

Diplomacy

Diplomats meet activists

Taliban hold 1st talks in Europe since 'takeover'

OSLO, Jan 24, (AP): The Taliban and western diplomats have begun their first official talks in Europe since they took over control of Afghanistan in August.

The closed-door meetings were taking place at a hotel in the snow-capped mountains above the Norwegian capital. Taliban representatives will be certain to press their demand that nearly \$10 billion frozen by the United States and other Western countries be released as Afghanistan faces a precarious humanitarian situation.

"We are requesting them to unfreeze Afghan assets and not punish ordinary Afghans because of the political discourse," said Taliban delegate **Shafullah Azam** on Sunday night. "Because of the starvation, because of the deadly winter, I think it's time for the international community to support Afghans, not punish them because of their political disputes."



Azam

Ahead of the talks, western diplomats met with Afghan women's rights activists and human rights defenders to hear from civil society in Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora about their demands and assessment of the current situation on the ground. The meeting was attended by representatives of the EU, the US, Britain, France, Italy and hosts Norway.

Standing silent as attendees gathered, women's rights activist Heda Khamoush, who lives in Kabul, held up the photos of Tamana Zaryabi Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhel, two women arrested by the Taliban last week following an anti-Taliban protest against the compulsory Islamic headscarf, or hijab, for women. They haven't been seen since.

Rejecting the accusation the Taliban had abducted them, Azam said he was "not aware of that" and suggested activists may be using this event to seek asylum.

Speaking after the meeting, women's rights activist Mahbouba Seraj angrily rejected this and warned that "if they continue this way -to tell us something and do something else - that's when the trust is going to break, completely."

The three-day talks opened on Sunday with direct meetings between the Taliban and civil society representatives.

A joint statement tweeted overnight by Zabihullah Mujahid, the Afghan deputy culture and information minister, said "participants of the meeting recognized that understanding and joint cooperation are the only solutions to all the problems of Afghanistan," and emphasized that "all Afghans need to work together for better political, economic and security outcomes in the country."

Seraj acknowledged the progress made. "Yes, they were listening. I should say that," she said Monday morning. "We gave them a paper. We asked them what we wanted. They took it. They were very, very cordial about it."

The talks come at a crucial time for Afghanistan as freezing temperatures are compounding misery from the downward spiral that has come with the fall of the US-backed government and the Taliban takeover.

Aid groups and international agencies estimate about 23 million people, more than half the country, face severe hunger and nearly 9 million are on the brink of starvation. People have resorted to selling possessions to buy food, burning furniture for warmth and even selling their children. The United Nations has managed to provide some liquidity and allowed the Taliban administration to pay for imports, including electricity.

Faced with the Taliban's request for funds, Western powers are likely to put the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan high on their agenda, along with the West's recurring demand for the Taliban administration to share power with Afghanistan's minority ethnic and religious groups.

Since sweeping to power in mid-August, the Taliban have imposed widespread restrictions, many of them directed at women. Women have been banned from many jobs outside the health and education fields, their access to education has been restricted beyond sixth grade and they have been ordered to wear the hijab. The Taliban have, however, stopped short of imposing the burqa, which was compulsory when they previously ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s.

The Taliban have increasingly targeted Afghanistan's beleaguered rights groups, as well as journalists, detaining and sometimes beating television crews covering demonstrations.

A US delegation, led by Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West, plans to discuss "the formation of a representative political system; responses to the urgent humanitarian and economic crises; security and counterterrorism concerns; and human rights, especially education for girls and women," according to a statement released by the US State Department.

The Scandinavian country, home to the Nobel Peace Prize, is no stranger to diplomacy. It has been involved in peace efforts in a number of countries, including Mozambique, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Colombia, the Philippines, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Syria, Myanmar, Somalia, Sri Lanka and South Sudan.

Also:

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan: A bomb attached to a packed minivan exploded in Afghanistan's western Herat province on Saturday, killing at least seven civilians and wounding nine others, Taliban officials said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the explosion, but the Islamic State has claimed credit for similar attacks on civilians and the country's new Taliban leaders elsewhere in the country since the group seized power on Aug. 15.

Saturday's bombing was the first such attack in Herat. Local Taliban official **Naemulhaq Haqqani** said investigations were ongoing.

A Taliban intelligence official in western Herat told the Associated Press that the bomb was attached to the van's fuel tank. He spoke on condition of anonymity as he wasn't authorized to release the information to the public.

Herat Ambulance chief **Ebrahim Mohammadi** said the victims — three in critical condition — were transferred to the provincial hospital.

Since their return to power, the Taliban have imposed widespread restrictions, many of them directed at women.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan on Saturday called on the Taliban to find two women rights activists — **Tamana Zaryabi Paryani** and **Parawana Ibrahimkhel** — who disappeared on Wednesday from Kabul.

"We urge Taliban to provide information on their whereabouts & to protect rights of all Afghans," UNAMA said in a tweet Saturday. Taliban have denied any involvement in their disappearance.

