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Heart of Asia

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20 U.S. senators seek emergency refugee protection for Afghan Sikhs, Hindus

As many as 20 U.S. senators have urged the Trump administration to grant emergency refugee protection to Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan facing persecution as religious minorities.

In a bipartisan letter addressed to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the senators called on the State Department to prioritise resettlement opportunities under the US Refugee Admissions Program allocation ceilings for Afghan Sikh and Hindu communities.

The population of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan have plummeted markedly due to years of persecution by the Taliban and more recent terrorist actions perpetrated by ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K), they said.

This Administration has repeatedly highlighted protecting religious freedom as a top foreign policy priority, ... **P3**



Ghani Urges Taliban to End Violence, Start Talks

As violence continues across the country, President Ashraf Ghani on Saturday called on the Taliban to end the violence and instead come forward to start the intra-Afghan talks.

Speaking to the Afghan senators at the Presidential Palace early on Saturday, Ashraf Ghani stressed the need for a swift start to the intra-Afghan peace process. "Referring to the increased violence by the Taliban, the President stressed the need for an end to the violence to help kick start intra-Afghan talks as soon as possible," the President Palace said in a statement, quoting Ghani.

This comes hours after an explosion in Kabul struck a vehicle claiming the lives of two employees of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

No group has claimed responsibility for the incident yet.

This comes a day after Afghan security sources told TOLONews that fighting between the Taliban and security forces is ongoing in at least 15 out of 34 provinces. Recent battles ... **P3**

SIGAR Criticizes Impunity of Corrupt Afghan Govt Officials



John Sopko, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has strongly criticized a move by the Afghan government to appoint one of the key masterminds behind the collapse of the old Kabul Bank to take charge of a government agency.

On June 1st, President Ashraf Ghani in a decree appointed Mahmoud Karzai as acting minister of urban development and land

"One of the masterminds behind the failure of the largest Afghan bank--Kabul Bank--is now currently under consideration to oversee a major Afghan government agency, if that is true, it seems that we are taking a step back and Afghanistan is step backwards, not step forward," said John Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

The SIGAR chief called on the Afghan

government to take action against important cases of corruption. "...but some practical examples that we hope to see in the Afghan government's efforts when we do this report (new SIGAR report on corruption) would include addressing the backlog of important corruption cases that the Afghan government is aware of, but has not done anything about it--and I would say just one example there has been on case

sitting for over six years dealing with hundreds of millions of dollars lost of the US and Afghan government," he said.

SIGAR also criticized the Afghan government for not taking practical action on 6,500 cases of corruption that have not been assessed.

"We hope we will see that the arrest, trial and imprisonment of powerful individuals engaging in corruption occurs on a regular basis," Sopko said. Seven months have passed since the former acting minister of housing Jawad Paikar was dismissed from his job over reports of misusing his official authority, but the presidential Palace so far has not said anything about the progress on his case.

SIGAR has frequently said that corruption poses serious threats to the efforts of the US and the international community for Afghanistan.

According to SIGAR, the Afghan government's anti-graft policy has been only on paper. "The lack of political will and the serious weakness that exists in terms of freedom of the legal and judicial institutions has blocked the way for the investigation of cases related to the ministers over the past ten years," said Naser Taimoori, a researcher of Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA). ... **P3**

Russia: NYT article on Russia in Afghanistan fake from US intelligence

The New York Times publication that Russia allegedly offered secretly bounties to Afghan militants for killing coalition forces was fabricated by the US intelligence agencies, Russia's Foreign Ministry told TASS on Saturday. "We have paid attention to another piece of fake news, launched in the media space by the American intelligence community, about alleged involvement of Russia's military intelligence unit in contract killings of US troops in Afghanistan. That unpretentious fake clearly demonstrates low intellectual ... **P3**



Wardak Faces Imminent Threat as Taliban Expands Presence

Residents in the Afghan province of Wardak on Friday expressed deep concerns over a dramatic surge in the level of violence in their areas, saying Taliban groups have significantly increased their presence in the area and are frequently engaging in deadly battles with the Afghan security forces.

