

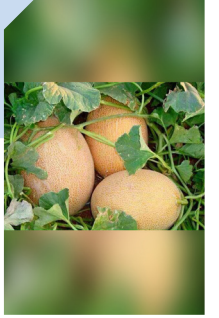


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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Monday, July 13, 2020

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10 afs



## EU contributes to WFP lifesaving aid to Afghans

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has welcomed a new contribution of EUR 3.6 million from the European Union (EU) for lifesaving assistance to the most vulnerable Afghans affected by natural and man-made disasters.

“Humanitarian needs across Afghanistan are high and communities in hard-to-reach areas, often with minimal healthcare services, are amongst those most in need of assistance,” said Luigi Pandolfi, head of EU humanitarian programs in Afghanistan.

“Coronavirus struck Afghanistan at a time of urgent needs and therefore the capacity of aid workers to reach food-insecure families, malnourished children and mothers has never been more important.”

The EU contribution will allow ... **P2**



## Taliban violence damaging hopes for intra-Afghan talks

The Presidential Palace on Sunday said the increased Taliban’s violence was damaging the Afghans’ and international community’s hopes for intra-Afghan talks.

Sediq Sediqi, spokesman for the Presidential Palace, wrote in his twitter account that the Taliban militants had increased their violence and civilians were killed and wounded in their attacks on security forces.

He said the Taliban had started a targeted killing spree by attacking government employees across the country.

He said the increased violence shattered the hopes of Afghans and international community for conduct of intra-Afghan talks.

The presidential spokesman called on the Taliban to bring their ongoing violence to an end and take real steps towards peace.

National Security Council (NSC) said on Saturday that 23 civilians were and 45 others wounded as a result of Taliban attacks last week in 16 provinces. ... **P2**

# Govt Seeks New List of Taliban Detainees: Sources



The Afghan government has asked the Taliban to provide a new list for the prisoners who have not been released so far, but the Taliban has insisted on the release of their prisoners based on an existing list, sources close to the group said Sunday.

The Afghan government has so far released 4,080 Taliban prisoners

and is currently refusing to free 597 detainees of the group, which is postponing the much-awaited intra-Afghan negotiations.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid in a tweet responded to criticism over the increase in violence, stressing that first the release of 5,000 prisoners should be completed and then intra-Afghan

negotiations should start.

Otherwise, he said, calls for stopping the violence are “illogical” and the group has not found another option to stop the war.

“Despite the government’s repeated call for a change in the list of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, the Taliban is still insisting that their list of 5,000 individuals is not open to change,”

said Sami Yousufzai, a free journalist familiar with the process.

He added: “The Afghan government thinks that there are up to 100 prisoners on the Taliban list who are not political prisoners, who are not Taliban, but they are involved in crime cases, or are accused of smuggling and (the government) wants their names deleted (from the list).”

The sources also said that of the 592 prisoners in question, at least 90 of them are those that even the Taliban is not in favor of releasing.

“This list of (Taliban) prisoners will not change... The Taliban is insisting that the list that was sent should be implemented,” said Sayed Akbar Agha, a former Taliban commander. Taliban spokesman Mujahid also questioned hurdles in the way of the talks, saying: “If someone does not want war, why are they creating hurdles for talks?” He said, “Let Afghans reach a result through political understanding that is the will of the nation and the international community.”

Critics said they see something else in the background of the calls for a new list or the emphasis on an existing list. ... **P3**

## Taliban reject int’l calls for cease-fire

The Taliban on Sunday rejected mounting calls for cease-fire by the Afghan government and international community, saying they were yet to find “an alternative” to the ongoing insurgency.

The group’s spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said on Twitter that the implementation of the Doha deal signed between the US and Taliban on Feb. 29 and the start of intra-Afghan negotiations would be necessary for the conflict to de-escalate and end. “If anyone seeks ceasefire before talks then such is illogical. War is raging precisely b/c we have yet to find an alternative,” he said. ... **P3**



# Private schools: Covid-19 renders thousands jobless

Around 55,000 people lost their jobs as a result of the closure of 2,500 private schools nation-wide.

