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Heart of Asia

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2 Million Afghans Receive Psychological Counseling Each Year

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) on the occasion of World Mental Health Day announced that two million people in Afghanistan receive mental health services each year. World Mental Health Day is observed on 10 October every year, with the overall objective of raising awareness of mental health issues around the world and mobilizing efforts in support of mental health.

The day also provides a platform and opportunity for people who work on mental health issues to talk about their work, and what needs to be done to make mental healthcare a reality for citizens around the world.

With the COVID-19 pandemic changing our lives considerably, mental health has become even more important. Previously, it was reported ... **P2**



Afghanistan, U.S., Turkmenistan Hold Online Trilateral Talks

The first meeting in Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-USA format was held in a video conference format on Oct 8, 2020.

According to the Afghan Foreign Ministry's press release, the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan Mohammad Haneef Atmar, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov and the U.S. Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale took part in the trilateral talks.

During the meeting, the parties discussed a number of important issues in political, trade-economic and humanitarian spheres.

One of the main topics of the meeting was the advancement of intra-Afghan negotiations aimed at ending the long-term conflict and establishment of peace in the region. To this end, in accordance with the principles of the country's neutrality, **P2**

Nearly 10,000 Families Displaced in Afghanistan During Past Month



The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR) says nearly 10,000 families across the country have been displaced in the past month.

MoRR in a statement on Saturday said that at least 9,916 families have been displaced across the country during the past month.

The ministry noted that

humanitarian assistance has been provided to 7,592 displaced families in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. According to the ministry, of the total number of displaced families, 765 of them have returned to their own areas with the betterment of

the security situation.

According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Refugees, the total number of IDPs since the beginning of the current solar year has reached 35,739 families.

However, At least seven civilians were killed in two explosions in Herat and Helmand provinces, local officials and the Defense Ministry

said.

A roadside bomb blast that hit a passenger bus in Gereshk district, Helmand province, on Saturday morning, left five civilians dead and nine others wounded, the Defense Ministry said in a statement.

The mine was planted by the Taliban, the Defense Ministry said. According to TOLONews' Abdullah Hamim, the 601 Highway in Helmand that connects Lashkargah city with the Kandahar-Herat highway is also closed to traffic over the last two days due to damaged roads and bridges. The roads, security officials said, have been damaged by the Taliban.

In a similar incident on Friday evening, a passengers' bus hit a roadside bomb in Herat-Kandahar highway in Shindand district, Herat province, killing two civilians and wounding 10 others, according to Herat Public Health Directorate's spokesman Mohammad Rafiq Shirzai.

Shirzai said that women and children are also among those wounded in the blast.

Jailani Farhad, spokesman for Herat governor, said the mine was planted by the Taliban. ... **P3**

Nearly 800 Thieves Arrested During Last Month in Kabul: Mol

The Ministry of Interior (Mol) on Saturday confirmed to media outlets that nearly 800 thieves between the ages of 12 to 22 have been arrested in the capital, Kabul over the past month and a half; But Kabul residents are still complaining about the increase of insecurity.

Based on the reports, some of Kabul residents claim that the Police are incapable of arresting thieves and robbers and even they are involved in some cases. ... **P3**



Early Withdrawal of Int'l Troops Will Impact Peace: Abdullah

Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, on Saturday said that an early withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan will have some impacts on the ongoing peace process and the country's situation but added that Afghans should be ready for any type of conditions and that they should work for their future together.

He made the remarks at an event at Afghanistan's embassy in New Delhi on the last day of his four-day visit to India.

Abdullah said that whatever the decision on the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, Afghans should come together and make their nation and the country on their own and that it should not be dependent



on staying or withdrawal of the troops.

"No doubt, if it (troops pullout) is done early or ahead of ensuring peace in the country, it will have its impact but despite that, the first and the last responsibility is on us, on Afghans, so that what can we do under such circumstances and how can we prevent a crisis. It

has only one response: we should strengthen our unity," Abdullah said.

Late last week, US President Donald Trump in a tweet promised to withdraw his forces from Afghanistan by the end of this year. However, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said the withdrawal will be dependent to the ... **P3**

2 Million Afghans...

that about half of Afghanistan's population suffers from mental illness. The Ministry of Public Health cited that given the prevalence of mental disorders, people's access to these services is still unsatisfactory.

According to World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH) the theme for World Mental Health Day 2020 is 'Mental Health for All: Greater Investment – Greater Access'.

