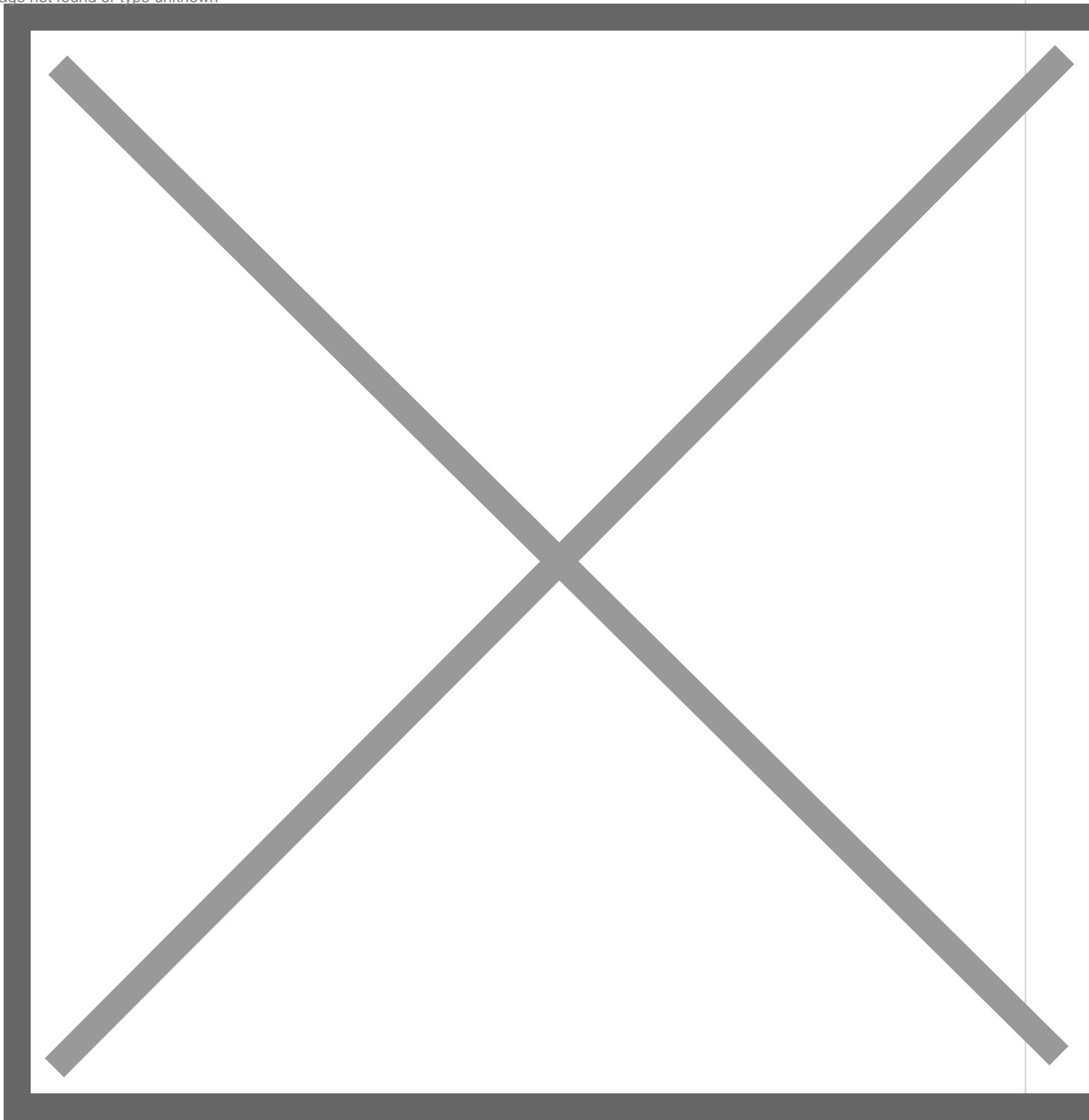


Taliban warn U.S. against prolonging exit

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Kabul, August 23 (RHC)-- Afghanistan's ruling Taliban movement has issued a warning to the United States against prolonging the withdrawal of its military beyond the declared deadline, meanwhile extending an amnesty to runaway president Ashraf Ghani and vice president Amrullah Saleh, saying they

may return if they so wish.

