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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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## Atmar Meets Heads of EU Missions & Head of EU Delegation to Afghanistan

Acting Foreign Minister, Mohammad Haneef Atmar, met with the Kabul-based heads of EU missions and the head of the EU Delegation to Afghanistan at the Italian Embassy in Kabul on Sunday. Ministry of Foreign Affairs by releasing a statement reported BNA, Minister Atmar thanked the EU Member countries for their assistance and cooperation to Afghanistan over the past 19 years. Mr. Atmar then spoke about the latest developments in the Afghan peace negotiations, the establishment of a humanitarian ceasefire and the mechanism for monitoring the reduction of violence.

He also highlighted the role that the European Union could play in maintaining international consensus on peace talks in Afghanistan.

Talking about further strengthening the relations between the EU member ... **P2**



## Ceasefire still key topic in Doha talks: Naderi

The Afghan government-backed peace negotiating team in Qatar on Monday said the main issue in the talks with Taliban representatives was ceasefire, which was still being discussed.

Earlier today (on Monday), contact groups involving Kabul and Taliban negotiators met in an effort to finalize rules and procedures for the ongoing peace talks in Doha.

A member of the government negotiating team, Nader Naderi, tweeted on Monday: "Contact groups of both delegations held a meeting on Monday and discussed ways of finalising rules and procedure."

In a video press conference, he said, "What is very important and what we are still discussing are two main issues that have been brought to the table ahead of time and we need to come up with a solution that will continue to be discussed on Monday."

Naderi said the debate on Afghanistan's values should end soon in order to discuss fundamental issues --- ceasefire and end of conflict --- because it ... **P3**

# Abdullah in Pakistan Meets Qureshi to Discuss Afghan Peace



Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, traveled from Kabul to Islamabad on Monday morning for a three-day official visit that will include meeting Prime Minister Imran Khan, as well as the president and other Pakistani officials, Abdullah's office confirmed. Abdullah on Monday morning

met with Shah Mahmud Qureshi, Pakistan's foreign minister. Qureshi welcomed Abdullah to Pakistan and expressed hope that his visit "will open a new chapter in bilateral ties, further strengthen relations" and "forge a common understanding" on the Afghan peace process, said Pakistan's foreign ministry in a tweet.

Reaffirming Pakistan's support for the Afghan peace process, Qureshi said Pakistan has "always maintained there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and encouraged all parties to reach a political solution through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process," it said.

While travelling, Abdullah said:

"The visit will provide a unique opportunity for the two sides to exchange views on Afghanistan peace talks in Doha and bilateral relations," and added that he hopes this visit will open a new chapter of "mutual cooperation" at all levels. Mohammad Umer Daudzai, President Ghani's Special Envoy for Pakistan, is accompanying Abdullah on the trip and said he believes the visit will yield results as the situation has changed in recent years.

Daudzai said "Pakistan is showing that they are serious about cooperation with the Afghan peace process."

Abdullah and his delegation will meet Prime Minister Imran Khan on Tuesday, Daudzai said.

Previously, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan in an op-ed published in the Washington Post said that peace is within reach in Afghanistan, but a hasty withdrawal of foreign forces will be unwise.

"We have arrived at a rare moment of hope for Afghanistan and for our region. On Sept. 12, delegations from the Afghan government and the Taliban finally sat down in Doha, Qatar, to begin ... **P3**

## Kabul concerned at Nagorno-Karabakh tension

Afghanistan on Monday expressed its concerns on the ongoing fierce clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno Karabakh region and regretted the human and material losses as a result.

In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoF) said the Nagorno-Karabakh region has been recognized internationally as a part of Azerbaijan. "Afghanistan demands the end of occupation in Nagorno-Karabakh and supports the efforts by the people and government of Azerbaijan and other nations of the world in this regard."

The statement said that the MoF called for re-establishing the ceasefire and resolving the region's long-running crisis peacefully.



## Recognition of US-Taliban Deal Key to Move Forward: Taliban

Almost two weeks have passed since negotiators from both sides of the Afghan peace negotiations began attempts to reach an agreement about the procedural rules intended to guide the formal talks.

