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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Monday, July 6, 2020

Issue No. 802

www.heartofasia.af

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**UK backs Afghan-led Peace Process**

Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Hanif Atmar and British Ambassador to Afghanistan Alison Blake have held a telephonic conversation and discussed matter related to peace process, a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said on Sunday.

Increase in violence and release of prisoners were the other issues discussed between Atmar and Blake during telephonic conversation, the statement said.

They also shared views on the global experience of Covid-19 and its impact on Afghanistan and United Kingdom. The acting foreign ministers and UK top diplomat exchanged views on the latest development in peace process and expressed concern on the increase in level of violence. ... **P2**



**Concerns Grow About Foreign Militants in North**

An increase in the presence of foreign militants in the north and northeast part of Afghanistan is raising fears that the situation will worsen if not addressed.

According to political leaders from the north, the fighters are entering the country from neighboring countries and have stations in Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Jawzjan and Faryab.

"Extremist foreigners have been stationed in Badakhshan to Kunduz to parts of Takhar and parts of Darzab and Qoshtepa (districts) of Jawzjan, Almar and Qaisar of Faryab, Kohistanat district of Sar-e-Pul and parts of Badghis and are very active," said Atta Mohammad Noor, CEO of the Jamiat-e-Islami party and the former governor of Balkh.

Former MPs from northern provinces said some of the fighters have also brought their families and all are armed. "Some have joined these groups and are roaming in Raghistan (district) and are fighting," said Fawzia Kofi, a former MP from Badakhshan.

## Russia Answers Bounty Claims, Says U.S. is 'Drug Trafficking'



The Russian president's special envoy for Afghanistan affairs, Zamir Kabulov, on Saturday accused U.S. intelligence in Afghanistan of "drug trafficking," reported Tass, a Russian news agency.

Following a New York Times story alleging that a Russian unit was offering bounties to Taliban-linked militants to kill US-led coalition

troops in Afghanistan, Kabulov responded to the allegations, saying that U.S. intelligence officers, who "accuse us of different things," are involved in "drug trafficking." "Those wonderful U.S. intelligence officers, who accuse us of different things, are involved in drug trafficking. Their planes from Kandahar, from Bagram [airfield

near Kabul] are flying wherever they want to - to Germany, to Romania - without any inspections," he said. "Every citizen of Kabul will tell you that, everyone is ready to talk about that," said Tass quoting Kabulov speaking to a state-run tv channel. The New York Times report said that there were different theories on why Russia would support

Taliban attacks, "including a desire to keep the United States bogged down in war."

The Taliban operation was "led by a unit known as the GRU," said the Times article, "which has been blamed in numerous international incidents including a 2018 chemical weapons attack in Britain that nearly killed Russian-born double agent Sergei Skripal."

The New York Times quoted a Kremlin spokesman saying that Russia was unaware of the accusations.

The Taliban also rejected the allegations.

Russia has more recently been accused by the United States of quietly providing weapons to the Taliban.

The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday last week, in remarks to the press on the reports of Russian bounties for Taliban fighters who kill Americans, said: "The fact that the Russians are engaged in Afghanistan in a way that's adverse to the United States is nothing new."

"Some members of Congress who are out there today ... **P2**

**Abdullah Abdullah to visit Pakistan soon**

Dr Abdullah Abdullah, the head of Afghan peace council, will soon pay an official visit to Pakistan as part of efforts to advance the peace process that has entered in the crucial phase with an imminent intra-Afghan dialogue.

The visit also indicates improvement in ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan, often marred by mistrust and blame game.

Dr Abdullah, who was appointed as Chairman of the Supreme National Reconciliation Council as part of a power-sharing deal ... **P3**



## India Signs 5 Pacts for Afghan Education Projects

India and Afghanistan on Sunday signed five agreements for developing educational infrastructure in four Afghan provinces, with the move seen as a reiteration of New Delhi's support to Kabul at a time when the war-torn country's peace process is facing challenges.

The five memorandums of understanding (MoUs) were signed under the high impact community development projects (HICDP) programme being implemented by India to further strengthen the bilateral development partnership, said a statement from the Indian embassy in Kabul.

Since 2001, India has undertaken projects worth \$3 billion in Afghanistan, including \$1 billion pledged in 2016 under the "new development partnership" scheme over the period of five years. These projects are part of India's



commitment to assist Afghanistan emerge as a "peaceful, united, prosperous and pluralistic nation", the statement said.

