



# I didn't steal £123m, vows ousted president who fled to billionaires' playground

From **Vanessa Allen** in London and **Melanie Swan** in the UAE

AFGHAN president Ashraf Ghani broke cover last night to say that he hoped to return home soon – and to deny claims that he had fled with £123million in cash.

Days after escaping Kabul and leaving his people to the wrath of the Taliban, he said he had been forced to do so to avoid further bloodshed and to make sure he was not lynched.

But he will face more anger after it emerged that he had escaped to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a luxurious playground for the world's rich and famous.

Mr Ghani, 72, faced calls for his arrest over allegations that he and his aides took £123million in cash stuffed into bags when they left the presidential palace, along with expensive cars and a helicopter. He branded the claims 'baseless lies'.

Afghanistan's ambassador to Tajikistan, Mohammed Zahir Aghbar, accused him of embezzling the money and his embassy asked Interpol to arrest Mr Ghani on charges of theft from the war-torn country.

A Russian official claimed Mr Ghani and his aides had taken so much cash that they could not fit it into their cars and helicopter, and had to leave some lying on the runway when he flew out on Sunday night.

Mr Ghani faced widespread condemnation and accusations of cowardice after he fled Kabul as the Taliban advanced through the Afghan capital.

His first appearance since leaving came in a video message, streamed on his Facebook page. Mr Ghani said he supported talks



between the Taliban and former president Hamid Karzai about forming a government, and said he had 'no intention' of remaining in exile.

'For now, I am in the Emirates so that bloodshed and chaos is stopped,' he said. 'I am currently in talks to return to Afghanistan. If I had stayed, the people of Afghanistan would have witnessed the president hanged once more.'

Mr Ghani also said he had left Afghanistan to stop the Taliban from unleashing a bloody assault on Kabul. 'If I had stayed I would have been witnessing bloodshed in

Kabul,' he added. Mr Ghani's hasty departure led to speculation that he had flown to Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, and diverted to Oman after officials refused to let him land in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe.

A Russian official said he was followed out of the presidential palace by a motorcade and a helicopter loaded with cash.

Nikita Ishchenko, a spokesman for the Russian embassy in Kabul, said: 'Four cars were full of money. They tried to stuff another part of the money into a helicopter, but not all of it would fit, and some of the money was left lying on the tarmac.' But in

**Video message: Ashraf Ghani speaking last night. He is said to be in Abu Dhabi, top, in the United Arab Emirates**

the video Mr Ghani rejected these claims. 'I left with just a waistcoat and some clothes,' he said. 'The personality assassination against me has been ongoing, saying that I have taken money with me.'

'The accusations are baseless lies. You can even ask customs officials.'

The UAE revealed it had taken Mr Ghani in on 'humanitarian grounds'.

He is said to be in the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, which boasts seven-star hotels and a Louvre museum.

A security source told the Daily Mail Mr Ghani would be installed in a luxury villa in a fortified compound, where he would be kept under 24-hour armed guard, far away from the world of supercars, yachts and luxury shopping.

While other exiles – including Juan Carlos, the former king of Spain – can enjoy relative freedom in Abu Dhabi, the source said Mr Ghani would remain a 'wanted man', effectively kept within a palatial prison for his own safety. 'His life is under immediate threat,' the source said.

Dr Andreas Krieg, a senior lecturer at the School of Security Studies at King's College London said his new life would resemble a 'golden cage'.

Mr Ghani's vice president, Amrullah Saleh, has stayed in Afghanistan and is attempting to rally troops in his home town in the Panjshir Valley, the only region which has not been taken by the Taliban. The UAE foreign ministry said: 'The UAE has welcomed President Ashraf Ghani and his family into the country on humanitarian grounds'.

## down on dissenters

appeared to have begun backtracking on their earlier pledge, with a senior spokesman saying the decision on whether women would be entitled to work and education would be decided by a council of Islamic scholars.

Rather than running as a democracy, which the fundamentalists do not believe in, it was added that a ruling council would be implementing Sharia law 'and that is it'. Sources said

that – while the Taliban hierarchy is outlining a more modern regime – low-level fighters are refusing to accept this, preferring to enact the group's previous rule of hardline Sharia fundamentalism.

Hassan Miakhil, 34, a teacher from Jalalabad, fled as the Taliban attacked crowds yesterday. He said: 'We were defending our dignity. We fought for years under our national flag and now the situation is the foe will

get benefits from it.' In contrast to Mujahid's claims of an amnesty for any Afghans who helped Western forces during the 20-year conflict, militia were reportedly continuing door-to-door enquiries in Kabul yesterday, looking for anyone who worked with soldiers, diplomats or government officials.

It came as charity Save the Children warned 14million Afghans are already in need of supplies owing to a drought.



Rally: Anti-Taliban protests with Afghan national flags in Jalalabad yesterday