But for the first time, two members of the Taliban's negotiating team have confirmed the disagreements. The Taliban insist that without recognizing the US-Taliban deal as a main foundation of the peace process in Afghanistan, the continuation of current talks between both sides of the Afghan peace negotiations will not have meaning.

Mullah Khairullah Kharikhaw, a member of the Taliban peace negotiating team, in answer to a question regarding the inclusion of Hanafi and Jaffari Figh jurisprudence, said that the Taliban respect the rights of all citizens of Afghanistan, but the rights of



the Shias of Afghanistan will be discussed during the talks about the Constitution of Afghanistan.

The Taliban demand recognition of the US-Taliban agreement as the 'mother deal' underlying the Afghan peace negotiations, and Hanafi Figh as the sole religious legal guidelines for the talks.

Reports say that the republic's team has suggested alternatives to the Taliban's demands.

Regarding the US-Taliban agreement, the republic team

recommended four options:

First option: The terms of the US-Taliban agreement could be accepted as underlying the talks, however, the terms of the joint declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, NATO and the US should also be accepted as applicable.

Second option: Neither the US-Taliban agreement nor the declarations of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan with the US and NATO will be recognized as ... **P2**

### Atmar Meets...

states and Afghanistan, Minister Atmar asked for EU cooperation post peace agreement. He spoke of the continuation of mechanisms such as the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan to maintain mutual accountability in aid, good governance and service delivery.

The ambassadors and other diplomatic representatives of the European Union member states called the start of peace talks a good step towards reaching a comprehensive and sustainable peace. They reiterated the EU's continued support for the Afghan peace process, strengthening regional consensus and the preservation of the democratic achievements of the past 19 years.

In closing, Minister Atmar and distinguished participants of the meeting engaged in general discussions on the issues raised.

### Belarus...

that all these atrocities are continuing and the Belarusian people are suffering," Tikhanovskaya said. At a summit in Brussels next week, EU leaders are set to debate personal sanctions against Lukashenko and other high-profile figures seen as responsible for a violent crackdown.

Tikhanovskaya said the bloc could go further and also adopt "sanctions against firms, individual businessmen who support Lukashenko's regime". But she emphasised that the EU should stop short of general economic sanctions as "ordinary people will suffer most" from them.

She also stressed that EU countries should ignore any deals being made by Lukashenko since "they can be reviewed in the future because now he is not the voice of the Belarusian people."

By Lyse Doucet

# Afghan-Taliban peace talks: What's next?

History took a front seat at the table this month when Afghan enemies formally sat face to face for the first time to embark on negotiations to end what is now regarded as the world's deadliest conflict.

"We'll start introductions on the left," suggested Masoom Stanikzai, the grey-bearded chief negotiator of the Afghan government's chosen delegation who only just survived a suicide attack nine years ago by bombers posing as messengers of peace.

From the other long table, on the other side of the glittering Qatari ballroom, another Stanikzai of no relation loudly interjected with a grin. "You always do things from the left," chimed in the white-bearded deputy head of the Taliban team, Abbas Stanikzai. "We mujahideen start from the right always." In an instant, in these very first moments, would-be peacemakers were pulled back to days gone by when they brandished banners for communism or Islam - a violent war of words which sparked the Soviet invasion of 1979 and a fire which kills and maims across Afghanistan to this day.

History has left its calling card in these talks which are as emotional as they are historic. Forty-two negotiators, one for every painful year of war, are now charged with the Herculean task of turning this page.

Formal interviews and informal conversations over the first 10 days of talks in the Qatari capital, Doha, signalled both early signs of hopeful progress as well as significant and stubborn disagreements over visions of a post-war future which imperil this push towards peace.

All the while, reports keep reaching negotiators from the Afghan battlefield thousands of miles away.

But they're as close as ever-present

phones with encrypted messaging services and social media posts seething with an anger and anguish, on both sides, and intensifying the pressure.

The UN reports that civilian casualties are now at a lower level than in recent years. But on one day alone, four separate incidents killed 20 women, boys and girls and injured 39.