The projects to be taken up under the five MoUs include the construction of classrooms, a higher education building and a road within the campus of Albironi University. The projects are spread across the four provinces of Nooristan, Badakhshan, Farah and Kapisa.

Since 2005, the Indian government has committed \$200 million to support more than 550 high impact community development projects across Afghanistan. Of these, more than 400 projects have already been completed while the rest are in various stages of implementation. These are usually smaller grassroots projects that involve a lower financial outlay but have a direct impact on local populations. ... **P2**

## Russia Answers...

suggesting that they are shocked and appalled by this, they saw the same intelligence that we saw. So it would be interesting to ask them what they did when they saw whatever intelligence it is that they are referring to," Pompeo said. Following Pompeo's remarks about Russia, a source on TOLONews confirmed to TOLONews that the man who controls the transaction is named Rahmat Sia and he is the owner of a construction company.

Rahmatullah Azizi is his given name, but he is known as Rahmat Sia. He lives in Russia.

According to the source, Rahmatullah's brother, his driver, his cousin and a Forex dealer have been arrested by the Afghan security forces in PD4 of Kabul city.

## UK backs...

The source added that mechanisms needed for monitoring a reduction in violence, release of prisoners by the government of Afghanistan and Taliban and importance of starting intra-Afghan talks were also discussed.

Atmar and Blake also talked the importance of regional and international engagement and the need for consensus on the Afghan peace process.

Blake reiterated her country's support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, the statement added.

By DAVID S. CLOUD, TRACY WILKINSON

# White House tentatively agrees to leave some troops in Afghanistan past U.S. election

Top U.S. commanders believe they have tentative White House approval to leave just over 4,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond November, delaying a full American pullout until after the presidential election. The plan, worked out at a meeting between Pentagon and White House officials late last month, would represent an about-face for President Trump. He has pushed for a complete withdrawal of the 8,600 troops now in Afghanistan by the election, seeing a pullout as a much-needed foreign policy achievement as his reelection prospects have deteriorated.

Trump had only recently told advisors that a full and rapid pullout could blunt the controversy over intelligence reports that Russia has paid militants to kill American service members, one official said. The president, who has made clear that he cares little about conditions in Afghanistan, could still order a full withdrawal by November if he decides it would help him in the election, officials said.

But Pentagon officials warned that a complete withdrawal over the next five months could plunge Afghanistan into crisis, dooming peace talks U.S. officials have been seeking to jump-start between the Afghan government and Taliban militants and worsening already surging violence. Officials also warned the White House that getting out completely by November would force them to leave substantial amounts of equipment behind.

"The timetable is being driven by the election clock, not the Afghan clock," said one official, who requested anonymity in discussing the administration's thinking.

Other administration officials also believe that a sooner-than-planned exit would only worsen the perception that the U.S. and Trump were being driven out of the country after nearly two decades of war. Marine Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the top commander in the Middle East, said last month that he could not recommend a full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan until the Taliban demonstrates it no longer supports Al Qaeda forces there.

"If conditions would allow, we're prepared to go to zero" by May, McKenzie said in a videoconference hosted by the Washington-based think tank Middle East Institute. "If asked my opinion, those conditions have not been fully met."

It wouldn't be the first time that the Pentagon had successfully lobbied a president to halt a planned withdrawal from Afghanistan months before an



election. President Obama also halted plans for a complete pullout in 2015, leaving to his successor the question of whether the U.S. should depart.

If Trump loses the election, the decision on a final withdrawal would fall to Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, who has long favored reducing the U.S. presence in the country.

The president recently revived his talk of a complete withdrawal before the election, amid the public furor over the reports that he was informed this year about the Russian bounties and has done nothing in response.

Trump has denounced the report of Russian bounties as a "hoax" and claimed that intelligence officials never told him verbally about the payments. The bounties were mentioned, however, in intelligence summaries provided to him and other top advisors at the White House. A Taliban spokesman has denied the reports. U.S. military commanders and intelligence officials say there is strong evidence that Russia paid bounties to the Taliban, and they have been investigating whether payments were made after three Marines were killed last year by a car bomb near Bagram Airfield, north of Kabul, officials said.

The U.S. troop level in Afghanistan has already fallen steeply, to 8,600 last month from 12,000 as recently as January. The initial drawdown was part of a Feb. 29 agreement between the Trump administration and

Taliban militants that calls for a complete American exit by next spring.

