US designates Afghanistan as 'state sponsor of wrongful detention'

Afghan foreign ministry denied that foreign nationals had been detained for ransom

AFP | Washington, United States

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced yesterday he has designated Afghanistan as a "State Sponsor of Wrongful Detention," demanding Taliban authorities release two Americans and commit to ending its "hostage diplomacy."

The move, described by the Afghan authorities as "regrettable", comes just over a week after Iran became the first country added to Washington's new "wrongful detention" blacklist.

President Donald Trump in September signed an executive order that created the blacklist, similar to designations by the United States on terrorism.

"The Taliban continues to use terrorist tactics, kidnapping individuals for ransom or to seek policy concessions," Rubio said in a statement.

He said it was "not safe for Americans to travel to Afghanistan because the Taliban continues to unjustly detain our fellow Americans and other foreign nationals."

In response, the Afghan foreign ministry denied that foreign nationals had been detained for ransom.

"Certain individuals have been detained on charges of violating established laws, and in many instances, they have been released in the normal course following the completion of legal procedures," it said in a statement in English.

Rubio called on the government in Kabul to release US citizens Dennis Coyle and Mahmoud Habibi as well as "all Americans unjustly detained in Afghanistan now and commit to cease the practice of hostage diplomacy forever".

Habibi, an Afghan-American businessman, previously served as Afghanistan's director of civil aviation.

He was arrested in August 2022 in Kabul along with dozens of other employees of his telecommunications company, according to US authorities.

The State Department has issued a reward of $5 million for information leading to Habibi's return.

Coyle is an academic from Colorado who worked for two decades in Afghanistan before being detained in January 2025, according to the James Foley Foundation.

The Afghan foreign ministry said that in the last year, the country "has taken positive steps as a goodwill gesture regarding the cases of some detained US nationals".

A number of US citizens were freed last year. In September, Amir Amiri, who had been held since December 2024, was handed over to Trump's special envoy for hostages, Adam Boehler, who was in Kabul to negotiate a prisoner exchange.

Chinese-American Faye Hall, who was arrested in February 2025 in central Bamiyan province, was also freed.

In January 2025, two Americans were freed in exchange for an Afghan fighter, Khan Mohammed, who had been convicted of drug trafficking in the United States.

Another American, aerospace engineer George Glezmann, was released after more than two years in detention during a visit by Boehler in March last year.

The Afghan ministry pointed out that talks between Kabul and Washington have been held with the mediation of Qatar.

It said it wanted the issue of detentions "to be appropriately resolved and concluded through the ongoing discussions and constructive engagement between the two sides".

BETTER YOU KNOW

The Taliban authorities returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, leading to the collapse of the previous government and the hasty departure of US troops, who had ended their rule between 1996 and 2001.

Israeli airstrike on Abbasiyeh in southern Lebanon

Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike on the village of Abbasiyeh in southern Lebanon. Lebanon was drawn into the Middle East war last week when Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah attacked Israel in response to the killing of the Iranian supreme leader during US-Israeli strikes on February 28.

Iran deploys Lego-style animation in propaganda war with US, Israel

AFP | Tehran, Iran

While Iran hits back against US and Israeli attacks with missiles and drones, it is also fighting a propaganda war with a Lego-style animation video complete with toy renditions of Donald Trump, bombs and warplanes.

Iran's state-run Revayat-e Fath institute released its video on state television following the February 28 US-Israeli attacks that killed supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and triggered the Middle East war.

The two-minute video has since been shared on Meta-owned platforms and on X, garnering tens of thousands of likes and shares.

With no dialogue, it appears designed to have international reach in a war that has rattled energy and stock markets, and divided world public opinion.

The video kicks off with Lego-type depictions of US President Trump flanked by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the devil himself, looking at an album titled the "Epstein file" (sic).

Enraged, Trump hits a red button to kick off the war, and sends a missile through the clouds that hits what looks like a classroom, with toys representing girls wearing pink headscarves as they listen to their smiling teacher.

After the teacher writes on the board the words "My homeland is my life", the screen goes dark. The next scene shows a pink backpack and a pair of pink shoes in the rubble of a strike.

An Iranian officer, also in Lego-inspired form, picks up the bag and weeps, before his sadness turns to rage.

Iran has accused the United States and Israel of conducting a deadly strike on a school in Minab in the south on the first day of the war.

AFP has neither been able to access the site in order to verify the incident nor obtain independent confirmation of the toll.

War in the Middle East: casualty figures from across the region

AFP | Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Since the US and Israel unleashed strikes on Iran on February 28, war has spread across the region and casualties have been reported in countries around the Middle East.

Due to reporting restrictions, AFP has not been able to independently verify all of the following tolls.

The figures are based on numbers released by governments, militaries, health authorities and rescue organisations in the affected countries.

Iran

Iran's health ministry said on March 8 that more than 1,200 people had been killed, including around 200 women and 200 children under the age of 12, with more than 10,000 civilians injured. tIran's state-run Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs said on Thursday that the death toll from US and Israeli strikes had reached 1,230. The Iranian Red Crescent previously said on March 3 that 787 people had been killed.

The US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said on March 9 that at least 1,761 people had been killed, including 1,245 civilians -- among them at least 194 children -- as well as 189 military personnel and 327 people whose status had not been classified.

Israel

Israel's first responders and the country's authorities have reported 14 people in total killed on the Israeli side.

First responders and local authorities say Iranian missile fire killed 12 people in Israel, including four minors, since the start of the war, according to an AFP tally based on their announcements.

The Israeli military has separately announced the deaths of two soldiers in combat in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon

Lebanon's health ministry said on Monday that 486 people had been killed and 1,313 wounded during a week of strikes.On Sunday it said that an earlier death toll of 394 people included 83 children and 42 women.

AFP has not been able to view a detailed breakdown of the figures.

The Lebanese army said three of its soldiers had been killed.

Hezbollah has not announced its losses.

The Gulf

Authorities in Gulf states and the US Central Command (CENTCOM) have reported 24 people killed in neighbouring states since the start of the Iranian attacks.

Most of those killed were military or security personnel, including seven US service members, and 11 civilians.

Kuwait's military and health ministry have reported six deaths -- two Kuwaiti soldiers, two border guards and two civilians, one of them an 11-year-old girl.

The United Arab Emirates defence ministry has also reported six deaths. They include four civilians and two military personnel who died as a result of a helicopter crash blamed on a technical malfunction.

Saudi Arabia's civil defence agency has reported two civilian deaths.

Bahrain's interior ministry has reported two deaths.

Oman's maritime security centre reported the death of a mariner at sea.

Qatar's ministry of interior has reported 16 injuries and no fatalities.

CENTCOM has confirmed six US service personnel killed in Kuwait and one killed in Saudi Arabia.

Iraq

Pro-Iran fighters in Iraq said 20 of their members had been killed in air strikes they blamed on Israel and the United States.

In Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, authorities said one airport guard was killed in a drone attack on Erbil airport, while at least two Iranian Kurdish fighters were killed in Iranian strikes.

Jordan

Jordan's military spokesman Brigadier General Mustafa al-Hiyari said 14 people had been injured in various parts of the country due to falling debris from Iranian missiles and drones.

No deaths have been reported in Jordan.

Syria

Syrian state media reported eight people injured by falling debris from exchanges of fire between Iran and Israel on Monday.

US Air Force B-1 Lancer bombers taxi into position on the tarmac at RAF Fairford in south-west England