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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Sunday, August 16, 2020

Issue No. 821

www.heartofasia.af

10 afs



Afghanistan forms new women's council ahead of Taliban talks

The Afghan Government has announced a new council to safeguard women's rights and interests, amid fears peace talks with the Taliban could lead to the loss of hard-won gains.

President Ashraf Ghani said the council, announced late on Thursday, would "empower women", promote their rights at home and implement Afghanistan's international commitments on women's rights.

The move came a day after a coalition of women's rights activists wrote to Ghani demanding a place in the historic talks with the Islamist militant group that once banished women from public life. "We will not allow our place and contribution towards rebuilding our country to be erased or reversed," they said.

The United States and the Taliban reached a peace deal in February, ... **P2**



Releasing Taliban terrorists 'poses danger' but 'necessary' for peace: President Ghani

Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani on Friday said that Taliban terrorists who are being freed by the government might pose a danger to the world but their release was necessary for peace. Ghani made the remarks during a conversation with the Council on Foreign Relations, Tolo News reported. The conversation was hosted by James B Cunningham, a senior fellow of the Atlantic Council and former US ambassador to Afghanistan.

His remarks come a day after the Afghan government commenced the release of 400 high-value Taliban prisoners by releasing 80 of them in the first phase. The move is expected to open the way for intra-Afghan negotiations.

"The list is likely to pose a danger both to us and to you and to the world because it is the drug dealers and hardened criminals—that has been shared with all our allies and friends—but ... **P3**

Taliban Doesn't Recognize Afghan Government: Statement



On the threshold of the intra-Afghan talks, which are expected to be held on Doha in the near future, the Taliban on Saturday issued a statement saying the group does not recognize the Afghan government as a legitimate system.

The statement was apparently issued in response to a recent statement by the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and one of his advisers on the peace

process with the Taliban. "The Islamic Emirate does not recognize the Kabul administration as a government but views it as western imported structure working for the continuation of American occupation," the Taliban's statement reads, in versions of English, Dari and Pashto.

"Two days earlier, an advisor to Kabul administration's Arg stated

that 'intra-Afghan' term ascribed to the negotiation process was incorrect and that talks were going to be held between the Kabul administration and Taliban along with other such remarks," the statement said.

Also last week, the Taliban's spokesman Suhail Shaheen in an interview with Iran's Hamshahri newspaper said that the group doesn't recognize the government

in Kabul as a legitimate government. In the interview, Shaheen described the Taliban as the 'winner of the war,' stating that the group will attend the intra-Afghan talks only to bring an Islamic government in Afghanistan. Shaheen said that the Taliban will talk with all Afghan factions not only the government and the High Council of National Reconciliation.

In response to the statement, the Presidential Palace has said that such statements by the Taliban are only to waste time and make irrelevant excuses.

Afghan government officials have said that the Taliban must accept the Afghan government as the main side of the talks.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Reza Bahrami, the former Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan, in a series of tweets, said that recent statements by the Taliban officials indicate that their views have not changed.

"The position of the Taliban's spokesmen as articulated in recent interviews with the ShemshadTV and Hamshahri paper reaffirms the fact that their ideology remains fundamentally unchanged; their perspective on governance is essentially the same and they are as intransigent as ever," tweeted Bahrami. ... **P3**

Armenian peacekeeping brigade off to Afghanistan

A new peacekeeping brigade of the Armenian Armed Forces left for Afghanistan today, the Ministry of Defense informs.

The Armenian contingent will take part in training and pre-deployment exercises, after which it will carry out a peacekeeping mission as part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

"The Armenian peacekeepers have always kept the honor of Armenia, the Armenian soldier high, during the missions they have been highly praised by the superior command, as well as by the high-ranking foreign military," the Ministry of Defense says.



Washington furnished no proof of Russia's alleged collusion with the Taliban – diplomat

The New York Times wrote on June 26 that a Russian military intelligence unit had offered bounties to Taliban militants to kill US troops in Afghanistan.

The US failed to provide facts confirming alleged ties between Russian intelligence services and the Taliban movement even after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had requested this in a phone call with US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told a briefing on Thursday.

