Pentagon says continually assessing status of Afghanistan retrograde

By: Jim Garamone

KABUL: U.S. leaders continually assess the progress of the retrograde from Afghanistan and the state of operations in the country and adjust accordingly, Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby said Monday.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III has said the retrograde from Afghanistan is on pace. But, it is a dynamic situation in the nation.

The Taliban have attacked Afghan government bases and units. Kirby said that Austin and military leaders in the Pentagon, at U.S. Central Command and in Afghanistan, "are constantly looking at the pace we're going at, and the capabilities we have, and the capabilities that we're going to need throughout to complete the withdrawal," Kirby said. "So as we said, from the very beginning; while there is a schedule, we are mindful that that schedule could fluctuate and change, as conditions change."

Kirby said there are only two aspects of the Afghanistan retrograde that will not change: The first is the U.S. military will withdraw all U.S. forces from the country, and the second is the withdrawal will be finished by the September deadline set by President Joe Biden.

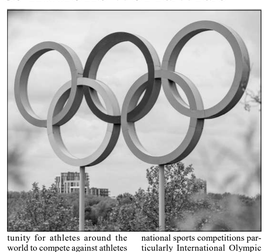
Other aspects of the Afghan situation are still being studied, Kirby said. Commanders at many levels are wrestling with what over-the-horizon counterinsurgency and over-the-horizon logistics will look like. The U.S. military can already provide the over-the-horizon support that the Afghan government will need, Kirby said, those capabilities already exist. Leaders are looking for better ways to perform the missions.

"[People] tend to forget that we already do have over-the-horizon capability when it comes to the counterterrorism threat in Afghanistan," he said. "Is it robust enough? Is it sustainable for the long term? Well, that's what we're looking at."

Austin has extended the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower in the region. He has deployed a bomber task force to the area. "Nobody is discounting how difficult this is," Kirby said. "But as the secretary said, difficult does not mean impossible, and we have the ability right now to reach any scrap of Earth that we believe we need to, should the risk warrant it."

Planners continue to look at ways to provide contractual support to Afghan forces once the retrograde is completed. "There's a range of options that we're looking at for how to continue to provide contractual support … specifically the Afghan Air Forces," Kirby said. "We're very actively working our way through that right now. We're looking at a range of options."

Sports causing solidarity between Afghans & nations worldwide



International Olympic Day is celebrated on June 23 across the world every year. This day marks the importance of sports and fitness in our daily lives and also promotes the participation of an individual in games and sports, irrespective of age, race, gender, caste or religion.

For the first time, Pierre de Coubertin on 23 June 1894 suggested that old Olympic traditions were executed. On the same year, he named modern Olympic games.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was formed in the year 1894, and it is commemorated on International Olympic Day. This committee focuses on inspiring people all around the world to be their best selves.

The Olympic Day was inaugurated on June 23, 1948, at that time nine countries – Portugal, Greece, Austria, Canada, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Uruguay, Venezuela and Belgium, participated in Olympics.

Jacques Rogge, IOC President at that time, sent out a message to the young people around the world and encouraged them to participate in sports and fitness.

This year, the theme of International Olympic Day is – "Stay healthy, stay strong, stay active with the Olympic Day workout on June 23."

Olympians from all over the world have inspired people with their enthusiasm and positivity. Olympics Day is something more than just a sports event. It is based on three pillars – 'move', 'learn' and 'discover'.

The Olympics provide a fantastic international ground for athletes. It gives an excellent opportunity for athletes around the world to compete against athletes of a similar level on the international stage.

In Afghanistan constitution, it has been clarified that the government is adopting all necessary measures for strengthening sound physical sports and development of national and local sports.

In spring 1962, the first modern gymnasium was constructed at Kabul University in vicinity of Aliabad area for Afghan students to go ahead with some trainings and sports. Later on, the second gymnasium was built at Kabul Polytechnic University.

Afghanistan National Olympic Committee was established in 1935 and was officially recognized in 1936. Currently, the committee is responsible to manage and prepare Afghan players and sportsmen for national and international sports competitions particularly International Olympic games.

For the first time, Afghan sportsmen participated in 11th World Olympic Games held in 1936 in Germany's Berlin. The games are held every four year. For the first time, Rohullah Nikpa won Bronze medal in World Olympic Games held in 2008, considered as the historic victory for Afghanistan.

Afghanistan National Olympic Committee considers sports as effective for strengthening national unity. In recent years, sports have considerably developed in Afghanistan, causing happiness among the people. sports result not only in solidarity among Afghans but solidarity among nations of the world.

Lailuma Noori

Ban on Afghan girls singing at schools overturned by social media stir

The protracted war in Afghanistan has fragilized the country's entire education system. Both the quest for political power and religious extremism in the Islamic country have led to the politicisation of education, with some circles seeking to introduce ideology into the school system. Officially, the Afghan government favours girls' access to education, but culturally, some girls still face restrictions to attend school in certain areas of the country. While on paper the Afghan constitution guarantees gender equality, there are serious shortcomings in practice. Najiba Arian, a spokesperson for the Afghan Ministry of Education, said there are currently 9.7 million students in the country, 42 per cent of whom are girls. But roughly 3.7 million children do not attend school — 60 per cent of them are girls. Hardships to access the school system are worst in southern and eastern provinces, said Ms Arian, not only due to security reasons but also because of tribal and traditional customs. Most of these areas, which belong to particular ethnic groups, are controlled by the Taliban, who ruled the country in the 1990s and still oppose girls' and women's education, despite recent claims of change. Schools that have been built over the last 20 years are in fact getting destroyed by the armed group. Yet facing these and other challenges have led Afghan women to fight for their rights, sometimes with successful outcomes. In 2015, the country's Ministry of Education presented a controversial plan involving female students' uniforms that would cover girls' bodies with long, dark-coloured clothing, similar to that of extremist Islamist groups. Civil society activists contested the move, arguing that the dress not only promoted extremism but was also too hot to wear during summertime — which is when schools are open in the country. The Ministry of Education had to abandon the plan. In some parts of the country, where conservatism and tribal customs still prevail, girls do wear body-covering long dark dresses —which also cover their faces— despite often reaching high temperatures, making it hard for them to attend school or actually paying attention in class. But now the battle for gender equality in Afghanistan's educational environment has taken a new shape, thanks to an online women's rights movement that hopes to raise the voice of those who have been silenced for too long — the "Ma'arif [which means Education] Choir Campaign."

