

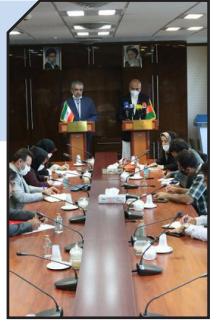


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Heart of Asia

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**Alipour's men
 kidnap, beat road
 workers in Wardak**

Dozens workers of a road construction firm were kidnapped and then beaten by armed men belonging to Alipour in central Maidan Wardak province, a public representative said on Tuesday. Abdul Ghani Alipour has been accused of spearheading an illegal armed militia. He was detained by security forces last year but released soon by second vice president Sarwar Danish. Gulalai Akbari, a lawmaker from northeastern Badakhshan province in the Meshrano Jirga, said Badakhshan residents had no discrimination against any ethnic group in Afghanistan and worked in each part of the country. Without elaborating, she said a number of workers from Badakhshan were arrested and beaten in Behsood district of Maidan Wardak and some of the injured were shifted capital Kabul for treatment." ... **P3**



**Senate demands
 probe into ventilators'
 smuggling**

The Meshrano Jirga or Senate on Tuesday demanded a serious investigation into the "smuggling of 32 ventilators to Pakistan." The lawmakers said those who involved in the smuggling should be punished severely. According to a Pajhwok Afghan News report, 32 ventilators donated to Afghanistan have been smuggled to Pakistan, while coronavirus patients are dying due to lack of oxygen in hospitals. The Pajhwok report went viral on social media and yesterday's Meshrano Jirga session discussed it as well. Abdul Wahaf Erfan, a member of the Senate, told yesterday's session said all documents should be collected and those involved in the smuggling should be identified and punished. He said a number people had died in the country due to lack of ventilators and that those involved in the smuggling were the killers of Afghans who died of the virus due to lack of oxygen. Mohammad Alem Izadyar, first deputy chairman, said the smuggling ... **P3**

Attacking civilians to harm peace bid, says Ghani



President Ashraf Ghani on Tuesday said attacks on civilians were against all Islamic principles and could harm the peace process. The president said attacking civilians was a crime against humanity and tasked the authorities concerned with investigating the attack on Attorney General Office (AGO) officials in Kabul. On Monday, five AGO prosecutors were killed by unidentified gunmen in Deh Sabz district of Kabul province. The slain AGO personnel worked in the Judicial and Detention Centre of Bagram Jail in central Parwan

province. AGO Spokesperson Jamshid Rasouli told Pajhwok Afghan News the Monday attack was staged by terrorists in Deh Sabz district at around 8:00am. A statement from the Presidential Palace Media's office received by Pajhwok said President Ghani strongly condemned the attack. It quoted the president as saying, "Attacks on civilians and government officials are inhuman act and against all Islamic principles. The country's enemy want the peace process to

fail." The statement said, "Taliban should stop violence so the people of this country see an end to the ongoing conflict and experience a lasting peace." It added President Ghani has tasked authorities concerned to investigate the attack on the AGO employees and also shared his sympathies with the victims' families. Sediq Seidiq, spokesman for the Presidential Palace, told a press conference here that the rise in Taliban was undermining public confidence

in the group's commitment to the peace process. He strongly condemned the latest attacks, which he said put the lives of Afghans at risk. He said Taliban attacks within the past one week showed they had a weak commitment toward the demand of Afghans and government of Afghanistan of an end to the ongoing conflict in the country. He said last week's attack was bloodiest in the past 19 years in the country. At least 42 civilians lost their lives and another 105 were wounded in Taliban attacks last week, the National Security Council (NSC) said on last Sunday. In a statement, the NSC said the Taliban continued to inflict casualties on civilians despite the promise of reduction in violence. The statement claimed most of civilian casualties resulted from roadside bomb blasts, face-to-face fighting, targeting civilians by insurgents who also used civilians as human shield. The NSC said targeting civilians was un-Islamic. Sediqi said the Afghan government had taken a number of steps for the peace process but the Taliban had a weak resolve in this regard.