"In a telephone conversation of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the US secretary of state on July 13, the US side indeed raised the issue of alleged collusion of Russian intelligence services with the Taliban fighters whom they [Russian intelligence] allegedly incite to make sorties against US military in Afghanistan," Zakharova



said. "The Russian side's answer was as follows - the Russian foreign minister described these statements as dishonest speculations having nothing to do with reality. He also asked the US side to produce evidence that Washington had on hands, which was not provided as usual," the diplomat stressed. "Moreover, Sergey Lavrov emphasized that the Russian side was interested in the US presence in Afghanistan, among other things

within the context of preventing militants from moving to Central Asian countries," she added. The New York Times wrote on June 26 that a Russian military intelligence unit had offered bounties to Taliban militants to kill US troops in Afghanistan. "The intelligence finding was briefed to President Trump, and the White House's National Security Council discussed the problem at an interagency meeting in late March, the officials said," the newspaper wrote.

Afghanistan forms...

but many Afghan women worry that it does not include adequate safeguards for their rights.

They fear a US troop withdrawal, the winding down of international engagement and re-emergence of the Taliban in politics could destroy hard-won gains women have made since 2001 - from education to freedom of movement.

The Taliban have said they will sit down with Afghanistan's US-backed government in Qatar within a week of the release of the last of their prisoners, a precondition to the talk, aimed at drawing a line under more than 40 years of war.

On Thursday, the Afghan government released 80 of the last Taliban prisoners from a final batch of 400.

Lawmaker Fawzia Koofi, a vocal critic of the Taliban who has been involved in the peace process, said the council would help drive gender equality.

"In countries where gender disparities are huge due to many reasons, such steps can definitely change the status quo", she said.

The president said the council would comprise representatives from at least 26 non-government and government bodies, including female deputy governors from various provinces.

But it was not clear what, if any, formal powers the council would have and Arezo Aasenat, a Kabul-based women's rights activist, cautioned against putting too much faith in it.

"It is yet to be seen if this council can safeguard women's rights in the face of the Taliban, who seem determined to roll back the gains of the past few years and force women and girls to stay home", she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Members of this council must ensure the extremists do not sideline women in Afghanistan."

The Taliban enforced a strict interpretation of Islamic law that included public lashings, flogging and stonings. Under their rule from 1996 to 2001, Afghan women were obliged to cover their faces and could not study, work or leave the house without a male relative.

By Ashraf Ghani

Ashraf Ghani: Afghans and their international partners have paid the costs. Now we're taking a risk for peace.

The Afghan people want peace. This has been our constant demand and foremost priority for four decades, an entire lifetime for most of us. In June 2018, the Afghan government, and our people, took a risk for peace by initiating the country's first cease-fire since 2001. It allowed us, for three days, to not only want peace but to live it. Over the past two years, we have taken multiple risks in the pursuit of peace because we cannot afford to pay the costs of failure.

Last week, we made the decision to take another risk for peace. After releasing 4,600 Taliban prisoners to facilitate certain conditions of the U.S.-Taliban deal of Feb. 29, we were confronted with the difficult issue of releasing 400 remaining prisoners convicted of serious crimes, including the killing of Afghans and citizens of the international community. We were assured that their release would fulfill the Taliban's final demand before facing us at the negotiating table.

This was not a risk I could take alone, constitutionally or morally, without consulting the Afghan people. Earlier this week, 3,400 women and men from all provinces of Afghanistan and all strata of society came together, in the presence of the country's political leadership, at a consultative assembly known as a Loya Jirga, to deliberate and debate. They decided to approve the release of the prisoners, and the next day I signed the order. It was the Afghan people's latest, and boldest, risk for peace.

In 2018, we knew peace would be costly, but we did not know what those costs would be. We do know now, and we have paid heavily. The cost of releasing these 5,000 prisoners meant, among other things, denying justice and healing for the families of those they murdered. Since March, we have also paid for peace with intensified Taliban violence. Over the past five months, while Afghan security forces maintained a defensive posture, the Taliban and associated terrorist groups (which the Taliban has yet to publicly renounce) killed or wounded 12,279 Afghan security forces and civilians, according to our own figures.

We have paid with our lives — tens of thousands of Afghan lives, including even our tiniest, most



precious and innocent lives.

We have paid the costs. There must now be a dividend of peace for the Afghan people.

Now, despite the violence, Afghans are coming to the negotiating table with renewed momentum for peace, a stronger relationship between the government and citizens, a better sense of coordination with our international partners, and unity among our political leaders.

