
US and NATO withdraw from Afghanistan. Father Scalese (Kabul): "Afghans now fear another civil war. Leaving weapons do the talking is much easier"

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken arrived in Afghanistan yesterday. The purpose of the visit is to initiate a round of talks on US troop withdrawal, announced on April 14 by President Joe Biden. "It's time to end this forever war", Biden said. "only the Afghans have the right and responsibility to lead their country. The US accomplished its goal in Afghanistan 10 years ago when al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, was killed by an American commando." The withdrawal from Afghanistan will be completed by September 11, marking 20 years since the attack on the Twin Towers on 7 October 2001, and the subsequent Operation Enduring Freedom against the Taliban regime. According to the US President, "the withdrawal will be orderly, not a hasty rush to exit. And it will be coordinated with our NATO allies." The latter approved the US decision and will withdraw their contingent by September 11. Some 800 Italian soldiers stationed in the Asian country will return to their home country. SIR interviewed Bernabite Father **Giovanni Scalese**, in charge of the Missio sui iuris in Afghanistan created by John Paul II in 2002. The Missionary Sisters of Charity and the nuns of the inter-denominational NGO "Pro Bambini di Kabul" have been actively engaged in the Afghan capital. The Christian and Catholic presence in Afghanistan is restricted to a small number of officials serving in diplomatic seats and international organisations. **Father Scalese, what do you think of President Biden's decision?** The announcement to withdraw US and NATO troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 is hard to judge. We should simply acknowledge the decision. After all, it had been already taken by the previous US administration. Those who had assumed that a new White House administration would be enough to re-think the issue had clearly failed to consider that US military involvement in Afghanistan - and that of the other NATO countries - had become unsustainable and, in fact, devoid of prospects. The only difference is the extension of the withdrawal by a few months, which would probably have been necessary in any case. **Which risks could the withdrawal of Coalition troops pose for Afghanistan?** The main risks involve security. Will the Afghan Government manage to ensure security? There are grounds for doubt on this matter. Likewise, it is perfectly reasonable to raise some doubts on the Government's effective ability to run the State apparatus without having to rely on the financial support of Western Countries. *While all the parties involved promise that they will not abandon Afghanistan and will continue to support it, cooperation interventions and ongoing funding of institutions are two different things. Not much effort has been made in recent years to revive the Afghan economy, also because the situation prevented it from happening. I therefore don't see how a country without a healthy economy can move forward.* **Do you think that given these circumstances the country could relapse into civil war?** This is the most serious threat. Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban (under the U.S.-Taliban agreement, signed in Doha on February 29, 2020, *Ed.'s note*) never made a serious start or yielded significant results. The plan was to form an interim government of national unity followed by free elections to decide who would govern the country.

But if the interested parties do not talk to each other, how can a coalition government be formed? Leaving weapons do the talking is much easier...

What could happen if the Taliban were to take control? The US President has warned them to honour "their commitments" against terrorism and warned them that the US will hold them accountable for the developments in Afghanistan. Even if the Taliban were to gain the upper hand, thanks to their greater organisational and financial resources, I doubt that they could delude themselves into thinking that they could restore the Islamic Emirate, as if the last twenty years had never existed. They could impose a new Constitution - in fact, the present Constitution already

envisages an "Islamic Republic" - but they will not be in a position to eliminate freedoms or disregard the rights that the Afghan people have come to appreciate over the past years. It should be remembered that the young generation has never experienced the Emirate and grew up in this new reality. *Contrary to popular belief, women are a significant, qualified and active part of Afghan society. Locking them up in their homes or in burkas again is not an option.* One can only wait and see how the situation develops. As Christians, we must hope for a positive development that will restore some serenity to this country after all these years of violence.

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