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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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**McMaster Calls Trump's Afghan Policy a 'Travesty'**

The Washington Post reports that HR McMaster, a retired general and former national security adviser, has publicly said that Trump's Afghanistan policy is a "travesty," and that his deal with the Taliban is similar to Europe's appeasement of Adolf Hitler in the Munich agreement of 1938.

McMaster was promoting his new book during an online event hosted Thursday by the Alexander Hamilton Society, a nonprofit foreign policy network, and he told the audience that by making a deal with the Taliban, Trump has now betrayed the mission, undermined US security and undermined the US's Afghan partners, the Washington Post reported.

By dealing with the Taliban, the US had also cancelled out its motivation for the war, McMaster said, saying Trump's strategy "renders the war unjust, because we no longer have ...

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**2,393 Police Officers Reported to Attorney General's Office**

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has arrested at least 2,393 police officers on various charges of crimes in the past two years and reported them to the Office of the Attorney General, said Gen. Dawood Hassas, head of internal security.

Hassas said that reforms were underway at MoI and had resulted in tangible achievements by saving human and material resources.

They had also managed to prevent the infiltration of terrorist and intelligence groups into the ranks of the police and reduced their vulnerability.

At a press conference, the MoI official said that the of the officers detained, around 1,332 were charged with corruption, 86 with criminal offenses and human rights violations such as murder, 32 with robbery, 153 with causing injuries and 31 for crimes against chastity such as adultery and sodomy.

Their ranks ranged from ordinary police soldiers to generals, Hassas said, and added, that all the cases had been reported to the Attorney General for prosecution. ...

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## NATO vows support for Afghan forces till 2024



NATO allies and partners on Tuesday gathered at a plenary meeting of the Afghan National Army Trust Fund Board and reviewed the implementation of their financial contributions in support to the Afghan security forces.

In a statement, the alliance said that the meeting discussed contributions

for 2021 and reiterated their commitment to providing financial support to the Afghan security forces through 2024.

"Today's commitments help underpin the confidence that our financial support to the Afghan security forces will continue to be strong beyond 2020. International funding support

to the Afghan forces is a key pillar of our commitment to Afghan security. As of 5 October 2020, total cumulative contributions made to the Trust Fund since its establishment amounted to over 3,2 billion US dollars, the NATO secretary general pointed out. The NATO-run Afghan National Army Trust Fund was created in 2007. It has

since played a vital role in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainment of the Afghan security forces by funding activities ranging from installation of donated equipment to training, literacy courses, professional military education, and capacity building.

The Trust Fund is open for contributions by the broader international community. It is one of three funding streams used by the international community to channel its financial support to Afghanistan's security forces and institutions.

The other two are the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), administered by the United Nations Development Programme, and the United States Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF).

However, The United Kingdom (UK), reaffirming its ongoing support for Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, has pledged £70m for 2021 to strengthen their work.

The aid was pledged at the ANATF Plenary Meeting in Brussels on Monday, a statement from the British embassy in Kabul said.

It said Afghanistan is currently experiencing appalling levels of violence, despite the ...

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**MFA: Pakistan 'Severely' Damaging Relations by Firing Rockets into Kunar**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on Monday, condemned the rocket firing across the Durand Line over the Marawara district of Kunar.

The MFA said a civilian was killed while three other children were injured in the attacks when Pakistan fired 25 rockets into residential areas of the district on Sunday.

"The continued rocket fire on Afghan soil, while Afghanistan wants good relations with Pakistan, is severely damaging relations between the two countries," the ministry said.

Expressing concern, they added that the continuation of these ...

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## 180 Civilians Killed, 375 Injured in Past Month: Mol

180 civilians have been killed and 375 have been wounded over the last month in a spate of violence across Afghanistan, the Afghan Ministry of Interior (MoI) said on Tuesday.

This comes as negotiators representing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the peace talks with the Taliban are in Doha to help find a negotiated settlement to the current bloody conflict in the country; however, no breakthrough has been achieved so far and the formal talks have yet to begin.