Assurances will no longer be enough to propel the peace process forward. It is now time for the Taliban to sit across from the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in earnest, in order to reach a political solution and to declare a comprehensive cease-fire. We acknowledge the Taliban as part of our reality, and we are solidly committed to reaching a political deal that accommodates this reality. The Taliban must, in turn, acknowledge the changed reality of today's Afghanistan. The Taliban must work with us to preserve and expand the gains the Afghan people have made over the past 19 years, including for the benefit of the thousands of Taliban fighters, and refugees and returnees, who will need to be immediately reintegrated into society.

The international community will play an important role as facilitators and mediators of the talks, ensuring that momentum, and a level playing field, are maintained. Our international partners

must also continue to stand firm for the values and principles in which we have all invested for 20 years. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces have not only been sacrificing to preserve and protect our country, but also in pursuit of counterterrorism objectives that we share with the United States and the international community. Our forces took over full responsibility for combat operations from foreign troops in January 2015, and since then the Afghan government has taken measures to substantially reduce the burden on U.S. taxpayers. We thank the United States and our international partners for their continued support of our security forces, which will be critical as we move forward with the peace process.

We share a vision with the United States and our international partners for the outcome of our talks with the Taliban: a sovereign, unified, democratic Afghanistan at peace with itself, the region and world, capable of preserving and expanding the gains of the past two decades.

We must all come together to achieve this vision. It will require a different kind of strength than war. It will require us to practice patience, make compromises and pay further costs toward the price of peace. But to fail in our pursuit of a sustainable peace is not an option; it would demand a far deadlier price — one that the Afghan people, and our international partners, cannot afford to pay.

By Amin Saikal

Will the US withdrawal from Afghanistan put the Taliban in power?

The endurance reflected in the oft-quoted Taliban taunt to the Americans, 'You have the watches, but we have the time', is evidently paying off. The United States and its allies have reached a point of exhaustion in Afghanistan. President Donald Trump, a longstanding critic of America's Afghan adventure, has firmly acted to bring 'the boys' home and extract the US and its NATO allies from what has become a very costly and unwinnable war. The Taliban and their main backer, Pakistan, have never been closer to victory. Where does this leave war-torn Afghanistan?

The US is now at the same juncture that it found itself at in 1969 after six years of combat in Vietnam, and where the Soviet Union was after its decade-long occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The US wants to exit militarily from Afghanistan, but with some face-saving measures. It signed a bilateral peace agreement with the Taliban in February to facilitate a US and allied troop withdrawal. It also hailed the deal as a significant step towards promoting a political settlement between the warring Afghan parties. Trump has shown no qualms about elevating the Taliban to the status of a US partner in

peace, perhaps to improve his chances of re-election in November.

The US has acted in earnest by withdrawing some 5,300 troops, out of a total of 14,000, and Trump has promised to pull out most of the remaining soldiers by November. Meanwhile, the US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, Afghan American Zalmay Khalilzad, has enhanced his shuttle diplomacy, styled after the approach of Henry Kissinger in 1969 as he negotiated the Vietnam peace agreement and in the mid-1970s as he sought to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Khalilzad's goal is to encourage the Taliban and other Afghan parties, including the government in Kabul, to reach a political settlement while persuading interested parties from the region and further afield to support the process.

However, for many reasons, the foundations for achieving a viable and lasting political settlement are very thin. The US-Taliban peace agreement does not provide for a ceasefire; nor does it obligate the Taliban to negotiate with other Afghan parties in good faith. It obliges the US and the Taliban to avoid fighting one another but does not ask the Taliban to stop their operations

against the Afghan National Security Forces. Since the agreement was signed, the Taliban have amplified their operations, resulting in more military and civilian casualties than in the preceding months, though the Afghan and allied forces have also been responsible for some of the civilian losses. The Afghan security forces are overstretched, with unsustainable levels of losses and desertions.

The Taliban are not the only armed opposition in Afghanistan. The many other groups include the Khorasan Branch of Islamic State (IS-K) and al-Qaeda. IS-K has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks across the country, including the latest in the eastern province of Nangarhar on 2-3 August, which killed 39 people and injured many more. IS-K is a rival of the Taliban and the Taliban have no control over it. Al-Qaeda reportedly maintains close links with the Taliban. For the US to expect the Taliban to restrain IS-K or al-Qaeda, or, for that matter, some of its own splinter groups and criminal gangs that operate in Afghanistan, is a mistake. The government in Kabul is very weak, with writ over no more than half of the country. It lacks a widely ...

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Tehran advises...

"The U.S. draft resolution, presented in gross violation of Security Council Resolution 2231, is aimed at addressing U.S. domestic policy and has nothing to do with maintaining international peace and security," the mission said, according to Press TV.

