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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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## Treat Afghans under global rules, Kabul call neighbors

Reacting to Iran's summoning of the Afghan envoy, second vice-president Sarwar Danish on Sunday asked neighboring countries to keep their relations with Afghanistan in accordance with international laws. The reaction from Danish comes after Iran summoned Afghan ambassador based in Tehran over protests against Iran in Afghanistan.

A large number of Afghans protested against mistreatment of Afghans in the neighboring country, chanting anti-Iran slogans.

The protests follow alleged throwing of some of Afghan nationals into a river and the killing of others in a car blaze. The second vice-president tweeted "neighboring countries should keep their relations with Afghanistan in accordance with global norms..." **P2**



## New polio cases in Afghanistan as coronavirus halts immunisation

Afghanistan has detected polio in areas previously declared free of the life-threatening disease after immunisation programmes were paused due to the coronavirus pandemic, officials said Sunday.

The polio virus has spread to three provinces that had not reported cases for up to five years, said Jan Rasekh, a spokesman for Afghanistan's polio eradication programme.

Balkh, Herat and Badakhshan have each declared a single case.

Although the number of new cases nationwide is lower so far this year -- with 14 compared to 26 in 2019 -- the location has sparked concern.

"We had worked hard for years and cornered polio to a limited geography," Rasekh said.

"The coronavirus has helped polio spread beyond its endemic region of south and southeast, and ..." **P3**

# Qatar to Host Intra-Afghan Peace Talks



President Ghani and Mutlaq bin Majed Al-Qahtani, currently the Special Envoy of the Foreign Minister of the State of Qatar for Counterterrorism and Mediation of Conflict Resolution, have agreed to hold intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, capital of Qatar, Aljazeera Arabic reported. Last week, Qahtani visited Kabul

and met with President Ghani and other Afghan leaders and discussed the Afghan peace process. During his visit, Qahtani also met with the Taliban delegation in Kabul.

Qahtani told Qatar TV that following the meeting the Taliban released Afghan government prisoners and "more prisoners will be released in

upcoming days." The Qatari envoy hopes that the release of prisoners will be completed this week so the intra-Afghan negotiations begins soon. A Presidential Palace official said that the government of Afghanistan has accepted that the preliminary intra-Afghan negotiations be held in Qatar, but "so far there has been no

agreement over holding the main intra-Afghan talks in Qatar."

In a virtual interview given for the Atlantic Council on Thursday, President Ghani laid out his vision for peace in Afghanistan and highlighted the importance of a ceasefire and a reduction in violence to kickstart the intra-Afghan talks.

However, Ghani rejected the possibility of the formation of an interim government in Afghanistan as a result of a potential peace deal with the Taliban.

Ghani said that he will not repeat the historic mistake committed by the Soviet-backed president Dr. Najibullah.

"Dr. Najibullah made the mistake of his life by announcing that he was going to resign...Please don't ask us to replay a film that we know where it ends." Ghani said.

"I think now we are on course and next week we should be able to inform the world of the next steps," he told Atlantic Council's Stephen Hadley as they discussed intra-Afghan negotiations.

"The United States and Afghanistan are completely aligned. ..." **P3**

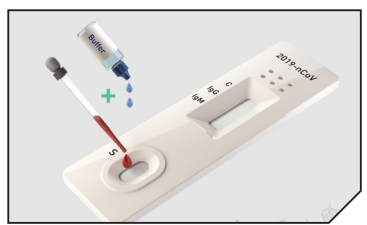
## Private Hospitals Charge \$100 Per COVID-19 Test

The Ministry of Public Health says there isn't any specific data on the number of private hospitals and health centers that will conduct COVID-19 testing where patients will be charged \$100 for each test.

The government involved the private sector in the COVID-19 response efforts on Saturday as it announced that it lacks the capacity to test and treat coronavirus patients..

One of the health centers that started COVID-19 tests on Sunday is the City Laboratories in Kabul.

"The \$100 cost that we announced for each test is the amount that ..." **P3**



## Pakistan to Allow Afghan Exports But With New Conditions

After three months Pakistan has opened its routes for Afghan goods which can be sold in Pakistan or be transferred on to India, but with some new restrictions, according to an official from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

Pakistani officials have said they will allow only 100 trucks a day, less than the past, and these goods will be transferred in Pakistani vehicles that first bring goods from Pakistan to Afghanistan. According to the ministry, at least 500 trucks entered Pakistan from Afghanistan on a daily basis before the lockdown.