**\$36.7M Spent by the
 Health Ministry for
 Virus Response**

Data from the Ministry of Public Health shows that so far \$36.7 million has been spent for the coronavirus response out of a total of \$155.7 million allocated by the government for this purpose. The data shows that \$38 million has been spent by foreign organizations for coronavirus response in the country. The majority of this amount has been used for the purchase of health equipment and the construction and upkeep of hospitals, according to the ministry. "Another \$30.8 million will be spent through our donors on fighting the coronavirus," said Hafizullah Saadat, head of the finance department of the Ministry of Public Health. ... **P3**



Uzbekistan, Pakistan back early Afghan peace talks

Top diplomats from Uzbekistan and Pakistan have underlined the need for an early start to intra-Afghan peace negotiations, a news report said on Tuesday. Efforts by Uzbekistan and Pakistan to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan also came up for discussion at a virtual meeting between the special envoys for Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's National News Agency reported Ismatulla Irgashev held a videoconference with his Pakistani counterpart Mohammad Sadiq Khan on Monday. Irgashev greeted Sadiq Khan, who has also served as Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan, on his appointment and wished him success in his new mission. The Pakistani side emphasized the role of Uzbekistan in a political settlement to the conflict in



Afghanistan, the report added. Cooperation between Uzbekistan and Pakistan on reviving Afghanistan's economy and implementation of infrastructure projects in the country was also discussed. "There are two main hurdles to the intra-Afghan talks - the release of Taliban prisoners and composition of the government delegation," said Asadullah Wahidi, a political

analyst. He said US special envoy for reconciliation in Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad recently made efforts to convince the Afghan government about changes in the negotiating team and also asked the Taliban to begin talks with Afghan politicians. He said the high council on national reconciliation was yet to be completed. Deputies of the ... **P2**

Hunter's millions...

corruption and vote-buying schemes, and so on. The recordings have not been authenticated and Derkach himself was careful to say the voices "sound like" Poroshenko and Biden. He has turned the materials over to the prosecutor-general's office, which is reportedly looking into charges of treason and abuse of power against the former president. Poroshenko's corruption and Hunter Biden's job have had a major impact on US politics. Last year, Democrats accused President Donald Trump of soliciting foreign interference in the 2020 election by bringing up Burisma on a phone call with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky and threatening to withhold US military aid to Kiev. The House of Representatives actually impeached Trump on those charges, though he was acquitted in the Senate. One of the witnesses in the process was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs George Kent. On Monday, Derkach named Kent as the liaison between Biden and Poroshenko, used to keep them informed of any developments regarding Burisma. Poroshenko responded to the revelations by claiming they were a "fabrication" by Russia as "part of a large-scale hybrid war" intended to "undermine the Ukrainian-American strategic partnership that underlies the international coalition in support for Ukraine." He said the same exact thing about last month's revelations, though on that occasion he also accused someone from Zelensky's office of handing over "raw materials" to investigative journalists who then gave the recordings to Derkach.

By Stefanie Glinski

'Divorce isn't an option': Afghan women find hope in saffron scheme

Anita Zadid would divorce her husband if she could. Eight years into the marriage, her husband turned to opium and crystal meth because he couldn't find work. He's now addicted.

As well as taking care of her three children, Zadid, who was married at 14, says she also has to support her spouse. "Divorcing him is not an option in rural Afghanistan, but I mentally left my marriage many years ago," the 30-year-old tells the Guardian. Sadly, she's not the only woman to do so.

In Zadid's village in Herat province's Pashtun Zarghun district, an area disputed by the Afghan government and the Taliban, an increasing number of men are struggling with addiction, leaving their wives to both take care of the family and provide an income. Many men end up stealing their spouse's hard-earned salaries to buy drugs.

The road from Herat's provincial capital to Pashtun Zarghun is desolate and empty of checkpoints. Zadid's village is a transitional community with a lone police car on one side, and the Taliban on the other. In the village centre, both sides mingle, Zadid explains, with many households having family members in the Taliban and on the government's side.