"The draft resolution undermines the integrity, authority, and credibility of the Security Council; and by extension, the United Nations, multilateralism, the rule of law and diplomacy," it added.

In a bid to gain more council support, the U.S. slashed its earlier draft resolution on Tuesday to just four paragraphs that would simply extend the arms ban on Tehran "until the Security Council decides otherwise," claiming it's "essential to the maintenance of international peace and security." The Iranian mission said the United States baselessly accuses Iran of instability in the region to satisfy its deep addiction to sanctions and to justify its irresponsible behavior in the Council.

"While its interventions, destructive behavior, divisive policies, and insatiable appetite for exporting its deadly weapons to countries in the region as well as the presence of a large number of its forces in the Middle East (West Asia), their involvement and spreading lies and destructive acts are the main sources of instability, insecurity and human suffering in this region," it underlined.

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif pointed out that Washington has no legal right to invoke the snapback mechanism to reinstate sanctions against Tehran under the nuclear deal that the U.S. unilaterally left in May 2018.

"Legally speaking, the United States is no position to use the snapback [mechanism]. The three European allies of the United States also explicitly stated at a previous meeting of the UN Security Council that the United States could not use this mechanism," Zarif told reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

Milak border crossing between Iran, Afghanistan reopened

The Milak border crossing between Iran and Afghanistan in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan was reopened following the signing of a border agreement between the two neighbors, the spokesman of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) said. The mentioned border crossing was closed and reopened several times in the past few weeks due to a strike by Afghan truckers and their blockade of the return route of Iranian trucks and the Iranian retaliation.

According to Ruhollah Latifi, the signing ceremony was attended by officials from both sides including the Acting Deputy Governor of Sistan-Baluchestan Province for Economic Affairs Madana Zanganeh, and the head of Milak Customs. Milak border terminal was first reopened earlier this month after a week of closure and over 70 Iranian truckers returned to the country, however, Afghan truck drivers once again closed the crossing in Afghanistan's Nimruz Province and Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan



Province, only a couple of days after it was reopened. Milak is a village in Jahanabad Rural District, in the central district of Hirmand County, Sistan-Baluchestan Province.

Japan marks...

tackling global problems. Under his goal of turning Japan into a "beautiful" and "normal" nation, Abe has steadily pushed to cleanse Japan of its embarrassing wartime history and build up its military by stretching the interpretation of Japan's war-renouncing constitution. It includes acquiring greater missile defense capability in the face of a growing military threat from North Korea and China. "Remembering those days, I strongly feel we should never wage war," said Shoji Nagaya, 93, who traveled from Hokkaido in northern Japan to commemorate his brother who died of illness while serving in China. "But politicians today seem to have different views than ours, and I really hope that they will not head to a wrong direction." Abe stayed away from the shrine that honors convicted war criminals among the war dead. He sent a religious offering through a lawmaker, a gesture meant to avoid angering China and South Korea, which consider the Yasukuni shrine a symbol of Japan's militarism. Abe last visited Yasukuni in December 2013.

Trump says...

did not exist. But such a move would horrify many in the U.S. intelligence community, some of whose most important secrets were exposed. Trump has harshly criticized past leaders of the U.S. intelligence community and FBI, and on Thursday took aim at the bureau's current director Christopher Wray, his own appointee. The U.S. Justice Department filed a lawsuit last September against Snowden, arguing that his recently published memoir, "Permanent Record," violated non-disclosure agreements.

Taliban Doesn't...

"It cannot be accepted that the architects of the Doha agreement signed it without being fully informed of the Taliban's intentions. Perhaps one should search for a more realistic characterization than "mistake" for their act," Bahrami said. Shaheen has said that the Taliban's violence reduced significantly in the country, but the Afghan government has insisted that violence has increased despite the Taliban's continued assurances. The Afghan Ministry of Interior said on Thursday that at least 121 Afghan civilians were killed and 336 more were wounded in Taliban attacks in 29 provinces over the past two weeks. The majority of the casualties occurred in Kandahar, Baghlan, Nangarhar and Logar provinces, according to the Ministry of Interior.

