

Chaos Ensues as Thousands Flee Afghanistan After Taliban Takeover

Thousands of people packed into the Afghan capital's airport on Monday, rushing the tarmac and pushing onto planes in desperate attempts to flee the country after the Taliban overthrew the Western-backed government. U.S. troops fired warning shots as they struggled to manage the chaotic evacuation.

The Taliban swept into Kabul on Sunday after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, bringing a stunning end to a two-decade campaign in which the U.S. and its allies had tried to transform Afghanistan. The country's Western-trained security forces collapsed or fled in the face of an insurgent offensive that tore through the country in just over a week, ahead of the planned withdrawal of the last American troops at the end of the month.

In the capital, a tense calm set in, with most people hiding in their homes as the Taliban deployed fighters at major intersections. There were scattered reports of looting and armed men knocking on doors and gates, and there was less traffic than usual on eerily quiet streets. Fighters could be seen searching vehicles at one of the city's main squares.

Many fear chaos, after the Taliban freed thousands of prisoners and the police simply melted away, or a return to the kind of brutal rule the Taliban imposed when it was last in power. They raced to Kabul's international airport, where the "civilian side" was closed until further notice, according to Afghanistan's Civil Aviation Authority. The military was put in control of the airspace.

Videos circulating on social media showed hundreds of people

running across the tarmac as U.S. soldiers fired warning shots in the air. One showed a crowd pushing and shoving its way up a staircase, trying to board a plane, with some people hanging off the railings.

In another video, hundreds of people could be seen running alongside a U.S. Air Force transport plane as it moved down a runway. Some climbed onto the side of the jet just before takeoff. That raised questions about how much longer aircraft would be able to safely take off and land.

Massouma Tajik, a 22-year-old data analyst, described scenes of panic at the airport, where she was hoping to board an evacuation flight.

After waiting six hours, she heard shots from outside, where a crowd of men and women were trying to climb aboard a plane. She said U.S. troops sprayed gas and fired into the air to disperse the crowds after people scaled the walls and swarmed onto the tarmac. Gunfire could be heard in the voice messages she sent to The Associated Press.

Shafi Arifi, who had a ticket to travel to Uzbekistan on Sunday, was unable to board her plane because it was packed with people who had raced across the tarmac and climbed aboard, with no police or airport staff in sight.

"There was no room for us to stand," said the 24-year-old. "Children were crying, women were shouting, young and old men were so angry and upset, no one could hear each other. There was no oxygen to breathe."

After another woman fainted and was carried off the plane, Arifi gave up and went back home.

The U.S. Embassy has been evacuated and the American flag lowered, with diplomats relocating to the airport to aid with the evacuation. Other Western countries have also closed their missions and are flying out staff and nationals. {eo}

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