The government also closed all schools for at least three months to stop the rapid spread of coronavirus in the country.

The Government Committee for Combating Coronavirus delayed the opening of schools for nearly one more month and will make a decision in this regard in early August.

The Afghanistan Private Schools Association on Sunday said 55,000 individuals directly lost their jobs due to the closure of 2,500 schools and also affected other activities concerning education.

Syed Dawod Bawar, the association head, said private schools and universities were not for business purpose as these institutions came into existence after the government failed to accommodate all students



in public sector schools.

He said President Ghani and the Higher Education Ministry had pledged to provide free internet for online teaching --- a promise which remains unfulfilled.

He added: “The Ministry of Education had no plan but we were able to impart education to hundreds through video clips. Our program was for three months, but we were not supported.”

He alleged the government would keep schools closed even after the end of quarantine in order to

attract funds from the international community.

Sanjar Khalid, another member of the association, demanded opening of schools and added quarantine period had ended.

He said if the government was unable to reopen schools, the private sector was ready to reopen schools with pre-cautionary measures in place.

Syed Navid Amiri, another member of the association, said business centres, parks, transport and other places had opened while only schools were shut.



### EU contributes...

WFP to distribute food to nearly 470,000 people displaced by conflict or affected by natural hazards, including seasonal flooding and landslides.

It will also help WFP reach more than 150,000 malnourished children as well as pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in remote areas with food and nutrition assistance through mobile health teams.

"We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the EU," said Robert Kasca, WFP Deputy Country Director and Officer-in-Charge in Afghanistan.

"This generous funding comes at a critical time, as needs are rising rapidly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will help us save and protect many lives, offering critical support to communities which are still struggling to overcome the long-term impact of conflict and insecurity, compounded by the worst drought in a decade that hit the country in 2018."

Recently, the EU contributed an additional EUR 500,000 to boost WFP's supply chain capacity in Afghanistan. With that funding, WFP will purchase four new all-terrain trucks to replace old vehicles that have been in service for three decades.

### Taliban violence...

The insurgents inflicted casualties on 68 civilians during the week. Roadside bombings, targeted killings and direct fire were major causes of civilian casualties, the NSC said in a statement

By Frud Bezhn

# As U.S. Moves to Exit Afghanistan, Rivals Prepare to Swoop In

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was backed by most countries in the region, who shared the goal of ousting the extremist Taliban regime and eliminating the allied Al-Qaeda terrorist network.

The governments in Tehran, Moscow, and Islamabad readily helped the United States fight the extremist groups.

Iran provided crucial intelligence to support U.S. special forces and CIA teams orchestrating the invasion.

Russia supplied Soviet-era maps and intelligence and later allowed the U.S. military to send supplies to Afghanistan through its territory.

Even Pakistan, the chief backer of the Taliban, offered its assistance in helping hunt down Al-Qaeda militants and became the main supply line for NATO forces.

But in the intervening 19 years, the regional consensus favoring the U.S. troops in Afghanistan has eroded.

Though the U.S. military swiftly overthrew the Taliban and eliminated Al-Qaeda safe havens in Afghanistan, many feel it got bogged down in mission creep.

Meanwhile, Washington's ties with many regional players -- including Pakistan, Iran, and Russia -- became toxic.

With U.S. forces scheduled to exit Afghanistan next year as part of a framework peace deal with the Taliban, Washington's rivals see an opportunity to step in and expand their footprint in the war-torn country.

Those efforts have intensified since the United States and the Taliban signed a deal in February aimed at negotiating an end to the war, which began way back in 2001.

Under that agreement, U.S. forces will withdraw from Afghanistan by May 2021 in exchange for counterterrorism guarantees from the Taliban, which has pledged to negotiate a permanent cease-fire and power-sharing deal with the Kabul government.