Releasing Taliban...

again this is a step that we have considered necessary," Ghani said. "Until now, there has been a lot of pressure, requests from the Afghan government," Ghani said. "Now the balance shifts because we have taken all the risks because we are a state. We were not party to an agreement to release 5,000 Taliban but out of the imperative of wanting peace in the conviction, we did it." The Loya Jirga (grand assembly) on August 9 approved the release of 400 Taliban prisoners as a goodwill gesture in a major breakthrough that will pave the way for intra-Afghan talks. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has signed a decree to release 400 Taliban prisoners, as part of efforts to begin intra-Afghan talks, a source at the Presidential Palace said. The release of prisoners was being considered as the last hurdle into opening peace talks between the internationally-backed Afghan government and the Taliban under a peace deal between the group and the US. The Afghan government has said they have released over 4,600 Taliban prisoners over a period of time, which is 400 less than the number decided during the

US-Taliban deal. On February 29, the US and Taliban signed the peace agreement in Doha to end the two-decades-old war in Afghanistan. Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani on Friday said that Taliban terrorists who are being freed by the government might pose a danger to the world but their release was necessary for peace. Ghani made the remarks during a conversation with the Council on Foreign Relations, Tolo News reported. The conversation was hosted by James B Cunningham, a senior fellow of the Atlantic Council and former US ambassador to Afghanistan. His remarks come a day after the Afghan government commenced the release of 400 high-value Taliban prisoners by releasing 80 of them in the first phase. The move is expected to open the way for intra-Afghan negotiations. "The list is likely to pose a danger both to us and to you and to the world because it is the drug dealers and hardened criminals--that has been shared with all our allies and friends--but again this is a step that we have considered necessary," Ghani said. "Until now, there has been a lot of pressure, requests from

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Will the US...

acceptable and nationally unifying leader and has been wracked by kleptocratic, ethnicised and entrepreneurial politics. President Ashraf Ghani, who was declared in February the winner of the September 2019 presidential election with fewer than one million votes in a country of some 37 million people, has proved to be very controversial. His claim of electoral victory was initially challenged as fraud by his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, and five other candidates. The dispute was settled for the time being with Washington's heavy-handed intervention, resulting in the confirmation of Ghani as president and Abdullah as the newly created chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation outside the government's executive structure. Neither this development nor the inadequacy of the government in serving the common good, especially in the wake of the

savage Covid-19 pandemic, has left much room for most Afghans to have any trust in the government. Ghani has been struggling to cobble together an inclusive delegation to open dialogue with the Taliban, who, with their supporters inside and outside Afghanistan, are willing to bide their time until all foreign troops are withdrawn before they make a decisive bid for power. The US-Taliban deal contains nothing to stop outside interference in support of different groups in Afghanistan in pursuit of conflicting regional geopolitical objectives. While Pakistan as the traditional backer of the Taliban is keen to protect its interests against Iran and India, Iran has made common cause with Russia and China in an anti-US posture. Iran does not want Pakistan's strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia to enable the Saudis to secure anti-Iranian leverage in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, given the web of regional tensions and rivalries, all of these actors, with

the exception of India, have also been courting the Taliban as a future key player in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan situation is so complicated that it would take a lot more than a US-Taliban rapprochement to bring about a lasting and viable political settlement of the conflict. For an honourable withdrawal, the US needs to leave behind a stable Afghanistan. An interlocking national and regional consensus is essential. This should also involve a positive understanding with Russia and China as to what kind of functioning Afghan state could be nurtured that would have the necessary domestic and foreign policy capability to look after itself on the one hand, and not be perceived as a threat in the neighbourhood on the other. But it seems that a valuable opportunity might have been missed. The Taliban are now better positioned than any other party to influence the future direction of Afghanistan, whatever that may turn out to be.

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Trump says he is considering pardon for leaker Edward Snowden

President Donald Trump said on Saturday he is considering a pardon for Edward Snowden, the former U.S. National Security Agency contractor - now living in Russia - whose spectacular leaks shook the U.S. intelligence community in 2013.

The Republican president's comments followed an interview Trump gave to the New York Post this week in which he said of Snowden that "there are a lot of people that think that he is not being treated fairly" by U.S. law enforcement.

U.S. authorities for years have wanted Snowden returned to the United States to face a criminal trial on espionage charges brought in 2013.

Snowden fled the United States and was

given asylum in Russia after he leaked a trove of secret files in 2013 to news organizations that revealed vast domestic and international surveillance operations carried out by the NSA. Trump's softening stance toward Snowden represents a sharp reversal. Shortly after the leaks, Trump expressed hostility toward Snowden, calling him "a spy who should be executed."