The slow pace of the talks in Doha and the ongoing violence have also sparked strong reactions from the Afghan public.

On Tuesday, a number of residents in Kabul gathered to call on the warring sides to reduce the level of violence and ensure the protection of the gains the country has made over the past two decades.



"Where is peace? Which peace? While we are going to Doha for talks, you witness a wave of suicide attacks, there are explosions, soldiers are being martyred--we do not need this kind of peace," said Najibullah Kabuli, the head of Musharekat-e-Milli party.

"The people do not know what will happen. Are the Taliban coming to take over the government by force

or will there be an Islamic emirate?" asked Hamid Sultani, peace activist. "The people have grave concerns; they ask what will happen next. Some people are trying to complete their projects, they are not willing to launch new projects," said Shafiqullah, a businessman.

Residents in other provinces of the country also called for the violence to stop. ...

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### McMaster Calls...

defined a just end." "It's just a travesty," said McMaster. "We will pay the price, and we'll be back. We'll have to go back, and at a much higher cost."

"War is a contest of wills. And we have to have the will ourselves to prevail," McMaster said.

Gabriel Scheinmann, executive director of the Alexander Hamilton Society, asked McMaster: "Is this our Munich agreement? Are we pursuing a policy of appeasement with Taliban?"

"Yes, yes, we are," McMaster said.

### MFA: Pakistan...

attacks is not in the interest of peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such attacks also go against the statements of the Pakistani government's commitments to maintain and strengthen good relations between the two countries.

The Kunar governor's office had told Reportedly on Monday that a rocket had landed on a civilian and killed a child, while four other people were injured.

### 2,393 Police...

Similarly, the MoI also identified 54 "enemy" infiltrators among the police forces and they were arrested for spying.

In addition, he clarified that 80 others were also suspects, but the MoI did not find any evidence to prove their guilt. However, these people were still moved to passive roles where they did not have access to confidential information or weapons.

In addition, Hassas noted that over the past two years, 647 "ghost" police officers have been identified and removed from the list.

By Saeed Naqvi

# There can be no intra Afghan talks unless Ghani steps aside

President Donald Trump and his National Security Adviser, Robert C. O'Brien, are aching to announce troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as a last minute sweetener for the American voter, rather like floral touches in an Indian wedding. Gen. Mark A Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is probably looking at life beyond Trump, unless there is a second coming. He is talking of ending the Afghan war "responsibility", which means "not in a hurry".

When President Barak Obama had set firm deadlines for withdrawal, I made an extensive survey of the country for the Observer Research Foundation. I had concluded that the US is "not leaving Afghanistan today; it is not leaving it tomorrow." A super power enters a major theatre with one set of interests but, over a period of time, develops multiple compelling interests. Why would a country, which is directly involved in 14 shooting wars in various parts of the globe, walk away from its longest war ever without any identifiable gain. Withdrawing empty-handed would be an admission of defeat. Since this is not on the cards, the only conclusion one can draw is that a plan for the future is not being disclosed for now.

US involvement in Afghanistan has been a great tragedy, but its frequent false starts in a rush to the exit door is material for a spoof by someone like Michael Moore. Take, for instance, the peace agreement the US signed with Afghan Taliban on February 29 in Doha. So eager was US negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad to flourish a peace agreement just when the election campaign in the US was picking up, that he would have inserted into the agreement anything the Taliban wished. Read the title headline of that agreement: it is patently absurd:

"Agreement for bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America." The fragility of the agreement is transparent in the pulls and counter pulls that have obviously gone into the headline. There is unbridgeable distance on the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's role, for instance. The Taliban will not talk to Ghani whom they describe quite brazenly as a US "toady".

Ghani deludes himself if he imagines he is being "firm". He is coming across to the world at large as a leader with a very thick skin. New Delhi wishes to keep appearances. In the trapeze act, South Block does not wish to be seen loosening the clasp of Ghani's hand midair. The zero sum game with Pakistan may operate as a factor but, in deference to realism, not a defining one.

