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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Issue No. 817

www.heartofasia.af

10 afs



Afghanistan offers internet at 34-time higher rate compared to India

The internet price has been reduced in Afghanistan from nine afghanis per one GB data to 6.5 afghanis, but the rate is still 34 times higher as compared to India and seven times compared to Pakistan. Telecommunications and Information Technology Ministry spokesman Hamid Poya told Pajhwok Afghan News that Afghanistan purchased the internet from Pakistan and Kazakhstan and then sold to telecom companies.

He said previously the telecom firms offered one GB data to customers for nine afghanis, but the rate had been reduced to 6.5 afghanis.

Poya said telecom companies had promised to further cut the internet price, but the promise remained unfulfilled. However, Afghan Wireless and Salaam network had somehow reduced the internet price.

"We are not happy with services ... **P2**



Pompeo Warned Russia About Bounties to Taliban for Killing U.S. Troops in Afghanistan

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reportedly warned Russia's foreign minister last month about alleged bounty payments that Russia offered Taliban militants to target U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Pompeo warned Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov against placing bounties on the heads of American soldiers during a July 13 phone call, the New York Times reported, citing unidentified U.S. officials. The phone call was officially about a separate topic, the possibility of meeting between the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, two of which are the U.S. and Russia along with China, France, and Britain. The secretary of state expressed Washington's intense opposition to the bounty program but spoke in terms of payouts and red lines ... **P3**

Loya Jirga: No committee opposed Taliban prisoners' release: Abdullah



Consultative Loya Jirga (CLJ) chairman Abdullah Abdullah on Saturday said no committee of the ongoing jirga had opposed the release of 400 Taliban prisoners but demanded their conditional release. Addressing reporters here, Abdullah said there was no contradiction over the release of Taliban prisoners within the committees, adding that

generally no committee opposed their release.

Without going into more detail, he said: "Majority of the committees have demanded conditional release of Taliban prisoners."

He said the CLJ decision will be announced today (Sunday) and that after the release of Taliban prisoners, intra-Afghan talks would

begin in three days in Doha.

He hoped the Taliban will not come with more conditions and if something like this happened, the people of Afghanistan will take their decision.

The CLJ head rejected the release of any foreign terrorist, saying: "There is no foreigner in these 400 prisoners."

He said matters related to individual rights were vital and the CLJ offered their suggestions in this regard.

Abdullah said there was consensus on CLJ, but some key political parties leaders were missing and only their representatives were present.

Abdullah warned the Taliban against making any obstacles in the way of this historic opportunity for peace.

Answering a question about whether there are any foreign nationals among the 400 prisoners, Abdullah said: "They are Afghan Taliban, there are no foreign fighters among these 400 prisoners," he said.

This comes a day after the President Ashraf Ghani in his inauguration speech to the Loya Jirga said that the Taliban have stated they will start direct talks with the Afghan government and civil society faction in three days if these 400 prisoners are released.

Ghani also said that the Taliban have warned of continued bloodshed if these inmates are not released.

Only hours after the start of the Loya Jirga, the US State Department in a statement welcomed the Loya Jirga, saying the Jirga will consolidate national support for peace in Afghanistan and determine ... **P3**

Negotiators, Jirga Delegates Call for Flexibility on All Sides

The members of the negotiation team and some delegates of the Loya Jirga, the grand assembly, on Saturday called on the Taliban to show flexibility in the peace process as hopes increase for the start of intra-Afghan negotiations if the prisoner release is completed.

The Taliban so far has not released a statement on their willingness to begin the talks within three days after the completion of the prisoner release.

"We are more ready, and more issues were discussed. Talks require flexibility and both sides should show flexibility, but basic principles and the values of the Afghan people are the issues ... **P3**



Pompeo speaks with Pak foreign minister on Afghanistan and regional stability

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke with Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi over phone and the two leaders discussed the Afghan peace process and regional stability, his spokesperson said on Friday.

"Secretary Pompeo and Minister Qureshi discussed a range of issues, including the importance of US-Pakistan cooperation on the Afghan peace process and the importance of efforts to support regional stability," said Cale Brown, State Department's Principal Deputy Spokesperson.