The first task on the table has been formulating a "code of conduct", the rules and regulations to shepherd these talks.

Some of an initial 23 points were swiftly settled - such as starting each session with a recitation of the holy Koran, ending with prayers, and treating each other with respect.

But the Taliban immediately put bigger issues on the table - unsettling for the other side - including insistence that disputes be resolved within the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, one of four major schools of Sunni legal reasoning, without provisions for the Shia community as codified in the Afghan constitution.

They also called for this set of talks to be subsumed within the US-Taliban deal signed in February.

But, after a few days of stalemate and silence, progress was reported when "contact groups" from the two sides sat down again.

And they wrestled with the significant semantics of what this is all about. The government team spoke of ending the "war". The Taliban wanted to see it as "problems". They inched towards a compromise with "conflict".

Negotiators from Kabul, the capital, noticed that Taliban who sat at the table during the US-Taliban process - tough talks which took place over more than a year - learned skills which are helping break logjams now.

"The fact that we continue discussing



these issues for hours is a step forward," said Nader Nadery, spokesman for the government delegation. "We are focused on the task at hand: to end this war."

"It's hoped that consensus will be reached on the remaining points," his Taliban counterpart, Dr Mohammad Naim, posted on his Twitter account, in English, Persian, and Pashto.

"Patience" is the byword, always uttered with a knowing smile, by both Stanikzais whenever I ran into them, as they hurried to and fro in the sprawling beachside resort of white crenellated Arabian villas transformed, in part, into a negotiating hub.

But for all the small encouraging steps forward, the process is still firmly rooted in deep mistrust, and mutual recrimination.

While the government side prides itself on a team reflecting the diversity and strength of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Taliban hail their largely homogenous group as the stronger side at the table, and on the battlefield - a pole position they see embodied in their deal signed with the US which committed Washington to a phased withdrawal of its forces in exchange for Taliban security guarantees and a commitment to negotiate a roadmap for peace.

Taliban officials accuse President

Ashraf Ghani's supporters of trying to drag out this process on in the hope of changing the goal posts with the next US administration.

On the other side, Afghans worry the Taliban haven't moved significantly on fundamental issues since their harsh rule of the 1990s, and are just biding their time until US forces pull out to try to steal a march on Kabul.

"We are testing the waters now, and the waters are deep," reflected Habiba Sarabi, one of four women negotiators on the government side, who is part of the minority Shia Hazara community.

In public statements and private remarks, the Taliban speak of an Islamic system which is "more Islamic" than the current Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. "It's too early to talk about this," a Taliban official replied when I asked about elections, but he hastened to dismiss all previous Afghan polls as riddled with fraud.

When I asked about democracy, he burst out laughing.

Women's rights is another hot button issue. The Taliban have been repeatedly asked about this and have repeatedly insisted that women and girls will be given all rights provided "within Islam". They're also being repeatedly asked to include women on their own team.

"There's a war going on, so we need to respect and protect women," ... **P3**

By JEREMY LOTT

## The Man Who Can Get Us Out of Afghanistan

President Trump has admitted "personnel" is a problem in his administration. But with his latest ambassadorial nomination to Afghanistan we can be fairly certain he has a nominee who doesn't blow. Don't take it from me. Read the man's very own Twitter account.

In August, William Ruger began a tweet with "I'm running" as a way of announcing that he was taking part in a 5K sponsored by Concerned Veterans for America. This was misread by some as an announcement that he was running for office. In a follow-up message, Ruger said that he was only running a race to draw attention to America's longest hot war. "But if I did run for office," he teased, "I might make my campaign about how to deal with the bane of leaf blowers."

He then linked to a piece in the Atlantic about how

activists got leaf blowers banned in D.C. over the noise, appropriately titled "Get Off My Lawn." Ruger added, "don't get me started on food trucks that use loud generators."

No taco truck on every corner for this diplomat!

All silliness aside, this is a great appointment and likely signals that Trump is getting serious about bringing American troops home. Here's hoping America can declare victory and pull out short of the conflict's twentieth anniversary.