The delayed intra-Afghan peace talks are expected to be complex and protracted, and will likely take years. Impatient to end the costly and unpopular war, President Donald Trump is considering fast-tracking the exit of American troops ahead of the U.S. presidential election in November, according to U.S. media reports.

Experts say that in the absence of a peace deal, a U.S. military withdrawal could ignite a free-for-all that involves regional powers pursuing often competing interests in Afghanistan.

"The stage has already been set, with many key actors



-- including Russia and Iran -- increasing their ties with both the Afghan state and the Taliban," says Michael Kugelman, South Asia senior associate at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

"The objective is to develop more influence and generate more leverage with key actors across the board, so that they will be in a better position to pursue and achieve their goals in a post-America Afghanistan -- a place we can expect to be increasingly unstable and complex."

Iran, Pakistan, and Russia -- with long histories of meddling in the country -- are hedging their bets. The three countries have sought to improve their relations with the Western-backed government in Kabul, while also reaching out to the Taliban in case it gains a role in a future Afghan government.

Islamabad has retained its long-standing ties with the Taliban and shelters the group's leadership, while Tehran and Moscow have been tacitly working to bolster their ties with the militants, with the goal of expanding their own strategic interests in Afghanistan.

'Make The Taliban Even Stronger' Pakistan has long been accused of playing a double game in Afghanistan, sheltering and aiding the Taliban while receiving billions in U.S. aid to clamp down on

the militants.

Pakistan's ties to the Taliban date back to the 1990s, when it provided arms, training, and intelligence to the militants. Islamabad was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban government when it took power in Afghanistan in 1996. After the regime's fall in 2001, many Taliban leaders took shelter inside Pakistan.

Observers say Pakistan sees the Taliban as an insurance policy for reaching its long-standing strategic goals in Afghanistan -- installing a pro-Pakistan government in Kabul and limiting the influence of its archrival India, which has close ties to Kabul.

Experts say Pakistan stands to be the biggest beneficiary of a U.S. military pullout from Afghanistan.

"If a withdrawal leads to a peace process that results in a settlement, then Pakistan would benefit as this would likely entail the Taliban holding a fair share of power," says Kugelman. "If the peace process collapses and the U.S. withdrawal ushers in a period of extended destabilization, Pakistan would still benefit because it would make the Taliban even stronger."

'Buffer Zone'

Iran has supported its traditional allies in Afghanistan -- the Shi'ite Hazara minority and the Persian-speaking ethnic Tajiks -- while recently establishing contacts with the Taliban, a predominately ... **P3**

By Andrew Hammond

## Is Afghanistan approaching peace breakthrough?

Afghan President Ashraf Gani briefed foreign governments on Friday on preparations for peace talks with the Taliban. Yet, while the forthcoming negotiations may see a historic breakthrough, they remain balanced on a knife edge with Gani warning last week that an upsurge in Taliban violence may scupper the whole process. The intra-Afghan talks, slated to begin in the Qatari capital Doha as soon as this month, are part of a wider February deal between the United States and the Taliban to end the post-9/11 two-decades long war in the country. This is now the longest ever running US involvement in a military conflict, and the Trump team badly wants to signal a further commitment to drawdown US troops with

November's presidential election on the horizon.

The US peace deal with the Taliban, which involves withdrawal of foreign forces in exchange for security guarantees by the Taliban, comes as Afghanistan stands at a critical crossroads with much uncertainty on the horizon. This is not least given the continued violence across the nation, with insurgents now controlling perhaps the largest portion of the country since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.

While a historic peace breakthrough is possible, there remains a prospect of significant new political, security and economic instability if the reconciliation process breaks down.