"Dozens of my neighbours are facing the same struggle when it comes to addicted husbands. Many of them gather in the village's centre, where they often smoke opium together. The Taliban doesn't like it. They tell them off; they tell them to go home," she explains.

Between the war and a dwindling economy, employment opportunities have been limited, with many men seeking work just over the border in Iran, which is often where they begin taking opium or crystal meth.

Drug use is rampant in Afghanistan. Figures from the country's national drug use survey in 2015, found that between 2.9 million and 3.6 million people could be addicted – roughly one in 10 in the nation of 37 million. A gram of opium – the soft brown substance extracted from poppies – is sold for about 80 Afghani (\$1), a low price as about 90% of the world's opium is still cultivated in the war-torn country.

The UN's Office of Drugs and Crime says that approximately 375 tonnes of heroin enter the global market annually from Afghanistan.

In Zadid's village – a cluster of mud houses surrounded by green fields and fruit trees – wives of addicts have



now started their own saffron production businesses with the help of a local initiative, hoping to earn enough to buy food and send their children to school. Although divorce is not illegal, many women in the conservative village say it is not possible. Instead, women have sought work opportunities and talk to each other about their difficulties.

"I've been thinking about leaving him, but according to the law, this would mean that the children would remain with him," Zadid says, adding that if she were to separate, she'd never think of marrying again. "He leaves the house early in the mornings and returns late at night. When he's home, he's kind to the children, but we barely speak. We have no relationship."

Zadid has grown saffron in her garden for the past year, having received both training and saffron bulbs to plant. While the first year yields just up to 150 grams of the expensive spice on her 2,000-square-metre plot, the harvest should increase over the years, with a maximum production of 2,500 grams for her field, says Dr Nazir Ahmad Ghafoori, who runs the Rehabilitation Association and Agriculture Development for Afghanistan, the local group that helped the women set up their businesses.

The crops should sell at 30 Afghani (\$0.40) per gram. The majority of the saffron will be exported to the Middle East, the Gulf and even Europe. "Many wives in rural communities are made to stay

at home, which means they are unable to earn an income. We've brought the jobs to their houses, which is especially important in communities like Anita's," Ghafoori says.

"If I want to leave our compound, I still have to ask my husband," Zadid says. "He would get angry otherwise. But what he doesn't know is how much I'm making. He spends up to 300 Afghani (\$4) on drugs a day, often borrowing money. If he knew I had a small amount of savings, this could risk my children's education." In addition to growing saffron, Zadid is a tailor and wheat farmer.

Bibi Gul, a 46-year-old mother of four, faces a similar dilemma. "Because of my husband's addiction, I even had to send my children to work," she says, sorting through a mountain of fresh red saffron, the strong smell filling the room.

The new business, she says, has brought a welcome distraction – and an additional income. "I'm managing our household alone, even though my drug-using husband still makes family decisions if he wants to," says Gul. "I've learned to deal with it though."

"In Afghanistan, men are expected to work for their families, but that's not always what happens. In my case, I have to be strong for my children, which means dealing with my husband and making sure my children will be educated. It's an inner rebellion, but I have no choice but to fight it."

By Bahar mehr

Slowly but Surely, the Afghan Police Force is Developing

For the first time in the last two decades, Afghanistan's National Police (ANP) is going through a comprehensive and systemic reform process. This mission is complicated and challenging. The synergy of national and international efforts to build, improve, and sustain civic and modern policing in the country intersects with the continued cycles of violence and conflict, exhausting resources at strategic and tactical levels. A sterile modus operandi has long impeded organizational and structural reforms of the ANP.

Fortunately, on General Massoud Andarabi's watch, the current leadership of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) is, on many levels, engaged in rethinking the ANP's status with Afghanistan's National Security and Defense Forces – the function, strategic direction and organizational culture of the police.

At the strategy level, the MoI is focused on pivoting the ANP toward its constitutional and professional mandate which is to protect lives and property, enforce law and order, as well as respond to calls for police services across cities and districts.