"We forgive Ashraf Ghani, Amrullah Saleh and [former National Security Adviser] Hamdullah Mohib," senior Taliban leader Khalil Ur-Rahman Haqqani said in an interview on Monday with Pakistan-based Geo News broadcaster, insisting that "there is no enmity" between the group and the three former senior officials.

Ghani fled Afghanistan just before the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul last week. He was later reported to be in the United Arab Emirates. "We forgive everyone from our end; from the general (who fought in the war against us) to the common man," Haqqani further reiterated.

Promising that the Taliban intend to establish a government that would represent all groups within Afghanistan, Haqqani also claimed that people from all schools of thought were pledging their allegiance to the group.

"Highly capable, educated people will form the government in Afghanistan," he vowed. "People who unite the masses will be included in the new government." He went on to call on Afghans fleeing the country to stay, pointing out that the "enemy" was spreading propaganda that the Taliban will exact revenge on them. "Tajiks, Balochs, Hazaras and Pashtuns are all our brothers," he said.

The official noted that they only took up arms after American forces invaded their homeland and fought against the country as well as its culture and religion. "The Americans were using weapons against us, on our homeland," he said, adding that those weapons were now in the hands of the militants as spoils of war. He further boasted how the Taliban had accomplished a massive victory over the US-trained Afghan army, which consisted of 350,000 troops and was backed by American and NATO forces.

The Taliban said hundreds of militants were dispatched to conquer Panjshir Valley, north of Kabul, which remains the lone territory in Afghanistan that has resisted the Taliban takeover. Saleh is reportedly in Panjshir, and photos posted on social media in recent days have shown him in talks with resistance leader Ahmad Massoud.

In a related development on Monday, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen reacted to reports the US might extend its military presence in the country beyond the August 31 deadline. He said the complete withdrawal of foreign forces was a "red line" and warned of serious consequences if the occupation is extended.

"It's a red line. [US] President [Joe] Biden announced that on 31 August they would withdraw all their military forces. So if they extend it that means they are extending occupation while there is no need for that," Shaheen said in an interview with Sky News.

"It [the extension of the troop exit deadline] will create mistrust between us. If they are intent on continuing the occupation it will provoke a reaction."

He further underlined that the militant group would say "no" if the US or the UK "seek additional time to continue evacuations."

Earlier, The Telegraph reported that during a G7 meeting on Tuesday, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will push Biden to delay the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

The newspaper claimed that UK ministers have been pressing the US privately for days to consider postponing the troop pullout in order to ease pressure on Kabul airport. Biden, for his part, told reporters that discussions were underway with American military officials about possibly extending the Afghanistan evacuation mission beyond the deadline.

Separately, Shaheen also commented on women's rights, insisting that "they will lose nothing" under the Taliban.

"Only if they have no hijab, they will have a hijab [...] women are required to have the same rights as you have in your country but with a hijab," he proclaimed, pointing out that female teachers and journalists have resumed working in Afghanistan and that they have "lost nothing."

Responding to a question on the reasons why many Afghans are trying to flee, Shaheen insisted that "it is not about being worried or scared."

"They want to reside in western countries and that is a kind of economic migration because Afghanistan is a poor country and 70 percent of the people of Afghanistan live under the line of poverty so everyone wants to resettle in western countries to have a prosperous life. It is not about [being] scared," he emphasized.

"They occupied our country. If we occupy your country, what you will say to me? What if I killed your people in your country what you will say? I think all people suffered a lot. Bloodshed. Destruction. Everything," he said.

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