Trump wanted to expedite that even as U.S. officials insist that further withdrawals are contingent on the Taliban denying sanctuary to Al Qaeda within Afghan territory under its control and on the power-sharing negotiations with the Afghan government. Neither condition has been achieved.

The planned talks have been delayed by jockeying between Kabul and Taliban officials over the release of prisoners. And a Pentagon report released Wednesday concludes that Al Qaeda operatives still "routinely" work with "low-level Taliban members" and maintain "an enduring interest in attacking U.S. forces."

Also, attacks by Taliban fighters against Afghan troops have soared since the signing of the U.S.-Taliban deal. The agreement barred Taliban attacks on U.S. troops but left out similar protections for Afghan government forces, whose casualties have reached levels unseen for a decade.

Afghan government officials say more than 400 Taliban attacks this year have claimed the lives of some 200 members of the Afghan security forces. Separately, 42 civilians — including babies in a hospital maternity ward — were killed in a single week, although other Islamic militants were blamed.

Trump's insistence on pulling out all U.S. troops has drawn opposition not only from the Pentagon ... **P3**

By Baria Alamuddin

## Afghanistan is a graveyard for foreign invaders — Iran included

Last week's news was dominated by reports that the U.S. president had ignored intelligence indicating that Russia offered bounties to the Taliban to murder American troops. The world should not overlook the fact that Iran has long been doing the same: As far back as 2010, Taliban fighters were collecting more than \$1,000 each from Iran for each U.S. soldier they killed, and The Sunday Times identified five Iranian front companies in Kabul clandestinely distributing funds to the militants.

Britain's ambassador to Afghanistan at the time, William Patey, said his government was aware that Iran was "supporting the Taliban against our troops ... logistically and with money," which he described as "sickening" given the Taliban's viciously anti-Shiite ideology. Although Iran and the Taliban were then nominal enemies, Tehran was exporting weapons

for militants to attack NATO forces in western Afghanistan, notably roadside bombs that had proved so deadly in Iraq. This relationship became considerably warmer from 2015 as Daesh in Afghanistan came to be regarded as a greater threat to Iranian interests. Iran sent squads of assassins and spies, and infiltrated the police and civil service, with far-western Herat a hub for these clandestine activities.

Iran began holding substantive talks with senior Taliban officials about strategic alignment. In 2016 a U.S. drone killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour as he returned from Iran after discussions with Iranian and Russian security officials. major Taliban assault on Afghan cities throughout autumn 2016 was largely at Tehran's instigation. Taliban fighters were recruited from refugee populations in Iran, primarily from Shiite

Hazara communities (similar demographics were drawn on for Iran-funded militias in Syria). Dead and wounded Taliban from these campaigns were transferred back to Iran, along with the bodies of four senior Iranian commandos killed in the fighting.

Incentives offered to Afghan recruits for Tehran's overseas paramilitary adventures include Iranian nationality. However, all but the most desperate refugees have been increasingly reluctant to be deployed as Syrian cannon fodder, particularly after families of the deceased often failed to receive promised compensation.

Iran has forcibly repatriated hundreds of thousands of the three million Afghan refugees inside its territory. Many have suffered extreme brutality by Iranian border guards. In the past couple of months, dozens drowned after being beaten, tortured and forced back into a river along the border. ... **P3**

## India Signs 5...

The ceremony in Kabul for the signing of the MoUs was presided over by the Afghan minister of economy, Mustafa Mastoor. Tripartite agreements were signed between the Indian government, the Afghan ministry of economy and the implementing ministries, such as the ministry of education. Two MoUs were

signed by Indian ambassador Vinay Kumar and ministers Mustafa Mastoor and Abdul Tawab Balakarzai, while three were signed by Kumar and ministers Mastoor and Rangina Hamidi. "The government of India remains committed to take forward the India-Afghanistan Development Partnership based on the national priorities of the government

and people" of Afghanistan, the statement said.

Despite an agreement signed by the US and the Taliban in February, Afghanistan has witnessed a surge in terrorist violence even as it grapples with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The intra-Afghan dialogue, a key component of the peace process, is yet to get underway.