Ruger is both a soldier and a scholar. He is a veteran of the Afghanistan War who currently serves as an officer in the Naval Reserve. He is also a former tenured professor of political science who decided to go into the think tank world to make a difference.

The Stars and Stripes newspaper described him as a "conservative foreign

policy expert and veteran of the post-9/11 conflict who has repeatedly called for a full withdrawal of American troops from the country."

Arguably, Ruger is the member of the Koch Institute apparatus who has done the most to move the center of gravity on foreign policy. He has done this by making funds and opportunities to connect available to diplomats, pundits, professors, and other professionals who want to push back against the seemingly never-ending push to drag America into more conflicts and wars.

For a brief while, this included me. Several years ago, I went to a Koch foreign policy conference in Washington, D.C. that brought writers and diplomats and international relations scholars together to talk about how to nudge America away from war and towards a position of stability and strength. It was clear that Will Ruger was the ... **P3**

### Recognition of US...

having any authority, and the negotiations will move forward based on the decisions of the consultative Loya Jirga and the Jirga's declarations.

Third option: Both sides start talks "based on the national interest of Afghanistan."

Fourth option: The Quran and Hadith are the main authority for the talks, replacing all others. "We want to say that the intra-Afghan negotiations should be based on the Doha agreement or part of the agreement which was signed between the Islamic emirate and the United States," said Abdul Salam Hanafi, a member of the Taliban negotiating team.

What does the republic's team say? "The United States also issued a joint declaration with the Afghan government; for us

that is also a foundation---but the fundamental foundation for talks is the will of the people," said Attaullah Ludin, a member of the republic team.

What does the Taliban say?

"We entered the talks based on the agreement that was signed with the Americans---we are sitting with you (republic team) based on that agreement, otherwise, what is the need for the meeting?" said Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwah, a member of Taliban's negotiating team.

The Taliban insist that talking about the Jaffari Figh at this juncture is not logical, but said that this can be discussed during the talks about the Constitution of the country.

There is no confirmed information about when the two sides will resume talks on the procedural rules.

### UN urges immediate...

regional tensions.

"We urge the sides to work with the Minsk Group Co-Chairs to return to substantive negotiations as soon as possible. As a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, the United States remains committed to helping the sides achieve a peaceful and sustainable settlement to the conflict," it added.

Border clashes broke out earlier in the day after Armenian forces targeted Azerbaijani civilian settlements and military positions. The number of casualties is not yet known.

Armenia has once again proved that it is the biggest obstacle to peace and stability in the region, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said earlier in a statement, adding Turkey will stand with

Azerbaijan by all means.

Baku has the right of self-defense to protect its people and territory, it added.

Relations between the two former Soviet nations have been tense since 1991, when the Armenian military occupied the Upper Karabakh, or Nagorno-Karabakh region, an internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan.

Four UN Security Council and two UN General Assembly resolutions as well as many international organizations demand the withdrawal of the occupying forces.

The OSCE Minsk Group -- co-chaired by France, Russia and the US -- was formed in 1992 to find a peaceful solution to the conflict, but to no avail.

# Kabul, Colombo sign historic MOU on trade, investment

Afghanistan and Sri Lanka on Monday signed a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on cooperation to expand bilateral trade ties.

A statement from the Afghan Embassy in Sri Lanka received by Pajhwok Afghan News said that the CEOs of the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment Sayed Zaman Hashemi and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce Manjula de Silva virtually signed a historic MOU of Cooperation between the two chambers.

The statement said the MOU provides for establishment of an Afghanistan-Sri Lanka Trade Desk within both Chambers, helping implement both sides' shared commercial goals.

Afghan Ambassador Sri Lanka Mohammad Ashraf Haidari witnessed the signing ceremony at the Offices of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce. He delivered remarks after the

two CEOs exchanged views on numerous business and investment opportunities in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, taking into account the existing low volume of bilateral trade. They pledged to work with the Embassies of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka in Colombo and Kabul to implement the MOU for realizing the vast trade and investment potential that exists between the two South Asian nations.