Building professional capacity for the police to deliver a legal and constitutional mandate has required strategic thinking, planning, and implementation. To that end, the MoI developed a reform strategy that included sequencing structural changes, tackling corruption, countering narcotics, improving police behavior, and enhancing strategic communications with citizens and stakeholders.

Addressing the ANP foundational problems

A comprehensive organizational review of the police was conducted in 2019. The review helped us to identify longstanding organizational disarray, unresponsive bureaucratic stoppages, organizational overlaps, legal and procedural ambiguities, and a lack of human resources to carry out the mission of policing in our communities across the country. The findings of the review guided us to devise policies to address underlying sources of problematic procurement, controversial recruitment including the issue of ghost soldiers, as well as a lack of reliable inventory systems for logistics and ammunition.

Implementing the reform policies has significantly improved the procurement, recruitment and service deliveries to our soldiers. More work needs to be done, of course. We are not satisfied with the overall state of affairs. It is far from being perfect. For the first time, however, our soldiers are better served, regularly paid, and are more respected and heard than any time in the last 19 years. Our wounded soldiers and the families of martyred police forces are not abandoned anymore. Making sure that they are treated responsibly is our highest moral and professional duty.

Given the numerous problems that we face, including a war that drags all forces in and brutally absorbs most of the police institutional energy and resources, the ANP, after all, is becoming functional, although slowly. The ongoing reforms will put in place systems and infrastructure that will serve as the foundation of Afghanistan's police once violence is reduced and the police can return to its civic law enforcement mission. Therefore, at the core of our efforts at the MoI stands the need to ... **P3**

Uzbekistan, ...

council have not been appointed so far, he said, adding the Afghan government was waiting for the outcome of elections in the US.

"If Donald Trump loses, the new government in Washington may retreat from the Doha agreement," Wahidi said.

Another political analyst, Shafique Hamdard said there were many hurdles to the intra-Afghan talks including hidden and obvious.

He said the release of 5000 Taliban prisoners was part of the deal, but it did not happen.

He said the government failed to introduce an inclusive negotiating team and the Taliban did not reduce violence after their accord with the US.

He believed one of the hidden reasons was elections in the US and difference of opinion among neighboring countries about the peace process.

Afghan journalist in London Samiullah Yousafzai, who travelled to Qatar many times, said the main reason behind the stalemate was not releasing the Taliban prisoners in the given

time.

He said the government had made the reduction in violence as an excuse not to release all the rebel prisoners. He said the Taliban wanted their prisoners to be released at once.

Meanwhile, Taliban Doha office spokesman Sohail Shaheen said there was no problem from their side to commence intra-Afghan talks.

He said they were ready for intra-Afghan talks in a week if all their prisoners were released.

"Every hurdle comes from the government side and our stance remains the same on the talks," Shaheen said.

However, the government says the Taliban instead of reducing violence they intensified attacks on government forces.

Sadiq Sidiqi, the president's spokesman, said the government had taken measures to facilitate the intra-Afghan talks and released 3600 Taliban prisoners while the rebels did not free government prisoners as per the pledge.

He asked the Taliban to reduce violence in order to pay the ground for intra-Afghan talks as soon as possible.

Iran says Afghan bank likely to set up branch in Chabahar FTZ

An Afghan bank may open a branch in Iran's Chabahar Free Trade Zone (FTZ) to facilitate transactions with the businesses to and from Afghanistan, Eghtesad Online news website reported on Tuesday.

"Afghanistan is exempt from (U.S.) sanctions ... (therefore) Afghan banks are allowed to operate in Chabahar," Iran's Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian said on Monday in meeting with visiting Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar in the capital Tehran.

"Opening bank branches in Chabahar can pave the way for closer ties between

the two neighbors," Ardakanian was quoted as saying.

The Iranian minister did not specify the name of the bank.

According to the report, three banks from Afghanistan have already applied for permits to open branches in Chabahar FTZ, and Ghazanfar Bank, one of the three, is reportedly taking the final steps to open a branch in the strategic port.

Washington has exempted Iran's southeastern port of Chabahar from anti-Iran sanctions to leave the route open for Afghanistan's trade with other countries.



\$36.7M Spent...

