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Heart of Asia

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UN urges immediate halt to fighting in Afghanistan

The United Nations has called for Afghan government forces and the Taliban to immediately cease hostilities.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan made the appeal in a report on Sunday. It warns a growing number of healthcare personnel have been bearing the brunt of the poor security situation.

The report says fighting between the two sides has continued even after the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in February.

The report says that in March, a group of Taliban members in the eastern province of Kunar abducted five healthcare workers carrying out government-mandated services.

The report says that in April, an improvised explosive device ... **P3**



Negotiation Team Prepares for Peace Talks

The negotiation team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has started its consultations with lawmakers as hopes remain high that the intra-Afghan talks will begin soon, despite a UN report stating an increase of Taliban attacks in Afghanistan.

The UN report, that will be presented to the United Nations Security Council this week, indicates that 5,543 security incidents happened between February 7 and May 14, a 2% increase compared with the same period from last year. The Taliban has rejected the report, saying their attacks have been reduced by 40%.

The report says that airstrikes were reduced by 47 percent during this period. Nader Nadery, a member of the team, said preserving the republic is a main demand of the Afghan people in the talks.

"Demands are about how to preserve the (government) system and its main pillars, like the national army and the national police," he said.

Iranian, Afghan Top Diplomats Hold Talks in Tehran



Afghanistan's interim foreign minister met with his Iranian counterpart on Sunday in Tehran as tensions persist between the two neighbors after the deaths in May of Afghan migrants at the border.

Iran's state news agency IRNA published a photo Sunday of the meeting between Afghanistan's Mohammad Hanif Atmar and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, both wearing face masks.

The two-day visit aims to discuss

"recent unfortunate events (and) find solutions to avoid them happening again," Afghanistan's foreign ministry said Saturday on Twitter, without elaborating.

Atmar heads "a high-level delegation including Afghan political, economic and security officials," IRNA said, citing a statement from the Iranian foreign ministry released earlier.

Earlier in the day, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman's office announced that a comprehensive

cooperation deal will be signed between Iran and Afghanistan within three months.

The visit follows controversy over the deaths in May of several Afghan migrants who were allegedly forced into a river by Iranian border guards and drowned.

Afghan officials claim the migrants died while they were illegally crossing into neighboring Iran from Herat province.

Eighteen bodies, some bearing

signs of torture and beatings, were recovered from the Harirud river, while other migrants were reported missing, in an incident that sparked anger and protests in Afghanistan. One Afghan official said 55 migrants were forced into the river.

Iranian authorities have dismissed the claims, saying the incident occurred inside Afghanistan's territory.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani ordered an investigation into the drownings, a move welcomed by the United States, at a time of heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran. The meeting also comes after an incident earlier this month in the central Iranian city of Yazd in which three Afghans died and several others were injured after a car chase with police, Iranian media reported. According to one Iranian official, the driver of the vehicle "defied police instructions and failed to stop at a checkpoint."

According to UN refugee agency UNHCR, around 3.5 million Afghans, including almost a million refugees, live in Iran.

Tens of thousands returned to Afghanistan after the start of the novel coronavirus outbreak, but as restrictions have eased in hard-hit Iran, many are again seeking work there.

UNAMA head meets Mullah Beradar in Doha, discusses peace process

Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Deborah Lyons on Sunday met the Taliban Qatar Office Head Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar and discussed matters related to peace process.

In a tweet, the UNAMA said: "Deborah Lyons had a cordial initial meeting in Doha with Mullah Baradar, Taliban deputy leader. The UN envoy for #Afghanistan highlighted the need for a just peace that was inclusive of all Afghans, including women, youth and minorities."

UNAMA has often called on Afghan government and the Taliban to reduce violence and stressed over intra-Afghan talks to lasting peace in Afghanistan.



Taliban Militants Kidnap About 60 Civilians Amid Peace Efforts

Afghanistan authorities on Sunday, June 21 reported that Taliban militants kidnapped nearly 60 civilians in central Afghanistan over the last week. The officials added that more than half of the captured civilians are still being held amid peace talk efforts.