The campaign was born out of the outrage caused by an announcement from one of the Ministry of Education's departments in March 2020, which forbade female students over-12 from singing in school choirs in public and in front of men. Spontaneous and leaderless protests began taking place online, due to the coronavirus pandemic, in a rather original way. More than 100 women posted videos of them singing their childhood songs on the Internet, asking why female students should be prevented from singing two decades after the fall of the Taliban rule, prompting widespread and long-lasting public support for the campaign. Once again, the protests led the government to retreat, and the Ministry of Education finally issued a statement saying that the plan did "not reflect the official position and policy of the ministry." Wahid Omar, an adviser to the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai said, "No individual or institution is allowed to set limits for its citizens, [which is] contrary to the spirit of the country's constitution." Earlier this year, the government tried another move, this time to merge schools with mosques during the first three years of the elementary school programme —presumably to gain influence against radical Islamists groups such as the Taliban— but it was also quickly shut down after online protests. The Minister of Education, Assadullah Hanif Balkhi, said the plan was for students to have access to education in areas without schools and that it had been misinterpreted. During the choir campaign, Fariha Esaar, one of the women activists who sang in front of a camera, said, "Both the plan to merge schools with mosques for the first three years of education and the plan to ban female students over-12 from singing in schools are efforts made to radicalize and Talibanize Afghanistan's education system." Now, with the withdrawal of foreign forces and the possibility of escalating civil war in the country, she added, there are serious concerns about the group's influence in specific circles. "We can not remain silent in this regard. We will stand up and prevent the influence of extremism in the education sector. We have succeeded in this campaign, but we must have more structural plans to ensure gender equality so that political decisions don't exclude women." Ghulam Dastgir Munir, an education expert, said he got suspended from his teaching position in a public school because of his heavy criticism of extremist initiatives such as educating children in mosques and banning girls from singing. According to him, the main challenge that remains ahead is that the seats and positions in the education sector are assigned not on the basis of expertise but depending on political affiliation, and that, in order to ensure gender equality and de-politicize schools, appointments must be free of political affiliation. The Ma'aref Choir Campaign is one successful example of a civil society movement fighting for gender equality in Afghanistan. However, a long term action plan is needed to guarantee gender equality in the educational sector — one that raises female teachers rates and increases awareness among families, particularly in remote areas of the country, so that more girls can attend school.**independent**

More than half million Afghan refugees return home since early 2021

Afghanistan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation says more than half million of Afghan refugees have returned home from Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and other western countries since the beginning of the current year.

In an exclusive interview with The Kabul Times correspondent, media advisor to ministry of refugees and repatriation Abdul Basit Ansari said nearly 540,000 Afghan refugees have returned home since the beginning of the current year.

"Based on our information, nearly 540,000 Afghan refugees have returned home from Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and all other countries where Afghans are living since Jan of 2021," Ansari said, adding that there is no exact information regarding the number of those Afghans who are illegally leaving the country.

Pointing to services provided to Afghan returnees in the country's borders, media advisor to the ministry of refugees and repatriation said returnees were provided with aid package along with foodstuffs and blankets and clothes, adding that nearly of 1,000 of returnees have been recently provided with lands.

"Last year, lands were distributed to hundreds of Afghan returnees and almost 1,000 returnees in Kabul have been introduced to ministry of urban development and land to provide them with lands," Ansari said, adding that biometrically registration of returnees is planned to be resumed soon in Kabul.

Pointing to deportation process of Afghan refugees from EU member countries, media advisor to the ministry of refugees and repatriation says Afghanistan ministry of refugees and repatriation has not signed any agreement with EU member countries for deportation of Afghan refugees, stressing that the ministry was making effort to have an agreement with host countries to better manage the process as the ministry has continually shared its concern over forced deportation of Afghan refugees. He said that a joint declaration has been signed between Afghanistan and EU for voluntarily repatriation of Afghan refugees to their home country. According to the declaration, five categories of people are not departed as women without guardian, aged people, children without guardian, disabled and people with chronical diseases.

"Despite of the declaration, we found out that a number of Afghans have been deported to Afghanistan. Upon hearing this, the ministry has urgently contacted the host country and prevent and land to provide them with lands," Ansari said, adding that biometrically registration of returnees is planned to be resumed soon in Kabul.

He further said that any Afghans who would like to live in EU member countries should process their immigration document through migration courts as this could be a good chance for Afghans living in Europe.

In his interview with The Kabul Times, the media advisor to the ministry of refugees and repatriation also pointed to increasing displacement of Afghan families in the country.

He said that more than 4 million people have been displaced from their home areas due to increasing insecurities in the past one year, adding that nearly 18,400 families have been displaced from home provinces as Helmand, Kandahar, Baghlan, Takhar, Farah and other provinces since the beginning of the current year.

Afghanistan government particularly the ministry of refugees and repatriation, along with relevant international organizations, is working to provide urgent assistance to internally displaced people as well as those returning home from other countries.

Masouda Qarizada