The number of positive cases of the coronavirus is nearing 30,000, according to the data provided by the Ministry of Public Health. There is criticism about the way the fund has been spent so far.

On Tuesday, the Attorney General's Office in a statement said an employee of the Ministry of Public Health was arrested on charges of taking a bribe of \$80,000.

"We have a few hospitals under construction (in Herat) and their work is yet to be completed," said Jahantab Tahiri, member of Herat provincial council.

A monitoring organization in Kabul has found that there has been lack of transparency in the distribution of the coronavirus response fund, due to limitations on monitoring by the ministry's leadership.

"The Ministry of Public Health has faced problems within its management and is faced with problems at its leadership level," said Nasir Taimuri, a researcher at Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

The only government COVID-19 treatment center in Kabul is the Afghan-Japan Hospital, other government health facilities are just isolation centers.

Two residents of Khost province who visited the provincial COVID-19 center in Khost painted a bleak picture of the healthcare situation.

"There is one hospital in Khost and it has neither oxygen nor other facilities. We spent 5,000 afghanis for ambulance fare and when we came there, they don't have medicine or doctors -- all of them are nurses," said Esmatullah, a Khost resident.

"Where does this money go and how is it spent and why do the people not see the results?" asked Rashid, a Kabul resident.

The ministry also rejected the recent Pajhwok news report about the smuggling of ventilators to Pakistan, and said that it has 225 active ventilators in government hospitals. The ministry said that at least 600 ventilators have been purchased in Germany and will be brought to the country in the near future.

UN chief Antonio...

The Security Council meeting, to be held by video conference, will be the last major international meeting on the issue before the July 1 deadline.

"Any decision on sovereignty will be made only by the Israeli government," Israel's UN envoy Danny Danon said in a statement on Tuesday.

Diplomats expect a vast majority of UN members to again oppose the Israeli plans on Wednesday (today).

Slowly but...

increase strategic thinking and leadership capacity to deal not just with the routine of policing tasks, but to attune the ANP into

embarking on a program of large scale and uninterrupted reforms.

For instance, the MoI is now equipped with the technological tools and management systems, including a geographic information system (GIS), that enables us to identify, support, and connect to all of our outposts across Afghanistan.

The inclusion of technology into ANP counterterrorism operations has considerably improved our operational capacity and reduced the percentage of police casualties over the last 12 months.

Moreover, in the process of reforming the ANP's administrative structure, we have directed resources to create a specialized set-up to investigate and counter corruption within the ANP.

Our newly established internal security division has so far investigated more than 1,000 corruption cases of police soldiers and officers. We believe

that transparency will increase the trust of the people and donors in the police.

We have also made significant progress in increasing financial savings and controlling the reasonable use of ammunition. In the last fiscal year, the MoI has saved more than 2.7 billion Afs in logistics, 3 billion Afs in salary payments and 700 million Afs in other administrative costs.

Fortunately, the amount of ANP logistic deliveries has increased by 650 tons in the last years. That includes the delivery of food, ammunition, policing equipment, clothing, and other required materials.

On a strategic level, the MoI is engaged in strategic communication with police stakeholders and citizens. The coordination and synergy between countering crime units and law enforcement agencies vis-à-vis citizens is a new and enriching experience. ANP's response to people's complaints has hugely improved. We are enhancing the operational capacity of hotlines-- 119

and 100 Kabul-focused—which provide 24/7 access, among other functioning mechanisms, for the public to respond to the police.

There are other means of communication with the public, such as WhatsApp chat groups with community representatives, ulemas, professionals, business owners, and members of civil societies and media. The level of our engagement with the media has been unprecedented in the last two years.

The mission of reforming the MoI has yet to be completed. The MoI requires uninterrupted reforms, smart investment, and visionary leadership. The foundation is laid out but it needs further work to make the MoI a transformed institution.

Bahar Mehr is Strategic Communication Advisor to the Ministry of Interior Affairs and Afghanistan-Pakistan region security analyst. He has translated few books from English to Farsi/Dari and he is a columnist to leading Afghan daily newspapers.