Pompeo's telephonic talks with Qureshi came a day after the Secretary of State spoke to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and discussed a range of issues.

The two leaders spoke over phone on Thursday and reiterated the strength of the India-US relationship



to advance peace, prosperity and security in the Indo-Pacific region and around the globe, Brown said on Thursday.

During the phone call, Jaishankar and Pompeo discussed the ongoing bilateral and multilateral cooperation on the issues of international concern, including efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, support the peace

process in Afghanistan, and address the recent destabilising actions in the region, Brown said in a readout of the telephonic conversation.

In Islamabad, the Pakistan Foreign Office said in a statement that Qureshi and Pompeo discussed bilateral relations, and developments in the region with a view to promoting peace, prosperity and stability. ... **P3**

Iran asks UN...

The Iranian ambassador said in line with provisions of the Convention on International Civil Aviation, Iran's civil aviation organisation contacted Syrian authorities and called for "a prompt and accurate investigation of the incident".

He said Iranian authorities also launched a probe after the plane returned from Beirut, Lebanon.

The results of both investigations will be released "after the revision and finalisation of the collected data and information" by both teams, Ravanchi said.

"It is obvious that the act by the United States fighter jets is a flagrant violation of the aviation security and freedom of civil aviation reflected in the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation and its relevant annexes, as well as an infringement of the 1971 Montreal Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation," he said.

"It is incumbent upon the United Nations to reject such an unlawful and yet adventurist act and hold the United States accountable for this irresponsible behaviour."

Afghanistan offers...

offered by the telecom companies. They should offer internet at affordable and cheap rate," he said, adding the government was ready to reduce the internet price if the telecom firms did so.

The price of monthly 10GB internet data is 1,099 afs, MTN 6.8GB internet data 725 afs, Etisalat 10GB internet data 999 afs and Afghan Wireless offers 4GB at the cost of 800 afs.

By SAMUEL RAMANI

Russia Is Winning the Information War in Afghanistan

Since 2015, when Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev suspended Moscow's participation in the Northern Distribution Network supply route, which facilitated the transit of food, fuel, and hardware for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Russia has transformed from an inconsistent partner to a multipronged adversary of the United States in Afghanistan.

To expedite a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and once again establish a geopolitical foothold in the war-torn country, Russia allegedly supplied light weaponry to the Taliban and hosted alternative peace negotiations, which undermined Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's sovereign authority.

The controversy surrounding U.S. President Donald Trump's nonchalant response to Russia's alleged payment of bounties to Afghan militants targeting U.S. forces has inspired a flurry of news stories about Moscow's relationship with the Taliban, but media outlets have paid little attention to a similarly insidious threat to U.S. national security: Russia's information war against U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Although Russian news channels have highlighted speculative accounts of U.S. criminality in Afghanistan for over a decade, Russia's information war against U.S. forces in Afghanistan intensified after Moscow strengthened its security ties with the Taliban in 2015. Russia's disinformation, which is transmitted through radio broadcasts and Kremlin-backed online media outlets, seeks to influence Afghan public opinion of the United States.

In particular, Russia's disinformation seeks to increase Afghan support for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces and fuel suspicions about the intentions of the residual U.S. security force presence in postwar Afghanistan.

By promoting anti-American conspiracies on Russian-owned state media outlets that reach an Afghan audience in their native language, such as Sputnik Dari, and lending support to these stories in official statements, the Kremlin has retooled its well-documented array of political interference strategies against Western democracies into a weapon of war in Afghanistan.

Although memories of the Soviet-Afghanistan War of 1979-1989 continue to fuel anti-Russian feelings in Afghanistan, Russia's infrastructure investments and construction of educational institutions have improved its image among young Afghans, who view the United



States as an occupying power. The improvement of Russia's image and growth of anti-American sentiment has bolstered the traction of Russian disinformation in Afghanistan. Sputnik Dari boasts over 275,000 followers on Facebook, who receive multiple daily updates with stories condemning U.S. conduct in Afghanistan.

