospital in Panjshir, said Taleban forces had reached the village of Anabah, where they run a surgical centre. "Many people have fled from local villages in recent days," Emergency said in a statement, adding it was continuing to provide medical services.



## Resistance fighters 'keeping Islamists at bay'

"There has so far been no interference with Emergency's activities," it said. "We have received a small number of wounded people at the Anabah Surgical Centre." Anabah lies some 25 kilometers north inside the 115-km-long valley, but unconfirmed reports suggested the Taleban had seized other areas too. Bill Roggio, managing editor of the US-based Long War Journal, said Sunday that there was still a "fog of war" with unconfirmed reports the Taleban had captured multiple districts-but that "it looks bad".

Both sides claim to have inflicted heavy losses on each other. "The Taleban army has been hardened with 20 years of war, and make no mistake, the Taleban trained an army," Roggio tweeted Sunday, adding that "the odds were long" for the Panjshir resistance. "The Taleban army was injected with a massive amount of weapons and munitions after the US withdrawal and collapse of the ANA" (Afghan National Army), he added. Fighters in Panjshir held out for a decade against the Soviet military and also the Taleban's first regime from 1996-2001.

Ali Maisam Nazary-who is not in Panjshir but remains a spokesman for the resistance-boasted yesterday that the resistance "will never fail". But former vice-president Amrullah Saleh, who is holed out in Panjshir alongside Ahmad Massoud-the son of legendary anti-Taleban commander Ahmad Shah Massoud-warned of a grim situation. Saleh in a statement spoke of a "large-scale humanitarian crisis", with thousands "displaced by the Taleban onslaught".

Pro-Taleban social media have boasted of capturing swathes of the valley, but Nick Waters from the investigative website Bellingcat said the posts did not include verifiable photographs to back up the claims. "It will be quite easy to verify a video showing Taleban within the Panjshir valley," Waters said. The Panjshir Valley, surrounded by jagged snow-capped peaks, offers a natural defensive advantage, with fighters melting away in the face of advancing forces, then launching ambushes firing from the high tops down into the valley.

## Civil war 'likely'

Afghanistan will "likely" erupt in civil war, the top US general told US media Saturday, warning that those conditions could see a resurgence of terrorist groups in the country. As American forces began their withdrawal, the Taleban took over Afghanistan in a lightning campaign, with only the northern province Panjshir holding out against the hardline Islamists. "My military estimate... is that the conditions are likely to develop of a civil war," General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Fox News.

He questioned whether the Taleban-who are yet to declare a government-would be able to consolidate power and establish effective governance. "I think there's at least a very good probability of a broader civil war and that will then in turn lead to conditions that could, in fact, lead to a reconstitution of Al-Qaeda or a growth of ISIS or other... terrorist groups," Milley said. Emphasizing that he could not predict what would happen next in Afghanistan, he nonetheless gave a bleak assessment.

"The conditions are very likely," Milley told Fox News, "that you could see a resurgence of terrorism coming out of that general region within 12, 24, 36 months." The United States invaded Afghanistan and toppled the first Taleban regime in 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, which had sanctuary in the country. Western governments fear Afghanistan could again become a haven for extremists bent on attacking them. The United States has said it will maintain an "over-the-horizon" capability to strike against any threats to its security in Afghanistan.— Agencies

## Haiti racing to rebuild schools destroyed in earthquake

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Haiti is struggling to send children back to class amid the devastation of the earthquake last month that killed more than 2,200 people and destroyed tens of thousands of buildings, including many schools. It is a logistical and humanitarian challenge in the disaster-prone country - the poorest in the Americas - one that never fully recovered from the huge quake in 2010 that killed more than 200,000 people and caused billions in damage.

Classes for most students, initially scheduled to start September 6, have been pushed back by two weeks. And they have been postponed until October 4 in the three southern departments hardest hit by the 7.2 magnitude quake of August 14. In those areas, many families lost everything. Word of the delayed start to the school year launched a countdown for aid workers, who have raced to help the very needy people in the southern departments.

## Schools destroyed

"Of the 2,800 schools in the three affected areas, 955 have been assessed by the government with support from UNICEF, and the first results show that 15 percent of them were destroyed and 69 percent were damaged," Bruno Maes, head of UNICEF in Haiti. "It is going to be a race against time because it is just a few weeks to set up protective, safe learning shelters for children in these three departments so they do not miss another school year," Maes said.

