Afghanistan asks Taliban to make use of opportunity for peace

Afghanistan Ministry of Interior in reaction to recent remarks of Taliban members in Moscow where they have said they can take the control of the whole Afghanistan in two weeks has asked the group to stop serving to foreigner and make use of the opportunity for peace in the country.

In Moscow, a journalist asked a member of the Taliban group on remarks of US President Joe Biden, who has said he does believe in Taliban strength. The member of group speaking in a news conference said when Taliban can capture 14 districts in a single day, they have the ability to take control of the whole Afghanistan in 14 days.

US President in his recent remarks had said that 75,000 Taliban fighters were not equal to 300,000 Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, adding that he did believe in Afghan security forces.

In reaction to the remarks of the Taliban delegation, a spokesperson to Ministry of Interior (MoI) rejected the Taliban's claims, saying that the Taliban member's remarks were not true.

"Taliban leaders would not live abroad if their claims were true. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, Afghan Air Forces, Afghan Special and Commando Forces are all well-prepared and can seriously respond the group's any threats," said Tariq Arian, a spokesperson to Ministry of Interior.

According to the MoI spokesperson, a former Taliban commander Mullah Basir has told The New York Times that there's no empty place for Taliban dead bodies to be buried in most graveyards along Afghanistan and Pakistan border, saying that most Pakistan hospitals have been overwhelmed by Taliban wounded.

Continued and failed attacks of the Taliban group on most districts show that the group does not have sufficient logistic possibilities. For example, they cannot fight more than three hours. Experiences have shown that they escape after the first hours of fighting.

The country's defense and security forces are now able to seriously respond their attacks in most districts and provinces.

A number of Afghan political experts consider recent visit of the Taliban delegation invited by Russian officials to Moscow as concerning. This comes amid of US and NATO troop withdrawal process from Afghanistan.

The Taliban delegation in Moscow has also said on that they will not attack provincial centers. Taliban negotiator Shahabuddin Delawar, in Moscow with two other members of the group, said that they will not attack cities to prevent bloodshed. This comes three days after the group's fighters launched large-scale attacks on Qala-e-Naw, the provincial capital of Badghis. The attacks were repelled by the country's defense and security forces.

In Moscow, the Taliban delegation stressed on formation of an Islamic government, saying the name is not important but its nature should Islamic. Taliban delegation's visit comes after the group's visit to Tehran, the capital of Iran.

Lailuma Noori

Most Afghan IDPs want to return to their home areas

Thousands of internally displaced people who have been recently displaced from their home areas due to increasing insecurities and surge in Taliban attacks are asking the government to clear their home areas from presence of Taliban so that they can return back to their homes.

A number of families who have been recently displaced from their homes in their interviews with The Kabul Times correspondent said recent surge in Taliban attacks in their districts have caused mass displacement in their areas. "War has demolished our life. We have lost everything as Taliban terrorists have set our homes on fire. We take the opportunity and left everything behind and came to Kabul," said Khair Mohammad, father of an internally displaced family from Takhar. He asked the government to free their area from the presence of the Taliban fighters so that they can return back to their homes. Mahnaz, another member of an internally displaced family says she is tired of continued war and violence in the country.

"We had good life in our home, but unfortunately Taliban changed our life to hell. Now we're living in Kabul," Mahnaz said, adding that they will return back to their home area after the government free all areas from presence of Taliban fighters.

A number of other internally displaced families are also asking for clearing their home areas from the presence of Taliban fighters.

Meanwhile, state ministry of disaster management has informed of displacement of more than 32,000 families in the past two months in 25 provinces of the country.

Following the announcement of US and NATO troops withdrawal process from Afghanistan in May, surge in Taliban attacks in hundreds of districts of the country have forced thousands of families to leave their homes.

"The number of internally displaced families is increasing by passing each single day as Taliban has intensified their attacks and violence almost in all districts of the country," said Ghulam Bahauddin Jailani, state minister for disaster management.

He added so far nearly 20,000 internally displaced families have been addressed and aids were being dispatched to other internally displaced people living in various parts of the country.

According to state ministry for disaster management, nearly 62,480 families have been displaced as a result of surge in Taliban attacks and insecurities across the country. Jailani added that more than 52,000 families have received necessary assistance provided by state ministry for disaster management.

Jailani further said that nearly 5 million families have been displaced from their home areas due to Taliban attacks and violence in the past two years, adding that most internally displaced people have been displaced from their homes areas to big cities including Kabul, the capital.