If New Delhi is seen to be digging in for Ghani, it will only find itself embarrassed down the line because it is clear as daylight that intra Afghan talks will not move unless Ghani steps aside. By visiting Islamabad and New Delhi, Abdullah Abdullah is positioning himself to step in as soon as the opportunity arises. This is not a process that is likely to reach fruition before the end of the year. So, no confetti on election eve.

One of the advantages the US extracts from its position of being a superpower is to keep making mistakes almost willfully without any fear of being called to account. It is almost a forgotten story that in December 2001 NATO, helped by Russia, Iran, India and the Northern Alliance headquartered in the Panjshir Valley defeated Taliban and Al Qaeda. Panjshir was also the operational headquarters for the Tajik hero Ahmad



Shah Masoud. So strong was Masoud's opposition to the Taliban and Al Qaeda that he travelled extensively to acquaint various international fora of the danger that Al Qaeda and Taliban posed to Afghanistan. His address to the European Parliament in the summer of 2001, months before 9/11, was historic by any yardstick. Complete silence on this speech of Masoud's is surprising. His forces had picked up chatter about a possible Al Qaeda action in the American mainland. He was speaking in Brussels. On September 9, precisely two days before September 11 (9/11) two Arabs, disguised as journalists, visited him in his hideout near the Tajik border for an interview. Their passports, it was revealed much later, had been forged in Brussels. These "journalists", while saying goodbye to Masoud, detonated their vests. All three died instantly. Two days later, the twin towers came down in New York. Is there nothing here that deserves investigation?

Maybe not before the US elections, but is the curtain about to be brought down on US involvement? Whether Trump or Joe Biden win the election, China, Russia, Iran are likely to remain America's adversarial concerns. A little over a year ago, just when

US military involvement in Syria was winding down, one common chatter was about Jabhat al Nusra and its variants being flown to newer theatres of action. Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Morgulov Igor Vladimirovich told a high-powered conference in New Delhi, with Zalmay Khalilzad in attendance, that militants were being flown from Syria to Northern Afghanistan. "Only the Afghan government and the US controls the Afghan air space." The blame cannot be placed at any other door. Khalilzad mounted a token protest but nothing more.

The following Friday, Iran's Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei was more specific: Daesh groups were being flown to Afghanistan. The distinguished chronicler of the West Asian scene, Robert Fisk of the Independent made similar allegations. The allegation fitted neatly into the thesis that militants, trained to kill, cannot be sent to the slaughterhouse. They have to be deployed in other theatres where they are proximate to Muslim population into which militancy has to be injected to stir up the Islamic cauldron - Xinxiang, the Caucasus and a handful of Sunni enclaves in Iran.

By Ron Paul

## Troops Coming Home from Afghanistan? Depends on Who You Ask

Foreign policy has really been dysfunctional in President Trump's first term. No sooner does the president make a strong foreign policy statement than one of his appointees grabs a microphone to explain what the president "really meant."

Earlier this month, President Trump Tweeted that, "we should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!"

It was a very encouraging statement. But almost immediately his statement was "clarified" - actually refuted - by two Administration officials. First, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Mark Milley, directly contradicted his boss - who also happens to be his Commander-in-Chief - stating, "It's a conditions-based plan. We're continuing to monitor those conditions." Then President Trump's National Security Advisor

Robert O'Brien told us that the president's statement was merely an expression of his "desire." "All presidents, all GIs, want the troops home by Christmas," he said on Friday. Then Milley and O'Brien launched a war of words against each other over troop withdrawal, with Milley attacking O'Brien's "clarification" that 2,500 troops would remain in Afghanistan until at least early next year. Milley called it "speculation."

O'Brien fought back, stating that it "has been suggested by some that that's speculation. I can guarantee you that's the plan of the President of the United States."

It's hard to follow! While President Trump's statement on bringing the troops home is to be applauded, he has a real problem getting his policies implemented by the very people he has hired to do the implementing. It has long

been said that "the personnel is the policy," and we have seen this very clearly in this administration.

