

INDIA ON WAIT AND WATCH ON AFGHANISTAN: CENTRE

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External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar interacting with presspersons in New Delhi on Thursday. PTI-

Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar on Thursday described the situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover as critical, adding that India, like the rest of the world, was following a “wait and watch” policy.

At an all-party meeting on the situation in Afghanistan held at Parliament House, Mr. Jaishankar said the priority of the Government of India at this point was the evacuation of Indian nationals and Afghan partners from the war-torn country.

“It is an evolving situation and I request everybody to be patient so that once the situation normalises, we can tell you what India’s stand is,” the Minister said, addressing presspersons after the meeting.

37 leaders attend

The meeting went on for three-and-a-half hours, and was attended by 37 leaders from 31 political parties, including Congress leaders Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, Mallikarjun Kharge and Anand Sharma; Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Sharad Pawar; Trinamool Congress leaders Saugata Roy and Sukhendu Sekhar Roy; former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda; Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) MPs Tiruchi Siva and T.R. Baalu; Telangana Rashtra Samithi’s (TRS) Nama Nageswara Rao; Telegu Desam Party’s (TDP) Jayadev Galla; and CPI MP Binoy Viswam. Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla and India’s Ambassador to Afghanistan Rudrendra Tandon were also present at the briefing, as was Leader of the House in the Rajya Sabha Piyush Goyal.

Mr. Jaishankar briefed the MPs on the evacuation of Indian Embassy staff and the closing down of India’s consulates in various cities, and added that a team has been deployed at the Kabul airport after the closure of the Embassy to facilitate evacuation. Mr. Jaishankar said the government had evacuated 175 Embassy personnel, 263 other Indian nationals, 112 Afghan nationals and 15 third country nationals, with the total figure at 565 in six evacuation flights so far.

His presentation to the MPs clarified the tough conditions under which the evacuations were taking place, including a lack of a central command and control, the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban earlier than expected and the bringing forward of the date of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The presentation also went into details of the various talks held on the Afghan issue and what went on in parallel in terms of the developments on the ground.

Opposition MPs present at the meeting said the government interlocutors also conveyed that the Kabul airport could also be attacked by suspected Islamic State (IS) terrorists, a fear even the Taliban had.

Speaking after the briefing, Mr. Jaishankar said, “On this [Afghanistan] matter, all political parties have similar views. We approached the issue with a spirit of national unity.”

Opposition leaders, while appreciating the briefing, had tough questions for Mr. Jaishankar over the deportation from India a few weeks ago of a woman Member of Parliament from Afghanistan.

Mr. Jaishankar expressed regret at the incident, calling it a decision taken by “overcautious” immigration officials at the Delhi airport. According to sources, this issue was raised by Mr. Kharge, who is also the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha. In reply, Mr. Jaishankar, while expressing regret, said it was an isolated incident and that India had rescued many other Afghan parliamentarians.

Fielding many questions from the Opposition on India’s future engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan, Mr. Jaishankar said India, like rest of the world, was following a “wait and watch” policy.

Mr. Kharge also raised a series of questions on the government’s contingency plan to evacuate Indians if they were stranded beyond the August 31 deadline, and the exact number of Indians yet to be evacuated. Sources claimed that the government did not share the exact number yet to be evacuated.

The Congress delegation also asked about the government’s counterterrorism measures, especially in Jammu and Kashmir, in the wake of the rise of the Taliban. While raising the issue of the Taliban’s impact on security in the region, Mr. Kharge stressed that the political process should be restarted by restoring Statehood for Jammu and Kashmir.

PM’s absence

Questions were also raised about the absence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the meeting, adding that it was a courtesy that his predecessor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, always extended to the Opposition. Mr. Kharge, according to the sources, said Mr. Modi should have been present at such a meeting.

Mr. Gowda said a similar period of uncertainty in Afghanistan had prevailed during his premiership, and that the current government needed to foreground the issue of internal security.

The Revolutionary Socialist Party’s (RSP) N.K. Premachandran, Mr. Viswam and the CPI(M)’s P.R. Natarajan cornered Mr. Jaishankar on what they called the “grand isolation” of India. Mr. Natarajan, as per sources, said U.S. President Joe Biden, in his campaign speeches, had announced that America would be withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. Despite prior warning, why was India not prepared, the MP asked. He also questioned whether the U.S. had kept India in the loop when they decided to advance the withdrawal of their forces.

The Left and the Trinamool Congress, which was represented by Mr. Saugata, also questioned the government on safeguarding Indian investments in Afghanistan.

“There are 500 projects, including the Afghanistan Parliament, in which India has made some serious investments. We asked what the government’s plan was to secure this investment. But Mr. Jaishankar did not give us a credible reply,” an Opposition member said.

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