While the peace process with the Taliban may

offer the best hope for a sustained peace for decades, many in Afghanistan are understandably anxious about their collective futures. While fragile gains have been made since 2001, the country faces a daunting array of economic, security, and political risks. And this is despite the fact that well over a €100 billion has been already spent by Washington alone in the last 20 years.

The biggest challenge may remain the country's internal security situation, despite pledges that are made by Taliban militants. This point was emphasised by Gani on Wednesday in briefings with international governments, including the United States, Russia, Pakistan, India, ... **P3**

### Poland votes...

Duda has the support of the powerful ruling party leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski and prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki.

He has travelled across Poland visiting open-air markets and vowing to protect the government's signature spending policies. He was especially well-received in farming regions and small towns, where government-paid bonuses have helped alleviate poverty and have given families with children more money to spend.

"This election will decide Poland's development in the future, whether it will continue on the path to development," Duda said at a rally in Starachowice, an industrial town of 50,000 in central Poland.

Duda has claimed that Trzaskowski would cut the popular welfare spending programs -- but Trzaskowski has vowed to preserve them, acknowledging the "mistake" his pro-business party made in not introducing such help earlier. Sunday's vote, just like the first round, will be held under strict sanitary conditions.

Voters must wear masks and gloves, maintain a safe distance, and use hand sanitizer. They can use their own pens to mark ballots. Election officials must wear masks and sit apart from each other, and ballot boxes will be regularly disinfected in well-ventilated polling stations. Morawiecki, the prime minister, said the virus is "retreating" and urged everyone to vote, which was seen as encouraging Duda's older supporters, some of whom did not vote in June's first round out of health concerns.

"The political situation is tense, the outcome may be a very close call, and that has pushed the coronavirus theme into the background," Jarostaw Flis, a political scientist with the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, was quoted as saying by the Gazeta Prawna newspaper.

Concerns were raised in the first round that some voters outside the country were disenfranchised because many mail-in ballots reached voters too late.

Trzaskowski won 48.1 per cent of votes cast from abroad, while Duda got 20.9 per cent, according to official results.

### UN renews Syria...

votes on Russian proposals and two vetoes by Russia and China of resolutions drafted by Germany and Belgium. Acting British UN Ambassador Jonathan Allen said after the vote that the loss of aid access through Bab al-Salaam border crossing would deprive "1.3 million people in northwest Syria of cross-border humanitarian assistance that they rely on". "One border crossing is not enough, but no border crossings would have left the fate

of an entire region in question," Germany and Belgium said in a joint statement after the vote. China's UN Ambassador Zhang Jun said Beijing always had reservations about the delivery of cross-border aid, but given the current situation in Syria, it does not object to retaining it "at this stage".

Aid agencies operating in Syria said in a joint statement on Sunday that the recent UN Security Council decision will cause loss of many lives in the region.



# Melon yield jumps in Kunduz this year

The yield of melon increased in northern Kunduz province this year amid complaints about lack of buyers.

Jabar, a grower in Chahardara district, told Pajhwok Afghan News he collected 30,000 afghanis gross income from his half an acre of land last year, compared to 50,000 afghanis this year from the same land.

He said, "Some diseases damaged the melon yield last year but this year we cultivated less land and spent more money, therefore the harvest is satisfactory."

Rahmatullah, another farmer in Aliabad district, told Pajhwok the yield of melon increased this year but they were concerned about the lack of market.



He said, "I tried a lot to have good income, but we lack market and attention from the government side."

The farmer urged the government to support and provide them medicines at the time of cultivation in the province.

Agriculture Director Hadi Qarliq told Pajhwok 111,000 hectares of land was brought under melon cultivation in Kunduz City, the provincial capital, Alibad and Khanabad districts this year.

He said according to their information the melon yield

increased by eight percent this year over last year's yield in the province. He said Kunduz exported melons to Kabul, Badakhshan, Khost, Paktia, Nangarhar, Laghman and some other provinces. He said efforts were underway to address growers' issues in near future.