An eyewitness said that at least ten-armed people claiming to be Taliban intelligence members broke into an apartment Wednesday in Kabul and arrested Tamana Zaryabi Paryani and her three sisters.

The women rights activist posted a video on social media shortly before they were taken away, showing them frightened, breathless and screaming for help. She said that Taliban were banging on her door.

Paryani was among about 25 women who took part in an anti-Taliban protest last weekend against the compulsory Islamic headscarf, or hijab, for women.



Tourist boats docked in the Golden Horn with Suleymaniye Mosque in the background at Istanbul, Monday, Jan 24, 2022. Snow blanketed most of Turkey's largest city Monday. Flurries are forecast to continue over the next few days in Istanbul, a metropolis of some 16 million spanning two continents and bridging Europe to Asia. (AP)

Crisis

Tensions with Russia soar

NATO outlines 'deterrence' plan

BRUSSELS, Jan 24, (AP): Tensions soared Monday between Russia and the West, with NATO outlining a series of potential troop and ship deployments and Ireland warning that upcoming Russian war games off its coast would not be welcome while concerns abound that Moscow is planning to invade Ukraine.

The Western alliance's statement summed up moves already announced by individual member countries — but restating them under the NATO banner appeared aimed at showing the alliance's resolve. It was just one of a series of announcements that signaled the West is ramping up its rhetoric in the information war that has accompanied the Ukraine standoff.

Russia has massed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine's border and is demanding that NATO promise it will never allow Ukraine to join and that other actions, such as stationing alliance troops in former Soviet bloc countries, be curtailed. Some of these, like any pledge to permanently bar Ukraine, are non-starters for NATO — creating a seemingly intractable standoff that many fear can only end in war.

Russia denies it is planning an invasion, and has said the Western accusations are merely a cover for NATO's own planned provocations. Recent days have seen high-stakes diplomacy that failed to reach any breakthrough and maneuvering on both sides.

Deterrence

On Monday, NATO said that it is beefing up its "deterrence" in the Baltic Sea area. Denmark is sending a frigate and deploying F-16 war planes to Lithuania; Spain is sending four fighter jets to Bulgaria and three ships to the Black Sea to join NATO naval forces; and France stands ready to send troops to Romania. The Netherlands also plans to send two F-35 fighter aircraft to Bulgaria from April.

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance will "take all necessary measures to protect and defend all allies." He said: "We will always respond to any deterioration of our security environment, including through strengthening our collective defense."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov charged that it was NATO and the US who were behind "tensions escalating" in Europe, not Russia.

"All this is happening not because

of what we, Russia, are doing. This is happening because of what NATO, the US are doing," Peskov said during a conference call with reporters. He also cited US media reports suggesting that Russia is evacuating its diplomats from Ukraine, something officials in Moscow denied.

The NATO announcement came as European Union foreign ministers sought to put on a fresh display of unity in support of Ukraine, and paper over concerns about divisions on the best way to confront any Russian aggression.

In a statement, the ministers said the EU has stepped up sanction preparations and they warned that "any further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe costs."

Support

Separately, the EU also committed to increase financial support for embattled Ukraine, vowing to push through a special package of 1.2 billion euros (\$1.4 billion) in loans and grants as soon as possible.

The West is nervously watching Russian troop movements and war games in Belarus for any signs that a new invasion of Ukraine is imminent. Russia has already invaded Ukraine once, annexing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Moscow has also supported pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists fighting the Kyiv government in the Donbass region. Fighting in eastern Ukraine has killed around 14,000 people and still simmers.

Asked whether the EU would follow a US move and order the families of European embassy personnel in Ukraine to leave, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said: "We are not going to do the same thing." He said he is keen to hear from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken about that decision.

Britain on Monday also announced it is withdrawing some diplomats and dependents from its embassy in Kyiv. The Foreign Office said the move was "in response to the growing threat from Russia."

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Oleg Nikolenko, said the US decision was "a premature step" and a sign of "excessive caution." He said that Russia is sowing panic among Ukrainians and foreigners in order to destabilize Ukraine.

Germany has issued no order, but it

has announced that the families of embassy staffers may leave if they wish. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stressed that "we must not contribute to unsettling the situation further; we need to continue to support the Ukrainian government very clearly and above all maintain the stability of the country."

Arriving at the EU meeting, Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said he would inform his counterparts that Russia plans to hold war games 240 kilometers (150 miles) off Ireland's southwest coast — in international waters but within Ireland's exclusive economic zone.

"This isn't a time to increase military activity and tension in the context of what's happening with and in Ukraine," Coveney said. "The fact that they are choosing to do it on the western borders, if you like, of the EU, off the Irish coast, is something that in our view is simply not welcome."

Some of the member countries closest to Russia — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — have confirmed that they plan to send US-made anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine, a move endorsed by the United States.