## China thanks Jordan,...

outcomes in various fields, including trade, investment, science and technology and tourism. For his part, Faisal said Saudi Arabia attaches great importance to its comprehensive strategic partnership with China and is ready to take the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations

between the two countries as an opportunity to deepen cooperation in various fields and lift bilateral ties as well as China-Arab relations to a new level.

Saudi Arabia is willing to cooperate closely with China under the G20 framework to push for new progress in global cooperation against COVID-19, he added.

## Israeli leader's...

Though he holds no official position, Yair Netanyahu is considered a key adviser and the mastermind of his father's increasingly confrontational social media strategy. Netanyahu faces charges of fraud, breach of trust

and accepting bribes in a series of corruption cases stemming from ties to wealthy friends. He denies the charges, which follow years of scandals swirling around the family.

For years, it was his wife, Sara, who drew most of the fire because of her

extravagant tastes, misuse of state funds and alleged abuse of her staff. But recently, his eldest son has taken center stage. He's figured prominently in various scandals while earning a reputation of living a life of privilege at taxpayers' expense.

# Khaf-Herat railway to come on stream in Nov.

Khaf-Herat Railway will become operational before the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2021). Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mohammad Eslami made the remarks on Fri. and added, "a part of Khaf-Herat Railway will be constructed by Iran while the remaining part will be built by neighboring Afghanistan." Construction operation of the part related to Iran is on the verge of completion, Eslami emphasized. He put the length of the railway from border to Khaf city at 66km and stated, "the significance of this

giant project is this that the railway in Afghanistan will be revived, so that Afghanistan will be connected to Iran's national railway network as well as other parts of the world." Elsewhere in his remarks, Eslami pointed to the transit and added, "Iran has a variety of routes such as North-South Corridor and also East-West Corridor in a way that transiting Afghan territory and investing in Afghanistan is an essential for Iranian traders and also this country." Afghanistan government has commitments to transfer country's mining and mineral capacity to other countries, so that a treaty inked



between India, Afghanistan and Iran will have an effective role in this regard, he added. Khaf-Herat Railway, as long as 35km, will connect Iraqi rail network to Central Asia.

Khaf-Herat is part of Iran-Afghanistan rail corridor. The project, started in the fiscal year of 2007-2008, connects Iran's eastern city of Khaf to Afghanistan's western city of Ghoryan.

## White House tentatively...

but also from lawmakers of both parties. The House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday moved to restrict his ability to order steeper withdrawals, approving a provision that would block funding for reductions below 8,000 troops unless the administration certifies that doing so would not compromise counter-terrorism goals and other conditions. The amendment, attached to an annual defense bill, was approved by a vote of 45 to 11.

Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, a member of the House Republican leadership, said the provision "lays out, in a very responsible level of specificity, what is going to be required if we are going to in fact make decisions about troop levels based on conditions on the ground and based on what's required for our own security, not based on political timelines."

U.S. diplomats have consulted numerous times with Taliban and Afghan government leaders, with the goal of pushing the sides toward enacting the Feb. 29 agreement. But they have made little progress.

"Giving the process a short shrift will undermine our interests and our international reputation," Earl Anthony Wayne, a former senior U.S. diplomat in Afghanistan, told The Times. "We would pay serious costs in the short, medium and long term for a precipitous departure this year."

Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo on Wednesday declined in a news conference to confirm or deny reports that Russia has paid the Taliban to kill U.S. troops, but warned the Taliban against attacks. The administration is constantly issuing warnings to Russia, he said, despite Trump's outward affinity for Russian President Vladimir Putin. "When we see credible information that suggests that the Russians are putting American lives at risk, we're responding in a way that is serious," he said. "Do we warn them? Do we talk to them? ... The answer is, of course we do."

In a videoconference Monday night with the Taliban's chief negotiator, Abdul Ghani Baradar, Pompeo had reiterated that "the expectation for the Taliban [is] to live up to their commitments, which include not attacking Americans." Pompeo insisted that the United States was continuing to press Taliban leaders to cut ties with Al Qaeda. "I think we will be able to see when we get to that point," Pompeo said Wednesday on Fox News.

Asked whether U.S. troops will be in Afghanistan on election day, Nov. 3, he said, "The president will ultimately make that decision."

## Afghanistan is a...

Others were burnt to death after their vehicle was fired on by border guards.