Afghanistan, ...

Turkmenistan is ready to provide its political space for the next rounds of intra-Afghan negotiations, Turkmen Foreign Ministry said in the statement.

The parties also considered the opportunities for the development of trade relations between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, the U.S. and the Central Asian region by increasing the efficiency of customs and other procedures in accordance with the existing U.S.-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).

The diplomats discussed the opportunities for joint implementation of infrastructural projects, including such energy projects as TAPI and TAP.

The opportunities for humanitarian collaboration were also considered, including the coordination of actions on countering the current pandemic and crises in the area of public healthcare.

By Khaled Ahmed

Pakistan is vulnerable to the impending ideological storm in Afghanistan

Former Chief Executive Officer of the Unity Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and now leader of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, was in Pakistan in the last week of September seeking the latter's help in getting the Taliban to stop killing and sit down with the government in Kabul and talk about the future of the country. Persian-speaking Abdullah was immediately likeable, quoting Pakistan's national poet Allama Iqbal in Persian and speaking Urdu with TV hosts. In terms of public relations, he was an immediate success in contrast to President Ashraf Ghani, whose earlier visit was marked with stiffness because of his scepticism about Islamabad's "friendship" with his government. Both visits were a parable of paradox. Ghani was a Pakhtun deeply suspicious of Pakistan, Abdullah, a Tajik, seemed upbeat. The Pakhtun represent the external image of Afghanistan but they are deeply divided. Tajik Abdullah is supposed to be pro-India but appears to have forgotten what Pakistan did after all the commanders facing up to the Soviet invasion of 1979 took refuge in Pakistan. Clearly, the "charismatic" Pakhtun Hekmatyar was preferred over the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. For Pakistan, the choice was natural: Afghanistan was an extension of its own Pakhtun Belt on the Durand Line, and the Tajiks were peripheral to its strategic interest. Today, Pakistan is disenchanted with the old policy of Talibanisation of Pakistan.

India has traditionally been connected with the Tajiks of northern Afghanistan and developed political-social relations with them — like Tajiks getting their higher education in India — while Pakistan got into trouble with its side of the Afghan jihad. The last leader of the Taliban — Mullah Fazlullah — played havoc with the Swat Valley in Pakistan's north until he was ousted from there. While in Afghanistan, he delivered the most lethal blow to Pakistan — the 2014 massacre of children at an army-run school in Peshawar, killing 132 children. (Ehsanullah Ehsan, the man who planned the massacre, was caught by Pakistan but was able to mysteriously escape; yet another indicator of Pakistan's vulnerability while dealing with Afghanistan.) Somehow, one believes that the Pakistani Taliban sheltering in Afghanistan will remain separated from the Afghan Pakhtuns in the post-US phase.



But it is the Haqqani Network Pakistan is delivering on in the latest phase of diplomacy. The Haqqanis, married into the Gulf Arab aristocracy, are the strongest group of fighters in Afghanistan. A joint cell of the Islamic State or Daesh and the Haqqani network recently carried out major attacks in Kabul, including an attack on a Sikh temple in March. Pakistan is supposed to get the Haqqanis to agree that the Taliban and other jihadi outfits like Islamic Jihad would stop killing and sit across the table with the Afghan government. In 2012, the US had tried to persuade Pakistan about joint action against the Haqqanis and Mullah Fazlullah but Pakistan wouldn't see the two as one force. Once again, it is Pakistan's outreach to the Haqqani Network that is being considered an important factor in discussing the future of Afghanistan.

Pakistan is supposed to be facing off a possible Indian penetration into Afghanistan but its real danger is from the jihadi outfits — the Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban, Islamic State, al Qaeda, etc — with warriors from the northern neighbourhood like Uzbeks and Uighurs. If the Taliban take over from the Afghan government, they will have a tough time deciding which group of warriors will have the lead in governance. They will likely end up dividing the country into infighting satrapies. The sharia will have

to come back to regain consensus, and much of the social development under the Afghan government and American guidance will be rolled back. And there will be civil war redux, and consequently a lot of refugees — women and children — racing across the borders. Aware of the coming chaos, Pakistan is wire-fencing its border with Afghanistan and there are people on the other side who don't want it and Pakistan army personnel are being killed daily on the Durand Line. Who could be behind this? The Pakistani Taliban, who can easily be bribed by anyone, are thought to be behind it. Pakistan, disenchanted finally with its "strategic depth" dream, is nonetheless fatally unafraid of "the dream of sharia". The Haqqani Network can help because it is the strongest group fighting under one command but its ideological worldview is different from the average Pakistani, barring the rare general like Shahid Aziz who will disappear after retirement and join the Islamic State in Syria and achieve the kind of martyrdom Pakistan couldn't allow — fighting to the last against the evil of the US.