"I am delighted to witness the fruition of our shared hard efforts over the past year to sign this historic MOU between our two Chambers of Commerce," commented Ambassador Haidari.

He said they will work together in partnership with our two Embassies here and in Kabul, to foster and deepen commercial ties between Afghanistan and Sri Lanka

He also acknowledged the strong

support from the leaderships of both countries for further expansion of bilateral relations, especially full-spectrum connectivity for trade and investment, thereby forging long-lasting people-to-people ties between Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The MOU seeks to enable the two Chambers to "disseminate all such information as may be relevant to enhance bilateral trade and business; initiate and promote joint ventures, partnerships and other business linkages; provide technical expertise; arrange visits between the two countries; formulate proposals to accelerate bilateral relations; and convene meetings, conferences, and discussions."

To that end, both sides agreed to hold regular webinars, including major investors, to exchange business ideas and to discuss the specifics of investment opportunities

in agribusiness (tea, saffron, coconut oil, fresh fruits and dried nuts), services (skilled and unskilled labor), logistics, textiles (garments, rugs and carpets), gemstones (precious and semi-precious stones), tourism, medical tourism, higher education tourism, as well as other sectors of mutual investment interest.

Moreover, the Ambassador took note of the pending Air Services Agreement and Trade and Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement to be signed between Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, which he said would further enhance and facilitate bilateral trade. Once signed, he noted that Afghanistan and Sri Lanka could initiate to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to remove all barriers to easy and profitable trade and investment between the two friendly countries, with growing ties in all areas of bilateral cooperation.

### The Man Who...

one who had brought us under one roof.

If confirmed, Ruger will be bringing many parties together in Afghanistan to formalize an iron withdrawal schedule for all U.S. troops. One real advantage of sending him and not someone else to those talks is that everybody knows he's serious as taxes about getting it done.

He could also be a steady, forceful voice for peace through strength inside the administration. One of Ruger's long-term bets has been that there are plenty of people on the right who are not wild about all the blood and treasure this country has spilled all over the world after 9/11.

For instance, Ruger quoted an article about the Republican convention in the Federalist on his Twitter page in late August, when his nomination was surely in sight.

"Americans want a strong military but one that is extremely cautious about getting involved in war," wrote Mollie Ziegler Hemingway. "And when war is called for, Americans want a clear strategy, particular outcomes that are being sought, and an exit strategy that is far shorter than, for example, our 19 years in Afghanistan."

### Abdullah in Pakistan...

negotiations toward a political settlement that would bring the war in Afghanistan to an end," read the op-ed. "We also learned that peace and political stability in Afghanistan could not be imposed from the outside through the use of force. Only an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led reconciliation process, which recognizes Afghanistan's political realities and diversity, could produce a lasting peace," wrote Imran Khan.

"All those who have invested in the Afghan peace process should resist the temptation for setting unrealistic timelines. A hasty international withdrawal from Afghanistan would be unwise. We should also guard against regional spoilers who are not invested in peace and see instability in Afghanistan as advantageous for their own geopolitical ends," said Khan.

### Afghan-Taliban...

a Talib explained when I asked about female Taliban negotiators. "When there is peace, they will have all their rights within Islam including education and work."

Once rules and regulations governing the talks are agreed, the focus will shift to issues.

A ceasefire is at the top of the government's list, as it is for an exhausted people pleading for an end to the everyday violence. For the Taliban, that can only come once progress is made on the shape of a new order. There will be another semantic search for a "pause", a "reduction", and the like.

For the moment, both sides insist they're committed to this process, and determined to stay the course.

"It's not easy to sit with your enemy, especially when we are still fighting on the ground," remarked Matin Bek. His father, a mujahideen commander and member of parliament, was assassinated by a suicide bomber in 2011.

"In the peace process, you meet your enemy, then you meet your friend."

In the relaxed atmosphere of a hotel lobby where sides are more spontaneously blurred, 33-year-old Bek was spotted sitting cross-legged on the floor while negotiators from both sides perched on adjoining sofas.