Unified

But questions have been raised about just how unified the EU is. Diverse political, business and energy interests have long divided the 27-country bloc in its approach to Moscow. Around 40% of the EU's natural gas imports come from Russia, much of it via pipelines across Ukraine — and many are skittish about being cut off from that supply in winter, with prices already soaring.

The EU's two major powers appear most cautious. French President Emmanuel Macron has renewed previously rejected calls for an EU summit with Putin.

Late on Saturday, the head of the German navy, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach, resigned after coming under fire for saying that Ukraine would not regain the Crimean Peninsula, and for suggesting that Putin deserves "respect."

Still, diplomats and officials said hard-hitting sanctions are being drawn up with the EU's executive branch, the European Commission. They were reluctant to say what the measures might be or what action by Russia might trigger them, but said they would come within days of any attack.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson arrives at 10 Downing Street, in London, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022. (AP)



Benedict



Ghebreyesus

Europe

Former pope was at meeting: Retired Pope Benedict XVI has acknowledged that he did attend a 1980 meeting at which the transfer of a pedophile priest to his then-diocese was discussed, saying an editorial error was responsible for his previous assertion that he wasn't there.

Authors of a report on sexual abuse between 1945 and 2019 in the Munich archdiocese, which Benedict — then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — led from 1977 to 1982, on Thursday faulted his handling of four cases during his time as archbishop and said his claim that he wasn't at the meeting lacked credibility.

Benedict, who provided lengthy written testimony, denies any wrongdoing on his part.

One case involved the transfer to Munich of a priest to undergo therapy, which was approved under Ratzinger in 1980.

The priest was allowed to resume pastoral work, a decision that the church has said was made by a lower-ranking official without consulting the archbishop. In 1986, the priest received a suspended sentence for molesting a boy.

In a statement to Germany's KNA Catholic news agency on Monday, Benedict's longtime secretary, Monsignor Georg Gaenswein, said the retired pope wants to clarify that he was in fact at January 1980 meeting of local church officials in which the priest's transfer to Munich was discussed. He said Benedict apologizes for the error. (AP)

WHO chief warns: The head of the World Health Organization is warning that conditions remain ideal for more coronavirus variants to emerge and says it's dangerous to assume omicron is the last one or that "we are in the endgame," while saying the acute phase of the pandemic could still end this year — if some key targets are met.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO's director-general, laid out Monday an array of achievements and concerns in global health over issues like reducing tobacco use, fighting resistance to anti-microbial treatments, and risks of climate change on human health. But he said "ending the acute phase of the pandemic must remain our collective priority."

"There are different scenarios for how the pandemic could play out and how the acute phase could end. But it's dangerous to assume that omicron will be the last variant or that we are in the endgame," Tedros told the start of a WHO executive board meeting this week. "On the contrary, globally, the conditions are ideal for more variants to emerge."

But he insisted that "we can end COVID-19 as a global health emergency, and we can do it this year," by reaching goals like WHO's target to vaccinate 70 percent of the population of each country by the middle of this year, with a focus on people who are at the highest risk of COVID-19,

and improving testing and sequencing rates to track the virus and its emerging variants more closely. (AP)

Snow blankets Athens: Heavy snowfall disrupted air traffic Monday in the Greek capital of Athens and neighboring Turkey's

largest city of Istanbul, while several Aegean islands and much of Turkey were blanketed by snow.

The storm, named Elpida, or "hope" in Greece, snarled traffic in both Athens and Istanbul, a metropolis of 16 million people.

Flights in and out of Istanbul Airport were suspended until 4 a.m. Tuesday (0100



Senator Emma Bonino casts her ballot during the first round of votes in the Italian parliament, Monday, Jan 24, 2022. The first round of voting for Italy's next president opens Monday without a clear slate of candidates. Political parties held internal meetings over the weekend, but were keeping the names of possible candidates close to their vests. (AP)

GMT) while authorities worked to clear runways as well as a road leading to the airport. Meanwhile, public offices closed early to ease rush-hour congestion.

Flurries were forecast to continue over the next few days in Istanbul. Istanbul's Disaster Coordination Center AKOM says an Icelandic low-pressure system is behind the cold front and precipitation.

In Greece, authorities warned the public to limit outdoor movements to only essential ones on Monday and Tuesday, while schools in many areas were closed. Government spokesman Giannis Oikonomou said more than 46,000 school classes across the country were being held online. (AP)

4 wounded in Germany shooting: A lone gunman wounded four people, some of them seriously, during a lecture at Heidelberg University in southwestern Germany on Monday, police said.

Police said that the perpetrator was dead, but didn't give details of how that happened. They had earlier asked people on Twitter to avoid the Neuenheimer Feld area of Heidelberg, where a large university campus is located.

The man opened fire with a long-barreled firearm in a lecture hall and then fled outside, police said. They stressed that they believe he was acting alone and there was no longer any danger.

There was no immediate word on a possible motive.

German news agency dpa cited unidentified security sources as saying that the gunman killed himself. (AP)