"I'm going to start looking at it," Trump told reporters about a possible pardon, speaking at a news conference at his Bedminster, New Jersey golf club.

Trump said he thinks Americans on both the political left and the right are divided on Snowden.

"It seems to be a split decision," Trump told



reporters. "Many people think he should be somehow treated differently. And other people think he did very bad things."

Some civil libertarians have praised Snowden

for revealing the extraordinary scope of America's digital espionage operations including domestic spying programs that senior U.S. officials had publicly insisted ... **P3**

A look at the world

Tehran advises Washington to take lesson from its failures

Making a reference to the United States failure at the UN Security Council to extend an arms embargo on Iran, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman says Washington should take a lesson from its total failures.

"The int'l community, once again & w/ a clear voice, rejected the US reckless & futile attempt to undermine the #UNSC credibility," Abbas Mousavi wrote on his Twitter page on Saturday morning.

"The #American_regime should take a lesson from its total failures & stop shaming itself at UN, otherwise it will get isolated, even more than now," he added.

The tweet came after the UN Security Council resoundingly rejected the U.S. bid to extend the arms embargo, with Russian President Vladimir Putin proposing a summit of world leaders to avoid "confrontation" over a threat by Washington to trigger a return of all UN



sanctions on Tehran.

In the Security Council vote on Friday, Washington got support only from the Dominican Republic for its resolution to indefinitely extend the arms embargo on Iran, leaving it far short of the minimum nine "yes" votes required for adoption, Al Jazeera reported.

Eleven members on the 15-member body, including the United Kingdom, France and Germany abstained.

Russia and China strongly opposed extending the 13-year ban, which is due to expire on October 18 under the 2015 nuclear agreement signed between Iran and six world powers.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the defeat of the resolution ahead of a very brief virtual council meeting to reveal the vote.

"The Security Council's failure to act decisively in defense of international peace and security is inexcusable," Pompeo said in a statement. In a statement on Thursday, Iran's permanent mission to the UN had called on the UN Security Council to stand up to the "ill-intentioned" move by the U.S. government. ... **P2**

Lukashenko, Putin discusses situation in Belarus



The President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko has discussed the situation in the country in a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, BelTA quotes the President's Press Office as saying. Lukashenko said on Saturday he wanted to speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin, warning street protests were not just a threat to Belarus.

Mass unrest followed Lukashenko's re-election victory last week, as tens of thousands of people took to the streets accusing him of rigging the vote.

"There is a need to contact Putin so that I can talk to him now, because it is not a threat to just Belarus anymore," he said, according to BelTA.

"Defending Belarus today is no less than defending our entire space, the union state, and an example to others ... Those who roam the streets, most of them do not understand this," Lukashenko said.

Japan marks 75th anniversary of war end with no Abe apology

Japan on Saturday marked the 75th anniversary of its surrender in World War II, with Emperor Naruhito expressing "deep remorse" over his country's wartime actions at a somber annual ceremony curtailed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Naruhito pledged to reflect on the war's events and expressed hope that the tragedy would never be repeated. There was no word of apology from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who gave thanks for the sacrifices of the Japanese war dead but had nothing to say about the suffering of Japan's neighbors.

"Reflecting on our past and bearing in mind the feelings of deep remorse, I earnestly hope that the ravages of war will never be repeated," Naruhito said in a short speech at the event in Tokyo marking the 75th anniversary of Japan's surrender on Aug. 15, 1945.

Amid virus fears and worries about the fading memories of the fast-aging war generation, about 500 participants, reduced from 6,200



last year, mourned the dead with a minute of silence. Masks were required, and there was no singing of the "Kimigayo" national anthem. Naruhito has promised to follow in the footsteps of his father, who devoted his 30-year career to making amends for a war fought in the name of Hirohito, the current emperor's grandfather.

Abe has increasingly sought to whitewash Japan's brutal past since taking office in December 2012. He hasn't acknowledged Japan's wartime hostilities during Aug. 15 speeches, which had previously been a nearly 20-year tradition that began with the 1995 apology of Socialist leader Tomiichi Murayama.

Abe, in a largely domestic-focused speech, said the peace that Japan enjoys today is built on the sacrifices of those who died in the war. He pledged that Japan will reflect on lessons from history and will not repeat the war devastation. He listed damage inflicted on Japan and its people, including the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, massive firebombings of Tokyo and the fierce battle of Okinawa.

Abe pledged to play a greater role in ... **P3**



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