Much like Russia's efforts to sow distrust of liberal democracy in Western societies, Moscow's disinformation tactics in Afghanistan have been characterized by their ideological fluidity and diverse—and sometimes contradictory—array of messages. Russia has largely promoted two narratives about U.S. conduct in Afghanistan. The first is that the United States is the primary contributor to instability and extremism in Afghanistan, and the second is that the U.S. government has neocolonial ambitions in Afghanistan, which have prolonged its military presence and will be completely unmasked as soon as the war ends.

The narrative that the United States has destabilized Afghanistan through passivity toward terrorism or active support of extremist networks, such as the Islamic State, is a central theme of Russian state media coverage of Afghanistan. In an October 2017 interview with RT, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has been Kremlin-friendly since he endorsed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, described the Islamic State in Afghanistan as a "tool" that the United States uses to advance its broader regional goals.

In a February 2018 interview with Sputnik Dari, Ahmad Wahid Mozhdha, a former mujahideen commander and Afghan political analyst, stated that many Afghans believed a "mysterious foreign hand" was supporting the Islamic State. As clarified later in the interview, this foreign hand was a direct reference to the United States. To reinforce the credibility of these assertions, Russian media outlets have highlighted the alleged U.S.-Islamic State alliance as an international phenomenon, which also seeks to undermine Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's legitimate authority and Iran's geopolitical influence in Iraq.

Russian officials have repeatedly endorsed these allegations in public statements and interviews with Russian state media outlets. In August 2018, the Russian foreign ministry claimed that "unidentified helicopters" were delivering weapons to the Islamic State in Afghanistan. This assertion built on Sputnik's prior interview with former Afghan Gen. Atiqullah Amarkhel, which alluded to the possibility of U.S. planes helping Islamic State fighters smuggle precious stones and narcotics from Afghanistan.

This disinformation narrative continued unabated, even as Russia offered to serve as a guarantor for a U.S.-Taliban peace agreement. In September 2019, Sergey Beseda, a senior Russian intelligence official, accused the United States of transferring Islamic State militants to northern Afghanistan.

On July 4, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, claimed that U.S. collusion ...

P3

Withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan to benefit China: Report

The US' decision to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan after 20 years of war against the Taliban will be an advantage for China to establish its influence in the region

The US' decision to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan after 20 years of war against the Taliban will be an advantage for China to establish its influence in the region, according to a report in the US News.

China and Pakistan have reportedly begun an unprecedented intelligence-sharing arrangement to secure Beijing's influence in Afghanistan.

A source familiar with a US assessment, spoke on the condition of anonymity, "The reality is now dawning within the intelligence community...We are now leaving Afghanistan, but who are we leaving it to?"

As China needs Pakistan's experience in Afghanistan as well as Islamabad's connections to the terrorist groups operating there, who will determine the war-torn country's fate, Beijing has reportedly invited a Pakistani general to sit in on its highly restricted meetings as an observer.

Meanwhile, China and Pakistan have secured a promise from the Taliban leaders to not provide support to the

Uyghur Muslims.

"The arrangement far exceeds any accommodation the Afghan insurgent network has ever afforded the US with regard to Washington's concerns about al-Qaida presence in Afghanistan," the article said.

The current US government and officials disclosed how Pakistan fits into China's ambitions for its southern and western border regions and that shifting priorities in Beijing require greater collaboration with a limited number of outside countries.

"If the Chinese are bringing Pakistan more 'behind the curtain,' in terms of intelligence and military cooperation, it will be tailored to their common interests like confronting India over territorial disputes," Vikram Singh, a former top official at the Pentagon for South and South-East Asian affairs, was quoted as saying.

"Pakistan's leadership has really backed China on Uyghur internment, even though Pakistanis are upset by the repression of Muslims in Xinjiang," said Singh, who is presently a senior advisor at the US Institute of Peace's Asia Center.

The latest developments show how China-Pakistan partnership has seen a big boost in recent years. This comes

amid tensions with the US government over Islamabad supporting terror networks that Washington wanted to defeat in Afghanistan. At that time, Pakistan was keen to cease intelligence sharing with the US, following which Washington retaliated by saying it would slash military aid amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars to Islamabad.

