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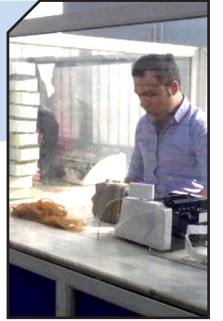
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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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MoPH to buy oxygen machines from China

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has decided to purchase 500 oxygen producing machines from China and announced compelling all local companies to provide oxygen to Covid-19 hospitals.

Public Health Minister Ahmad Jawad Usmani said revealed this during a meeting with Kabul governor and Wolesi Jirga members. He said the oxygen supply issue to Covid-19 hospitals had been totally addressed.

Referring to the purchase of 500 small oxygen producing machines from China in near future, the minister said: “The Ministry of Defence provided 200 oxygen cylinders, UNICEF provided 50 small oxygen producing machines to the ministry.”

Usmani said during his visit to provinces in recent days, he monitored the situation closely and thought about solution to problems Covid-19 ... **P2**



Despite Reform Claims, Taliban ‘Severely’ Restricts Rights: HRW

The Taliban in Afghanistan have imposed severe restrictions on rights in areas under their control despite claims of reform, the Human Rights Watch said in a report on Tuesday.

The report says residents reported “an inability to criticize or question Taliban actions, violations of the rights of women and girls, and also “severe limits on freedom of expression and the media.”

Rights abuses by both the Taliban and government forces mean that the United States and other countries supporting the peace process “should ensure that any agreement has strong human rights commitments and enforcement mechanisms,” the report says.

The 69-page report, “You Have No Right to Complain’: Education, Social Restrictions, and Justice in Taliban-Held Afghanistan,” focuses on the everyday experiences of people living in Taliban-held districts and Taliban ... **P2**

Watchdog: ANA Counterattack Resulted in Civilian Deaths in Helmand



The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) on Tuesday said its findings indicate that the Afghan security forces, while responding to an attack by the Taliban in Sangin district of Helmand, caused massive civilian casualties by firing artillery that hit a marketplace.

The commission said that at least

27 civilians--including children--were killed and 35 more were wounded after the security forces launched a counter-attack on the Taliban insurgents in Sangin.

“The incident happened as a result of the counter-attack by the Afghan military forces, the Afghan government needs to initiate a transparent investigation into the

attack,” said Naeem Nazari, the deputy head of the AIHRC.

“They do not bear mercy on the children, on the women and on the people, what kind of government is this? I personally don’t know what kind of governance this is,” said lawmaker Hanif Hanafi.

“The Taliban blame the government, and the government

blames the Taliban--everyday Afghans are killed and wounded,” said Rahmatullah Achakzai, a member of parliament.

At least 23 civilians were killed after four explosive projectiles hit a festival being held at a market in Sangin district in Helmand province on Monday morning, the provincial governor’s office said in a statement.

Meanwhile, General Wali Ahmad Ahmadzai, the commander of 215 Maiwand Army Corps, has said that the army is ready to investigate the incident in Sangin in a thorough way.

“An investigation team has been tasked and we welcome it, we are ready to provide any sort of clarification on this issue, we strongly reject civilian casualties,” said Wali Ahmad Ahmadzai, the commander of 215 Maiwand Army Corps.

‘24 Civilians Killed or Wounded Everyday’

This comes as Javid Faisal, the spokesman for the National Security Council (NSC), on Tuesday accused the Taliban of killing and wounding 24 civilians per day in Afghanistan since earlier in ... **P3**

U.S. envoy to Afghanistan not going to Kabul

The U.S. peace envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, will not be going to the Afghan capital, Kabul, while in the region on his latest peace mission because of the dangers presented by the coronavirus and instead will video conference with Afghan leaders, the U.S. State Department said.

Afghanistan’s dilapidated health system is grappling with the pandemic, with the number of infections thought to far outnumber the official tally of over 31,000 cases, including 733 deaths. ... **P3**



Allegations of Russia offering money to Taliban not confirmed by U.S. intelligence

U.S. President Donald Trump was not informed about alleged Russian attempts to offer money to the Afghan militants to kill the US servicemen, because such reports were not confirmed by the US intelligence, White House National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien said in a written statement. “Because the allegations in recent press articles have not been verified or substantiated by the intelligence community, President Trump had not been briefed on the items,” O’Brien said, adding that the US Administration, including the National Security Council has “been preparing should the situation warrant action.”