President Trump ran on a sensible foreign policy, defining "America first" as getting the US out of endless and counterproductive wars. Many, me included, believe this position may have provided his margin of victory. The "peace candidate" nearly always wins. But you cannot pursue an "America first" foreign policy if you put people like Mike Pompeo, John Bolton, Nikki Haley, Mark Milley, and others in charge of carrying it out. They simply won't do it. We are seeing that again when it comes to withdrawing our troops from the long and foolish war in Afghanistan.

For a president once made famous for uttering the line "you're fired," Trump seems unwilling or perhaps unable to dismiss those who actively seek to undermine his policies. There is no need for ... **P3**

## FEFA: Parliament Should Vote for Accountable and Competent Candidates



The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) called on members of the House of Representatives to cast their vote of confidence in favour of accountable and competent candidates, regardless of expediency.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, FEFA said that "introducing the [Cabinet] nominees to the House of Representatives means putting an end to the culture of ["acting"] governance and returning to the constitution and values of the republic in Afghanistan." The cabinet nominees were chosen based on the political agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the High Council for National

Reconciliation.

FEFA They urged the lawmakers to discount narrow-minded ethnic, sectarian, team and linguistic views and vote for those nominees who would serve the nation best and are accountable.

They called on the House of Representatives to carefully review the nominees' credentials and work, and to ensure that they have the capacity, competence and tact to lead the relevant ministries.

Members of the parliament should evaluate agreed criteria and a clear mechanism to ensure the good reputation of the nominees before voting, the watchdog urged, calling for an end to the terms of "acting" ministers.

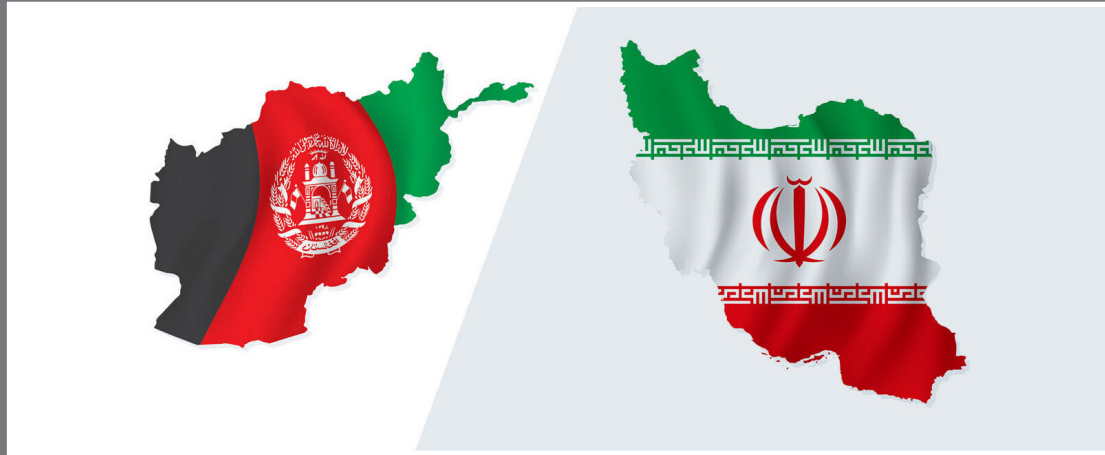
# Iran-Afghanistan railway station to become operational soon: Abdullah

Chairman of Afghanistan's Peace Council Abdullah Abdullah said that the launch of the Khaf-Herat railway is underway and the railway will become operational in the coming weeks. On the sideline of his meeting with Iran's Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian, Abdullah Abdullah told IRNA that the Khaf-Herat railway station has reached the final stage and is now ready to be inaugurated.

Taking advantage of this railway in all areas has a positive impact on both countries and can play an important role in the development of mines in the region, he continued.