Meanwhile, there are reports that the Taliban took at least seven security force members hostage two days ago from Deh Afghanan, a vicinity near Maidan Shar, the center of Wardak.

"There is no sign of peace, they just shoot and don't care about anyone," said Hamid, a resident in Sayedabad district, referring to the battles between the Afghan forces and the Taliban.

"Every corner is under siege, the Taliban move forward day-by-day, the province is on the verge of collapse. Every day there is a



war going on, every day they bring 20 to 30 dead bodies here," said Mohammad Nazeer, a resident of Maidan Shar. But he didn't mention whose side the dead bodies belong to.

"Fighting goes on throughout the whole night. The people are being killed, the defenseless people are killed," said Abdullah Khan, a resident in Wardak.

Under the US-Taliban peace agreement, the Taliban committed to not stage any big attack on

the center of the provinces, but residents in Wardak have said that neither the provincial capital is safe nor the highway.

Meanwhile, Rahmatullah Nabil, the former head of Afghan intelligence agency in a post on Facebook has said that "foreign insurgents" and their "domestic affiliates" are mobilizing in Paktika and Zabul provinces to stage a major attack on the strategic province of Ghazni, which neighbors Wardak.

"According to reports, ... **P3**

Washington's...

Tian Feilong, executive director of the Center for Legal Studies in One Country Two Systems at Beihang University in Beijing, said the move clearly illustrates the logic of hegemony in US diplomacy, as well as its attempt to interfere in another country's domestic affairs.

"American enterprises in Hong Kong will suffer if the act is passed in the end as the sanctions for sure will strike a blow to their business," Tian said. More than 1,300 US companies now have offices or regional headquarters in the city.

The Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, the largest party in the city's legislature, denounced the act as an escalation of US meddling in the affairs of the Hong Kong SAR.

Hong Kong lawmaker Holden Chow Ho-ding of the alliance said the US has applied double standards when meddling in China's national security legislation, which is designed to protect Hong Kong residents and safeguard national interests.

Top US officials have repeatedly stressed that the nation's tough handling of racism-related riots in its own backyard was intended to protect the safety of its citizens, Chow said.

The Hong Kong party strongly urged the US government to give up on such "fatuous acts that harm both sides".

Dozens of Hong Kong residents on Friday protested against the bill at the US consulate general in Hong Kong. They condemned the US for placing politics over law and acting against international norms by attempting to derail China's own security legislation for Hong Kong.

By Nick McKenzie

'I was sorry': Australian soldier's journey to Afghanistan for forgiveness

A former Australian soldier has sought forgiveness from the Afghan children of a man allegedly stomped to death by another senior special forces soldier in a further development linked to an independent war crimes inquiry.

Former special forces medic Dusty Miller's journey of reconciliation with the family of Afghan farmer Haji Sardar comes as the Brereton war crimes inquiry examining Mr Sardar's 2012 death and allegations of serious misconduct prepares its final report.

An investigation by The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age and 60 Minutes can reveal the SAS was recently briefed by senior defence officials that inquiry chief Judge Paul Brereton has uncovered evidence to conclude that a small number of SAS soldiers committed war crimes in Afghanistan.

While the full details of the war crimes uncovered will not be known at least until Mr Brereton's report is finalised in the coming weeks, defence sources who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the report is still confidential claim it will be so revelatory that Australia's special forces command believe the fallout will last for a decade.

Official sources party to internal defence briefings have confirmed the SAS has also been told Australia's military chief Angus Campbell and his top brass support the inquiry and the whistleblowers inside the SAS who exposed the misconduct of a small number of rogue soldiers.

The case involving Mr Miller is among those investigated by the inquiry and involves the death of Mr Sardar on March 14, 2012, in the southern Afghanistan village of Sarkum.