### Taliban reject...

Mujahed underlined that prisoner exchanges must be completed and intra-Afghan negotiations launched "immediately" for a resolution to the fighting.

Last week, Afghan President Mohammed Ashraf Ghani warned the peace process might face "serious challenges" if the Taliban continued with the war.

In a virtual conference with the representatives of some 20 regional countries and international organizations, Ghani underlined that though the Afghan government had the capacity and political will to end the war, it had offered the Taliban a political solution to move away from violence.

"The champions of peace will be people of Afghanistan and the region. Regional support for a democratic system in Afghanistan would further strengthen regional cooperation," he said.

The rejuvenated yet fragile Afghan peace deal hinges on sluggish prison swaps testing the patience of the warring parties.

In line with a landmark US-Taliban peace agreement -- which was only cautiously welcomed by the Afghan government -- some 5,000 Taliban prisoners should have been released months ago from government prisons in return for the estimated 1,000 captive security forces.

The freeing of prisoners came to a halt less than halfway through in May amid bitter exchanges and allegations, as well as a spike in violence across the war-ravaged country. According to official sources, there are 12,000-15,000 inmates in Afghan government prisons, including militants from Pakistan, Central Asia and Gulf countries. No figures are available on captives held by the insurgents.

### Govt Seeks New...

"The main issue is not that these individuals are involved in crimes," said Mahmoud Marhoon, a university lecturer. Critics also said that the government should make public the list of prisoners about which it has reservations.

"It is good that the government differentiates who is a war criminal, who is a prisoner and who is political," said Farooq Zamani, an analyst.

The Taliban has so far released over 700 prisoners out of a pledged 1,000 inmates. They released 17 prisoners in Ghor and 12 in Herat in the last two days.

### Is Afghanistan...

China, Egypt and Qatar, when he highlighted a spike in Taliban violence.

This increase in disorder comes after Afghan authorities have released more than 4,000 of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners promised in February's deal. Meanwhile, Washington has reduced its troop presence to 8,600 (from 12,000) with the plan to potentially withdraw all foreign forces potentially by the middle of next year.

Worries over economy In this context, fears have been repeatedly raised that, should the security situation deteriorate much further in coming months, this foreign force (now a tiny fraction of the previously 150,000-strong combat presence) is not big enough.

This footprint also remains key for ensuring training and cohesion for the several hundred thousand strong Afghan police and

military personnel -- which have day-to-day responsibility for security in the country -- which may otherwise disintegrate. On the economic front, the news is not good either. Reconstruction has been slow, unemployment remains very high, and over a million Afghans are internally displaced in the country, with millions more refugees believed to be in Pakistan and Iran. And this, despite estimations that Washington has spent more on Afghan reconstruction than the cost of the Marshall Plan that helped rebuild Europe after the Second World War.

One of the most corrupt states in the world It is also clear that, since 2001, the economy has not been diversified enough from drug exports such as opium and heroin, despite the fact that the country has abundant natural resources -- gas, minerals and

oil -- with an estimated value of some \$3 trillion. A related problem is corruption with Transparency International ranking Afghanistan as one of the most corrupt states in the world.

However, in the midst of this difficult picture, there remains some cause for optimism, especially if a sustainable peace deal can be agreed with the Taliban. Take the example of the country's fledgling democracy.

The country's first national unity government survived more than a half decade of a landmark power-sharing agreement was reached in 2014 between Gani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, the former foreign minister. The creation of the national unity government represented the first democratic transfer of power in the country's history following Hamid Karzai's administration.

### As U.S. Moves...

Pashtun group. Iran and the Taliban were on the verge of war in 1998 -- when the group controlled most of Afghanistan -- after the deaths of eight Iranian diplomats in the Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif.

Tehran backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance before the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. But in recent years the Islamic republic and the Taliban have forged closer ties, with militant leaders even visiting Tehran.