“To those government officials who betray the trust of the people of the United States by leaking classified information, your actions endanger our national security. No matter



the motivation, there is never a justification for such conduct,” the advisor said, underscoring that there is no matter more important for President Trump than the security of the US and the safety of the American servicemen. He also noted that “while we [the White House] do not normally discuss such matters, we constantly

evaluate intelligence reports and brief the president as necessary.”

On Monday, Pentagon spokesman Johnathan Hoffman claimed that the US Department of Defense has no facts to recognize the allegations against Russia as credible.

About the report On June 26, The New York Times published an article, ... **P3**

Despite Reform...

restrictions on education, access to information and media, and freedom of movement. The report says that “the Taliban’s widespread rights abuses in areas it controls raise concerns about their willingness and ability to keep commitments on rights in any future peace agreement.”

MoPH to buy...

patients faced. Kabul Governor Mohammad Yaqub Haidari said: “It is shameful for a country that its citizens are dying due to the shortage of oxygen.” He regretted that in the past 18 years, shortcomings in the health sector could not be addressed and now it was not possible to address them in months. Haidari, who is member of the Committee Coronavirus, pledged to provide fund to the health ministry to meet its needs. The committee has 300 million afghani fund to provide support to the country’s health sector to deal with Covid-19. Wolesi Jirga Member Abdul Qadir Qalatwal said the lower house was monitoring government’s expenses on fighting the coronavirus. Earlier, Public Health Ministry Spokesperson Akmal Samsour said that contracts had been inked with six companies for the supply of oxygen to hospitals treating Covid-19 patients. He said due to strict monitoring the issue of oxygen supply to hospitals was solved, adding that problem emerged in the process after laziness in the monitoring of oxygen supply process. Kabul residents said no attention was being paid to coronavirus patients in the public hospitals.

By Zack Beauchamp

The Russian bounties on U.S. troops in Afghanistan scandal, explained

The past few days in American politics have been dominated by revelations that Russia may have paid Taliban militants to kill US troops in Afghanistan in 2019 — and that the Trump administration knew about the scheme and did nothing to stop it or punish Russia.

The New York Times reported Friday that US intelligence officials found evidence indicating that a unit of the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency, had put out bounties on US troops in Afghanistan. It’s not clear how many Americans may have been killed as part of this plot, but at least one incident in April 2019 that killed three Marines in a car bomb attack near Bagram Airfield is reportedly being investigated in connection to the alleged Russian effort.

The Times reported that President Donald Trump was briefed about the Russian operation months ago but chose to do nothing in response.

Trump loudly denied this claim on Sunday, tweeting that “Nobody briefed or told me, [Vice President Mike] Pence, or Chief of Staff [Mark Meadows], about the so-called attacks on our troops in Afghanistan by Russians,” adding that “everybody is denying it & there have not been many attacks on us.”

But there’s mounting evidence that this is false.

The Associated Press reported on Monday night that in March 2019, then-National Security Adviser John Bolton personally briefed Trump on the Russian scheme. Also on Monday night, the New York Times reported that the intelligence had been included in the February 27 edition of the President’s Daily Brief, a daily summary of what the CIA describes as “the highest level of intelligence on the president’s key national security issues and concerns” prepared specially for the president by his intelligence chiefs. So what to make of all this?

Experts on Russia and Afghanistan say the underlying claim — that Russia paid bounties to Afghan militants to kill US troops — is quite plausible. Since at least 2015, Russia has attempted to undermine and weaken the US and its allies from the shadows, sometimes violently. The GRU has been the tip of Putin’s spear in this effort; it makes sense that it would target US troops in Afghanistan in particular, a kind of delayed payback for America’s support for anti-Soviet Afghan rebels in the 1980s.

“Russia, or at least some Russian agencies, apparently feel free to assassinate regime opponents in London,



Salisbury, and Berlin,” says Steven Pifer, an expert on Russia at the Brookings Institution. “It’s not that big a step from there to going after coalition soldiers in Afghanistan.”