"Pakistan has offered us two options," said Jawad Dabir, head of media at the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. "One of these options is that the vehicles that bring Pakistani goods to Afghanistan will transport Afghan exports (to Pakistan)."

Afghan entrepreneurs said that by offering such options, Pakistan



wants to reduce the Afghan exports to Pakistan and those through Pakistan to India.

"Pakistan should apply the same policy, as it was ahead of the lockdown in which there was no limitations on Afghan exports," said Sardar Mohammad, an Afghan trader. "Such limitations will create big problems for our exports."

A member of the Commerce and Industries Chamber, Mohammad Yunus Mohmand, said the conditions applied by Pakistan are in contravention of the international laws, and that the government should try to implement these laws. "We have been assured that Pakistan's routes will be fully opened," said Mohmand.

## Russia, Turkey...

in a position that would support the GNA and al-Sarraj, and could also be involved in the political settlement in Libya.

In Syria, Russia supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, while Turkey backs opposition fighters.

Although a Turkish-Russian brokered deal three months ago produced a ceasefire that halted fighting in northwest Syria's Idlib, air strikes have once again hit the region in the past week. Iranian paramilitary forces in Idlib were to be an issue discussed in Istanbul.

Turkey has already expressed concerns and expectations regarding six significant locations where these forces are stationed.

Military sources say that especially in the last three months, Iranian paramilitary forces have increased their fighter numbers near some Turkish observation posts in Idlib - that was seen as a potential risk by Turkey.

## Treat Afghans...

and show their good will towards Afghans."

"We ask our neighbors to avoid creating any critical conditions regarding Afghanistan," he added.

He said Afghans could resolve their problems themselves peacefully and with mutual respect.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) also in a statement in reaction to Iran's action said that Afghans had the right to conduct peaceful protests according to the country laws. A delegation from Afghanistan is expected to travel to Iran for resolving the ongoing tension between the neighbors.

By Taimur Shamil

# Afghanistan and regional diplomacy

The rapidly changing Afghan political landscape heralds opportunities for the Afghan leadership as well as for the regional stakeholders. In a recent meeting between General Bajwa and Afghan leadership in Kabul, both countries have reiterated for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue and intra-Afghan talks. Amidst these developments, the appointment of Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq as special representative for Afghanistan affairs is an important step which comes as a sign that Pakistan, in changing dynamics, would re-engage and re-develop its diplomatic relations with the various Afghan political factions and regional stakeholders.

The times have changed for Afghanistan. The new social dynamics and the political changes envisage the Taliban in the power sharing equation. Moreover, the commencement of the intra-Afghan talks doesn't seem to be unachievable. There seems to be a realisation among the Taliban and the Kabul government that if they want to build on the peace deal, they'll have to show flexibility, which would not be seen as weakness but as willingness to bring peace. The recent prisoners' swap hints at the urge from both sides that peace must be given a chance. In a realist interpretation of the Afghan war, whoever dominates the battlefield benefits at the negotiations table. Nothing is settled until everything is settled. Therefore, the violence continues. That's the Afghan way. Taliban continue to carry out attacks widely and in several Afghan provinces. The Kabul

government blames the Taliban for the brutal attacks in Kabul and the clashes continue. This security situation is a concern for all of Afghanistan's neighbours and major regional stakeholders. It is expected that the intra-Afghan talks may start next month but if the clashes continue the chances of talks become bleak. This can be detrimental for the regional peace. In this challenging scenario diplomacy aiming at intra-Afghan talks and regional cooperation can play an important role.

In a joint statement, Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran have reiterated their support for intra-Afghan peace talks noting that the intra-Afghan talks may start and address the internal political imbroglio. However, all the major stakeholders in Afghanistan also observed that the withdrawal of the US troops should be a "responsible" and "orderly" withdrawal. The underlying apprehensions in the joint statement are that the withdrawal of the troops should not leave a security vacuum in the country that may be filled by terrorist organisations who continue to pose a grave threat to the Afghans and their neighbouring countries.

Among the terrorist organisations who continue to undermine the Afghan security are ISIS, ETIM, TTP and several others. ISIS, which is one of the deadliest, has carried out attacks in Kabul in recent weeks targeting innocent civilians and minorities. While the Kabul administration and the Taliban continue to keep the possibilities of intra-Afghan talks alive, the role that these spoilers and their



supporters can play, must never be underestimated. It is also important to keep in mind that there are several influential groups and factions inside the Afghan government who do not approve of the US-Taliban deal or the future intra-Afghan talks involving the Taliban. It simply doesn't fit their schemes. Nonetheless, the Taliban and the Afghan government continue to release each other's prisoners, giving hope that once the prisoners are released the gesture can pave the way for intra-Afghan talks.