As per reports, Provincial deputy governor Mohammad Ali Uruzgani said that the militant group took hostages in the central province situated in Daikundi after a woman escaped a Taliban dominant village in the neighbouring province. He added that nearly 26 people, including women and children, had been released. However, Taliban, on the other hand, denied any kidnapping of the civilians.

After Afghan President Ashraf



Ghani said he will 'expedite' the process of releasing Taliban prisoners, sources of an international agency have revealed that Western nations are supporting Kabul in its denial free hundreds of those inmates who are accused of some of the most violent attacks.

The release of prisons held by the Afghan government is demanded

by the extremist group as a condition to start peace talks and is mentioned in the US-Taliban peace deal. While the Afghan government has already released hundreds of Taliban prisoners, it has kept hold of some of them who are accused of gruesome crimes. If this final major point that has halted the intra-Afghan talks is resolved, it could lead ... **P3**

'Ring of fire'...

in northeastern Republic of Congo from 5:56 local time (04:56 GMT) just a few minutes after sunrise.

"It's a bit like switching from a 500-watt to a 30-watt light bulb," he added. "It's a cold light and you don't see as well." People hundreds of kilometres (miles) on either side of the centreline across 14 countries could also see light drain from the day but not the "ring of fire". Weather conditions are critical for viewing.

A solar eclipse always occurs about two weeks before or after a lunar eclipse, when the Moon moves into Earth's shadow. Lunar eclipses are visible from about half of the Earth's surface.

There will be a second solar eclipse in 2020 on December 14 over South America. Because the Moon will be a bit closer to Earth, it will block out the Sun's light entirely.

UN urges...

planted by the Taliban exploded inside a pharmacy in the eastern province of Nangarhar, wounding eight people, including a doctor.

The report mentions an Afghan Air Force plane that conducted an airstrike in May targeting Taliban members outside of a health clinic in the northern province of Kunduz. The attack left two health workers slightly wounded and damaged the facility.

In the midst of these attacks, Afghanistan faces the challenge of improving its vulnerable medical system to deal with the growing spread of the coronavirus.

By Shimada Haruyuki

The Legacy of Ogata Sadako and Nakamura Tetsu: Japan's Role in Afghanistan

Last year saw the passing of two Japanese citizens who have had an enormous impact on the recovery of Afghanistan: Ogata Sadako and Nakamura Tetsu. Nakamura, in particular, was directly involved in extremely difficult aid activities on the ground in Afghanistan. Their loss also comes at an important time in reassessing what role Japan can take in helping ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a breeding ground for terrorism.

On February 29, 2020, representatives of the United States and the Taliban signed a peace deal in Doha, the capital of Qatar, with Washington agreeing to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. In return, the Taliban agreed to work with the Americans and NATO in fighting terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and Daesh. The agreement also includes provisions requiring the Taliban to open direct talks with the Afghan government. There are many obstacles to the success of those talks, however, including the Taliban's continued attacks during the unrest surrounding Afghanistan's 2019 presidential elections; the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic; and the stalled exchange of prisoners between the two parties, which is one of the agreement conditions. Even so, the signing marked a momentous change in the 18-year conflict that has dominated US-Afghan relations.

Amid these major changes, it can be difficult to see what role Japan could possibly have. Indeed, to most Japanese nationals Afghanistan is simply one more distant foreign land. But as we will see, Japan and its people have, in fact, had a long, friendly relationship with that country.

Two Japanese at the Center of Aid

Ogata Sadako and Nakamura Tetsu were Japanese citizens who played powerful roles in Japanese-Afghan relations. However, both passed away in 2019: Ogata in October, and Nakamura in December. Nakamura's violent death at the hands of armed insurgents was particularly shocking. These two individuals were known to a great many in Afghanistan, and now they are gone. The loss is profound.

