



Page 2 | NATIONAL  
As violence flares in south Afghanistan, key questions answered

**'Regional consensus can drive peace in Afghanistan'**

Consensus among regional countries can drive peace in Afghanistan with people of the war-torn country in the driver's seat, speakers ...

Page 3 | ECONOMY  
Team to Investigate Alleged Cronyism at MoF, Customs



Kabul  
17 / 3



Herat  
23 / 5



Nangarhar  
30 / 15



Balkh  
24 / 11



# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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10 afs



**Senate asks U.S. to review Doha pact with Taliban**

The Meshrano Jirga or Senate on Sunday stressed tangible outcome from the ongoing peace talks and asked the US to review its agreement with the Taliban who have increased violence in violation of the Doha agreement.

Senate chairman Fazal Hadi Muslimyar accused the Taliban of breaking promises and asked the government negotiating team to work with patience and take the ongoing talks to a fruitful conclusion.

He asked the US and international community to reconsider their pledges with the Taliban because the group acted against Doha Agreement and continued violence.

"It was based on the US promise that the Afghan government showed flexibility and released Taliban's prisoners and now the US should remain committed to the Afghan government under the security pact the two countries ... **P3**



**Khalilzad: 12 Children Killed in 'Tragic' Takhar Airstrike by Afghan Government**

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad called the Takhar airstrike a "terrible tragedy" that claimed the lives of civilians.

Citing the report by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Khalilzad said that 12 children were killed and 18 others, including the mosques' mullah, were injured in an airstrike by the Afghan government forces in Takhar.

Offering condolences to the families, the envoy said: "This is a terrible tragedy. Unfortunately, tragedy is not limited to Takhar. Civilians are victims of car bombs, IEDs [improvised explosive devices], and targeted killings perpetrated by the Taliban. Civilians have been forced to flee fighting in Lashkar Gah and other areas."

Calling for an immediate reduction of violence leading to a ceasefire, Khalilzad pushed for an accelerated political settlement in Doha. ... **P2**

## Hekmatyar: Formation of Interim Government Only Solution for Peace



Hezb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar said on Sunday that as the Taliban did not want the current government, an interim government remains the only solution to peace in Afghanistan.

He emphasised that the current Afghan government wanted the war to continue and was not in favour of peace which could only be achieved if "all foreigners leave" the country.

Sharing details of his recent visit to

Pakistan, he said the leaders there had assured him of their cooperation in the Afghan peace process.

Last week, Hekmatyar had given a press conference in Islamabad on Oct. 20 where he said that the U.S. had been "defeated in Afghanistan" and Washington had "no choice except to leave the country."

Criticizing the ongoing peace talks in Doha, Hekmatyar said they were between the team of the Presidential

Palace and the Taliban and are not "intra-Afghan" talks.

"These talks are not intra-Afghan talks, because there is no presence of many Afghan political parties in these talks, we are not there. There is a need for consensus first so that we can go towards talks with a unified idea," he said.

During a talk at a think tank on Oct. 23, he warned that the only durable solution for peace in Afghanistan

was that "the U.S. should withdraw its troops and a non-aligned, independent and sovereign government should be formed by Afghans in light of their beliefs and traditions without any interference." "Otherwise, the country would slip into another civil war," warned the former prime minister.

Despite, As parties to the Afghan peace talks process in Doha stall over preliminary issues, Atta Mohammad Noor, CEO of Jamiat Party and former governor of Balkh province has called on New Delhi to help by playing a more proactive role in the dialogue and hold talks with the Taliban.

Noor, who is currently in India, is the fourth prominent Afghan leader to visit India in the past few weeks to discuss the peace talks process - after visits by Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation; former Afghan Vice-president Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Afghan politician and former Mujahideen Leader.

In an interview with ThePrint in Delhi this past week, Noor, who picked up a weapon in 2016 to save the lives of Indian diplomats during an attack on their consulate in Balkh province, said he was there to try to garner India's support.