Afghan government officials have said efforts are underway in close coordination with relevant international organizations, donor agencies and relevant government institutions to provide further necessary assistance to internally displaced families across the country. **Shukria Kohistani**

Taliban undermines women's rights and media freedom in Afghanistan's north

KABUL: Many Afghans who hoped the Taliban would reform their extreme views amid ongoing talks with the Afghan government and the U.S. troop withdrawal have been disappointed by the new severe restrictions imposed on the local population in some of the districts that they have recently captured.

Several residents of Balkh, a district in northern Balkh province that is located 20 kilometers north of the provincial capital, Mazar-e Sharif, confirmed to VOA that the Taliban have distributed leaflets, ordering locals to follow strict rules that are similar to those they imposed on Afghans when they last governed the country from 1996 to 2001.

"They want to impose the restrictions that were imposed on women under their rule," said Nahida, a 34-year-old resident of Balkh district, adding that the restrictions targeting women include "not leaving our houses without a male companion and wearing hijab."

Before their ouster by the United States in 2001, the Taliban mandated Afghans follow a strict interpretation of Sharia law, forcing women to cover themselves from head to foot and preventing them from leaving their houses without a male companion.

That changed after 2001 when the new Afghan government, supported by U.S.-led forces, introduced laws to encourage more girls to attend school and to have more women participate in the workforce.

Nahida, who requested to be identified by her pseudonym due to safety concerns, said the group's new restrictions will be difficult for women to follow "since many of them are the breadwinners of their families and they have to work outside."

According to the Afghan government, about 30% of the civil servants are now women who were not allowed to work outside their homes during the Taliban's rule. Last year, following its peace agreement with the United States, the Taliban leadership initially appeared to recognize this new reality and hinted at an openness to changing policies. In interviews with news agencies and in published essays, the group's leaders hinted at an openness to changing policies. But in this year's spring offensive, the Taliban's actions have indicated otherwise.

Since May, when the United States and NATO began withdrawing their remaining troops, the Taliban captured about 100 of Afghanistan's more than 400 districts from government-allied forces. Afghan officials have since vowed to retake the lost districts.

Another resident of Balkh, who requested anonymity due to fears of retaliation by the militants, said "salons were ordered not to shave or trim beards" when the Taliban controlled the district last month.

"It is possible that they impose more restrictions. In some of the mosques, during the Friday sermons, Mullahs say that the Sharia law should be implemented," another Balkh resident told VOA.

In several districts of Takhar, Badakhshan, and Kunduz province that came under the Taliban control recently, local reports claim the Taliban issued similar restrictions on women and forced men to grow beards.

The acting U.S. ambassador in Kabul, Ross Wilson, in a tweet on Wednesday, warned that the Taliban's growing violence violated human rights and triggered fears that "a system this country's citizens do not support will be imposed."

While no progress has been reported in the intra-Afghan peace talks that started in Doha, Qatar last September, Wilson called on the Taliban to negotiate "in good faith and a genuine will."

In a sign of breaking the long stalemate, a Taliban delegation and a group of Afghan politicians met Wednesday in Tehran. In a joint statement, both sides agreed that "a peaceful solution should be sought."

Meanwhile, the Afghan forces have vowed to continue their counterattacks to recapture the districts lost to the Taliban.

In a press conference on Tuesday, Afghanistan's national security advisor, Hamdullah Mohib said that the security forces had recaptured 14 districts, adding that the government forces "will recapture the districts' buildings," that have fallen to the Taliban in recent weeks.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) in a statement Wednesday accused the Taliban of forcibly displacing residents and burning their homes in an apparent retaliation for cooperating with Afghan forces.

Heather Barr, a HRW senior researcher for women's rights in Asia, said that reports about the Taliban recent crackdown on women and media were "not very surprising" since her organization's investigation has found that "the Taliban's policies are not that different from what they were in 2001." It is "very concerning indeed for human rights," Barr told VOA, adding that "some of these abusive attitudes are actually intensifying as they are feeling triumphant in gaining control of more and more territory."

The watchdog group in a report last year said although the Taliban, at least at the leadership level, have portrayed themselves as having reformed their hardline views, they have continued to impose extreme restrictions enforced by the militants.

This skepticism was also shared by Sher Jan Ahmadzai, the director of Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska.

"There is no evidence to substantiate their claims that they have changed their tactics of dealing with the local populace in the areas of their control," said Ahmadzai.

He added that local reports from the areas under the Taliban show the militants have forced residents to feed them and forced the women not to venture out of their houses without their partners or relatives from their families.