Amid the US-Pakistan tensions, Chinese President Xi Jinping faced massive pressure over China's investments in Afghanistan in the past few years, especially in mineral wealth amounting to billions of dollars but largely left inaccessible in view of the poor security situation.

Apart from that, Beijing was facing massive criticism for its mistreatment on Uyghurs in Xinjiang province of western China. The CCP has turned the region into a "brutal totalitarian police state" and everything unique about Uyghurs is "systematically targeted". Amidst growing calls for action against the Chinese officials involved in human rights violations in Xinjiang. The US had recently imposed sanctions and visa restrictions against high-ranking Chinese officials and firms over human rights violations in Xinjiang.

U.S. State...

The suit claims that MBS has been trying to kill al-Jabri for the past three years, that "Defendant bin Salman continues in his attempted extrajudicial killing to this day", and that MBS has obtained "a ruling by religious authorities endorsing the killing of Dr. Saad [Al-Jabri]". It further alleges that al-Jabri's "close ties to the US Intelligence Community stand in the way of Defendant bin Salman's consolidation of influence and power among US government officials", and seeks a jury trial in the US. Kaldahl's letter said it was concerned about any "alleged activities" that led al-Jabri to go to exile in Canada and said accusations of wrongdoing by him should be addressed through legal channels. Saudi Arabia, which has issued Interpol red notices seeking al-Jabri's return that have since been dismissed as political, has urged other countries to send al-Jabri back to the kingdom, accusing

the former senior intelligence officer of corruption.

Al-Jabri had access to the highest levels of information in decades as an intelligence officer working closely with US counterparts.

The four US senators who have sought to help him wrote last month: "As a top intelligence officer in Saudi Arabia, Dr Al-Jabri has been credited by former CIA officials for saving thousands of American lives by discovering and preventing terrorist plots."

They said the US has a "moral obligation to do what it can to assist in securing his children's freedom".

The State Department reply said the US-Saudi partnership "permits us to engage in frank discussions in areas where we disagree" and that in coordination with the White House and other US government agencies it would "continue to engage Saudi counterparts to resolve this situation in a manner that honors Dr. Aljabri's service to our country".

Afghanistan transits 15,000 tons of goods through Iran's Dogharoon border

Afghanistan has transited over 15,000 tons of commodities through Dogharoon border with Iran in the first four months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20-July 21). The mentioned commodities have been sent to their destination markets through Iran's southern ports or Western land borders, IRNA quoted Hamid Mohammadifaz, an official with the Iranian Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization

(RMTTO), as saying on Friday. "These goods were imported by 610 trucks, of which 34 truckloads were transited to Turkey from the western borders and the rest went to the southern ports of the country," the official said. "While last year only 11 trucks transited cargoes from Dogharoon border crossing to the southeastern Chabahar port, this year, 256 trucks have transited Afghanistan's goods

through this route," he noted. Dogharoon is one of Iran's top border customs in terms of employing modern management technologies, electronic infrastructures, and computerization which is located on the Iran-Afghanistan border in the northeastern Khorasan Razavi Province. Trade through the border, which was closed temporarily due to the coronavirus pandemic, was officially

resumed in June. Transit cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan has witnessed considerable growth in recent years despite the restrictions caused by the U.S. sanctions and also the outbreak of the coronavirus. Earlier this week, Afghanistan's private sector signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to transit goods via Iran's southeastern Chabahar Port.

Negotiators, Jirga...

that are not negotiable and cannot be compromised from our side," said Fawzia Kofi, member of the negotiation team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, who also chairs the Loya Jirga, said the first round of the intra-Afghan negotiations will be held in Doha, if the prisoner release is completed. "It seems that the people do not have any problem in releasing the prisoners, but they want a nationwide and reliable peace," said Amir Mohammad Akhondzada, former governor of Helmand. A former Taliban member, Sayed Akbar Agha, said "intra-Afghan talks need time and it must be clear about who are the nation's representatives and who are not." "The two sides should start the intra-Afghan negotiations sharply after the release of the 400 prisoners," said Shaida Mohammad Abdali, Afghanistan's former ambassador to India. As the jirga is expected to break the stalemate on the release of prisoners, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) chairperson Patricia Gossman said that the dispute has highlighted "fundamental problems" in the Afghan justice system and amplified fears that the peace process will not challenge longstanding impunity.