But at this point, Trump’s apparent failure to do anything about the revelations is becoming as big a story as the Russian scheme itself.

It seems pretty clear now that senior officials in the Trump administration have had intelligence of a Russian plot to kill Americans for more than a year and have briefed the president about it several times. Yet Trump not only failed to mount any kind of response but also seems to be, at best, alarmingly unaware of information he was apparently given several times, or, at worst, outright lying about his knowledge of it. Either way, it’s further proof that the Trump administration’s approach to policymaking is profoundly broken. It once again raises disturbing questions about Trump’s policy toward Russia. And now, lawmakers of both parties — and the mother of one of the Marines killed in the Bagram attack — are demanding answers.

“We’re going to have a hearing,” Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) told me. “And we’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

Is Russia paying the Taliban to murder Americans?

And why would they?

Initially, it wasn’t particularly clear how this Russian program worked or how solid the US intelligence about it was. But in the past day, the strength of the intelligence in question become disturbingly clear. According to a Tuesday New York Times piece, American spies grounded their assessment in two major sources of information: interrogations of captured Afghan militants revealing the program’s assistance, and intercepted bank records showing large payments from a GRU bank account to the Taliban. This conclusion is supported by the Afghan government’s security forces, who captured a group of local moneymen who seem to have worked as go-betweens connecting the Russian government to the Afghan militants.

This finding, per the Times, helped “reduce an earlier disagreement among intelligence analysts and agencies over the reliability of the detainees.” The intelligence was evidently compelling enough that the US shared it with its British counterparts (British forces are also active in Afghanistan as part of the US-led coalition fight, and may have been targeted as well, according to the Times).

Both the Russian government and the Taliban have denied the allegations, and the ...

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By THOMAS KNAPP

Afghanistan Bounties: Pot, Meet Kettle (and Turn Off the Stove!)

“American intelligence officials have concluded that a Russian military intelligence unit secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants for killing coalition forces in Afghanistan,” claims the New York Times.

More controversially, the authors write that US president Donald Trump was briefed on the assessment (he denies it) and the piece’s tag line says that his administration “has been deliberating for months” on how to respond (he says the US intelligence community didn’t find the claims credible). Naturally, the response preferred by those who buy the Times’s version of events is:

First, make domestic political hay with it. Sure, trying to frame Trump as a Russian asset has backfired spectacularly every time it’s been tried, but sooner or later it’s bound to work, right?

Second, make foreign policy hay with it. Punish the

Russians until they’ve been baited back to full-blown Cold War levels of enmity, all the while whining that “they hate us for our freedom.”

First, reduce the US military presence in Afghanistan to zero. If there aren’t any US forces in Afghanistan, no US forces in Afghanistan will be in danger due to supposed “Russian bounties.”

Second, ignore — forget! — the slim possibility that Russian bounties were behind any American deaths.

Problems solved. Why should the US let the Russians off the hook and quit worrying about it? Here’s why: To date, fewer than 2,500 Americans have died in Afghanistan in nearly 19 years of war.

The Russians’ 1979-1989 Afghan war lasted about half as long. Their toll was 15,000 dead.

Why didn’t the Russians get off as lightly as the Americans?

Because the US government spent at least \$3 billion directly funding and arming groups like al Qaeda to fight the Russians in Afghanistan (through the CIA’s “Operation Cyclone”), and billions more indirectly via the Pakistani government. Even counting only, the known direct aid, that amounts to a \$200 in-kind bounty for every dead Russian soldier. \$200 was a pretty sweet paycheck, more than Afghanistan’s per capita GDP during most of that period.

If there is a Russian bounty program on US troops in Afghanistan now, it’s clearly been less successful than the equivalent US program was 30-40 years ago. And with that program, the US government gave up any conceivable standing to complain about a Russian remix.

That supposed remix is just one more reason, from among a long list of good reasons, to bring the troops home from Afghanistan.

China says...

banned are Tencent’s WeChat - downloaded more than 100 million times on Google’s Android - Alibaba’s UC Browser and two of Xiaomi’s apps.

India is the biggest driver of TikTok app installations, accounting for 611 million lifetime downloads, or 30.3 percent of the total, app analytics firm Sensor Tower said in April.