With Tehran offering arms and training for Iran-affiliated Taliban elements in western Afghanistan, Farah province governor Mohammed Arif Shah Jehan (a former intelligence official) observed that "the strongest Taliban here are Iranian Taliban." Nevertheless, Iran's ambitions beyond the western provinces are somewhat constrained, given that Hazara and Tajik communities tend to be wary and suspicious of Tehran, while Pashtun footsoldiers of the Taliban are often nakedly hostile. The U.S. Treasury has designated as terrorists Taliban and Iranian figures overseeing Tehran's financial and logistical support. "Iran's provision of military training, financing, and weapons to the Taliban is yet another example of Tehran's blatant regional meddling and support for terrorism," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said. A key figure in the Afghan strategy was Esmail Qaani, who took over as Quds Force commander after Qassim Soleimani's death.

With the U.S. explicitly committed to withdrawal from Afghanistan since late 2018, Iran has become increasingly brazen in seeking a controlling stake in its neighbor's future. The Iranian military said it was taking full control over Afghan-Iranian border security. High-profile Taliban and Iranian delegations made a show of engaging with each other, and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said it would be "impossible to have a future Afghanistan without any role for the Taliban." Iran's special envoy for Afghanistan

was in Doha last week, holding meetings with those top Taliban leaders who prefer Qatar's five-star treatment to the hardships of Afghanistan.

By 2018 Iran had become Kabul's biggest trading partner, prompting Washington to offer sanctions exemptions for Afghanistan, despite the 800km Afghan border being a principal conduit for Iranian sanctions evasion.

As sanctions continue to strangle the Iranian economy, the avaricious ayatollahs are eyeing Afghanistan's estimated \$1 trillion mineral reserves, including copper, lithium, gold and rare-earth elements. There have been efforts to secure a stake in western Afghan iron-ore mines, along with the imminent completion of a rail network between the two countries expected to facilitate the mass movement of raw materials, increasing Kabul's reliance on Iran as an export conduit. Nevertheless, Iran's efforts to dominate western Afghanistan overlap with the rival Central Asian strategies of China, Pakistan and Russia.

Iran has vigorously sought to undermine U.S. diplomatic efforts: The Hezb-e Velayat-e Islami, a breakaway Taliban faction thought to be based in Iran and including hardline dissident Taliban commanders who support continuation of the war, rejected the recent understandings reached with the U.S.

Moscow and Tehran have jointly sought to bog America and its allies down in Afghanistan and ultimately force a humiliating exit. They used similar tactics to force Trump out of eastern Syria, staging increasingly aggressive

confrontations against the 500 remaining U.S. troops — scarcely sufficient in number to defend themselves, let alone eradicate Daesh.

Two decades of massive Western efforts to pacify Afghanistan have almost nothing to show for them, despite 3,500 coalition soldiers killed (and well over 100,000 Afghans) and a \$2 trillion price tag.

After this humiliating military retreat, Western leaders will now do their utmost to pretend to forget Afghanistan's existence. Yet 90 percent of the world's heroin originates there, along with a high proportion of refugees; not to mention Afghanistan's predilection for hosting worldwide terror plots and terrorist organizations, while remaining a favored route for sanctions evasion, money laundering and arms proliferation. Sooner or later, Europe, America and the Arab world will again find themselves compelled to re-engage with this perfect storm of strategic threats. Afghanistan is a notorious graveyard for foreign armies. In the 1980s the Soviet Union disintegrated amid its bloody and unaffordable attempts to dominate this territory. A century before, colonialist Britain waged a series of comparably disastrous and futile Afghan campaigns; in 1842, a large British force was annihilated almost to the last man.

Iran, Russia and the Taliban may congratulate each other's success in forcing the Americans out, but the Islamic Republic would do well to read the history books and realize that when it dips its head into the Afghan quagmire it has little more to gain than a bloody nose.

## Abdullah...

with President Ashraf Ghani, was invited by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi to visit Islamabad, foreign office officials said on Sunday.

Pakistan's special representative on Afghanistan Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq confirmed the invitation in a tweet.

"Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are moving forward. Foreign Minister SM Qureshi has invited the Chairman of the Supreme

National Reconciliation Council, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, to pay an official visit to Pakistan. Dr Abdullah Abdullah will visit at mutually convenient dates," the ambassador said.

This will be the first visit by any senior Afghan figure in months. Relationship between the two neighbours remained tense in recent months primarily because of mistrust. Both accused the other for supporting elements destabilising each other's

country.