Loya Jirga: No committee...

the fate of the remaining Taliban prisoners which are a major obstacle to starting the intra-Afghan talks. "The United States commends the participants of the Loya Jirga to be convened on August 7 to consolidate national support for peace. We understand that they will decide on the expeditious release of the remaining Taliban prisoners from their list, the last obstacle to the start of intra-Afghan negotiations," said the statement. The prisoners were named on a 5,000-member list handed to the government by the Taliban. The Afghan government has so far released 4,600 prisoners on this list but has refrained from releasing the remaining 400. President Ghani on Friday said he does not have the constitutional authority to release the 400 prisoners and, therefore, will convene a Loya Jirga to decide on the inmates.

Pompeo Warned...

and did not speak about the specific intelligence indicating that Russia paid Taliban fighters and other Afghanistan militants to kill U.S. service members. Reports broke in June that U.S. intelligence found that at least one American soldier, as well as a number of Afghan civilians, died as a result of the secret bounty payments.

Russia Is Winning...

with Afghanistan's narcotics trade is an "open secret" and that in Kabul "everyone is sick and tired of it and dismisses it as a given." The regular participation of Afghan politicians who propagate anti-U.S. conspiracies, such as Karzai, in the Moscow-approved talks provides further evidence that Russia is seeking to burnish the credibility of these opinions among the Afghan population. In addition to portraying the U.S. government as a supporter of extremism and instability on Russia's southern flank, Russian media outlets have propagated unsubstantiated rumors about a secret U.S. neocolonial agenda in Afghanistan. In June 2017, Sputnik Dari quoted a member of the Afghan parliament from Helmand province, who said that U.S. forces were smuggling uranium from the region, instead of partaking in counterterrorism operations, and cited anonymous local residents, who accused the United States of carrying out "robbery and theft."

In February 2018, Karzai told Sputnik that the U.S. saw "Afghanistan only as a tool for implementing their geopolitical plans in the region." Citing Akhtar Shakh Hamdard, an Afghan political scientist, the Russian state broadcaster RIA Novosti claimed that the United States has long-term strategic plans in Afghanistan, as it allows the United States to exploit Central Asia's mineral resources and access Iran's untapped reserves of oil and natural gas. Although conspiracies about U.S. hegemonic ambitions in Afghanistan abound, Russian state media outlets frequently downplay China's extractive ambitions in the region.

As they highlight Beijing's satisfaction with Russia's security policy in Central Asia and the constructive elements of the Belt and Road Initiative. As the U.S. military has taken steps toward a withdrawal from

conducive environment would be created for the earliest convening of the intra-Afghan negotiations. Stressing the importance of the Pakistan-US Relationship, the Foreign Minister stated that the leadership of both countries was committed to further strengthen it. He added that Pakistan would be a partner for peace with the U.S. Exchanging notes on the COVID-19 pandemic, Foreign

Pompeo speaks...

Minister thanked Secretary Pompeo for the US support and assistance. The talks between Pompeo and Qureshi also come after Special U.S. Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad travelled to Qatar, Pakistan and Uzbekistan in June as part of his sustained effort to bring peace in the war-torn country. The Taliban has kept up violence against Afghan government forces.

Afghanistan, Russian media outlets have pivoted toward stories on residual intelligence or private security personnel in the country, portraying them as a permanent occupation force. Allegations of U.S. hegemonic ambitions in Afghanistan have also surfaced along with the revelations of Russia allegedly paying bounties to the Taliban. In a Sputnik article that described the bounty scandal as RussiaGate 3.0, Mohammed Daud Miraki, an Afghan activist, was quoted as saying, "The war in Afghanistan is a milk cow for the U.S. establishment and NATO that they refused to lose."