Pakistan is vulnerable to the coming ideological storm in Afghanistan. Its border provinces are rebellious and receptive to the new wave of strict Islam, helped no less by the deeply aggrieved and "believing" populations that it allowed to be crushed by its jihadis.

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

A New Generation Fights for Afghanistan

The explosion occurred a few hours earlier. A suicide car bomber double-parked on a shopping street. When the convoy passed carrying Vice President Amrullah Saleh, known for his anti-Taliban militancy, the driver pulled up alongside Mr. Saleh's armored car. Ten people were killed and 15 wounded. The vice president survived with burns to his hands and face.

Thank you, Taliban. A fine affirmation of the commitment you made in advance of the peace talks that will begin in Doha, Qatar, the day after the Kabul bombing, to cease what you have the temerity to call "the fighting."

Ahmad Muslem Hayat takes in the scene of the overwhelmed police, encourages the impoundment crews that are using cranes to remove abandoned vehicles, lends a hand to a rescue team as it pulls from the wreckage a child whose breathing is a death rattle. Mr. Hayat, who served as head security officer under the legendary commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, has just returned from London to provide security for my reporting trip. "The same old story," he growls. "They're too cowardly to claim the

attack. They'll pin it on al Qaeda or on the Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba or the Haqqani group. But all those are the Taliban's beards. Put that in your article!"

In a Kabul groaning under the weight of refugees, where foreigners haven't been seen in the street since President Trump's summer announcement of the American withdrawal, carnage like today's can occur anywhere at any time. So says Saad Mohseni, founder of the TOLONews television channel, whose modern studios are sure to be one of the Taliban's first targets on its return.

Through the window of my vehicle I see an agitated man who, noticing us, makes the gesture of slitting his throat. A ragged peddler, sitting on the sidewalk beside a pile of cellphones, padlocks and old watches, pretends to train a gun on our convoy. Another, hardly more than a boy, sees that we're photographing him and spits in our direction. As we drive, Mr. Hayat doesn't let go of the Kalashnikov lying between him and the driver. Then, seeing that the traffic is blocked and we're no longer moving

forward, he suggests we go the rest of the way on foot.

It's Sept. 9, the 19th anniversary of Massoud's assassination in 2001, when he was 48. I have come to this downtown neighborhood to find the house where, in 1992, I accompanied him on a visit to a wounded member of the mujahedeen. Massoud was minister of defense at the time. His old enemy, radical Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was shelling the city from the hills, I go from house to house, showing occupants an old photo of Massoud on my telephone. As we move away from the artery and into the maze of dusty, twisting streets of this Pashtun neighborhood, the people seem less hostile and, curiously, rather happy about "Massoud Day," even though he was a Tajik.

"You'll find the house you're looking for over there, just after the bazaar," says a grandfatherly man who recalls a neighbor named Mola Shams, whom Massoud, "wearing a long white coat," had come to comfort in midwinter, accompanied by a few bodyguards. "No, it's down there," says the neighborhood council head, whom someone had roused from a nap in the back of his

shop atop a shaky iron stairway. A junk dealer ultimately leads us through a labyrinth of laundry lines to what was the residence of Mola Shams, where a commercial center is now sprouting up.

I don't have time to learn more about the fate of the wounded mujahedeen fighter, because our surroundings have become worrisome. We pass drugged-out adolescents, women encased in burqas. An informer comes to tell Mr. Hayat that people are beginning to wonder about the foreigner who is asking impertinent questions. I lived in the French Embassy in early 2002, after President Jacques Chirac asked me to prepare a proposal on a French contribution to rebuilding war-torn Afghanistan and eradicating the Taliban. Nearly 20 years later, where do we stand? The good news is that France has an ambassador, David Martinon, who spares no effort to convince the Afghans that it would be suicidal to yield to Islamist blackmail. The bad news is that his determination wasn't enough to prevent the secret release the previous night of the two men who in 2003 mounted motorcycles and gunned down

Bettina Goisard, 29, a French aid worker, in Ghazni.