Senate demands...

of ventilators should be dealt with in accordance with the law. Other members of the upper house held similar views and wanted serious probe.

Fazal Hadi Muslimyar, senator chairman, said Pajhwok Afghan News was a reliable agency and it certainly published the

report based on document and evidences. He asked the National Directorate of Security (NDS) to probe the issue along with Pajhwok. Muslimyar also urged the President to seriously pursue the ventilators smuggling issue. Muslimyar stressed the need for probing the issue transparently

Urgent action...

and other physical distancing precautions are in place. In recent years, rising levels of prosperity produced significant health, education and other advances for children in South Asia. Improvements in infant and maternal mortality were matched by declines in the number of out-of-school children and in child marriages.

But the economic turmoil triggered by COVID-19 is hitting families across the region hard. Large-scale job losses and wage cuts have coincided with the loss of remittances from

overseas workers and from tourism. UNICEF projections show that over the coming six months as many as 120 million more children could be pushed into poverty and food insecurity, joining some 240 million children already classified as poor.

In order to mitigate the impact on poorer families, the report says that governments should immediately direct more resources towards social protection schemes, including emergency universal child benefits and school feeding programs.

and impartially and those involved should be identified and punished. Dr. Shafiqullah Shaheem, deputy financial and administrative minister of public health, in a press conference rejected the smuggling of ventilators and said the ministry would probe the issue.

Alipour's men...

Alipour's men. She told Pajhwok Afghan News that some families of the victims contacted her and said the workers were arrested and beaten by

Kamil Bek Hussaini, another representative from the same province, also confirmed the incident and urged the government to investigate the issue, at the earliest possible.

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77.15	\$	77.25
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Urgent action needed for 600 mln South Asian children threatened by COVID-19: UNICEF

The COVID-19 pandemic is unravelling decades of health, education and other advances for children across South Asia, and governments must take urgent action to prevent millions of families from slipping back into poverty, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a new report released Tuesday.

With the pandemic expanding rapidly across a region that contains a quarter of the world's population, the report "Lives Upended" describes the disastrous immediate and longer-term consequences that the virus and the measures to curb it have had on 600 million children and the services they depend on.

"The side-effects of the pandemic across South Asia, including the lockdown and other measures, have been damaging for children in numerous ways," said Jean Gough, UNICEF regional director for South Asia. "But the longer-term impact of the economic crisis on children will be on a different scale entirely. Without urgent action

now, COVID-19 could destroy the hopes and futures of an entire generation."

According to the report, immunization, nutrition and other vital health services have been severely disrupted, potentially threatening the lives of up to 459,000 children and mothers over the next six months.

Food insecurity is growing. A UNICEF survey in Sri Lanka showed that 30 percent of families have reduced their food consumption. In Bangladesh, some of the poorest families are unable to afford three meals a day.

With schools closed, more than 430 million children have had to rely on remote learning which have only partially filled the gap; many households - especially in rural areas - have no electricity, let alone internet access. There are concerns that some disadvantaged students may join the nearly 32 million children who were already out of school before COVID-19 struck. Phone helplines are reporting a surge ... **P3**



A look at the world

Hunter's millions: Ukrainian MP reveals new 'Biden-Poroshenko' tapes, claims VP's son was paid 'protection money' by Burisma

More tapes of what appear to be Joe Biden's phone calls with the former president of Ukraine have surfaced, along with documents showing how much his son Hunter was paid by Burisma, a gas company desperate to avoid prosecution.

Ledgers show payments of \$3.4 million from Burisma to Rosemont Seneca Bohai, the company co-founded by Hunter Biden, for "consulting services," former prosecutor Konstantin Kulyk and Ukrainian MP Andrii Derkach revealed on Monday in Kiev.



Kulyk added that these services clearly amounted to "political protection of Burisma" and its owner Mykola Zlochevsky by US vice president at the time, Joe Biden.