Russian officials have endorsed these narratives about U.S. conduct. In March 2018, Kabulov argued that U.S. military operations in Afghanistan were part of its broader geopolitical struggle against Russia and China, and he cited U.S. efforts to encourage Afghan forces to divest from Russian weaponry as proof of a hegemonic agenda. These allegations swiftly followed Sputnik Dari's interview with Afghan army spokesman Gen. Dawlat Waziri, which described the replacement of Russian weapons with U.S. arms as a "crime against the Afghan army" and proof that the Afghan army was a "human shield" of the United States. The Russian foreign ministry has also accused the United States of postponing the 2019 Afghan elections in order to advance its own interests, which built on Russian state media efforts to depict the Afghan government as a U.S. puppet. Beyond their potential threat to U.S. forces, Russian state media outlets could also bolster Moscow's influence over postwar Afghanistan.

Sputnik regularly emphasizes Russia's willingness to invest in Afghanistan's postwar reconstruction and highlights comments from anti-American politicians, such as Afghan Ambassador to Moscow

Abdul Qayyum Kochai, who praise Moscow's prospective peacekeeping role. These news stories support Russia's soft power campaign in Afghanistan, which began with the pledged construction of a \$20 million Russian cultural center in 2014 and, more recently, has extended to Kremlin-sponsored educational initiatives. Moreover, the depiction of Ghani's government as U.S.-dependent and ineffectual in Russian state media outlets strengthens his Kremlin-friendly opponents, which include anti-systemic figures, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who is the leader of the Islamist Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin party, and "trustworthy elements" of the Taliban.

A boost in Afghan public support for these figures and the co-option of the Taliban into a coalition with Afghanistan's internationally recognized government would amplify Russia's long-term leverage in Afghanistan and provide Moscow with local partners to look out for its security interests. Moscow's ongoing information war against U.S. forces is a threat that deserves much more attention. The United States should recognize that Russia's disinformation is not just a threat to liberal democracy but also a prospective danger to the security of U.S. forces in war zones, such as Afghanistan. The Trump administration's efforts to undermine the cohesion and independence of U.S. counterweights to Russia's disinformation campaigns, such as Voice of America, only compound the damage and should cease immediately. If U.S. officials do not address the threat posed by Russia's information war in Afghanistan, Moscow could escalate its use of disinformation against the U.S. military in other settings, which would threaten U.S. soldiers and undermine vital local support for counterterrorism campaigns.

Minister thanked Secretary Pompeo for the US support and assistance. The talks between Pompeo and Qureshi also come after Special U.S. Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad travelled to Qatar, Pakistan and Uzbekistan in June as part of his sustained effort to bring peace in the war-torn country. The Taliban has kept up violence against Afghan government forces.

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Dehbori Crossroads in
Front of Park Kabul

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Print: Waygal Printing .Co - +93 - 202512626

Trump believes Russia, China are against his re-election

US President Donald Trump believes that he is the last person whom Russia and China would like to see as the US president, the US leader told reporters in Bedminster, New Jersey.

"The last person Russia would like to see in office is Donald Trump, because nobody has been tougher on Russia than I have," he said on Friday, adding that China and Iran have the same stance. The statement came in response to a report by National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) Director William Evanina. According to the US intelligence official, Russia is trying to "denigrate" Trump's election rival, former Vice President Joseph Biden. China and Iran, at the same time, are reluctant to see Trump re-elected, the US official added.

When asked to comment on the reports of alleged foreign interference into the US polls, Trump replied: "We are going to look at that very closely."

The US intelligence services incriminate Russia of meddling in the 2016 US elections. These alleged influence attempts were investigated by former head of FBI Robert Mueller for almost two years. On April 18, 2019 the US Department of Justice made public his final report where the US special counsellor acknowledged that no collusion has taken place between Russian authorities and the US presidential candidate Donald Trump who had won the election. Trump himself repeatedly denied suspicions of any wrongful contacts with Russian officials during the election campaign. Moscow also repeatedly denied rumors of attempts to influence the US elections. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov earlier said that as the presidential election approaches, more and more "paranoid reports" of Russia's alleged interference would appear. "They certainly have nothing to do with the truth," he added.



A look at the world

Iran asks UN to hold U.S. accountable for plane interception

Iran has urged the United Nations to hold the United States accountable for the interception of an Iranian passenger plane by two US fighter jets in the skies over Syria last month, calling it "unlawful" and an "adventuristic act".

