ATTACKS INCREASE AS U.S. TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN ACCELERATES

The final phase of the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan has been ongoing for a month. According to US officials, it is more than half done and could be completed as early as 4 July and by late summer (August) at the latest. Since US President Joe Biden’s announcement on 14 April – all American forces would leave Afghanistan by 11 September, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks – violence has seen a dramatic increase around the country, with attacks reported in 27 of the 34 provinces. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Kabul’s latest report shows that the number of civilians killed and injured increased by 29% compared with the first quarter of 2020. The first month of the US troop withdrawal has not led to any significant progress in the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, which many analysts see as the only path to truly ending the conflict in Afghanistan. Instead, the troop withdrawal seems to have reduced the influence of the United States over the course of the peace talks, which its agreement with the Taliban kickstarted in 2020. However, former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai is convinced that the peace process should become a national process and that if it remains a foreign project, it will be less fruitful. Some are convinced that a Taliban return to power is inevitable, while others believe that this is not a foregone conclusion. There is deep concern, however, that a more severe civil war might erupt as the exiting foreign troops again create a power vacuum that many rival groups are eager to fill. Taliban leader Haji Hekmat told the BBC, soon after Mr Biden’s announcement: “We have won the war and America has lost.” The hardline leader made it clear what a Taliban victory would look like for those who favour the country’s current secular, democratic system: “We want an Islamic government ruled by the sharia. We will continue our jihad until they accept our demands.” The Taliban’s recently released governance manifesto openly rejects democracy and calls for an “Islamic system [that] has been described and its principles stated and compiled in the Quran, Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence.” This all runs counter to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani’s proposal that the country’s stalemate and war be resolved via new elections. The Taliban rejected Mr Ghani’s offer of a ceasefire during Ramadan, a month in which hardcore Islamists believe the “virtues” of jihad rise.

From a Christian perspective, it appears as if the US-led campaign in Afghanistan (2001-2021) has done little to achieve enduring freedom for the Afghan people. It did, however, provide a window of opportunity for the Lord to do some amazing things, through some amazing Afghans. Despite severe repression and persecution – from the government, the Taliban, other extremist groups and society – the Church in Afghanistan has grown. A 2013 estimate puts the number of Christians between 2,000 and 3,000, up from only a couple of hundred a decade earlier. Mindy Belz writes (in World magazine): “Among Afghanistan’s non-Muslims are Christians who have seen a revival of faith and rapid growth since the US-led liberation from the Taliban in 2001. There are basically three types of believers,’ said a foreign
worker in Afghanistan whom *World* is not naming due to threats—‘those who have been forced to leave the country, those who survive by exercising their faith underground, and those who are dead.’” Afghanistan’s Christians exist ‘underground’—meeting in homes, and small trusted groups. Muslims continue to come to faith, many through online evangelism. Some Afghan church leaders became Christians while living as refugees abroad, and they teach online or have returned to disciple others. Despite all the risks, bold church leaders continue to evangelise Muslims and baptise new believers. As one leader testified: “Only God keeps us safe.” Jason Mandryk, the editor of Operation *World* explains: “Where young and vulnerable movements to Christ exist in countries with occupying Western military forces, dynamics are always complex, delicate, and awkward. The US and NATO withdrawal will almost certainly mean gains for the Taliban, and gains for the Taliban almost certainly mean great difficulty and suffering for followers of Jesus there. Yet, history is filled with God working in ways that astonish us.” According to one Afghan church leader, many things in Afghanistan have changed since the Taliban governed, but the Taliban ideology is the same: “Their policy is the total revealing of the local church, and the killing of believers.” As a result of this very real threat, many church leaders are exploring options to flee the country. However, the persistence of the Taliban, said one foreign worker in Afghanistan, has sparked interest in conversion: “The Taliban has been the driving force to move people out of Islam because Afghans see extremism in the name of Islam. You could say the Taliban actually has spurred the growth of the church.”

Please pray with us for the following:

- For the Afghan government to remain steadfast in their efforts towards a political solution
- For the Lord to continue to advance His Kingdom in Afghanistan
- For the Lord's hand of protection to cover His followers as they persevere within a volatile climate

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