Ogata served for many years as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and from January of 2002 she was appointed special representative of the Japanese prime minister on reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. She continued to push for Afghan support throughout her years as president of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, as well.



Nakamura served as a physician near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border from the mid-1980s onward. During his time there, he came to see that the lack of water was holding back local agriculture, which in turn drove malnutrition and disease. He once said, "One irrigation canal will do more good than 100 doctors," and this conviction inspired him to found the nonprofit organization Peshawar-kai, or Peace Japan Medical Services. In this capacity he personally directed large-scale irrigation projects in the region.

I myself have had opportunities to speak with both. During one trip to Afghanistan, Ogata happened to be in the same area, and we ended up traveling together. She told me: "There are two issues from my time with UNHCR I still need to solve. One is Myanmar's Rohingya crisis, and the other is the Afghan refugee crisis." I saw then for myself why Ogata was so intent on Afghanistan. I met Nakamura only a few times, but once when I asked him about the danger of his life in Afghanistan, he answered, "You can't catch a baby tiger without entering the tiger's den." With this, the normally gentle man showed me the steel he had inside.

With all this work happening at the intersection of government bodies and private organizations, what further role is there for Japan and the Japanese people after the deaths of these two, who faced head-on the

difficulties of the situation in Afghanistan?

Focus on Large-Scale Support After 9/11

Japan has been involved in restoration efforts in Afghanistan in cooperation with the United States and allied nations ever since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as well as engaging in diplomacy and governmental cooperation. Naturally, these efforts involved more than just members of government. Many civilians and private groups, like Nakamura and his organization, worked to strengthen ties with Afghanistan, and shared cultures while engaging in support activities. This is just one more example of longstanding ties between the two nations, though. Japan and Afghanistan began official diplomatic exchange in 1930. Around the same time, Afghanistan invited Japanese nationals to come and share agricultural techniques and cultural activities, like judo. Japan also began accepting many Afghan exchange students. During World War II Afghanistan first declared its neutrality, but eventually joined the Allies at the request of the United Kingdom and Soviet Union. Naturally, this damaged its ties with Japan, then an enemy, but after the war relations were restored through economic partnerships.

However, the turmoil that rocked Afghanistan in the late 1970s once again damaged bilateral ties. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded ... **P3**

By Thierry Allafort-Duverger

After the Afghan maternity ward attack, MSF has no choice but to close it

About 10am on May 12, the maternity ward opened six years earlier by Medecins sans Frontieres in the Dasht-e-Barchi neighbourhood of Kabul, was attacked. The assailants went from room to room, killing 16 expectant mothers in their beds. Five of them were about to give birth. Several other people were murdered, including a midwife employed by MSF and two children aged seven and eight, who were at the hospital that day to get their jobs.

Nobody has claimed responsibility for this horrendous attack. The Afghan government immediately accused the Taliban, which denied any involvement; the US accused the ISIS affiliate known as Islamic State Khorasan Province. The assailants were reportedly killed during the assault carried out by Afghan and international armed forces, while a hundred or so terrified mothers and MSF employees hid in the hospital's safe rooms. And no official investigation has produced any evidence on who perpetrated the attack.

One month later, we know next

to nothing, but we know enough: whoever the perpetrators were, the targets of their attack were the Hazara women of Dasht-e-Barchi and the healthcare staff. And this is no isolated tragedy: it is part of a series of attacks against this particular Shia minority group, as well as civilians and aid agencies. It is also one among several assaults mounted against MSF, with more than 70 of our patients and personnel losing their lives since 2004. In June 2004, five employees – two of them Afghans – were killed in the Badghis Province. Allegedly committed by a local police chief, these killings were treated in the most off-hand manner by authorities, with no one punished for it. This resulted in MSF withdrawing from Afghanistan for five years.