Mr Miller has revealed that just prior to his death, Mr Sardar, a father of seven, was in his care suffering a non-fatal gunshot wound. He was shot through the thigh by the SAS when they first landed in his village. Mr Miller, also a soldier who was deployed with the elite SAS to Afghanistan in February 2012, claims the injured Mr Sardar was taken from his care by a senior SAS soldier. The Herald and The Age have chosen not to name the soldier, who has since left the military, for legal reasons. Injuries on Mr Sardar's body suggest he was stomped on. The injuries were photographed by Mr Sardar's family. Mr Miller did not witness Mr Sardar's death.

Mr Miller has been so haunted by his failure to protect Mr Sardar, he sought to contact his children in Afghanistan earlier this year and seek forgiveness.



His emotional meeting over Skype with Mr Sardar's son is covered by Good Weekend and in a special report for 60 Minutes on Sunday.

"I wanted to tell them that I was sorry for what happened to their father and that I should have done more," Mr Miller said.

Mr Miller, who is assisting the Brereton inquiry along with several other SAS whistleblowers, said the findings needed to be released to the Australian public to ensure full accountability.

Mr Miller said the vast majority of SAS soldiers did "great work" but a very small number "stepped over a line".

Mr Miller, who was deployed on dozens of missions in Afghanistan in 2012 and was decorated in 2018 for reforming military medic training, has been backed by two other Afghan veterans, former SAS medic Steve Thompson and senior special forces medical officer Dan Pronk.

Mr Thompson and Dr Pronk described Mr Miller as a brave and exemplary medic and said the moral injury he suffered had broken Mr Miller mentally. He suffers from severe PTSD.

Dr Pronk described Mr Miller as a medic who would "run through gunfire to try and save one of them [an SAS soldier] when they are critically wounded".

"He proved himself over and over again on the ground in Afghanistan, on combat operations with the SAS," Dr Pronk said.

Mr Thompson said Australians should be proud of Mr Miller not only for serving his country in Afghanistan but for "risking reprisals" to help expose the murder of Mr Sardar.

"I think he's incredibly brave," Mr Thompson said. The Good Weekend/60 Minutes investigation has discovered the initial military inquiry into the killing was bungled after Mr Sardar's body was confused with the body of another dead Afghan by military investigators. The mistake was relied on to dismiss allegations from Mr Sardar's children that he was brutally murdered.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission senior official who reported Mr Sardar's death to the Australian military in 2012, Abdul Gharraf, said it was one of many cases he felt was unduly dismissed by the Australian military.

Dr Gharraf, who lives in Adelaide, called on the Australian government to release the inquiry's findings to the international community and so the victims of atrocities could find some form of justice. Dr Gharraf said he had been interviewed by the Brereton inquiry.

In February, the office of the Australian military inspector general — which in 2016 appointed NSW Court of Appeal Justice Paul Brereton to run the war crimes inquiry — has revealed he is investigating at least 55 incidents, including the alleged execution of prisoners.

By Mujib Mashal

Afghan Deaths Pile Up in Uncertainty Over U.S. Deal with Taliban

Two employees of Afghanistan's human rights commission were killed in Kabul on Saturday as a bomb attached to their vehicle exploded, the latest in a rising number of targeted killings in the Afghan capital.

From assassinations of religious scholars and assaults against cultural figures to widespread Taliban attacks across the country, the rise in violence is sapping the brief optimism from an American agreement with the Taliban. Under that deal, the United States would withdraw its troops, paving the way for direct negotiations between the Afghan sides to end the war in a hoped-for political settlement. The peace deal has hit a wall over a prisoner exchange that was supposed to enable direct talks. Instead, the violence has intensified.

In a statement, Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights commission said one of its vehicles was struck by a magnetic bomb on Saturday morning, killing two employees who were on their way to work.

The victims were identified as Fatima Khalil, 24, a donor coordinator for the commission who had recently completed a degree from the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, and Jawid Folad, a longtime driver at the commission. "So far no group has claimed responsibility, and the perpetrators of this brutal attack are not clear," the statement said.

Afghan and American officials say the war has entered a complicated period of uncertainty, with an emboldened insurgency aided by regional powers exerting pressure on a struggling government by cranking up bloody attacks often without claiming them.

