

Afghan leader flies into besieged northern city as Taliban extend gains

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani flew to the besieged northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif Wednesday to rally his beleaguered forces, with Taliban fighters having now taken more than a quarter of the country's provincial capitals in less than a week.

Ghani arrived in Mazar as the Taliban captured Faizabad overnight, making it the ninth city to be overrun since Friday.

The Afghan leader held talks with Mazar's long-time strongman Atta Mohammad Noor and infamous warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum about the defence of the city, as Taliban fighters inched closer to its outskirts.

The loss of Mazar would be a catastrophic blow to the Kabul government and represent the complete collapse of its control over the north — long a bastion of anti-Taliban militias.

Hours before Ghani arrived, pictures posted on official government social media accounts showed Dostum boarding a plane in Kabul en route to Mazar, along with a contingent of commandos.

Fighting in Afghanistan's long-running conflict has escalated dramatically since May, when the US-led military coalition began the final stage of a withdrawal set to be completed before the end of the month.

Further to the east of Mazar, in Badakhshan's capital Faizabad, a local lawmaker told AFP that security forces had retreated after days of heavy clashes.

"The Taliban have captured the city now," said Zabihullah Attiq, confirming the latest city to fall.

Government forces were also battling the hardline Islamists in Kandahar and Helmand, the southern Pashto-speaking provinces from where the Taliban draw their strength.

In Kandahar, fierce clashes erupted between Taliban insurgents and security forces, with heavy fighting being reported near the city's prison, which the militants have been trying to reach for weeks.

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The Taliban frequently target prisons to release incarcerated fighters and replenish their ranks.



Image source: Yahoo News

No regrets

But even as the Taliban routed government forces, US President Joe Biden gave no hint of delaying his deadline to withdraw all American troops by August 31, instead urging Afghan leaders to “fight for themselves” on Tuesday.

“I do not regret my decision” to withdraw US troops after two decades of war, he told reporters in Washington.

And as fighting raged, US diplomats were desperately trying to breathe life back into all but dead talks between the Afghan government and Taliban in Doha, where Washington’s special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was pushing the hardline Islamists to accept a ceasefire.

Biden has stressed that Washington would continue to support the Afghan security forces with air strikes, food, equipment and money for salaries.

“They have got to want to fight. They have outnumbered the Taliban,” he said.

The Taliban have appeared largely indifferent to peace overtures, and seem intent on a military victory to crown a return to power after their ouster 20 years ago in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

The insurgents appeared to be consolidating their hold over captured cities in the north, with rifle-toting militants patrolling the streets of Kunduz on foot and in armored humvees as smoke rose from smoldering shops destroyed during the fight for the city.

After conquering most of the north, the Taliban have now set their sights on region’s biggest city, Mazar-i-Sharif — long a linchpin for the government’s control of the area — after capturing Sheberghan to its west, and Kunduz and Taloqan to its east.

Mazar saw some of the bloodiest fighting during the Taliban’s scorched earth rampage through the country in the 1990s, with rights groups accusing the jihadists of massacring up to 2,000 civilians — mostly Shiite Hazaras — after capturing the city in 1998.

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