The spirit of the intra-Afghan talks lies in the diversity of the Afghan population. Today's Afghanistan is different from what it was 20 years back. The Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbek are among the many other ethnic groups who have evolved into influential political groups over the years. Any political settlement that does not take into account the diversity and interests of these groups would be short-lived. Therefore, it is imperative for regional stakeholders to invest in the diversity that holds the Afghan spirit.

Pakistan is among the major influential countries when it comes

to Afghanistan. It has supported peace talks and mechanisms that are Afghan-owned and Afghan-led. However, it also leads the regional efforts and concerns on the peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue. Pakistan is involved with Afghanistan on many levels. From hosting millions of refugees to mutual trade, Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbours that have a plethora of opportunities as well as challenges that need to be addressed at the earliest, for this, a pro-active diplomatic mechanism needs to be revamped by Pakistan.

Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq's appointment as special representative for Afghanistan is a timely decision that may bring fruitful results for Pakistan. It is hoped that it will improve Pakistan's diplomatic and political clout in Afghanistan and in the region. Ambassador Sadiq is a revered Pakistani diplomat who has an acute understanding of the Afghan matters and its evolving dynamics. It is the right time that Pakistan engages all the Afghan stakeholders and all the ethnicities across Afghanistan to tap the true potential of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

By Razuddin Barlas

## The chances of ending the war and rebuilding Afghanistan

War and violence are the two most destructive phenomena that have been taking people's lives and annihilating Afghanistan's beauties, material and spiritual wealth from many years ago. In the last decades, besides war and violence, political instability is also among the most important factors. On one hand, these factors have prevented Afghanistan from rebuilding its infrastructure and economic development, and on the other hand, have made it one of the most corrupt and poorest countries in the world. Not long back, this country was once one of the strongest political powers in central Asia 40 years ago. Now the question is that, isn't it the time now to end war and violence, and return the country's previous political authority and power?

The collapse of the Taliban government in 2001 was

seen as a golden chance in the transition from war and violence to peace and the re-establishment of new governance in Afghanistan. Over time, with the formation of the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA) in December 2001, and later the establishment of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, their aspirations were not fulfilled, because, by the time, Taliban, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups reopened footprint in some parts of the country and rekindled the half-extinguished flames of war, which spread throughout the country.

Despite millions of dollars were donated to Afghanistan after the Bonn Conference by the international community for the purpose of rebuilding the country and thousands of foreign troops flocked all over to fight and eliminate

the terrorism which was a serious threat to the region and the world, but still, the Afghan government leaders were not only able to use these aids properly but also due to their failed leadership trends, the country soon became embroiled in corruption and war with various other terrorist groups. Taliban were after taking revenge from foreign troops and the newly formed Afghan National Security Defence Forces (ANSDF). But this time, the Taliban insurgency were emerged more equipped and powerful than before, they were backed by some other countries in the region. Besides international troops, Afghan National Security Defence Force has been fighting against terrorist groups including the Taliban with the suffering of many casualties from 2001 to date. After years of a failed administration by... **P3**

## COVID-19 fast spreading in Paktia amid no facilities

Public health officials in southeastern Paktia province on Sunday said they lacked oxygen, medicines and hospital beds amid rapidly spreading coronavirus cases across the province. Public health director Dr. Walayat Khan Ahmadzai said he was concerned about the ongoing situation and asked people to avoid crowds in order to contain the virus spread.

"Nearly 80 to 90 percent of Paktia people are infected with coronavirus, all people are complaining about fever and pains," he said. He confirmed they lacked enough testing kits to test the increasing number of patients. However, he said patients could visit private clinics for treatment as well.

Ahmadzai said he had shared the problem several times with the Ministry of Public Health but they did not receive any help despite promises. Five people infected with coronavirus in Paktia province died yesterday (Sunday). Dr. Mohammad Asif Ahmadzai, who runs a private healthcare center in Gardez, the provincial capital, told Pajhwok Afghan News that he examined dozens of patients mostly infected with coronavirus on a daily basis.

He expressed concern over shortage of medicines in the market and asked the government to take serious action for supply of medicines and oxygen in coordination with the private sector. "Our zonal hospital does not accept coronavirus patients. I refer four to five patients struggling

with shortness of breath to the zonal hospital but they refuse to admit them and told them to visit coronavirus treatment center which is also jam-packed," he said.