In a sign of the complexity of the war zone, U.S. intelligence recently concluded that the Taliban were receiving bounty money from Russian intelligence for targeting American and coalition forces last year even as they negotiating peace with the United States.

The deal, signed in February, included the exchange of 5,000 Taliban prisoners for 1,000 Afghan

forces within 10 days of its signing. That exchange, which was met with resistance from the Afghan government, is only now nearing completion with the release of nearly 4,000 Taliban prisoners.

The Taliban agreed not to attack American targets, but refused a cease-fire with Afghan government forces, leaving that to direct negotiations between the Afghan sides. However, American officials said there was an informal understanding with the insurgents that they would reduce their attacks by 80 percent. Afghans have been increasingly frustrated that they haven't seen that reduction in violence, and the United States, focused on President Trump's urgency to get out of the war, has done little to hold the Taliban to it.

The Afghan National Security Council said June had the deadliest week of the war, with 291 Afghan soldiers killed in Taliban attacks in one week. Javid Faisal, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said the Taliban attacks in the past three ... **P3**

Coca-Cola suspends...

social media firm of not going far enough.

"We are asking Facebook to commit to decisive change," CMO Jen Say said. "We want to see meaningful progress towards ending the amplification of misinformation and hate speech and better addressing of political advertisements and content that contributes to voter suppression. While we appreciate that Facebook announced some steps in this direction today - it's simply not enough."

The #StopHateforProfit coalition - which includes the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Anti-

Defamation League (ADL) - said none of the changes would be vetted or verified. "We have been down this road before with Facebook. They have made apologies in the past. They have taken meagre steps after each catastrophe where their platform played a part. But this has to end now," it added.

The campaign called on Mr Zuckerberg to take further steps, including establishing permanent civil rights infrastructure within his company; submitting to independent audits of identity-based hate and misinformation; finding and removing public and private groups publishing such content; and creating expert teams to review complaints.

SCO prioritizes...

organizations involved in anti-drug issues. "We have a common normative base and a flexible institutional cooperation foundation which encompasses absolutely all aspects of anti-drug policy, from intelligence gathering activities to the realization of a whole range of preventative, medical, and rehabilitation measures," he emphasized.

A three-level mechanism of regular consultations by the relevant organizations implements the renewed SCO anti-drug strategy and its program. Due to their joint effort, up to 40% of illegally trafficked opioids

have been seized throughout all of Eurasia.

The war on illegal drug trafficking is a top priority of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov said in an interview with TASS this Friday, June 26, dubbed International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

"For the Shanghai Cooperation Organization this day has a special meaning. The fight against illicit trafficking has transformed into a priority activity of the SCO and its Charter reflects that," the top official said.

'Local Strongmen Control Herat Customs': Businessmen

Revenue from Herat's border customs has badly declined over the past six months compared to other customs offices in the country, businessmen said on Thursday, saying that local strongmen control the customs. According to Afghan businessmen, local strongmen at the customs offices take half of the revenues intended for the national treasury. Revenues have also declined at Torkham and Spin Boldak customs after Pakistan decided to impose restrictions on the Afghan exports. According to the Ministry of Finance, the total estimated value of imports at Herat customs has declined from 59 billion afs to 36 billion afs over the past six months. "In proportion to the decrease in our imports, our revenue have also decreased. However, in order to

improve the situation, the Ministry of Finance is taking steps to address corruption and interventions. In the practical area, ex-ray machines and digital scales were sent to Islam Qala port. The Ministry of Finance never allows anyone to intervene," said Shamroz Khan Masjidi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Finance. The Finance Ministry's figures show that currently the revenues from Herat customs has declined to 6.1 billion afs from 9.2 billion afs. "Pakistan closed down its route after the outbreak of coronavirus, the traders then diverted to Iran for the imports of fruits and other products," said Khairuddin Khairkhw, a trader. "Local strongmen have their own people there (Herat customs), Sometimes, they even threaten with guns, you are aware that



Herat Custom's chief was attacked recently," said Khan Jan Alokozai, a member of the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment (ACCI). Last year the government decided to transfer Herat customs to Islam Qala port, but the move led to a 30 percent

decline in revenues last year. ACCI has suggested that if the government is unable to keep its sovereignty on Islam Qala port, then it should re-transfer the customs house to Herat to help increase revenue.