We returned in 2009 after negotiating an agreement with the government and the Taliban, which had since retracted statements it had made years earlier, declaring us as legitimate targets. In October 2015, MSF's hospital in Kunduz was destroyed by a US air force bomber, killing 42 people, including 24 patients and 14

staff members, and injuring 37 more. We returned to Kunduz two years later, after receiving assurances from all the armed groups with which we were in contact that we could resume our activities as humanitarian healthcare providers.

We were aware that our presence in Dasht-e-Barchi carried risks. This neighbourhood in Kabul, home to much of the Hazara community, has been the target of murderous attacks. One such attack, on a university in August 2018, left a deep impression on our personnel. And yet, we just could not believe that the worst would happen nearly two years later; that men would kill women about to give birth, as well as their babies. But it did happen, and it could happen again. Today, we have to accept this reality. We cannot protect ourselves from those determined to kill our patients and colleagues. Reinforcing security measures, such as building higher walls and increasing the number of safe rooms, will not be enough to protect us from another nightmare. Today, Afghanistan is a high-risk country. Since its emergence ... **P3**

TikTok users...

spokesman, Tim Murtaugh, in a statement to Reuters News Agency. "But we thank them for their contact information."

Empty seats

The campaign team blamed the disappointing crowd at the rally on protesters creating a hostile atmosphere and blocking supporters from getting into the arena.

There were factors involved, like they were concerned about the protesters who were coming in. There were protesters who blocked the (attendees)," Schlapp said.

"And so we saw that have an impact in terms of people coming to the rally." Schlapp went on to say there were families that "didn't want to bring - couldn't bring - their children because of

concerns of the protesters".

There were some shouting matches and scuffles outside the event between about 30 Black Lives Matter demonstrators and some Trump supporters waiting to enter.

But reporters on the ground said they saw no problems for people trying to get in.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democrat, responded to a tweet by Parscale blaming the media for discouraging attendees and cited bad behaviour by demonstrators outside. "Actually you just got ROCKED by teens on TikTok who flooded the Trump campaign w/ fake ticket reservations & tricked you into believing a million people wanted your white supremacist open mic enough to pack an arena during COVID," she tweeted on Saturday. "KPop allies, we see and appreciate your contributions in the fight for justice too."

Travel Ban on Finance Ministry Officials Raises Questions

A recent decision by President Ashraf Ghani to impose a travel ban on 68 employees of the Finance Ministry has raised questions about whether or not the Afghan president has the right to do so.

Along with the travel ban list, in another official letter President Ghani said his approval will be required for all travel by officials of the Finance Ministry up until grade five.

"A need to ask the president's approval for any trip for officials of the Finance Ministry until grade five questions their rights, particularly their citizenship rights," said Azim Kebarzani, an MP.

The reason behind the decision is not clear so far but sources said that the limitations might be due to corruption and relations-based appointments in the Ministry of Finance.

Corruption was cited by the Presidential Palace when the first list of 68 officials was announced, so sources say Ghani may be attempting to demonstrate his will for reform. There are also reports about the reduction in government employees' incomes due to alleged corruption in customs.



An official of the reforms commission said that many appointments in the Finance Ministry were made in the absence of free competition.

"The officials of the Finance Ministry did not announce their vacancies to allow for free competition, and we are insisting that all civil services positions in all institutions--including the Ministry of Finance--should be announced through free competition," said Farid Ahmad, spokesman for the Independent Administrative Reform

and Civil Services Commission.

"A better structure has been ensured in our customs offices around the country and processes have been eased and our activities have improved every year," said Shamroz Khan Masjidi, a spokesman for the Finance Ministry. But researchers said the government does not have the capacity to implement reforms in the Ministry of Finance.

"The president, the parliament and the legislative pillar are responsible

to make ministers and high-ranking officials accountable, but there is lack of a political will in this respect," said Nasir Taimori, a researcher at Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

"Incomes have reduced from one leader (in the ministry of finance) to another. You can see evidence in customs of how much the incomes were last year and the year before and how much they are now," said Khan Jan Alokozay, member of the Chamber of Commerce and Investment.