Zaheer Khan Angar, a civil society activist in Gardez, criticized the public health ministry for failing to control the situation despite having resources and receiving a high amount of foreign aid. "People are also responsible for creating this critical situation, they do not observe quarantine, social distance and preventive measures, this situation should be controlled as the virus kills from 15 to 20 people on a daily basis," he said. Arif Afghan, a resident of Gardez city, also said that some patients in the province died due to shortage of oxygen, a problem he added still persists.

On the other hand, Paktia public health director Dr. Walayat Khan Ahmadzai was also concerned about the ongoing situation and asked people to avoid crowds.

"Nearly 80 to 90 percent of Paktia people are infected with coronavirus, all people are complaining about fever and pains, testing kits are not enough to test them all, but they can be treated based on their clinical signs by private clinics as well," he said.

Ahmadzai said he has shared the problem several times with the Ministry of Public Health but they did not receive any help despite promises.

Five people infected with coronavirus in Paktia province died yesterday (Sunday).

# Ghori Cement Factory 95% reactivated

The state-run National Development Company (NDC) on Sunday said the Ghori Cement Factory has been 95 percent reactivated and would soon meet 50 percent domestic need.

Jarullah Mansoori, head of NDC legal board and Riazuddin Sharifi, director of the company, talked about the development in the development sector during a press conference here.

Mansoori said they integrated capacity building of the development sector, acceleration of economic development and cohesion of state-run companies affairs for better coherence of national programs and facilitation of development in the country.

He said the Ghori Cement Factory encountered some problems in the

contract implementation area when run by the private sector in 2017.

The factory contract was canceled with the private sector in August 2015 and its management was handed over to the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum.

However, the operation of the factory was later handed over to the National Development Department of the Presidential Palace which helped boost quality of the cement and increased the amount of cement production from 120 tons to 800 tons a day, Mansoori added.

Riazuddin Sharifi, head of Ghori Cement Factory, said that the factory had been 95 percent reactivated and would fully function in near future.

Mansoori, on the other hand, said that the factory was integrated



into the NDC framework following a presidential order and Abdul Rahman Attash was appointed as executive director of the factory.

"NDC now has the plan to keep both production systems in the factory continually operative, increase the capacity of the factory to produce at least 50 percent needs of domestic market in the near future."

He said a third production plant would be set up in the factory to meet 85 percent of domestic demand.

He said the NDC planned in long-term to upgrade all production technology in Ghori Cement Factory and turn the country from an importer to an exporter of cement in the next five years.

### Exchange Rates

|       |        |       |
|-------|--------|-------|
| 77.45 | \$     | 77.55 |
| 84.9  | €      | 85    |
| 93.9  | £      | 94    |
| 469   | Rp.    | 470   |
| 20.1  | د.ا.هـ | 20.2  |
| 970   | ₹      | 980   |

### Contact Numbers

Kabul Police - 119

Kabul Ambulance - 112

Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital

0202301360

Ata Turk Hospital

0202500312

Corona call center - 166

### Private Hospitals...

we spend on each test," Rezwanullah Ahmadzai, the head of the center, said.

Another testing center has been established at Blossom Hospital where officials said other hospitals said they will send patients for tests.

The officials of the Blossom Hospital said that they have PCR machines for COVID-19 tests, but TOLONews reporter Gulabuddin Ghubar says he was not given access to see these devices.

"We are conducting PCR and RNA tests and meanwhile we can diagnose (COVID-19) patients by CT scan and blood tests," said Mansour Mullahkhalil, head of Blossom Hospital.

Kabul residents said that the new decision by the Ministry of Public Health provides the ground for an illegal business.

"it is oppressive for the people, the people who cannot afford the money for their daily food," said Mohammad Nasir, a Kabul resident.

"This is a trade for hospitals," said Latif Nazari, a Kabul resident.

According to the Ministry of Public Health, each test for COVID-19 costs \$50.

"The Ministry of Public Health predicts that it will take two weeks for hospitals to be ready (for the tests)," said Akmal Samsor, spokesman for the ministry.

This comes as positive cases of coronavirus approaches 25,000 while the deaths are close to 500.

### Qatar to Host...

getting to peace is my absolute priority," said Ghani. Previously, sources said that the intra-Afghan talks will be convened in Doha once the release of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners has been concluded.

Presidential spokesman Sediq Sediqqi in a tweet said "the Afghan government has only agreed for a first meeting to take place in Doha" and that "there has not been any agreement yet on the venue of the direct talks."