Beijing-headquartered ByteDance had plans to invest \$1bn in India and open a local data centre, and had recently ramped up hiring in the country.

Anti-China sentiment has long simmered in India over accusations of cheap imports flooding the country. But a deadly border

clash earlier this month brought tensions to the fore with calls to boycott Chinese products.

The June 15 hand-to-hand combat in a disputed Himalayan region resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers and saw a heavy deployment of forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between the world’s two most populous nations.

The deaths triggered outrage on social media with calls to boycott Chinese goods and Chinese flags set on fire at scattered street protests.

A senior minister in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government demanded a ban on Chinese food while a prominent trading union said it would boycott a range

of commodities imported from China.

A hotel union in New Delhi last week said it would not allow Chinese guests to stay in their properties.

Millions of Indians downloaded “Remove China Apps”, a mobile application that helped users detect and delete Chinese software before it was removed by Google from its Play Store.

Media reports said Chinese consignments were being held up by customs at major Indian ports.

Despite relations that have been prickly in the past, India and China have steadily built up strong economic ties in recent years. Annual bilateral trade is worth some \$90bn, with a deficit of about \$50bn in China’s favour.

France’s Macron...

Battle for Sirte Haftar’s self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) is backed by the UAE, Egypt and Russia. In recent weeks, French officials have repeatedly said Turkey’s intervention was allowing Russia to gain a greater foothold in Libya.

Thousands of Russian mercenaries, along with fighters from Sudan and Chad are reportedly on the way to the strategic city of Sirte, as the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) moves to take the city. Haftar-allied forces released a video showing

military reinforcements being deployed from Benghazi, where the eastern forces are based, towards Sirte, 570km (354 miles) to the west.

The reinforcements included Sudanese and Chadian fighters, as well as more than 3,000 Russian mercenaries, sources told Al Jazeera.

Central Bank Defends Recent Dismissals



The Central Bank leadership defended the recent dismissals from its leadership, saying they occurred because of a decision by the Supreme Council of the bank. The dismissals were called “unconstitutional” by critics.

Five officials of the bank, including the deputy governor, Wahid Noshier, have been removed from their posts in less than two weeks.

The acting governor of the bank, Ajmal Ahmadi, in a tweet on Monday said the first four officials were removed based on the decision of the Central Bank's Supreme Council “in connection with seven corruption cases, three notifications, and two warnings.”

He said the case of the “former” deputy governor Wahid Noshier was sent to the Presidential Palace.

Based on Article Seven of Da Afghanistan Bank Law (Central Bank), the bank is led by a group known as the Supreme Council, which has seven members. This includes the governor – who also heads the Supreme Council-- the first deputy,

and five other members (including a second deputy).

Article Seven of the law also says that all members of the Supreme Council shall be appointed by the president “with the consent of the parliament.” Each member of the council can serve for a five-year term that is extendable, based on this law. Article 12 of the law says that the governor, the first deputy governor, and any other member of the Supreme Council, shall be suspended or removed by the president.

“The authority to remove deputies of independent institutions does not belong to the manager of an organization. It is the authority of the president,” said Rohullah Sakhi, a lawyer.

But some of the dismissed officials of the bank once again called the act a “conspiracy” against them.

“The observer (at the bank) provided reports that were unprofessional and personal. Their reports were not based on legal principles,” said Abasin Mal, former head of the procurement office of the bank.

“The observers are not professional... and I think it is a conspiracy,” said Sayed Yunus Sadat, former head of finance office of the Central Bank. Critics doubt the decision to remove the officials and look for ulterior motives.

“It shows a type of dictatorship in government offices,” said Zahir Tamim, an MP. “The issue could have been assessed through relevant legal institutions if the officials were involved in corruption.”

At the moment, Ajmal Ahmadi, Shad Mohammad Mehrabi, Catherin Faqiri, Abdul Wakil Montazer and Mohammad Naem Azimi are

members of the supreme council of the Central Bank.

“They are working in policy (making) and never have the executive authority to remove someone from their post or issue a warning or notification to anyone,” said Qadir Jailani, an analyst.