"The situation in Afghanistan ... **P3**

**Qureshi: Afghans Have 'Historic Opportunity' To Work Together for Peace**

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that the way towards reduction in violence in Afghanistan lay in progress in the ongoing intra-Afghan dialogue with Afghans working together to secure a political settlement.

Qureshi, who was talking to Speaker of Afghanistan's House of Representatives Mir Rahman Rahmani, on Saturday, said that Afghans have a "historic opportunity" to work together and secure an inclusive, broad-based and comprehensive political settlement.

"Progress in the intra-Afghan negotiations would help in ... **P3**



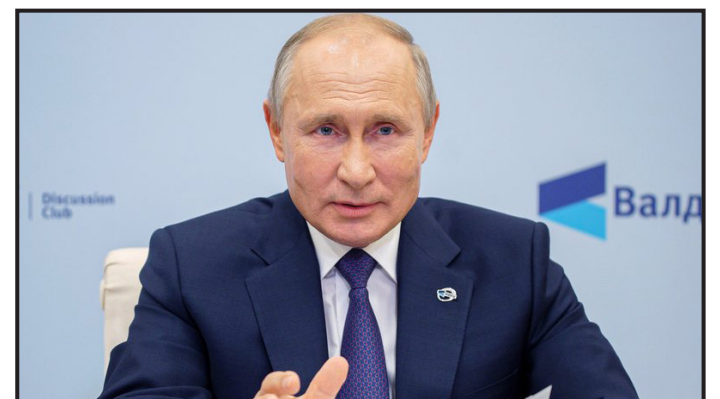
**Putin says U.S. presence in Afghanistan good for security**

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the continued presence of American troops in Afghanistan is beneficial for overall security.

"Initially, we backed US forces' presence in Afghanistan and earlier voted in favor of a respective UN Security Council resolution. I still believe that US presence in Afghanistan does not run counter to our external interests," Putin said in an interview with "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin" program on Rossiya-1 TV channel.

"On the contrary, when it was announced that the Americans are preparing to withdraw their military contingent - yes, our official position is that maybe this creates additional conditions for a kind of Afghan reconciliation - but I personally think that this creates many risks," Putin said.

"First, we will have to spend more to maintain stability and second,



no matter what, still US presence in Afghanistan contributes to stability in the country and their exit creates risks," the Russian leader explained. "We don't have to fight against the Americans' presence there."

Putin noted that the two countries' special services continued working in this direction. "We are cooperating with the US despite numerous contradictions on a lot of areas, still

cooperation at the level of special services is underway," he said. In particular, this is cooperation on de-conflicting in Syria and a very good working contact was established at the operational level and at the level of military units' chiefs.

War on terror According to Putin, the Americans share data on anti-terror with their Russian colleagues. ... **P2**

## Putin says U.S. ...

"We view the Americans' effort in Afghanistan as an anti-terrorist effort," Putin stressed.

"They hand over and repeatedly handed over [data] to us. I thanked incumbent President [Donald Trump] because information that we received from America helped us prevent several terrorist acts in Russia," Putin noted. "In our turn, we are trying to do the same and we have such an agreement with the incumbent US president that if this information emerges, we will share it and help each other."

## Khalilzad: 12..

"The United States is singularly focused on this goal and is pressing both parties to reduce violence and find a path to peace as soon as possible," the envoy said.

He also added that it was "vital" for Afghanistan's independent media and civil society to be allowed to document current events, referring to comments by the First Vice President Amrullah Saleh last week.

The Ministry of Defence and First Vice President Amrullah Saleh had said the Oct. 21 airstrike killed Taliban fighters who were responsible for attacking Afghan security forces.

Saleh's office said they arrested the person responsible for spreading "venomous and fake news" against the security forces.

Clashes between the Afghan forces and the Taliban militants continue despite the ongoing peace talks in Qatar which began in September.

By Shereena Qazi

# As violence flares in south Afghanistan, key questions answered

Afghanistan has seen an uptick in violence over the past week, with the Taliban launching attacks in several provinces even as negotiators from the armed group and the Afghan government are still in Qatar's capital for talks aimed at bringing peace to the country.