Russia: NYT...

abilities of US intelligence propagandists who have to invent such nonsense instead of devising something more credible. Nevertheless, what else could be expected from the intelligence agency that has failed miserably in the 20-year-long war in Afghanistan," the foreign ministry noted. The Russian Foreign Ministry pointed to US intelligence agencies' involvement in Afghan drug trafficking. "Should we speak about facts - moreover, well-known [facts], it has not long been a secret in Afghanistan that members of the US intelligence community are involved in drug trafficking, cash payments to militants for letting transport convoys pass through, kickbacks from contracts implementing various projects paid by American taxpayers. The list of their actions can be continued if you want," the ministry said. The Russian Foreign Ministry suggested that those actions might stem from the fact that the US intelligence agencies "do not like that our and their diplomats have teamed up to facilitate the start of peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban (outlawed in Russia - TASS)." "We can understand their feelings as they do not want to be deprived of the above mentioned sources of the off-the-books income," the ministry stressed. On Friday, the New York Times published an article claiming that a Russian military intelligence unit allegedly secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants for killing coalition troops in Afghanistan.

Wardak Faces...

various domestic and foreign terrorist groups are intensifying their logistical supply through Paktika and Zabul from across the Durand Line and are preparing for a possible major attack on the strategic city of Ghazni," Nabil wrote. Nabil said that the Taliban leaders were also on the move between the Gomal district of Paktika province and the Shawal Valley of Waziristan. "In the Shawal Valley they held secret meetings with unknown people," said Nabil. "If the Taliban are really sincere about the peace process, they should prevent this attack," Nabil said. Nabil said that the Taliban leaders in Qatar are disconnected from the reality on the ground of the war in Afghanistan, adding that Afghans will not be fooled by the deception of the Pakistan Army.

SIGAR Criticizes...

"Corruption has been institutionalized within the structure, it means that we cant summarize it within the working area of a minister or deputy minister, if we are supposed to investigate this issue, then we have to bring lots of these networks to justice," said Mahdi Rasekh, a member of parliament.

Afghan Deaths...

months rose nearly 40 percent compared with the same period last year. "We have had deep concern since the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban was signed," said Haidar Afzaly, the head of the Afghan Parliament's Defense Committee. "The only group that has benefited from that is the Taliban, who are seeing their prisoners released." He said the Taliban, who were set back by frequent airstrikes in 2019, "are emboldened now" and "have expanded their attacks." Officials say the Taliban are also exploiting the gray areas of the battlefield complicated by remnants of a weakening Islamic State and the rising presence of criminal networks as the coronavirus outbreak further damages the country's struggling economy.

20 U.S. senators...

the senators wrote. Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan face an existential threat from ISIS-K because of their religion. To protect religious freedom, we urgently ask that you take these essential steps to defend these threatened religious minorities, they said in the letter. The letter also calls on Pompeo to offer additional support to members of the Sikh and Hindu

Ghani Urges...

between the sides have claimed the lives of 15 soldiers in the past 24 ours. In the meantime, Deborah Lyons, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, on Thursday said that she was cautiously optimistic about the potential talks between the

The Attorney General of Afghanistan has so far not provided any details about the progress on corruption cases involving cabinet ministers. The UN mission in Afghanistan has also raised concerns over corruption in Afghanistan. Deborah Lyons, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, on Thursday briefed the UN Security Council