After the Afghan...

there in 2014, ISIS has grown in prominence, as evidenced by the attacks it has perpetrated on civilians and aid organisations in recent years. Meanwhile, the cycle of violence and reprisals between Taliban and the Afghan National Army continue unabated.

Intra-Afghan negotiations for a peace deal remain uncertain. And there is the risk of those in the business of violence refusing to compromise or seeking to demonstrate their importance by exercising their power to harm. In such a setting, the lives and deaths of humanitarian healthcare workers and patients are little more than adjustment variables on the agendas of these forces.

If we were to continue working in Dasht-e-Barchi, we would have had to be honest with our staff, telling them that attacks, such as the one in May, could happen again and at any time. And that would have meant MSF becoming an organisation that accounted for the loss of human lives. To our minds, this was unthinkable.

This is why we are ceasing our activities in Dasht-e-Barchi and withdrawing our personnel from the area. We will not be reopening the maternity wards. It is a heartbreaking decision, but one that we believe is necessary.

The Dasht-e-Barchi maternity ward was the only provider of emergency obstetric and neo-natal care for the underprivileged people living in this part of Kabul. It was one of the busiest maternity wards supported by MSF in the world: in 2019, almost 16,000 women gave birth in that ward. More than 350 employees devoted their days and nights to the cause.

Some of them are willing to take a risk and return. But we refuse to send them back to a place where courage and hope would be the only means of protection against another massacre.

Thierry Allafort-Duverger is general director at Medecins Sans Frontieres

The Legacy of...

Afghanistan, and in the aftermath Japan joined the United States in its boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. After the Soviet Union withdrew in February 1989, Afghanistan was thrown into years of chaos as the mujahideen (an Islamic anti-Soviet faction) continued to resist government forces, and the orthodox Taliban rose to eventually take control of the nation. Afghanistan grew more and more difficult to enter, and to Japan eventually became another distant nation on the old Silk Road.

Even so, Japan continued to work for stability in Afghanistan, and proposed to mediate meetings between the opposing mujahideen and Taliban factions. Japan used the fall of the Taliban following American reprisals for the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an opportunity to restore relations with Afghanistan.

As mentioned, the Japanese government invited Hamid Karzai, then president of the transitional administration of Afghanistan, and later president in full, to the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan in Tokyo in January 2002. This marked a new period of support for nation building. Japan became a leading force in the disarming, demobilizing, and reintegration plan to help Afghan combatants return to normal society. Japan also offered support in fields like agriculture, education, health and medicine, the advancement

of women, infrastructure (such as construction of the Kabul International Airport terminal building), and more. In fact, though it might not be well known to the Japanese public, the Japanese government offered official development assistance for a new capital construction plan for Kabul, as the city grew unable to accommodate its population after an influx of people from the countryside and abroad. The Japanese government has also instated a scholarship system to allow Afghan administrators to attend graduate school in Japan. Many NGOs also became involved in various ways, including humanitarian, reconstruction, and exchange activities. Of particular note is Dōshisha University's hosting of an international peace conference in June 2012, which marked the first official meeting between a Taliban representative and Afghan government officials after the fall of the Taliban regime. In addition, Yamamoto Tadamichi served as the UN Secretary-General's special representative to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan from March 2016 to March 2020, the third Japanese to lead that organization, which is tasked with overseeing and regulating international aid to Afghanistan. The Limits and Possibilities of Japan's Role

It should be clear that the relationship between Japan and Afghanistan thus far has been anything but loose. However, with the passage of time, aid

fatigue and declining interest in Afghanistan have resulted in a global drop in financial aid to that nation, including from Japan.

Japan now faces limited options in supporting stability in Afghanistan, considering the decreasing influence of international governments in that country and the comparative reduction of its own economic strength. Of course, support must go on, but unfortunately there is no sign that political or economic improvements are forthcoming. It is also true that even when aid is provided, corruption in the Afghan government leads to well-founded doubts about its effective and efficient use, and as Nakamura's murder shows, there are harsh limits on how much Japanese individuals can do on the ground.