The 2019-2020 school year ended in March of last year because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The following school year was then disrupted for many Haitians by widespread violence from powerful street gangs. In late 2020 and early this year, gang members carried out many kidnappings for ransom, abducting children or teachers near schools in the capital Port-au-Prince. About 150 kilometers from Port-au-Prince, the crime wave largely spared Camp-Perrin, but the area was hard hit by the quake.

Welcoming children back to school is a particular headache for private schools, which account for 80 percent of the schools in Haiti. "We have students who have not yet paid their tuition for the 2017-2018 school year," said Maxime Eugene, a teacher at Mazenod high school. "We cannot send them home and make them miss a year of school over money," he said. The quake destroyed every classroom in that well-known Catholic school. Soldiers have cleared away the debris but school officials are still waiting for help to get the scholastic year going.—AFP

## Climate change blamed for havoc in northeast floods

NEW YORK: Climate change and creaky infrastructure have been blamed for the scale of the impact from floods tearing through New York City when remnants of Hurricane Ida swept across the US northeast, killing at least 47 people. "We are in a whole different world," New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said after the flash floods. "This is a different challenge." Record rain turned streets into rivers and shut down subway services as water cascaded onto tracks. Nearly a dozen people drowned in basement apartments.

The extreme weather, combined with a lack of preparation, stretched the United States' biggest city to breaking point. "It's no big surprise that the city seems to break down every time there's a big storm," said Jonathan Bowles, executive director of the think-tank Center for an Urban Future. "The city's infrastructure hasn't kept pace with the population growth that New York's had in the last couple of decades, let alone the increasing ferocity of storms, and rising sea levels that have come with climate change," Bowles said.

While there has been a lot of investment in big projects - train stations, airports, new bridges - less funding has gone to "unsexy" projects such as sewer



SRINAGAR: Indian paramilitary troopers patrol along a road in Srinagar yesterday as thousands of Indian security forces maintained a lockdown across Kashmir after the death of a separatist political leader sparked clashes with protesters. - AFP

## Late Kashmir leader's family charged under anti-terror law

SRINAGAR: The family of a separatist icon from Indian-administered Kashmir has been charged under a sweeping anti-terrorism law for allegedly chanting anti-New Delhi slogans and wrapping his body with Pakistan's flag after he died, officials said. Tensions in the Himalayan territory, which is disputed between India and Pakistan, have been heightened since Syed Ali Geelani died on Wednesday at the age of 92 in the main city of Srinagar.

Police in Kashmir said a case under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) - which effectively allows people to be held without trial indefinitely-was registered on Saturday against Geelani's family. The family were accused of "raising anti-national slogans and resorting to other anti-national activities" at the influential resistance leader's home soon after his death. They have not yet been detained by police.

His son Naseem Geelani did not deny the allegations but repeated earlier claims that police took his father's body away to be buried in the middle of the night just hours after his death, and did not allow the family to perform last rites. Police have refuted those allegations. "We

told the visiting police officers that they had taken control of everything after my father's death and that we were mourning. We had no way of knowing who was doing what," the son said yesterday.

A video widely shared on social media showed the leader's body wrapped in a Pakistani flag before police officers took it away amid a scuffle with his family members. Chants of "we want freedom" were heard in the background during the mayhem. Authorities yesterday eased a lockdown imposed to maintain calm after his death across Kashmir, allowing for limited movement. An internet and mobile phone shutdown was partially eased on Saturday. Geelani, a popular figure in the region, spent over five decades fighting for self-determination for people in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Islamabad observed a day of national mourning after Geelani's death and funeral prayers for the leader were held across Pakistan and in Turkey. In Srinagar, Indian troops are guarding Geelani's grave and no-one is allowed to approach it. Anger has simmered in the territory since 2019 when New Delhi controversially revoked the region's semi-autonomy and brought it under direct rule.

Residents in the Muslim-majority region say repression has intensified in the two years since the changes. India has used the vaguely-worded UAPA legislation against thousands of Kashmiri residents, journalists and dissidents, according to activists. Rebel groups have been fighting Indian forces for decades, demanding independence for the territory or its merger with Pakistan that controls a part of it. Tens of thousands have died in the fighting, most civilians.—AFP

lines and water mains, he said. Nicole Gelinas, an urban economics expert at the Manhattan Institute, another think-tank, said New York's infrastructure "was not built for seven inches of rainfall in a few hours." Drains for the city's sewer system get clogged, Gelinas said, and "there's not enough green space to catch some of the water before it runs into the drains. "So some of these avenues, they become canals when there's a big storm."