### The chances of...

Hamid Karzai, he handed over an immersed government in corruption and war to Mohammad Ashraf Gani, who became the president of Afghanistan after signing a political agreement in 2014 forming a National Unity Government (NUG) with Abdullah Abdullah. At that time, it was hoped that Ashraf Ghani might have brought the key to peace, reconstruction and economic development and he can be a cure for the country's pain, which unfortunately never happened during the last five years.

After the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), which led by Ghani and Abdullah, the people came to this conclusion that instead of solving the people's problems, they (the two leaders) are one of the biggest problems themselves. Even their conflicts created a political crisis in the country.

Despite all the above-mentioned problems in the Afghan administration, some efforts were made during the NUG times to end the war and enter into peace deals with different terrorist groups. For instance, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of an anti-government militant group who fought against the Afghan National Security Defence Forces for many years,

was the first who signed a peace agreement with the government and his fighters and militants put down the guns and joined the peace process.

The United States which is one of the prime supporters of the Afghan government agreed to initiate face-to-face peace negotiations with the Taliban for the first time. The peace talks between the Taliban leaders and the U.S special envoy for the Afghan peace process, Zalmay Khalilzad run over a year which had many ups and downs and eventually concluded with the signing of a peace deal between the U.S and the Taliban in late February 2020.

The agreement which was signed between the two parties focused on the following four points:

1. Taliban agreed that the Afghanistan territory will not be used against U.S. security and its allies.
2. The international troops will pull in 14 months
3. An Intra-Afghan talk to begin between Afghan leaders and the Taliban.
4. The ceasefire, to be discussed during the intra-Afghan talks.

This historic peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban was signed at a time when the political tensions between Ghani and Abdullah

were at its peak. Political tensions boosted when the Afghan Independent Election Commission announced Ashraf Ghani as the winner but Abdullah did not accept the results and claimed victory.

After months of political controversy, Afghan political leaders mediated between the two sides for weeks and eventually, Ghani and Abdullah signed a power-sharing deal based on which Abdullah will lead the reconciliation process and his running mates will be considered in the cabinet.

The political tensions ended at a very good point and now it is time that the Afghan government gets ready for the Intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban. Both the Taliban and the Afghan government have shown eagerness in the commencement of the talks by initiating the prisoners' release process. The Afghan government has so far released 3,000 Taliban detainees and the Taliban has freed over 500 Afghan armies who were at their custody.

The pro-Afghan countries' efforts for peace have given this hope to the Afghans that they will reach to peace and end their long war. People also expect that the Afghan government must use this unique chance to end violence and rebuild the country.

### New polio...

now threatens people across the country," he added.

The UN children's agency UNICEF said last month that polio eradication drives had been suspended in dozens of countries, while measles vaccination campaigns were also put on hold in 27 nations. There are only two nations remaining where the wild version of the polio virus continues to spread -- Pakistan and Afghanistan -- but a strain that has mutated from the vaccine itself has caused outbreaks in Africa. Up to 10 nationwide polio

immunisation drives are usually completed in Afghanistan every year.

But only two missions were carried out before the outbreak of coronavirus, Rasekh said, adding that he hopes they can resume in July.

The Taliban continues to ban authorities from conducting house-to-house campaigns -- the most effective way to fight the virus -- in areas it controls, he added.

Polio immunisation is compulsory in Afghanistan as government policy, but distrust of vaccines is rife. But the Taliban and religious

leaders often tell communities that vaccines are a Western conspiracy aimed at sterilising Muslim children, and believe immunisation drives are used for spying on militant activities. Afghan authorities, meanwhile, are grappling with surging cases of coronavirus, as authorities struggle to impose a nationwide lockdown to curb its spread.

Afghanistan has so far declared more than 24,500 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 471 deaths.

Experts say the actual number of cases is likely higher given limited testing capacity.

## Heart of Asia

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# Vice premier urges decisive measures as Beijing cluster grows

Chinese Vice Premier Sun Chunlan called for resolute and decisive measures in Beijing to avoid further spread of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Sun, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks while attending a meeting held by the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council on Sunday.

Containing the epidemic at the source is essential, Sun said, urging comprehensive moves to trace the origin of the virus.

Meanwhile, she supported Beijing's efforts to increase its nucleic acid testing capacity, so as to cover all key areas and communities.