The Taliban have increasingly subcontracted assassinations and targeted killings to criminal networks in the cities, a senior Afghan security official said, putting pressure on the country's intelligence agency and law enforcement. In the countryside, the Taliban are continuing bloody attacks in the open, but they have refrained from publicizing the attacks to avoid a direct clash with the United States so as not to endanger the withdrawal of American troops. In a sign of the conflict's complexity, among the latest victims targeted for assassinations were five prosecutors with the Afghan attorney general's office who were fatally shot on their way to the Bagram prison to help release Taliban prisoners. The killings added to a long list of assassinations, including

communities that choose to remain in Afghanistan, and to ensure that Afghan religious minorities benefit from the USD 20.6 million in American aid already provided to address COVID-19. Ensuring that religious minorities receive US COVID-19 assistance should be a priority in all countries where protection of religious minorities is a challenge, the senators added. The letter was written by

Afghan government and the Taliban. "I am cautiously optimistic that the talks between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban negotiation teams will indeed start in the next few weeks in Doha, during the month of July. As the two sides embark on what will likely be

on the situation in Afghanistan and described corruption as a major challenge for the country. The UN envoy said that the impunity of well-connected political figures remains a major obstacle to fighting corruption in Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani has repeatedly stated in the past that fighting corruption is among his top priorities.

two of the most prominent religious scholars in Kabul, who were killed by explosions inside their mosques. Another explosion struck the family of the renowned Afghan writer and poet Assadullah Walwaliji, killing his wife Anisa and teenage daughter Alteen. "The investigation into the killing of one scholar hadn't been completed when they martyred a second one," said Mawlawi Habibullah Hasam, the head of an Afghan religious scholars' union. "We have told the government very clearly - if, God forbid, another scholar is martyred, then we have no other choice but to directly blame the government as the murderer." "They are responsible for security," Mr. Hasam said. "You can't just put up a Facebook statement and say this group did it. What are you here for then?"

senator Robert Menendez, Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, and senators Thom Tillis, Dick Durbin, Patrick Leahy, Dianne Feinstein, Kirsten Gillibrand, Tim Kaine, Kamala Harris, Bob Casey, Chris Van Hollen, Bernie Sanders, Patty Murray, Chris Coons, Ed Markey, Tammy Duckworth, Jack Reed, Mark Warner, Ben Cardin, and James Lankford.

a long and complex series of talks, I have encouraged them to show the necessary flexibility and foresight, the commitment to peace and most importantly compassion for their people that will be needed to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion," e UN envoy told the Security Council on Thurs.

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Washington's Hong Kong bill slammed

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government on Friday expressed strong opposition to the passage of the Hong Kong Autonomy Act by the United States Senate. "We urge the US Congress to immediately stop interfering in the HKSAR's internal matters. The act and the so-called 'sanctions' are totally unacceptable and will only harm the relations and common interests between Hong Kong and the US," a government spokesman said. "Any 'sanctions' imposed under the act will not create an obligation for financial institutions under Hong Kong law. We, however, urge the US to act responsibly by refraining from taking measures that may potentially affect the normal operations of financial institutions and the vast number of customers they serve," the spokesman said.

Academics and residents in Hong Kong also lambasted what they called the latest move by the US to meddle in the city's internal affairs. The chorus of condemnation came in response to the US Senate passing the act, which requires the sanctioning of individuals and companies, including SAR government officials, for enforcing the pending national security law and police officers for stopping protests. To become law, the act must also pass the US House of Representatives and be signed by US President Donald Trump. On China's part, this is regarded as a move by Washington to push back against the decision of China's top legislature to tailor a national security law for the HKSAR. Lau Siu-kai, vice-president of the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macao Studies, a leading think tank on Hong Kong affairs,



said the US is less likely to actually take strong actions against Hong Kong, considering its own enormous economic interests in the city. "Up to now the US government has not imposed any sanctions on Hong Kong or the mainland because it's also concerned about counter sanctions from Beijing," said Lau, who described US politicians' remarks targeting China's Hong

Kong policy as "empty rhetoric and empty threats". The sociology professor expected rising hostility from US politicians against China in the run up to the upcoming US congressional and presidential elections. "The US government already has a lot of legal weapons against Hong Kong. One more act does not make much difference." ... **P2**

A look at the world

SCO prioritizes battle against illegal drug trafficking

The war on illegal drug trafficking is a top priority of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov said in an interview with TASS this Friday, June 26, dubbed International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

"For the Shanghai Cooperation Organization this day has a special meaning. The fight against illicit trafficking has transformed into a priority activity of the SCO and its Charter reflects that," the top official said.