More bad news is that since a 2017 truck-bomb attack near the embassy, the lovely white residence that we used to enter and exit without a second thought has become a fortress protected by a complex of walls, sliding metal gates, concrete blocks, grates and watchtowers. The ambassador lives there in a state of war, protected by two dozen elite counterterrorism personnel.

Abdullah Abdullah is the other president of Afghanistan. Not the vice president but the rival president—the one who contested the victory of Ashraf Ghani in the 2019 election and took to bombarding the winner with vengeful communiqués. To mollify Mr. Abdullah, Mr. Ghani appointed him to head the delegation negotiating with the Taliban. But tonight, hosting us for dinner in his family home, he is not the Western-suited diplomat who will leave tomorrow for Doha, but the resistance fighter clad in traditional garb whom I met 30 years ago in the Panjshir Valley, where he was one of Massoud's bravest lieutenants. ... **P3**

China provides more medical aid to Afghanistan

China on Thursday handed over another batch of health equipment to the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health worth 1\$ million.

The equipment includes 40,000 kits of Covid-19, 20,000 protective cloths, two PCR spraying sets and two RNI sets.

The assistance was handed over to Minister of Public Health Dr. Ahmad Jawad Usmani by Chinese Ambassador Wang Yu today (Thursday) at the Hamid Karzai International airport.

Second vice President Sarwar Danish thanked the Chinese government for providing such important items, adding that the friendly neighbor was supporting Afghanistan since the

spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in the war-hit country.

He also thanked health workers for their efforts and role in controlling of the pandemic in Afghanistan.

Dr. Usmani also thanked the Chinese government for providing the health equipment

Usmani said his ministry had set up an online group with a number of Chinese experts, through which Chinese specialists shared their experiences with Afghan doctors on how to fight the coronavirus.

The acting minister said the pandemic was under control in the country and that they were fully prepared to fight a second wave of coronavirus.

Ambassador Wang Yu said his country



would continue assisting Afghanistan's fight against coronavirus and wanted to strengthen friendly relations between the two countries.

He said the pandemic crisis has caused as much damage to Afghanistan's economy as suffered by other countries in the world.

Early Withdrawal...

situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

Abdullah said that there isn't any "spoiler" of the peace process within the Afghan government but added that some individuals are concerned about the type of peace that will be made with the Taliban.

"I don't say peace spoilers but those who are concerned that what type of peace should we expect in Afghanistan, what type of situation will we face?" said Abdullah.

"There are groups within the Taliban and the government who will oppose peace. They should be prevented by both sides, by Afghans and by the negotiating teams," said Amir Mohammad Akhundzada, member of the High Council for National Reconciliation.

The head of the reconciliation council expressed his concerns over an increase in violence in the country and said Afghans should not return to the past.

During his four-day visit to India, Abdullah met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister of External Affairs of India, S. Jaishankar, in which they reiterated India's support to the Afghan peace process, according to Abdullah's office.

Nearly 10,000...

Taliban has not commented on the two incidents.

A rise in violence in the country comes amidst the ongoing peace negotiations in Doha. President Ghani in his speech at a research institute in Doha last week called for an agreement on immediate reduction in violence. A similar call was made by US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in his visit to Islamabad late last week.

Nearly 800...

However, Mol stresses that the police are working to reduce crime in the Kabul city and a national mobilization is needed to reduce crimes in the capital.

Mol officials say the process of arresting criminals is underway but the registration of a murder case causes people to ignore all the achievements of the police.

A New Generation...

Mr. Abdullah ends the evening taking us through room after room, each with walls of photos of himself and his leader, young and in combat against the Soviets. Lost in reverie, he says little. Finally I break the silence and ask about his strategy with the Taliban—the foe that sent two fake journalists armed with a rigged camera to assassinate Massoud.

Mr. Abdullah murmurs evasively that the country can't take any more—that 40 years of war have exhausted it and we have to give peace a chance. Then, collecting himself and seemingly filled with an ancient rage, he says of the 2001 assassins: "Do you know that those dogs stalled for a month? That the whole operation was supposed to have gone down much earlier than it did? And that the chief himself, at the last minute, when the phony journalists thought it was never going to happen, remembered about them and decided to grant them the fatal interview?" This is Mr. Abdullah's other face—the one I know will not yield in Qatar.

Two days later, we make our way to Panjshir province, north and east of Kabul. The Afghan security services being full of double agents, the news of our movement leaked. So now it's battle stations on pro-Taliban social networks. Along the road crossing the Shomali Plain, which Afghan army has trouble controlling, enemy checkpoints are a possibility. Mr. Mohseni, the TOLONews owner, has secured a helicopter, which flies us to Bazarak.