Many have been in this place before, or their fathers

were, when the Soviet troop withdrawal of 1989 led to vicious infighting among mujahideen groups which paved the way to Taliban rule.

"We all say we want peace, but it will take time," commented 26-year-old Anas Haqqani, the youngest member of the Taliban negotiating team and youngest son of the late Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose so-called "Haqqani network" was put on the US's terrorism list in 2012 - although they deny it now exists.

His older brother, Sirajuddin, is now the Taliban's deputy leader.

From the get-go, there was consensus on a crucial point. This was, to use the mantra, to be an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process".

From the seats at the top table, to the secretariat working at all hours to keep all the paper moving, to the arrangement of media interviews and interactions, Afghans are sorting it.

On the sidelines, at times in a cosy lobby of cushy leather chairs discreetly sheltered by miniature palms and marble pillars, diplomats from key countries engaged in this process and committed Afghan watchers are at the ready, if and when they're needed.

Ideas which worked in mediation efforts in other conflicts have already been seeded, successfully, into this one.

The six-member contact group from each side grapples for long hours with the gaps. There's a joint messaging system rarely adopted elsewhere.

"I've just sent a 'so far, so good' message back to the capital," commented one Western diplomat.

No-one can say for certain how long this round will last, how far it will go.

There's even a tussle over the venue of the next round. Some argue the process will benefit from just keeping it going in Qatar where extensive arrangements are already in place.

But Doha is also the site of a Taliban political office, and where many of their negotiators can go home at night to their families.

Four other countries in a contact group - Germany, Uzbekistan, Indonesia and Norway - are also lined up as possible venues, and countries keen to get in on this act keep offering their services.

For now, the focus is squarely on what's on the table in Doha. But everyone is mindful too of events beyond this bubble, and the risk that a spectacular attack on the ground, or even an unpredictable tweet from the White House, could cause it to unravel.

When I ask about what worries the most, there's often one refrain: we must avoid the mistakes of the past, so history is not repeated.

### Ceasefire still...

was people's demand.

He added they knew the people of Afghanistan were hoping for a good outcome of the talks, so their colleagues were working responsibly.

A few days back, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Peace Process Zalmay Khalilzad said the Taliban will not accept a permanent ceasefire until there is a political settlement in Afghanistan,

Talking to a US television,

Khalilzad said the Taliban were trying to wait until a political settlement was reached and will announce ceasefire after a general agreement.

However, previously Khalilzad had repeatedly said that the US-Taliban agreement would be signed on the condition of a ceasefire in Afghanistan but it did not happen.

On the other hand, the Taliban have said they will discuss other key issues to pave the ground for truce in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, some Wolesi Jirga on Monday criticized Taliban's conditions that led to a delay in the talks.

Zabihullah Attiq, a lawmaker from Badakhshan province, told today's (on Monday) session that some conditions of Taliban were beyond implementation.

Ghulam Hussain Naseri, another member of the lower house, said the Taliban were trying to suggest conditions that were impossible and against the Constitution.

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# UN urges immediate end to Armenia-Azerbaijan clashes

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Sunday urged Azerbaijan and Armenia to immediately end clashes in the Upper Karabakh, or Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Condemning the use of force and civilian deaths, Guterres called on the parties to immediately stop fighting, de-escalate tensions and return to "meaningful" negotiations without delay, his spokesman said in a statement.

The statement also said that Guterres will speak by phone with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The US State Department also called on the two countries to immediately end clashes in a statement.

"The United States is alarmed by reports of large-scale military action along the Line of Contact in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

zone that has resulted in significant casualties, including civilians. We extend our condolences to the families of those killed and injured," the statement said.

"The United States condemns in the strongest terms this escalation of violence."

The statement stressed that Deputy Secretary Stephen Biegun called Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and Armenia's Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan "to urge both sides to cease hostilities immediately, to use the existing direct communication links between them to avoid further escalation, and to avoid unhelpful rhetoric and actions that further raise tensions on the ground."