But, the ice broke when Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa along with ISI chief Lt-Gen Faiz Hameed visited Kabul on June 9. Ambassador Sadiq was also among the delegation that held wide-ranging talks with President Ghani as well as Dr Abdullah.

The improved ties between Islamabad and Kabul are seen as critical for any success of the intra-Afghan dialogue that is poised to start soon.

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# China thanks Jordan, Saudi Arabia for support on core-interest's issues

China appreciates the firm support of Jordan and Saudi Arabia on issues concerning China's core interests, especially for China's principled stand and legitimate rights and interests on internal affairs such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed China's appreciation during separate phone calls with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud on Saturday.

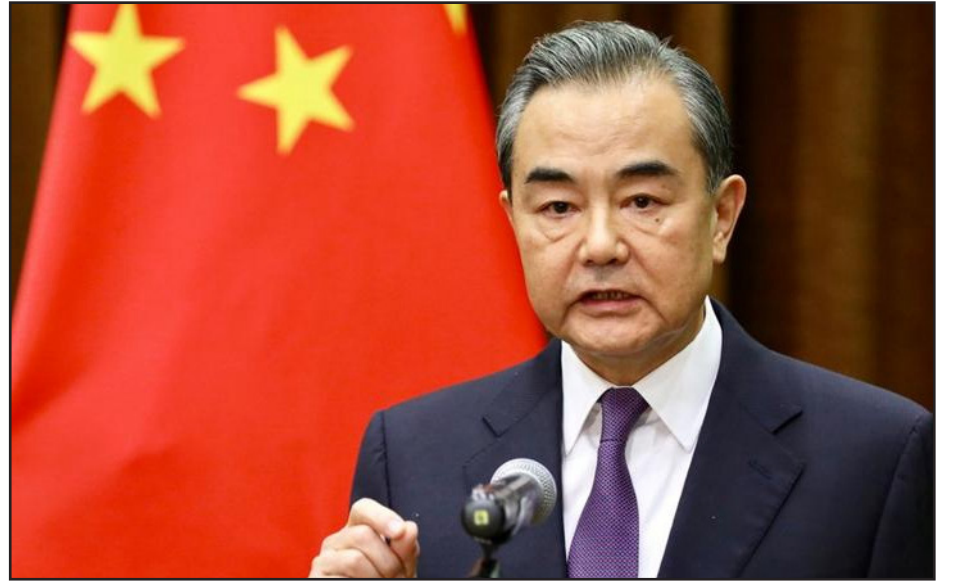
Noting that China highly appreciates Saudi Arabia's support for China's legitimate position on issues related to Hong Kong and Xinjiang, Wang said some people in the world always pretend to be teachers, frequently telling other countries what to do and violently interfere in China's internal affairs in the name of human rights. Their real purpose is to mess up Hong Kong and Xinjiang and impede China's development process.

The Chinese foreign minister also stressed cooperation after the pandemic. Wang said cooperation between China and Jordan in various fields will usher in faster development after the pandemic and China looks forward to working with the Arabian side to send a positive signal of fighting COVID-19 with solidarity amid the uncertain international situation.

Wang said he will co-chair with Safadi the ninth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum on Monday.

He also recalled the consensus reached by Chinese President Xi Jinping with King Abdullah II of Jordan and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud separately.

Expressing gratitude to China for providing anti-epidemic assistance, Safadi said the Jordanian side is willing to sign cooperation documents on the Belt and Road with the Chinese side at an early date to deliver more solid ... **P3**



### A look at the world

#### Air France cuts 7,500 jobs and sparks criticism of €7bn state bailout

Air France has today announced it plans to cut 7,500 jobs as the coronavirus lockdown continues to send shockwaves through the airline industry. The country's flagship airline said that 6,500 jobs will be lost at Air France, while regional subsidiary Hop will lose a further 1,000 by 2022.

Most of the losses are expected to happen by not replacing retiring and resigning workers, the company said on Friday - although voluntary departures would be encouraged ahead of redundancies.

The decision comes as Air France revealed its traffic had dropped 95% during the peak months of the pandemic, leading to losses of €15 million per day. This is not expected to be recovered until at least 2024.



A €7 billion state bailout was granted last month to rescue the airline, but this has since sparked anger as the talk of job cuts arose.