Long ago I arrived here with Ahmad Shah Massoud. Today I find, waiting to greet me, Ahmad Massoud—his son, 31. I can picture him as a 9-year-old carrying into the family library the set of de Gaulle's war memoirs that I had brought as a gift for his father. Twenty-two years later, with his well-groomed beard and serious, almond-shaped eyes, he looks like the elder Massoud's reincarnation.

Mr. Massoud tells me about the last time he saw his father. He sensed his father's unwonted way of coming back for one more hug, leaving again, and

returning once more. He tells about his father's death, of which I've never read a truly reliable account. According to the elder Massoud's senior secretary, who survived the attack, the commander's handsome face was riddled with bomb shards, his chest crushed, one eye blown out, a leg severed. He was killed almost immediately—but he had the strength to call two guards spared by the explosion and order them to hoist him up by the shoulder blades. There, standing upright for the last time, he gave up the ghost while reciting the shahadah, the prayer of the dying.

The young Mr. Massoud, despite his filial devotion, didn't invite me here to dwell on the past. Almost immediately we head east toward Abshar, where the Taliban last week launched an unprecedented attack on Panjshir. I watch him in the midst of his officers, some of them old enough to have served his father, all now on alert. He radiates authority as he tells them he wanted neither to go into politics nor to participate in these bizarre peace negotiations, because his place is here with them, at the gates of the inviolate sanctuary of free Afghanistan.

At the bottom of a vertiginous gorge, the time comes for the shooting contest, which his father also used to propose to his guests. The target is a white pebble placed on a ridge of ochre stone 75 yards away in the shadow of the mountain's folds. My performance with a rifle has hardly improved over the intervening years, but Mr. Massoud aims three times and scores three bull's-eyes. He didn't become an elite marksman by accident. After his father's murder, he was exfiltrated to Iran and then to England, where he became a brilliant cadet at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where the British army's elites are trained.

Back in Bazarak on Sept. 11, officers await Mr. Massoud at his father's tomb—including delegations that have come from Kandahar and Jalalabad to celebrate the memory of the Lion of Panjshir. There I glimpse

another side of this prodigious young man. He is eloquent, an inspired, lyrical orator, speaking on behalf of not only his Panjshiri brothers but the entire Afghan nation. He praises France, which never abandoned this people of potters, nomads, shepherds and poets. Mr. Massoud gives me the floor, and I pay tribute to him and his father.

Then we return to Mr. Massoud's childhood home and drink tea on the long garnet sofas facing the river where his father would meditate. "I love three things in this world," he says. "Books, gardens and the astronomy I learned, before entering Sandhurst, at King's College London, which instilled in me the habit of looking each night at the sky and its constellations. This means that, contrary to what you said earlier at the mausoleum, I was not cut out for political action. But someone had to pick up the torch. The hope my glorious father embodied could not be allowed to die out. So, yes, for that reason, and for that reason alone, I am ready to take over." Before leaving, I ask him three questions: Is he prepared to declare, in the charter of the movement he has created, that being the son of his father is not enough and that his crown truly belongs not to him but to the people of the mujahedeen? Is he willing to announce that he seeks the votes of the Afghan nation to launch reforms that the country's feudal lords never wanted? And are there principles—starting with women's rights—on which no peacemaker will be permitted to compromise as long as he lives? He answers each question in the affirmative, and in the same clear, resonant voice his father used 22 years ago when, amid the gathering storm, he came to Paris at my invitation. Have we come to that point again? Might the young Mr. Massoud be able to check the warlords who, in the face of the Taliban peril, are only hulks of their former selves? Is it possible that, in this last of the confrontations on which our joint fate hinges, we have a protagonist who will say no to obscurantism, to rule by murder, and to the spirit of resignation? I fervently hope so.

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Palestine FM slams world's failure to stop Israel

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki denounced the international community Friday for failure to stop Israeli violations against Palestine and instead only give rhetorical speeches.

Palestinian people are "facing an existential threat that threatens their rights of freedom and the right to self-determination," the official Palestinian News Agency (WAFA) quoted al-Maliki during a meeting with the Non-Aligned Movement.

"The critical situation in occupied Palestine, including East Jerusalem, largely reflects the serious shortcomings of the international system," which "is content with speeches without any real action to stop the illegal

Israeli practices," he said.