"The United States believes participation in the escalating violence by external parties would be deeply unhelpful and only exacerbate ... **P2**



### A look at the world

#### US' Pompeo visits Greece amid tensions in E.Med

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias on Monday, to discuss bilateral relations as well as recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Pompeo arrived in the city of Thessaloniki after midnight for a second visit in less than a year, starting a four-nation tour of Europe.

"Thrilled to be back in Greece, a vital U.S. partner with whom we share a common strategic vision," Pompeo said on Twitter after his arrival. "The strength



of our bilateral relationship is at an all-time high, and I'm looking forward to a productive visit."

Pompeo's visit aims "to renew shared commitment to advance security, peace and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean and celebrate the strongest U.S.-Greek relationship in decades," a spokesperson for the US Department of State announced last week.

Pompeo will also meet commercial energy sector leaders "for a discussion to highlight energy diversification and infrastructure projects in Greece."

He will then travel to Souda Bay on the island of Crete. There, he will visit the US naval facility "to underscore the strong U.S. security partnership with NATO Ally Greece," the Department of State said.

Pompeo held a phone call with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg before arriving in Greece to discuss "de-escalation of the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean".

Following his travels in Greece, Pompeo will visit Italy, Vatican, and Croatia.

#### Belarus opposition leader calls for Macron to mediate



Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya on Monday urged France's president to mediate in the political crisis in Belarus and called for EU sanctions against businesses that support President Alexander Lukashenko's government.

Tikhanovskaya told AFP that French President Emmanuel Macron could be "one of the mediators" and could involve his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in a dialogue between government and opposition.

"The protests are not going to stop," she said in an interview in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius where she fled after running against Lukashenko in an election on August 9.

"People will not accept the regime under which they have lived all these years. They will fight more and more against the system." Tens of thousands of people took to the streets on Sunday in the 50th day of unprecedented protests against Lukashenko's 26-year rule which have been met with a violent crackdown.

- 'No more blood' - Tikhanovskaya, 38, said she had requested a meeting with Macron during his two-day visit to Lithuania, which starts later on Monday. The French president would be her most high-profile meeting so far since the election and the protests which she has helped inspire.

She has previously met with leaders in neighbouring Poland and Lithuania, which have taken a lead in European diplomacy on Belarus, and with EU foreign ministers in Brussels. Tikhanovskaya said the French leader was known as a mediator in international crises and voiced hope that he could "influence" Putin.

The Russian leader is Lukashenko's main ally and has supported him financially, while also calling for stronger integration with Russia and a process of constitutional reform in Belarus.

"Now is the moment when Belarus needs help in starting dialogue," Tikhanovskaya said, adding that there should be "no more blood" in Belarus.

"Of course we would prefer to solve this problem by ourselves but we see ... **P2**

#### Pakistan opposition leader arrested after protest vow

Pakistani anti-corruption officials arrested the country's opposition leader on Monday, days after he vowed to help lead efforts to dislodge Prime Minister Imran Khan's government.

Shahbaz Sharif -- who heads the opposition in the country's National Assembly -- was arrested in Lahore after the eastern city's high court rejected a bail plea in a money-laundering case.

"We are not scared of these arrests," said Marriyum Aurangzeb, spokeswoman for Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N).

Sharif is the brother of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted



over corruption allegations in 2017 and is currently residing in Britain after being released from prison earlier this year for medical treatment.

Maryam Nawaz -- the daughter of the ex-premier -- also confirmed her uncle's arrest on Twitter.

"Sharif has been arrested ONLY because he REFUSED to play in the hands of those who wanted to use him against his brother. He preferred standing behind prison bars than to stand against his brother," she tweeted. Khan's administration has been pushing for Nawaz's return to the country to continue his prison sentence.

The arrest comes as opposition parties have reignited efforts to remove Khan from office, vowing earlier this month to launch a protest movement in the coming weeks demanding the government's resignation.

Pressure has been simmering against Khan's government in recent months with the country's economy battered by fiscal deficits, soaring inflation and a string of currency devaluations.

Khan was elected in 2018 on promises to rein in corruption and build a welfare state. But since taking power, the former cricketer has struggled to deliver on his campaign vows amid economic headwinds.



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