Abdullah Abdullah also talked about financial issues and its impact on mutual cooperation, adding that it is hoped that the financial problems will be resolved soon to expand bilateral relations.

On Oct 2, 2020, Iranian Transport and Urban Development Deputy Minister Kheirollah Khademi said that the Khaf-Herat railway station will be complete by end of Autumn, noting



that the border stations are also under construction at zero points of joint borderlines.

Khademi said part of the railway will be constructed by Iran with Afghanistan doing the remaining part. Khaf-Herat railroad is one of the largest projects "we are working to put into operation", Khademi added. He also said that 391 kilometers of the railway will be added to the railway

network of the country during the same period.

Khaf-Herat railway, 35km in length, will connect the Iraqi rail network to Central Asia.

Khaf-Herat is part of the Iran-Afghanistan rail corridor. The project which started in the fiscal year of 2007-2008, connects Iran's eastern city of Khaf to Afghanistan's western city of Ghoryan.

Iranian officials, including President Hassan Rouhani, have stressed the importance of the project in boosting trade ties with neighboring countries, including Afghanistan.

Experts believe speeding up the construction of Khaf-Herat railway will make Chabahar Port in southeastern Iran and Bandar Abbas, south Iran, more accessible for shipping millions of tons of goods.

### Palestinians slam...

and vice versa. Palestinian Jerusalemites are subject to having their residency rights withdrawn if they live in the other occupied territories.

Palestinian refugees, who number more than six million scattered around the world, are not permitted by Israel to return to their homeland at all, even for a visit. The Palestinian leadership has also described the normalisation agreements between the UAE and Bahrain respectively with Israel as a "stab in the back" and a betrayal of the cause. Hend al-Otaiba, director of strategic communications at the UAE foreign ministry, said the delegation was headed by the minister of state for financial affairs, Obaid al-Tayer, and Economy Minister Abdulla bin Touq al-Mari.

According to an Israeli government statement, the two sides will sign agreements on aviation, investment protection, and science and technology.

With their economies hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, the UAE and Israel are hoping for rapid dividends from their normalisation deal which broke years of Arab consensus that there should be no relations with Israel until it makes peace with the Palestinians. PM Netanyahu said both countries have also agreed to a reciprocal visa-free travel arrangement, making Emirati citizens the first in the Arab world to not require Israeli entry visas.

The two governments are also due to sign an agreement authorising 28 commercial flights a week between the countries, an Israeli transport ministry official said.

### NATO vows support...

long-awaited peace talks beginning in Doha.

"We strongly condemn the high levels of Taliban violence, in particular the offensive in Helmand which has forced thousands of innocent civilians to flee their homes."

The statement urged all sides to work for a ceasefire. "This UK funding - along with other donors - will provide financial, technical, and expert assistance to the Afghan security forces, strengthening their vital work to set Afghanistan on a path to lasting peace and stability."

### Retirees rally...

and extremely radical." However, the demonstrations have continued despite the crackdown.

More than 50,000 people gathered in Minsk on Sunday for a traditional anti-government march, according to the Viasna human rights center, and smaller protests also took place in other cities. The Interior Ministry reported that 280 demonstrators were detained on Sunday, 215 of them in Minsk. The ministry estimated the crowd in the capital at 7,000. According to Viasna, nearly 14,900 people have been detained since the election, and 91 of them have been declared political prisoners. Several journalists who covered the protests for Belarusian online media outlets were sentenced Monday to 13-15 days in jail.

Tsikhankouskaya, who is in exile in Lithuania after leaving the country in fear for her safety, has threatened to call a nationwide strike unless

Lukashenko resigns, releases political prisoners and stops the crackdown on protesters.

"If our demands aren't fulfilled by Oct. 25, the entire country will peacefully take to the streets," she said in a statement last week. "On Oct. 26, a national strike of all enterprises will begin, all roads will be blocked, sales in state-owned stores will collapse."

She said authorities have released Ilya Salei, a lawyer for her top associate, Maria Kolesnikova, from detention. Kolesnikova was jailed last month on charges of undermining state security, which could bring a five-year prison term if convicted. Salei also was detained on the same charge.