A menacing trend

The issue of non-medical use of narcotics and psychotropic substances has become ever more pressing, the Secretary General said. According to the UN 2019 World Drug Report, people using drugs numbered over 270 mln in the 15-64 age group (5.5% of world population) which is 30% higher than in 2009. The number of opioid users alone grew 1.5 times in 2016 - 2017 totaling 53.4 mln people. The underground drug market's revenues are estimated at approximately \$320 bln. The alarming surge of the drug business and



drug addiction seen over the recent years has adversely affected practically all spheres of society and government, undermining institutions, social norms, and particularly the gene pool of nations. The world today is open like never before with trade, economic and individual connections between countries, regions, organizations, and people circulating, so these opportunities are now used by transnational criminal networks dealing in illegal drug production, trafficking, and trade, the SCO chief pointed out. He added that the path to success in fighting the drug trade involves not only the increased effectiveness of law enforcement structures, but also a consolidation of nations' diversified efforts by sharing their best practices, information, and harmonization of legislation, national strategies and approaches to solve this issue. Cooperation

The Secretary General said that currently one can confidently state that the SCO is one of the most prominent regional ... **P2**

COVID-19 tally surges in four Arab countries



Health authorities in Oman, Morocco, Palestine and Libya confirmed new cases of the novel coronavirus on Saturday.

In a statement, the Omani Health Ministry said six people had died from the disease over the past 24 hours, bringing the nationwide death toll to 159.

A further 919 infections were recorded, pushing the figure to 36,953, while recoveries rose to 20,363 after 881 people had recovered, the ministry said.

In Morocco, the Health Ministry said 221 people tested positive for the virus, while 44 patients recovered, taking the total infections to 11,854 infections and 8,700 recoveries.

The country's death toll from the disease now stands at 218.

In Palestine, the Health Ministry said 67 new cases were registered, pushing the figure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to 1,862.

So far, Palestinian authorities have reported five deaths from the illness.

In Libya, the National Center for Disease Control said 15 more people tested positive for the virus, taking the figure to 713, including 18 deaths.

Since originating in China last December, the pandemic has claimed more than 493,000 lives in 188 countries and regions. More than 9.7 million cases have been reported worldwide, while an excess of 4.9 million patients have recovered, according to figures compiled by US-based Johns Hopkins University.

Coca-Cola suspends social media advertising despite Facebook changes

Coca-Cola will suspend advertising on social media globally for at least 30 days, as pressure builds on platforms to crack down on hate speech.

"There is no place for racism in the world and there is no place for racism on social media," the drinks maker's chairman and CEO James Quincey said.

He demanded "greater accountability and transparency" from social media firms.

It came after Facebook said it would label potentially harmful or misleading posts left up for their news value.

Founder Mark Zuckerberg said Facebook would also ban advertising containing claims "that people of a specific race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity or immigration status" are a threat to others.

The organisers of the #StopHateforProfit campaign, which accuses Facebook of not doing enough to stop hate speech and disinformation, said the "small number of



small changes" would not "make a dent in the problem".

More than 90 companies have paused advertising in support of #StopHateforProfit.

As a result of the boycott, shares in Facebook fell 8.3% on Friday, eliminating \$56bn (£45bn) from the company's market value and knocking \$7.2bn off Mr Zuckerberg's personal net worth, Bloomberg reported. As a result of the loss, Louis Vuitton boss Bernard Arnault replaced the Facebook founder as the world's third richest individual.

Coca-Cola told CNBC its advertising suspension did not mean it was joining the campaign, despite being listed as a "participating business".

Mr Quincey said the company would use the global "social media platform pause" to "reassess our advertising policies to determine whether revisions are needed".

Clothes maker Levi Strauss & Co also said it would be pausing advertising on Facebook following Mr Zuckerberg's announcement. Unlike Coca-Cola, it accused the ... **P2**



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