Kulyk also told reporters that his office had evidence of Burisma's lawyers offering \$50 million to the government to make the case against the company and its founder go away - and not \$6 million as was reported earlier. The reason Burisma's activities stood out from the white noise of general corruption in Ukraine following the US-backed coup in 2014 is that Zlochevsky sought to shield himself from scrutiny by hiring Hunter Biden as a board member, for a reported salary of \$50,000 a month. Biden had no qualifications for the job, other than father being the top US official in charge of Ukraine.

Last month, Derkach released a batch of audio recordings of what sounded like Biden and then-President Petro Poroshenko of Ukraine, discussing everything from sacking a prosecutor looking into Burisma to what Kiev needed to do to qualify for an IMF bailout loan. He revealed more tapes on Monday.

The new recordings show 'Biden' micro-managing Ukraine's internal affairs, asking 'Poroshenko' for a "favor," discussing personnel appointments in the prosecutor-general's office, assuring Poroshenko the FBI is not looking into claims of a Ukrainian MP who blew the whistle on massive ... **P2**

UN chief Antonio Guterres urges Israel to drop annexation plans



United Nations chief Antonio Guterres has called on Israel to abandon plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, saying such a move would be a "most serious violation of international law".

The UN secretary-general made the comments in a report to the Security Council on Tuesday, a day before the 15-member body holds its twice-yearly meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said it could begin the annexation process from July 1.

In the document, Guterres said an Israeli annexation would be "devastating" for hopes of fresh negotiations and an eventual two-state solution.

"This would be calamitous for Palestinians, Israelis and the region," he said, adding that the plan threatened "efforts to advance regional peace".

Guterres's comments came a day after thousands of Palestinians protested in Jericho against the Israeli plans, in a rally also attended by dozens of foreign diplomats.

The Palestinian leadership proposed last week a plan that seeks to create a "sovereign Palestinian state, independent and demilitarised", with East Jerusalem as its capital. It also leaves the door open to border modifications between the proposed state and Israel, as well as exchanges of land equal "in size and volume and in value - one to one". The Palestinian proposal came as a response to US President Donald Trump's controversial plan that gave a green light for Israel to annex large swaths of the occupied West Bank, including settlements considered illegal under international law, and the Jordan Valley.

Unveiled in late January, Trump's plan proposed the establishment of a demilitarised Palestinian state on the remaining patchwork of disjointed parts of the Palestinian territories without occupied East Jerusalem. The plan has been rejected in its entirety by the Palestinians. ... **P3**

Putin proposes new wealth tax

Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed Tuesday a new wealth tax starting Jan. 1 to sponsor treatment of rare childhood diseases. Putin told the nation in a televised address the pandemic has been a great challenge, and although, in general, the Russian health system responded "adequately", many problems were uncovered.

Particularly, for the children with rare, orphan diseases, whose parents are often incapable of paying for treatment and forced to seek charity.

"I want to thank everyone who responds, and I sincerely want to thank everyone who tries to help. But here we need a systematic, state-based solution. We need to establish a reliable, permanent source of funding. Help should reach every child, every family that has faced such a calamity," he said.



He advocated raising the tax on personal income of those whose annual earnings exceed 5 million rubles (\$70,000) from 13% to 15%. If earnings is 6 million, then 5 million will be subject to a tax at 13% and 1 million will be taxed at 15%. The new rate will give the budget 60 billion rubles (\$850 million) annually, which will be allocated for children with severe and rare diseases, purchase of expensive medicines, medical and rehabilitation equipment and high-tech operations.

"These funds must be protected from any other use," said Putin.

He also suggested tax benefits for the information technologies sector, a fixed rate for controlled foreign corporation and granting self-employment status to individuals starting at 16 years of age to revive the economy affected by the pandemic.

Putin urged Russians to stay cautious as the virus remains dangerous until a mass production of a COVID-19 vaccine is launched. The number of infections in Russia closed in on 600,000 Tuesday while recoveries are at more than 356,400. The number of deaths exceed 8,300. Since originating in China last December, the pandemic has claimed more than 473,800 lives in 188 countries and regions. More than 9.1 million cases have been reported worldwide, while over 4.5 million patients have recovered, according to figures compiled by US-based Johns Hopkins University.



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