On Monday, authorities released from jail Vitaly Shklyarov, a Russian political consultant who also holds Belarusian citizenship, and Lilia Vlasova, a prominent member of the opposition's Coordination Council formed to push for a transition of power. Both were

detained earlier this year and will remain under house arrest. The council, whose prominent members were either arrested or forced to leave the country, said in a statement that all those recently released "remain political prisoners" because the charges against them haven't been dropped.

"Only freeing of all political prisoners and ending persecution of people for their political views can be a step towards the beginning of resolving the political crisis," the statement read.

"The authorities are trying to mobilize their supporters and divide the opposition by ramping up repressions against some and releasing the others," independent political analyst Alexander Klaskousky said. Neither approach works, he added.

"For the third month, the protests are not dying down and the political crisis deepens still, leaving the authorities less room to maneuver," Klaskousky said.

### 180 Civilians...

"A month has passed since the start of the talks, the prolongation of the talks has left an impact on people's hopes," said Esmat Suhail, a resident of Badghis.

"The Taliban do not have any justification for their war, they must stop the violence and make peace," said Arif Hasrat, a resident in Badghis.

In Herat, activists during an exhibition called for violence to be halted to save civilian lives. "All these paintings reflect

the pains and wounds of the children," said Aziz Ahmad Suran, organizer.

In the latest violence, on Tuesday at least five civilians were killed and nine more were wounded in two roadside bomb blasts in Jalrez district, Maidan Wardak province, early on Tuesday morning, the provincial governor's office said.

In Khost, Abdul Hai Zazai, district governor of Zazai Maidan in eastern Khost, was killed in an ambush on Monday by gunmen in central Logar province, said

the provincial governor's media office. The incident occurred as Zazai was on his way to Kabul province, the statement said, adding that "Mr Zazai and one of his bodyguards were killed and two others were wounded." However, At least 12 police force members, including district police chief Faiz Mohammad Hotak, were killed in two explosions in Kang district, Nimroz province, on Tuesday, said Nematullah Sediqqi, a member of Nimroz's provincial council.

### Troops Coming...

endless negotiations with the Taliban on what the country might look like or should look like when we get out. The only way to get out of Afghanistan is to just get out of Afghanistan. To just come home. Nineteen years fighting a losing battle to re-shape a country thousands of miles away about which

the "experts" know nothing is more than enough. But if there is ever a "danger" of a war coming to a close, Washington's warmongers are right there trying to stir up another conflict. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said late last week that would like to see huge military spending increases to counter the "threat" of Russia and China.

Robbing Middle America to enrich the millionaires in the military-industrial complex seems to be the one issue universally supported in Washington. But it is not at all what the American people want. Will Trump have another chance to pursue an actual "America first" foreign policy? Soon we will know...

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# Palestinians slam UAE delegation visit to Israel

The arrival of a United Arab Emirates delegation in Israel has been slammed as “shameful” by Palestinian officials.

The delegation – UAE’s first official visit to Israel – was welcomed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Finance Minister Israel Katz at Ben Gurion Airport on Tuesday.

The five-hour visit would be restricted to the airport near Tel Aviv, due to coronavirus concerns, Israeli organisers said, and it comes after the two countries signed an agreement at the White House to normalise ties last month.

The visit will involve signing of a number of agreements.

Waseel Abu Youssef, a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said the visit will only validate Israeli forces’ crimes against the Palestinians. “The bilateral agreements that were announced

today and the delegations that come and go, all of that offers the occupation a strength to escalate its aggression and its crimes against the Palestinian people and increases its intransigence and arrogance,” said Youssef.

Speaking in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, he said the overtures come as Israel expands illegal settlement activity.

In the besieged Gaza Strip, Hazem Qassem, a spokesman for Hamas, said: “Such a visit will only encourage the occupation to pursue the gradual annexation of West Bank lands.”