However, Japan is in a strong position to persevere in its support and continue to build bridges between opposing factions, and both the international community and the Afghan people hold out hope for that continued role. Geographically these two nations are far apart, and unlike nations in the West their mutual interests are not directly connected, but Japan still holds a favorable position with the people of Afghanistan. Japan can take advantage of that positive light to contribute to the stability of Afghanistan, thereby helping to build broader peace across South and Central Asia and in the Middle Ea

Taliban Militants...

to an end of over an 18-year-old war.

According to an international media agency, the Afghan government has till now released over 3,000 Taliban inmates and in exchange, the extremist group has also freed Afghan officials.

A day after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani pledged to speed-up the process of releasing Taliban prisoners, Afghanistan freed at least 100 inmates from the insurgent group to mark the Eid al-Fitr celebrations.

Afghanistan's National Security Council spokesperson Javid

Faisal informed the international media that 100 Taliban prisoners have been released from the Bagram prison and the government plans on freeing at least 2,000 prisoners as a "goodwill gesture" after both sides agreed on a temporary ceasefire.

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TikTok users say they helped sabotage Trump rally in Tulsa

TikTok users and Korean pop music fans take partial credit for inflating attendance expectations at a less-than-full arena at US President Donald Trump's first political rally in months, held in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Social media users on different platforms, including the popular video-sharing app TikTok, claimed in posts and videos on Sunday that they completed the online registration for the event with no intention of going. Prior to the rally, Trump's campaign manager, Brad Parscale, said there had been more than one million ticket requests for the event. However, the 19,000-seat BOK Center arena had many empty seats and Trump and Vice President Mike Pence cancelled speeches to an expected "overflow" crowd which did not materialise.

Trump's campaign advisers had seen the rally as a way to rejuvenate his base and demonstrate support, at a time when a string of opinion polls have suggested he is trailing his Democratic rival, former Vice President Joe Biden. Oklahoma reported a surge in new coronavirus cases in recent days, and the state's department of health had warned those planning on attending the event that they faced an increased risk of catching the virus. The Trump campaign said the entry was "first-come-first-serve" and that no one was issued an actual ticket. "Leftists always fool themselves into thinking they're being clever. Registering for a rally only means you've RSVPed with a cellphone number," said Trump's campaign ... **P2**



A look at the world

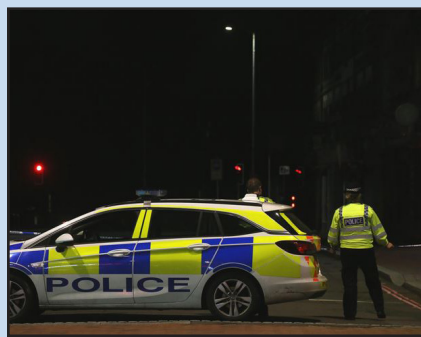
Al-Sisi's intervention threat declaration of war: Libya

The Libyan government on Sunday dubbed Egyptian president's military intervention threat as a "declaration of war." "The statements of the Egyptian President [Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi], which are harassing Libya's sovereignty and meddling in its internal affairs, and supporting putschists, militias and mercenaries in Libya are unacceptable," the government's press office said in a statement. "These are seen as hostile steps and clear intervention to internal affairs, and a declaration of war," it added. In a television speech in the Egyptian city of Matrouh near the Libyan border on Saturday, al-Sisi suggested that Cairo could launch "external military missions" into Libya "if required," saying that "any direct intervention