New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania were the hardest hit by Ida, which ravaged the southern state of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast earlier in the week before sweeping northeast. President Joe Biden, who



LOUISIANA: A sign for a beach resort rests among storm debris in the wake of Hurricane Ida in Grand Isle, Louisiana. — AFP

has made threats from climate change a priority, flew to Louisiana, where more than 800,000 people remained without power after Ida made landfall as a Category 4 storm. He said costly improvements to the levee system around New Orleans after the far deadlier Hurricane Katrina in 2005 had proved their worth in preventing more catastrophic damage this time.

Similarly transformative infrastructure projects - rather than simply rebuilding - will have to become the new norm, he said, pushing for passage of his giant \$3.5 trillion infrastructure bill in Congress. "Things have changed so drastically in terms of the environment, you've already crossed a certain threshold," he said. "You can't build back a road, a highway or a bridge to what it was before." New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy said Storm Ida had left 25 people dead in his state, most of them "individuals who got caught in their vehicles." Thirteen deaths were reported in New York City, including 11 victims who could not escape their basements, police said.

Three people were killed in the New York suburb of Westchester, while another five died in Pennsylvania and one - a state trooper - in Connecticut, officials said. "I'm 50 years old and I've never seen that much rain ever," said Metodija Mihajlov, whose Manhattan restaurant basement was flooded with three inches of water. "It was like living in the jungle, like tropical rain. Unbelievable. Everything is so strange this year," Mihajlov said. The National Weather Service recorded 3.15 inches of rain in New York's Central Park in just an hour - beating a record set just last month during Storm Henri.—AFP

## News in brief

## Gunfire in Guinea capital

CONAKRY: Heavy gunfire rang out in the centre of the Guinean capital Conakry yesterday morning and troops were seen on the streets, with a Western diplomat in the city describing the events as an attempted coup. The government in the west African nation has not yet commented on the situation. The whereabouts of President Alpha Conde is not yet clear. Guinea - one of the world's poorest countries despite boasting significant mineral resources - has long been beset by political instability. Yesterday, residents reached by telephone in Conakry's Kaloum peninsula - the government quarter - reported hearing sustained gunfire. Speaking on condition of anonymity for their safety, they reported seeing a number of soldiers on the streets who called on residents to return to their homes and stay there. One resident said that he had seen a "column of military vehicles with excited soldiers" on board, driving towards the city centre. — AFP



CONAKRY: Members of the Armed Forces of Guinea drive through the central neighborhood of Kaloum in Conakry yesterday after sustained gunfire was heard. - AFP

## Four killed in suicide blast

QUETTA: Four Pakistani paramilitary guards were killed yesterday when a suicide bomber on a motorbike blew himself up in the southwestern city of Quetta, police said. The bomber targeted Frontier Constabulary guards in the Mian Ghundi neighborhood of the city - around 140 kilometers from the frontier with Afghanistan - where Hazara Shiite merchants were trading vegetables. Three died immediately in the blast, with another officer dying later of his wounds, said Azhar Akram, a deputy inspector general of police. Akram told AFP that 17 guards and two civilians were wounded in the blast. Three are in a critical condition, he said. A spokesman for the police's Counter-Terrorism Department confirmed the attack. Quetta is home to approximately 500,000 Hazaras, who mostly live in an ethnic enclave on the edge of the city.— AFP

## Sao Tome holds election

LIBREVILLE: Sao Tome and Principe, a tiny Portuguese-speaking archipelago widely praised for its strong democracy, was voting yesterday in the second round of a presidential election after two postponements. The runoff was initially scheduled for August 8 but was postponed until August 29 before being rescheduled again after a candidate complained about the results in the first round. The country is a former Portuguese colony of 210,000 people in the Gulf of Guinea off West Africa, whose parliamentary system has fostered a tradition of peaceful transitions of power. It opened up to a multiparty system in 1991 after 15 years of single-party rule by a Marxist regime. Carlos Vila Nova of the centre-right opposition Independent Democratic Action (ADI) party led the first round of voting on July 18 with 39.5 percent of the vote. — AFP