Iran's UN Ambassador Majid Takht Ravanchi said in identical letters to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UN Security Council circulated on Friday that Iran "expresses its strongest objections against this violation of international law and will pursue the issue through relevant international bodies".



Ravanchi said a Mahan Airlines Airbus A310 en route from Tehran to Beirut on July 23 "was aggressively and unexpectedly intercepted" by two US F-15 fighter jets while travelling through internationally specified air corridors in Syria's airspace.

"In reaction to the offensive and hazardous manoeuvres of the United States fighter jets and in order to save the civil aircraft and passengers' lives, the airliner had to change altitude abruptly, causing injuries to the passengers on board," the ambassador said. 'Standard visual inspection'

US Navy Captain Bill Urban, a Central Command spokesman, told The Associated Press news agency at the time of the incident that a US F-15 "conducted a standard visual inspection" of the Iranian plane "at a safe distance of approximately 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) from the airliner".

He said the inspection was meant to ensure the safety of US-led coalition troops in al-Tanf in Syria as the plane was flying over that area. Urban said once the aircraft was identified as a passenger plane "the F-15 safely opened distance from the aircraft". ... **P2**

New Zealand's Ardern kicks off election campaign after taming virus



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on Saturday launched her re-election campaign promising a "laser-like" focus on boosting jobs and economic growth hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The charismatic 40-year-old leader is on track for a comfortable victory in the Sept. 19 election, topping 60 percent in the latest surveys following her leadership through the Christchurch mosque attacks, the White Island volcanic eruption and the pandemic, according to opinion polls.

In a country of five million people, New Zealand has had only 22 COVID-19 deaths and it has been 99 days since the last recorded case of infection from an unknown source.

"When people ask, is this a COVID(-19) election, my answer is yes, it is," Ardern said as she launched the campaign with a 311 million New Zealand dollar (205 million U.S. dollar) pledge to boost jobs.

Labour is the senior partner in a three-party coalition government but if it can maintain the support shown in recent opinion polls, where it has consistently been above 50 percent, it could govern alone after the election.

The centerpiece of Labour's campaign is to support businesses in hiring at least 40,000 people whose employment has been affected by the coronavirus.

It pledged to expand existing job schemes to help employers hire staff at risk of long-term unemployment.

It will also help out-of-work New Zealanders start a business through an expanded self-employment program which will provide the equivalent of the minimum wage for up to 30 hours a week.

"If you had told me then that our launch in 2020 would be in the midst of a global pandemic with our borders closed - I would have found that very hard to fathom," she said. Ardern's stratospheric rise in 2017 to become New Zealand's youngest prime minister and third woman to hold the office has been dubbed "Jacinda-mania" by some. **P2**

U.S. State Dept asks Saudi Arabia about ex-spy's detained children

The United States Department of State said in a letter it has repeatedly requested that Saudi Arabia "clarify the status and nature" of the detention of two children of a former top Saudi intelligence officer exiled in Canada who has alleged that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) wants to assassinate him.

The State Department letter came in response to one sent by four US senators last month, calling on President Donald Trump to help free the detained children of Saad al-Jabri, who has worked closely with the US.



"For years, Dr. Aljabri was the US Embassy in Riyadh's counterpart on shared counterterrorism efforts and responded around the clock to threats against our Mission and personnel," stated the letter by Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Legislative Affairs Ryan M Kaldahl.

It says the US appreciates Al-Jabri's "contributions to keeping our citizens safe" and "absent sufficient and compelling justification" will continue to advocate for the wellbeing of Al-Jabri's children.

The joint letter - sent last month by Republican Senator Marco Rubio and Democratic Senators Patrick Leahy, Tim Kaine and Chris Van Hollen - said the Saudi royal family was holding the children of Saad al-Jabri, Sarah and Omar, as leverage to force his return to the kingdom.

The two adult children, and a brother of Saad al-Jabri, who is said to hold key state secrets, were detained in Riyadh in March. Al-Jabri had earlier attempted to get his children to leave Saudi Arabia, but authorities had placed them under a travel ban, according to reports. ... **P2**



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