Without having full knowledge of the mutation of the virus, Sun underlined the arduous tasks for regular epidemic prevention and control, demanding continuous measures to guard

against imported cases and prevent a resurgence of the outbreak at home.

Eight new cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Beijing from midnight Saturday to 7 a.m. on Sunday, according to officials at a press conference.

Seven of the new cases were confirmed to be related to Xinfadi, a large wholesale market of fruits, vegetables and meat, while one case is currently under epidemiological investigation, said Pang Xinghuo, deputy director of the Beijing Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Chinese capital on Friday reported six new confirmed cases. On Saturday, the figure climbed to 36, along with one new asymptomatic case. Officials said the 36 confirmed cases were all related to Xinfadi market.



### A look at the world

#### Russia, Turkey put off talks expected to discuss Libya and Syria

Russia and Turkey have postponed ministerial-level talks that were expected to focus on Libya and Syria, where the two countries support opposing sides in long-standing conflicts.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov decided to put off the talks during a phone call on Sunday, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said.

"The two countries' deputy ministers will continue contacts and talks in the period ahead. Minister-level talks will be held at a later date," the ministry said in a statement. Lavrov and Russian Defence Minister



Sergei Shoigu were to visit Istanbul for the discussions.

This week, the United Nations said warring sides had begun new ceasefire talks in Libya, where Ankara supports the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), whose forces have in recent weeks repelled an assault on Tripoli by the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA).

Moscow, along with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, backs the LNA in the long-running Libyan conflict.

Turkey has always said its political and military support will continue for the GNA, the only government it recognises, which is led by Fayeze al-Sarraj.

Diplomatic sources told Al Jazeera that the disagreement was on the appointment of Aguila Saleh as the new leader of a political settlement in Libya as proposed by Russia. While Turkey is understood to be in agreement with Saleh's appointment, it wants him to remain a supportive figure to Sarraj and not his replacement.

In the talks, the Russians were expected to offer to replace the LNA's commander, Khalifa Haftar, with Aguila Saleh, the representative of the Tobruk House of Representatives, as he is seen as ... **P2**

#### Iranian FM leaves for Turkey for talks on bilateral ties, int'l issues



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Sunday left for Turkey's Istanbul for talks on bilateral relations and international issues, official IRNA news agency reported. A high-ranking delegation accompanies Zarif during his one-day trip to the Turkish largest city, IRNA said.

Zarif is expected to meet his Turkish counterpart to discuss the current relations amid the anti-coronavirus efforts as well as major regional and international issues.

Iran and Turkey are considering reopening borders and resuming the flights which have been suspended since March over the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zarif's visit to Turkey and Russia would be his second diplomatic trip after a recent slowdown in the COVID-19 epidemic.

Zarif visited Syria last month and discussed cooperation amid the impacts of the coronavirus and mounting western sanction pressure on Syria.

Iran's Foreign Ministry had earlier announced that Zarif also plans to visit Moscow on Monday.

Following his trip to Syria in April, this is Zarif's second foreign visit after the first wave of coronavirus.

Iran, Russia and Turkey, as guarantors of the Astana Process, are working to reinforce the Syrian-Syrian dialogue and let Syrians decide their future by establishing de-escalation zones, forming a constitutional committee, and following up on the dialogue process and national reconciliation.

#### Libya urges UNSC to refer Tarhuna mass graves to ICC

Libya's foreign minister on Sunday urged the UN Security Council to refer mass graves discovered in the city of Tarhuna to the International Criminal Court.

According to a written statement published by the Foreign Ministry on its Facebook account, Mohamed Siala sent a letter to the UN Security Council.

He said that they had found 11 mass graves, in which some people, including women and children, were buried alive, in Tarhuna, a city liberated from Haftar's militias on June 5.



Siala, in his letter, asked the Hague-based court to initiate the necessary steps to probe the crimes committed by Haftar's militias.

"The UN Security Council this time must adopt a determined stance against violations which were committed by Haftar's militias and could be counted as crimes against humanity," he said.

According to UN figures, eight mass graves have been found in Libya recently, mostly in Tarhuna.

The Libyan army has recently inflicted heavy blows to the renegade commander and liberated Tripoli and Tarhuna from his militants.

The internationally recognized Libyan government has been under attack by Haftar's forces since April 2019, with more than 1,000 killed in the violence.

The government launched Operation Peace Storm in March to counter attacks on the capital and recently regained strategic locations, including Al-Watiya airbase.

Libya's government was founded in 2015 under a UN-led agreement, but efforts for a long-term political settlement failed due to the military offensive by Haftar's forces.



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