Other campaigners say the French government shouldn't have agreed to the financial package without more protections in place to preserve jobs. "The state bailout funds are welcomed, but they must remain bailout funds and mustn't contribute to destroying a bit more of the company," Guilhaume, 51-year-old Air France pilot, told Associated Press.

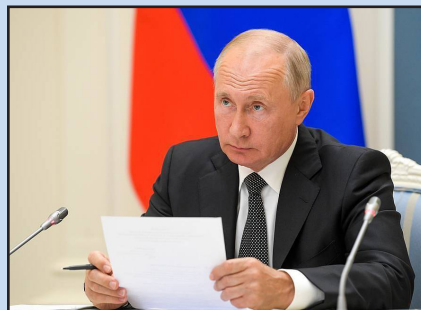
"The bailout funds must be used to rebuild Air France, as they must help rebuild other companies, big companies as well as small and medium-sized companies, liberal professions, the culture sector etc., everything that constitutes a nation in fact, a country. It mustn't be used to increase unemployment and put people into poverty."

Guilhaume was among protesters that gathered outside Air France's headquarters at Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport on Friday as talks began over the job cuts. For Greenpeace France, the job cuts are the result of bad decisions by the French government.

"The government is today an accomplice of the choices made by the management of Air France," said Sarah Fayolle, transport campaign manager at Greenpeace France.

"Supporting the company with 7 billion euros without requiring strong and restrictive conditions, both social and environmental, was an irresponsible decision."

#### Constitutional amendments will enable Russia to avoid Soviet Union's mistakes - Putin



The right of the republics to withdraw from the Soviet Union was a time bomb and Russia should avoid such mistakes, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview with Moscow. Kremlin. Putin on Rossiya-1 TV channel on Sunday.

According to Putin, the Soviet Constitution included a thesis of Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin that the republics should be given the right to pull out from the USSR. "This is a time bomb laid back in 1922 when the Soviet Union was established," Putin said, stressing that this right was included in other Soviet Constitutions of 1924, 1936 and 1977. "Certainly, we should avoid these things," Putin said.

"I am absolutely convinced that we are doing the right thing when passing amendments to the current Constitution. They will strengthen our statehood and create conditions for consistent development of our country for dozens of years to come," the Russian leader said.

The procedure of the republics' withdrawal from the Soviet Union was not regulated, Putin stressed. "The question arises: [what to do] if a republic joined the Soviet Union, but amassed into its "baggage" a huge number of Russian lands, traditional Russian historic territories and then suddenly decided to leave the Union," the Russian leader said. "Then, it should leave like when it came rather than drag "gifts" from the Russian people. Nothing of this was written down," Putin said.

On Friday, the Central Election Commission confirmed the outcome of the nationwide vote on amending the Russian Constitution. According to the document, 77.92% of voters backed the amendments to Russia's key law, while 21.27% opposed them. One of the amendments includes a ban on the alienation of Russian territories.

#### Israeli leader's son takes center stage in corruption sagas

As scandal-plagued Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stands trial for corruption, his 28-year-old son has emerged as a driving force in a counterattack against critics and the state institutions prosecuting the longtime Israeli leader.

A favorite of the prime minister's nationalistic base and far right leaders around the world, Yair Netanyahu has become a fixture in the news, clashing with journalists on social media, threatening lawsuits against his father's adversaries and posting online content deemed so offensive that Facebook briefly suspended his account.

In the past month alone, he has called to banish minorities from Tel Aviv, tweeted a



discredited conspiracy theory that former President Barack Obama was born in Kenya and intimated that a critical Israeli broadcast journalist slept her way up to her coveted job.

But his toughest broadsides have been directed at the Israeli media, judiciary and law enforcement for conducting what he has called a leftist, ideological crusade to topple his father. He's called for the attorney general to be investigated for his "crimes," compared the police chief to fictional mob boss Tony Soprano and described investigators as the Stasi, Gestapo and "the political police of the Israeli junta."

It's part of a campaign, echoed to a lesser degree by his father, that critics warn is eroding public faith in Israel's democratic institutions.

"We would love to just disregard him as a curiosity, as this difficult kid who keeps embarrassing his father. But the truth is there is evidence that he is very influential," said Raviv Drucker, a well-respected investigative TV reporter and favorite target of the Netanyahus, whom both father and son recently tweeted they would like to see imprisoned. "He holds very extreme positions and it affects the prime minister's actions." ... **P2**



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