The relationship between Shi'ite-majority Iran and the Taliban, a fundamentalist Sunni group, is complex. Iran officially opposes the Taliban, but experts say it provides some military support to the mainstream Taliban and even rival breakaway factions. Analysts say that while Iran does not want the Taliban to return to power, Tehran is looking to maintain influence with the group as a hedge in case the Taliban becomes a political player in Afghanistan or it forcibly seizes control of the country.

"These initiatives serve the

purpose of securing Iran's sphere of influence in Afghanistan and perhaps even creating a buffer zone on Afghan soil to protect parts of Iran's eastern borders from infiltration by forces hostile to Iran," says Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. 'A Great Power' For more than a decade after the U.S.-led invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin praised Washington for taking on the "burden" of fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and urged it to "carry it to the end."

But since 2014, the Kremlin has attempted to undermine the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, fueled by Moscow's desire to be an international power broker and its rivalry with the West in Ukraine and Syria, where Russia joined Iran in supporting President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Moscow said it has established contacts with the Taliban in recent years because of the common threat posed by the Islamic State (IS) extremist group

in Afghanistan. Washington has accused Russia of arming the Taliban, which it denies.

In the past two years, Moscow has hosted two international conferences on the Afghan peace process, inviting Taliban leaders and Afghan opposition members. Earlier this month, U.S. media reported that a Russian military intelligence unit had offered secret bounties to the Taliban if they killed U.S. or NATO-member troops in Afghanistan.

Moscow and the Taliban have denied the reports, which are based on U.S. intelligence assessments. But the revelations have served to highlight Moscow's murky dealings in Afghanistan.

"Russia's interests in Afghanistan are twofold: to avoid an explosion of chaos on the borders of what it considers its sphere of influence, and to use it as an opportunity to demonstrate and assert its claim to be a great power," says Mark Galeotti, a Russia analyst and a senior associate fellow at the British-based Royal United Services Institute.

### Exchange Rates

|      |       |      |
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# Trump seen wearing face mask in public for first time

U.S. President Donald Trump wore a face mask in public for the first time Saturday, finally yielding to intense pressure to set a public health example as the coronavirus rampages across America.

Trump had on a black mask as he walked through the corridors of Walter Reed military hospital outside Washington to meet with wounded veterans.

Trump walked past reporters and did not stop to speak to them about what had become a hotly anticipated moment – his possible change of mind on a practice recommended by the government’s own medical experts, even as he resisted.

At the medical facility, Trump walked by media gathered for a carefully staged photo opportunity wearing a navy blue mask emblazoned with a presidential seal embossed in gold.

“I think it’s a great thing to wear a mask. I’ve

never been against masks but I do believe they have a time and a place,” Trump said as he left the White House.

News reports this week said aides practically begged the president to relent and wear a mask in public – and let himself be photographed wearing it – as coronavirus cases soar in some states and as Trump trails Democrat Joe Biden badly in polls ahead of the November election. Even as other officials in his administration called for the use of masks and social distancing, Trump pressured states to reopen closed economies. Trump has steadfastly defended his administration’s handling of the pandemic even though the U.S. is the hardest-hit country in the world.

The country has recently seen several days of more than 60,000 new cases, nearly 135,000 people have died and states have been left to figure out on their own how to reopen without



a clear and coherent strategy from the White House.

As of 5:33 p.m. EDT Saturday, confirmed

coronavirus cases in the U.S. stand at 3,228,884, with 65,379 new confirmed cases in the past 24 hours, according to Johns Hopkins University.

### A look at the world

#### UN renews Syria aid via Turkey but one of two access points shut

The United Nations Security Council has approved aid deliveries to Syria from Turkey, but only after caving in to Russian pressure to close one of the two access points into the war-torn country.

Following a week of division and seven ballots, the UNSC on Saturday passed a proposal submitted by Germany and Belgium allowing the use of the Bab al-Hawa crossing point for one year.