The Central Bank in a statement on Tuesday rejected remarks by former deputies of the bank as baseless.

Legal experts on Monday said that Ahmadi's appointment as acting governor of the bank is in contravention of the law, as the Central Bank should be led by a full-fledged governor, not an acting chief.

U.S. envoy to...

Khalilzad, who was in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, on Tuesday, will be traveling to Pakistan later in the day or early Wednesday before meeting with Taliban officials in Qatar, where they have a political office.

The coronavirus infection rate in Pakistan has been climbing steadily, with 209,336 cases recorded as of Tuesday and more than 4,300 deaths.

Watchdog: ANA...

the year. “On average, the Taliban has carried out 44 attacks and killed or wounded 24 civilians every day in Afghanistan since the Feb. 22 reduction in violence week,” Faisal said in a tweet.

The European Union in a statement has raised strong concerns over a dramatic surge in the civilian toll in Afghanistan.

The EU has also warned that attacks by the Taliban could harm prospects for the start of intra-Afghan talks.

In addition, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) says Afghan forces are responsible for the blasts.

“UNAMA's initial impartial findings indicate Afghan National Army mortars inflicted heavy civilian casualties Monday at market in Sangin, Afghanistan. Multiple credible sources assert that the ANA fired lethal mortars in response to Taliban fire, missing intended target,” UNAMA tweeted.

The Russian...

militants pointed out in a statement to the Times that they don't need any incentives from the Russians to want to kill Americans.

But experts find the claim fairly credible, noting that such schemes are broadly consistent with how Russia operates these days.

“Five years ago ... it would have been very, very shocking,” Alina Polyakova, the president and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis, said. “But now,” she said, the Russians “feel like there's an open playing field — that there haven't been real consequences for similar operations in the past.”

The GRU, the military intelligence agency believed to be behind the bounties, was also a central player in Russia's interference in the 2016 US election. The specific part of the GRU that allegedly issued the bounties, Unit 29155, tends to handle more violent operations — like the poisoning of Russian double agent Sergei Skripal in Britain in 2018.

These operations reflect broader Russian strategic doctrine under Putin. Russia is, despite its nuclear weapons and massive oil deposits, a fundamentally weak country compared to its

American rival.

Lacking anything like America's conventional military strength or global network of alliances, it uses covert operations as a form of low-grade asymmetric warfare — weakening the United States, which Putin sees as an obstacle to expanding Russian geopolitical influence, without having to court an open fight with a much stronger enemy.

The result is a military intelligence agency empowered to engage in covert operations across the world, ranging from hacking to espionage to outright murder, with the aim of creating chaos and weakening America's ability to serve as a check on Russian expansionism.

“If the higher-ups in the Kremlin didn't authorize activity in Afghanistan, this wouldn't have happened,” Polyakova says. “The practical details of how they carried out the bounty program — I'm sure those details never go up as far as Putin himself. But the broader directive to undermine US interests certainly does come from the top.”

Afghanistan is an ideal site for this kind of anti-American activity. War zones are inherently violent and chaotic, making it easier for the Russians to get American troops killed without having to

do it themselves. It also serves as a kind of (perceived) symmetric retaliation for American involvement in Ukraine, where the US has given the government lethal weaponry to aid in its fight against Russian invaders.

It is also a sort of symbolic payback for America's decision to arm Afghan militants fighting back against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Reportedly, some members of the GRU's Unit 29155 are veterans of that war — and see getting Americans killed as a “dish served cold” kind of retaliation. “Remember for some Americans, Afghanistan in the 1980s was payback for Vietnam,” says Barnett Rubin, a political scientist at New York University who studies Afghanistan. “What goes around comes around.”

This isn't just a more violent extension of the 2016 election hacking campaign, in short. It's a reflection of the way in which, under Putin, Russian foreign policy has become a project of avenging historical humiliations and restoring the Kremlin to its rightful place as one of the world's great powers.

To do that, America must be punished.

Allegations of...

discussed this issue in late March. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called these allegations a lie and a “total hoax.” On June 27, the Russian Foreign Ministry labeled the initial publication on this issue as intentionally false. According to the Ministry, “this uncomplicated fake news clearly illustrates low intellectual capabilities of the US intelligence propagandists, who have to come up with such

nonsense instead of inventing something more credible.”