in Libya has already become legitimate internationally." Al-Sisi told his army to "be prepared to carry out any mission here within our borders, or if necessary outside our borders." The Libyan government said it has always called for a political solution, however, eastern Libya-based warlord Khalifa Haftar and his supporters started to attack the capital Tripoli. Many countries closed their eyes to violations and crimes by Haftar, it said. Noting that those countries started to talk about "political solution and dialogue" as Haftar forces suffered defeat, the Libyan government said that now they resort to intervention threats. Highlighting that "all of Libya is the red line," it said those lines are not drawn by such statements but by the blood of martyrs, in reference to al-Sisi's remarks, who said: "Sirte and Jufra are the red line." The UN recognizes the Libyan government headed by Fayeze al-Sarraj as the country's legitimate authority as Tripoli battles the militias of Haftar. The government launched Operation Peace Storm against Haftar in March to counter attacks on the capital, Tripoli, and recently liberated strategic locations, including Tarhuna, Haftar's final stronghold in western Libya. It has severely condemned military backing by Egypt, the UAE, France and Russia to Haftar's attacks on Tripoli, which began on April 4, 2019.

UK police declare Reading stabbings 'terrorist incident'



British police on Sunday declared a recent stabbing incident that killed three people in Reading a terrorist incident. "Counter Terrorism Policing can now confirm that the stabbing incident that happened in Reading last night (20/6), has now been declared a terrorist incident," Thames Valley Police said in a statement. Officers from Counter Terrorism Policing South East (CTPSE) have been working closely with Thames Valley Police's Major Crime Department throughout the night, it said. Deputy Assistant Commissioner Dean Haydon, Senior National Coordinator for the Counter Terrorism Policing network, has this morning "declared the incident a terrorist incident, and CTPSE will be taking over the investigation," according to the statement. Local police earlier said a murder investigation had been launched into the incident in which a knife-wielding man killed three people and seriously wounded three others. Police said a 25-year-old man "was detained at the scene and has been arrested on suspicion of murder." "We will be working closely with our partners over the coming days and weeks to support the Reading community during this time, as well as with CTPSE as they progress their investigation," said Chief Constable John Campbell of Thames Valley Police. "Police cordons continue to be in place and are likely to be for some time as CTPSE work further to investigate this incident and establish exactly what happened," he added. Police last night said they arrived at the scene at around 7.00 p.m. in Reading's Forbury Gardens shortly after a Black Lives Matter protest. "There is no indication that this incident is linked to the Black Lives Matter protest that took place in Reading today," police said.

'Ring of fire' solar eclipse thrills skywatchers in Africa, Asia

Skywatchers along a narrow band from west Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, India and the Far East witnessed Sunday a dramatic "ring of fire" solar eclipse. So-called annular eclipses occur when the Moon -- passing between Earth and the Sun -- is not quite close enough to our planet to completely obscure sunlight, leaving a thin ring of the solar disc visible. They happen every year or two, and can only be seen from a narrow pathway across the planet. Sunday's eclipse arrived on the northern hemisphere's longest day of the year -- the summer solstice -- when Earth's north pole is tilted most directly towards the Sun.



The "ring of fire" was first visible in northeastern Republic of Congo from 5:56 local time (04:56 GMT) just a few minutes after sunrise. This is the point of maximum duration, with the blackout lasting 1 minute and 22 seconds. Arcing eastward across Africa and Asia, it reached "maximum eclipse" -- with a perfect solar halo around the Moon -- over Uttarakhand, India near the Sino-Indian border at 12:10 local time (0640 GMT). More spectacular, but less long-lived: the exact alignment of the Earth, Moon and Sun was visible for only 38 seconds. Skywatchers along a narrow band from west Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, India and the Far East witnessed Sunday a dramatic "ring of fire" solar eclipse. So-called annular eclipses occur when the Moon -- passing between Earth and the Sun -- is not quite close enough to our planet to completely obscure sunlight, leaving a thin ring of the solar disc visible. They happen every year or two, and can only be seen from a narrow pathway across the planet. Sunday's eclipse arrived on the northern hemisphere's longest day of the year -- the summer solstice -- when Earth's north pole is tilted most directly towards the Sun. The "ring of fire" was first visible ... **P2**




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