Western nations say the closure of the second access point will cut a lifeline for 1.3 million Syrians in the country’s northwest.

Authorisation for the continued transport of aid to Syria, a system in place since 2014,



expired on Friday night.

The 15-member UNSC had been deadlocked, with most members pitted against Syrian allies Russia and China over the issue.

Russia and China, which hold veto power at the council, wanted to halve the approved Turkey border crossings to one, arguing that northwest Syria could be reached from within the country.

In the session, the measure was approved by 12 of 15 members in the council’s fifth vote this week on the issue, with Russia, China and the Dominican Republic abstaining.

German UN Ambassador Christoph Heusgen told his Chinese and Russian counterparts to report back to their capitals “how those people who gave the instructions to cut off the aid of 500,000 children ... are ready to look into the mirror tomorrow”.

Fifth vote

For weeks, Russia, Syria’s most important ally, had been demanding an end to the use of the Bab al-Salaam border crossing, which leads to the Aleppo region in northern Syria.

Council members had also been split on whether to renew authorisation for six months or one year.

“Russia is consistently in favour of humanitarian deliveries to Syria with full respect of the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and with coordination of its legal government. This issue should not be politicised,” deputy Russian UN envoy Dmitry Polyanskiy said after the vote.

The successful vote came after two failed ... **P2**

#### Misaligned radar led to Ukrainian plane downing: Iran



Iran on Sunday announced that poor communication, and a misaligned missile battery led to the accidental downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane on January 8.

In a new report, Iran’s Civil Aviation Organization said the surface-to-air missile battery that targeted the Boeing 737-800 had been relocated and was not properly reoriented.

The plane that was struck by two missiles shortly after taking off from Tehran’s main airport, it said, was misidentified and targeted due to poor communication between a defense unit operator and the command center.

Those manning the missile battery opened fire twice without getting a response from ranking officials, the report said.

The disaster occurred hours after Iran fired missiles at American troops stationed in Iraq. The strikes were in response to the Jan. 3 killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani in a US drone attack. Initially, Iran said it did not shoot down the plane, but later admitted to the “human error” that killed all 176 people on board.

The victims on the Kyiv-bound plane were from Iran, Canada, Ukraine, Sweden, Afghanistan, and the UK.

#### Poland votes: Poles head to the ballot box in knife-edge presidential election runoff

Voters in Poland will decide a tight runoff election on Sunday between populist incumbent President Andrzej Duda and his liberal pro-European Union challenger, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski.

Recent opinion polls show a race so close that it could hinge on a narrow margin of voters, which added urgency to the final days of campaigning in the central EU nation of 38 million people.

If Duda is reelected, he and the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party that backs him will maintain a hold on almost all key instruments




of power in the country, possibly until the next parliamentary election, which is scheduled for 2023.

The party’s welfare policies have helped reduce income inequality, creating reservoirs of admiration, especially in rural areas where the party’s attachment to Roman Catholic traditions also goes far.

But PiS has exacerbated divisions in society with rhetoric marginalising liberals, the LGBT+ community and other minority groups. It has also drawn criticism from some EU leaders for laws that increase political influence over Poland’s justice system.

A victory for Trzaskowski, who belongs to the main opposition party, Civic Platform (PO), would give him veto power over the laws passed by the ruling party. Also, since the Polish president represents the country abroad, Trzaskowski would bring a more pro-European side of Poland to European forums. “If Trzaskowski wins, it will be a clear sign that the society has had enough and wants a kind of politics where compromise is a value,” said Wojciech Przybylski, editor in chief of Visegrad Insight, a policy journal focused on Central Europe.

Duda and Trzaskowski, both 48, eliminated nine other candidates in the first round on June 28. Duda got 43.5 per cent support and Trzaskowski got 30.5 per cent but is expected to pick up many of the votes that went to other candidates in the first round. There are nearly 30 million eligible voters and the new president will serve a five-year term. ... **P2**



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