On June 28, Trump tweeted that the US intelligence labelled the reports of the alleged Russian attempts to offer bounty to the Afghan militants for assassination of US servicemen as false. Trump speculated that The New York Times, who published the initial report, could have published “another fabricated Russia Hoax,” in a bid to “make Republicans look bad.”

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China says concerned over India banning dozens of Chinese apps

China says it is concerned about India's decision to ban Chinese mobile apps such as Bytedance's TikTok and Tencent's WeChat and was making checks to verify the situation.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters during a daily news briefing on Tuesday that India has a responsibility to uphold the rights of Chinese businesses.

"We want to stress that the Chinese government always asks the Chinese businesses to abide by international and local laws and regulations," he said.

India on Monday banned 59, mostly Chinese, mobile apps in its strongest move yet targeting China in the online space since a border crisis erupted between the two nuclear powers this month.

TikTok denies sharing Indian users' data Earlier on Tuesday, TikTok denied sharing information on Indian users with the Chinese

government after New Delhi banned the wildly popular app, citing national security and privacy concerns.

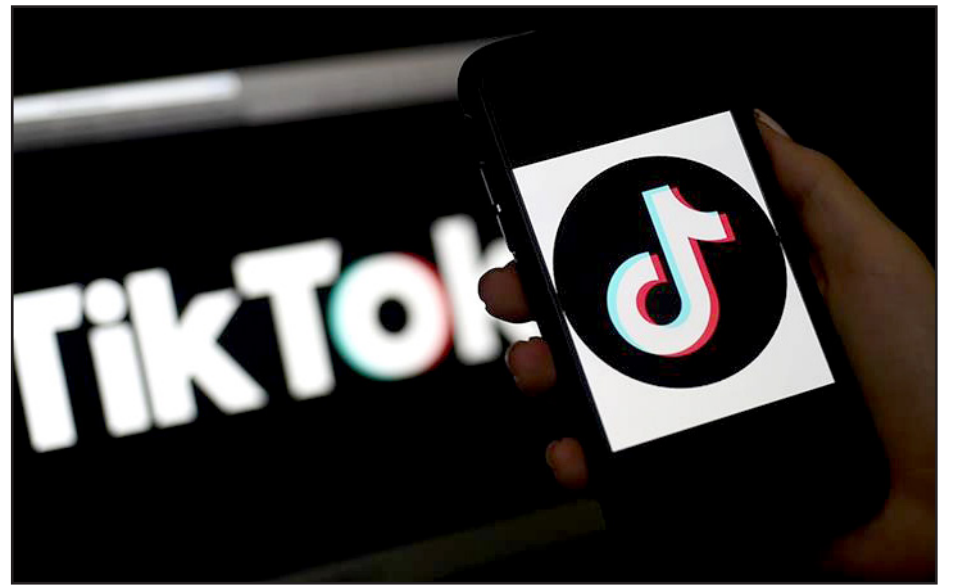
"TikTok continues to comply with all data privacy and security requirements under Indian law and have not shared any information of our users in India with any foreign government, including the Chinese Government," said the company, which is owned by China's ByteDance.

"Further if we are requested to in the future we would not do so. We place the highest importance on user privacy and integrity," TikTok said, adding that it had been invited to a meeting with the Indian government "for an opportunity to respond and submit clarifications".

In its order, India's technology ministry said the apps were "prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order".

Among other apps that have been ...

P2

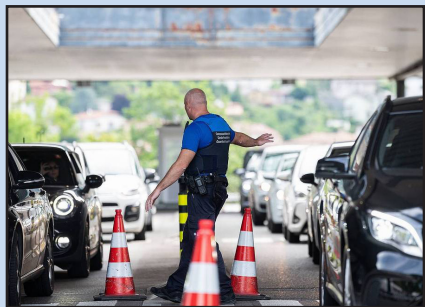


A look at the world

EU to open borders with 14 states starting July 1, Russia and U.S. not included

The EU will begin to open borders with 14 states starting July 1, with Russia and the US not making the list, the EU Council informed in a statement published on Tuesday. The document notes that China may be the fifteenth state if it is willing to open its borders to EU residents.