"It is difficult to confirm such posts by independent organizations because they are not allowed to report from areas under the Taliban openly," Ahmadzai said.

Nawbahar, the only FM radio station in Balkh district, was forced to broadcast Taliban's Tarani (chants) and anti-government messages instead of music when the militants entered the district last month, according to local journalists.

"It is against the freedom of expression," lamented Abdul Aziz Danishjo, a journalist in Mazar-e Sharif, who said the Taliban had forced Nawbahar editor and other staff to go to the radio station and start broadcasting "what the Taliban want."

Nai, a local media watchdog, has reported that nearly 20 radio stations have ceased broadcasting in Afghanistan's northern provinces due to the Taliban's restrictions and ongoing fighting.

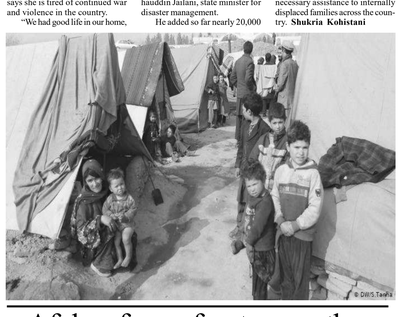
Some local journalists view the Taliban crackdown as a major blow to journalism in Afghanistan, a country ranked by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) at 122nd out of 180 nations for violations against journalists.

Mohammad Yaqoob, a local journalist in Balkh province, said the growing violence and Taliban restrictions mean many parts of Afghanistan will be cut off from the rest of the world, making it harder to monitor the human rights violations.

"As a journalist, I would say that the Taliban and the government should follow the media laws," Yaqoob said.

Yaqoob added that the warring parties should not impose their views on the local radio stations in the areas that come under their control.

The RSF charges that violence against journalists and media outlets has increased "significantly" despite of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. **Monitoring Desk**



Afghan forces far stronger than Taliban: US Defense Department

The US Department of Defense has said that Afghanistan has now a well-equipped and strong defense forces and at present, Afghan military forces are fighting the enemy on several fronts, the US Department of State has said.

Afghan experts believe that for the past 20 years, Afghan forces have received the necessary training and can withstand the enemy, and they are now stronger than the Taliban. But in the current situation, these forces must be equipped and supported further by the US.

They say that unfortunately, the fighting started by the Taliban in several parts of the country and during the period, Afghan forces have been able to liberate many districts again.

Afghan citizens also say war was not a solution and the Taliban will never win via military. They must sit at the negotiating table and stop propaganda wars as they have never people's support.

They call on the politicians to unite, tolerate each other and give up ethnic issues for the survival of Afghanistan.

They also ask the United States not to leave Afghanistan alone in the current situation because the country needs their help.

Although they believe that the United States has promised to assist and equip the Afghan security forces, it is expected that under the current sensitive condition, the United States will not leave the Afghan government alone.

Meanwhile, Pentagon spokesman John F. Kirby told a news conference that the Afghan security and defense forces were far stronger than the Taliban.

Over the past 20 years, he said they and their allies have helped build the capacity of the security forces, which was very significant and that they have now a powerful air force, while the Taliban have nothing. "They have more troops and more modern weapons than the Taliban," he noted.

The spokesman expressed hope that the neighboring countries and the region would work together to stabilize Afghanistan.

The Pentagon is making the remarks as US President Joe Biden announced at a White House media conference two days ago that he would end his troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by August 31.

On the other, clashes between Afghan forces and the Taliban have intensified after the start of the foreign troops withdrawal in most provinces of Afghanistan.

The Afghan government has recently said that the security and defense forces of the country have recaptured 14 districts from the Taliban militants in recent weeks and that they are still working to retake all lost territories from the outfit.

While US President Joe Biden recently announced that he would complete the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan by August 31, the Secretary of Defense announced that the responsibility for securing Hamid Karzay International Airport would handed over to the Turkish troops.

Earlier, the United States said that after their withdrawal from Afghanistan, 6,000 Turkish troops would be stationed at the Kabul International Hamid Karzai Airport.

According to US officials, 90 percent of US troops have been withdrawn since May 1, an assertion following the people of Afghanistan gratitude to the United States for long assistance.

They say that the United States has provided thousands of billions of dollars in aid for Afghanistan over the past 20 years, but leaving the US military forces at once will be too hard for this country, as they believe militancy will affect the whole region and world if assistances and supports for Afghanistan stopped, after foreign complete withdrawal.

Suraya Raiszada