Palestinians on social media have decried the “double standards” of the visa exemption rule for Emirati citizens, noting that they are not allowed to move freely within and to the occupied Palestinian territories.

Under Israel’s colour-coded ID system, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank are not allowed to travel to the Gaza Strip, ... **P3**



### A look at the world

#### Russia ready to freeze warheads total to extend nuclear pact with U.S. by a year

Russia said on Tuesday it would be ready to freeze its total number of nuclear warheads if the United States did the same in order to extend their last major arms control treaty by a year.

The offer, two weeks before the U.S. presidential election, appeared to narrow the gap between the two sides over the fate of the New START agreement, which is due to expire in February.

The United States last week rejected a Russian offer to unconditionally extend the pact for one year, saying that any proposal that did not envisage freezing



all nuclear warheads was a “non-starter”. But a statement published by the Russian Foreign Ministry on Tuesday suggested that the two countries’ positions had moved closer.

“Russia is proposing to extend New START by one year and is ready together with the United States to make a political commitment to ‘freeze’ the number of nuclear warheads held by the parties for this period,” it said.

New START, signed in 2010, imposes limits on the two countries’ strategic nuclear arsenals.

Extending it would mark a rare bright spot in the fraught relationship between the two countries. Failure to do so would remove the main pillar maintaining the nuclear balance between them and add yet another element of tension.

#### Iran, Ukraine talk compensation for downed passenger plane



Representatives from Ukraine and Iran are meeting in Tehran to negotiate compensation for the victims of a Boeing 737 passenger plane that was accidentally shot down by the Iranian military in January.

The Kyiv-bound Ukraine Airlines Flight 752 crashed minutes after taking off from the Iranian capital’s main airport on January 8, killing all 176 people on board.

Iranian authorities initially denied responsibility and blamed the tragedy on a technical problem. But days later, Iran’s armed forces admitted the plane had been misidentified and targeted by two missiles. Most of the crash victims were Iranian-Canadians, but there were also citizens from the US, France, Ukraine, Britain, Afghanistan and Sweden among them.

Compensation for victims Three days of negotiations over compensation for the crash victims got underway in Tehran on Monday, Iran’s state news agency IRNA reported. A first round of talks was held in Kyiv in July.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry has said it is willing “in principle” to pay damages as soon as the technical and legal details of the incident were clarified.

In a statement quoted by the AFP news agency, Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry welcomed “Iran’s decision to take full responsibility for bringing down the Ukrainian plane and its readiness to ensure the same compensation for all the relatives of the victims, regardless of their citizenship.”

A third round of talks between Iranian and Ukrainian officials is expected to be held in Kyiv at a later date.

#### Retirees rally in Belarus against authoritarian president

About 3,000 retirees rallied in the Belarusian capital of Minsk for a third straight Monday to demand the resignation of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko as mass protests of a disputed election continue to roil the country.

They marched through the streets of Minsk carrying flowers and chanting for Lukashenko to “Go away!” after the Aug. 9 balloting that was widely seen as rigged.

“How many grandmas should it take to oust one grandpa?” said one banner held by the protesters, referring to the 66-year-old president.

Pro-Lukashenko pensioners also rallied in the capital. Some 2,000 people — many of



whom were men in military and security forces uniforms — came to Independence Square with national flags and banners that said, “For peace, prosperity and traditional values.” Local media reported that some had been bused to the rally in what appeared to be an organized effort.

Lukashenko, who has run the country for 26 years, was declared the winner of the election with 80% of the vote. His main opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, got only 10% and refused to recognize the results as valid, saying they had been manipulated. Tens of thousands have been regularly protesting in Minsk and other cities since the vote, demanding that Lukashenko step down, with the largest rallies drawing up to 200,000 people. The authorities tried to disperse the mostly peaceful crowds with truncheons, stun grenades and water cannons, and they have made mass detentions. On Monday, the country’s Interior Ministry threatened to use firearms against them “if need be,” saying the rallies “have become organized ... **P3**



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