"The Council today adopted a recommendation on the gradual lifting of the temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU. Travel restrictions should be lifted for countries listed in the recommendation, with this list being reviewed and, as the case may be, updated every two weeks," the statement published by the council informs.



"As from 1 July member states should start lifting the travel restrictions at the external borders for residents of the following third countries: Algeria, Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, Montenegro, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, Serbia, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, China, subject to confirmation of reciprocity," the statement says.

According to the Schengen agreement, all decisions regarding border policy are made by the governments of separate EU states and not the EU official bodies. However, under current conditions, the European Commission has requested EU states to form a common list of third countries to renew contacts with. Otherwise, the EU fears that states would be forced to shut down borders within the Schengen zone if their neighbors choose to open borders with countries that still present an epidemiological threat.

EU member states began to shut their borders due to the coronavirus pandemic starting mid-March.

In late December 2019, Chinese officials notified the World Health Organization (WHO) about the outbreak of a previously unknown pneumonia in the city of Wuhan, in central China. Since then, cases of the novel coronavirus — named COVID-19 by the WHO — have been reported in every corner of the globe, including Russia.

France's Macron slams Turkey's 'criminal' role in Libya



France's president has accused Turkey of importing large numbers of fighters into Libya, labelling Ankara's intervention "criminal". Emmanuel Macron also lambasted Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambivalence towards his country's mercenaries operating in the oil-rich North African state.

Turkey has recently intervened decisively in Libya, providing air support, weapons, and allied fighters from Syria to help the internationally recognised government based in Tripoli repel a 14-month assault by renegade eastern commander Khalifa Haftar.

"I think it is a historic and criminal responsibility for a country which claims to be a NATO member," Macron said on Monday of Turkey's role in Libya.

Without providing any evidence on the nature of the fighters, he said Turkey was "massively importing" them from Syria.

Last week, Turkey heavily criticised France, saying Paris aims to restore "old colonial rule" in the North African country.

"Due to the support it has given to illegitimate structures for years, France has an important responsibility in dragging Libya into chaos," foreign ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said. "The people of Libya will never forget the damage France has inflicted on this country." Macron denied backing Haftar's east-based forces, saying France is in favour of finding a "political solution".

Ties between NATO allies France and Turkey have soured in recent weeks over Libya, northern Syria, and drilling in the eastern Mediterranean.

Tensions escalated following a June 10 incident between Turkish warships and a French naval vessel in the Mediterranean Sea, which France considers a hostile act under NATO's rules of engagement.

Turkey has denied harassing the French frigate. Paris has been accused of supporting Haftar politically, having previously given him military assistance.

France has long denied backing Haftar but has stopped short of rebuking his allies, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has also been singled out by the United Nations for violating an arms embargo in Libya. ... P2

\$7.7B pledged at Syria donor conference

The EU's crisis management commissioner announced on Tuesday that international donors pledged total of €6.9 billion (\$7.7 billion) to support Syrian refugees and host countries.

"As the international community, we have today expressed solidarity with the Syrian people," Janez Lenarcic said in a closing speech of the fourth Brussels Conference on the future of Syria and the region.

The donor conference, co-chaired by the EU and UN, took place via video format due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"The impact of COVID-19 is leading to a huge increase in humanitarian needs around the world," Lenarcic warned.



But these "concrete pledges of support will make a difference for millions of people" enabling them to afford food, decent shelter, sanitation facilities or schooling, he added, thanking host countries for their efforts.

Of the total, €4.8 billion will be mobilized in 2020, while the remaining €2 billion will be transferred during and after 2021.

In addition to the grants, financial institutions and donors will also provide €6 billion in the form of loans.

Earlier that day EU top diplomat Josep Borrell praised Turkey for carrying a "big burden" of taking care of more than 3.5 million people fleeing war-torn Syria to its territory for several years.

Syria has been locked in a vicious civil war since early 2011, when the Assad regime cracked down on pro-democracy protests with unexpected ferocity.

Hundreds of thousands of people have since been killed and more than 10 million others displaced, according to the UN.

Turkey is the largest host country for Syrian refugees and provides international protection to nearly 4 million people who fled the neighboring country.



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