The Non-Aligned Movement was established in the Yugoslav capital Belgrade in 1961 away from the polarization of Cold War camps at the time and currently consists of 120 members representing the interests and priorities of developing countries on several continents.

Despite, The Israeli army said on Friday it was holding the body of a Palestinian shot dead in the occupied West Bank earlier this week, ending days of uncertainty over his fate.

The announcement follows a policy change last month in which Israel said it would not return the bodies of any Palestinian killed during or as a result of an anti-Israeli attack.



A look at the world

Cease-fire comes into force in Nagorno-Karabakh

A cease-fire agreed between Azerbaijan and Armenia for the exchange of prisoners and retrieval of bodies in Nagorno-Karabakh came into force at 12 p.m. local time (0800GMT) on Saturday.

It came after a trilateral meeting took place on Friday in Moscow among Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov, and Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan.

No information was given for the duration of the cease-fire made on humanitarian grounds.

The Red Cross will act as an intermediary during the humanitarian operation.

Fighting began on Sept. 27, when Armenian



forces targeted civilian Azerbaijani settlements and military positions in the region, leading to casualties.

After the Armenian army attacked the Azerbaijani civil settlements on Sept. 27, the Azerbaijani army launched an operation, liberating the city of Jabrayil, the town of Hadrut, and more than 30 villages from occupation.

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

Some 20% of Azerbaijan's territory has remained under illegal Armenian occupation for some three decades.

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. A cease-fire, however, was agreed to in 1994.

Many world powers, including Russia, France and the US, have urged an immediate cease-fire.

Turkey, meanwhile, has supported Baku's right to self-defense and demanded the withdrawal of Armenia's occupying forces.

In war-torn Yemen, a bombed school brings back hope to children



With its walls pounded by artillery, roofs torn open and concrete beams in shreds, Al-Wehdah school lies in ruins as students return for the first day of Yemen's school year.

At the school near Taiz, the third-biggest city in a country shattered by years of war between the government and Houthi rebels, there are no doors or windows, let alone desks.

Instead, the students use old exercise books to jot down their lessons, as they sit in makeshift classrooms with a handful of teacher's brave enough to join them under crumbling ceilings.

Yet in a country where nearly a third of children do not go to school at all, these are the lucky ones.

Al-Wehdah school was hit in a 2016 air attack.

Ali Sultan, a parent of one of the students, points out to AFP news agency a warning sign in red letters written on a perimeter wall.

"Beware of Mines," it reads.

The school is located in the middle of a minefield, that was partially cleared to allow the students to return.

"We were faced with a difficult choice, either leave them at home or face the risk of bringing them here to study in this rubble," Sultan said.

Children first returned to the school the year after the attack.

"We have been through very difficult times," Sultan said, referring to the fighting in the southwest city, which is held by government forces but besieged by Houthi fighters.

In Taiz city alone, 47 schools were "totally destroyed in the fighting," said Abdel Wassae Chaddad, provincial director of education.

"As far as destruction is concerned, we got the lion's share," he said.

Chaddad said he was forced to close those schools and tell students to go to any other that could accommodate them -- even if they were also in poor shape.

Some children have to walk long distances to get there.

CPD: U.S. Oct 15 presidential debate officially cancelled

The October 15 presidential debate between U.S. President Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Joe Biden will not proceed, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) said in a statement on Friday, adding that both campaigns had announced "alternate plans for that date."

"It is now apparent there will be no debate on October 15, and the CPD will turn its attention to preparations for the final presidential debate scheduled for October 22," the commission said in an emailed statement.



"Both candidates have agreed to participate in the October 22 debate," said the statement, assuring the final debate, expected to be held at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, will be in accordance with "all required testing, masking, social distancing and other protocols."

The commission had announced Thursday it was converting the October 15 town hall debate to a virtual affair out of an abundance of caution because Trump had tested positive for the coronavirus.

But the U.S. president, who has been eager to return to the campaign trail and hold live events, refused to participate in the virtual format and sought unsuccessfully to return it to an in-person debate.

Biden had said earlier this week he would not debate Trump in person if he still had the virus, and his campaign called Trump's refusal to adapt to a virtual format "shameful."

"It's shameful that Donald Trump ducked the only debate in which the voters get to ask the questions -- but it's no surprise," Biden spokesman Andrew Bates said, Trump "doesn't have the guts to answer for his record to voters at the same time as vice president Biden."



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