A major Taliban assault last week on Lashkar Gah, capital of the southern Helmand province, sparked days of intense fighting and prompted the United States to launch air attacks in support of its allied government forces. Tens of thousands of people are estimated to have since fled their homes to escape the violence, which has stretched hospitals in Lashkar Gah to capacity.

Fighting continued on Monday in some areas of Helmand's Nad Ali and Nawa districts. Besides Helmand, the Taliban in recent days has also carried out attacks in Badakhshan, Kunduz, Farah and Kandahar provinces.

Faced with a surge in violence and delays in the start of the historic negotiations in Doha, many Afghans say peace is far from guaranteed.

### Here is what we know so far:

#### How did it start?

On October 11, the Taliban launched a major offensive from different directions in a bid to capture Lashkar Gah, Omer Zwak, spokesman for the provincial governor in Helmand, told Al Jazeera. The group's fighters overran security checkpoints, while a number of districts - Babaji, Cha-e-anjir, Nad-e-Ali/Marja and Nawa-e-Barakzai - also came under attack.

Two days later, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Afghanistan said the highway between Kandahar and Lashkar Gah was inaccessible due to the presence of improvised explosive devices.

Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem

told Al Jazeera that the group's fighters were recapturing districts that were previously under their control but were retaken by Afghan security forces a few months ago.

The Taliban controls most of Helmand province and in recent years has conducted several attacks to capture Lashkar Gah - but its fighters have been pushed back by Afghan security forces each time.

#### How have civilians been affected?

As the fighting intensified and the security situation around Lashkar Gah deteriorated, tens of thousands of people fled to the provincial capital. Afghan authorities estimate that 35,000 people (some 5,000 families) have been displaced by the fighting. The OCHA office in Afghanistan, however, told Al Jazeera that assessment teams from a number of organisations were still verifying these figures, with 5,000 people confirmed so far.

"Yesterday, around 300 families or approximately 2,100 people from Nawa-e-Barakzai have been newly displaced within Nawa district," it said on Monday. OCHA also said the deployed teams were catering to the needs of those sheltering in different parts of Lashkar Gah who may require immediate food, water and temporary spaces for living. Health facilities have also been affected due to the clashes, with some operating in a reduced capacity and others being completely shut.

OCHA said seven health facilities in Nad-e-Ali/Marja, Nahr-e-Saraj, Lashkar Gah and Nawa districts closed down on 14 October after healthcare workers received threats.

Medical charity Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF) told Al Jazeera that with the main trauma hospital in Lashkar Gah remaining "under pressure", its focus has been "on ensuring continuity of services in MSF-supported Boost Provincial Hospital, for



the wounded, but also for those in need of access to their regular services".

MSF Afghanistan said that between October 11 and 16, it received 56 people - including pregnant women and children. Some of the patients were wounded by shelling, blasts and gunshots, while others had suffered fractures.

"Additionally, in our ER, we admitted 33 people who have been displaced by the fighting, but these people were admitted for medical conditions that were not related to direct injuries sustained from the fighting," said MSF Afghanistan.

Overall, at least 200 people, including women, have been killed and wounded, according to OCHA.

#### US-Taliban blame each other; why?

Following the Taliban's push on Lashkar Gah and the seizure of security checkpoints, the US launched air attacks against the group's fighters in support of the Afghan security forces. This was a rare military intervention by the US since the signing of an agreement in February with the Taliban on troop withdrawal in exchange for security guarantees from the armed group.

The document inked in Doha also included a pledge from the Taliban to sit down with the Kabul administration

to find a peaceful settlement to decades of war.

Soon after the air raids, Colonel Sonny Leggett, a spokesperson for the US military in Afghanistan, said on Twitter that the recent Taliban attacks in Helmand were "not consistent" with the US-Taliban agreement and undermined the ongoing peace talks in Doha.

He insisted the air raids did not violate the February agreement - a position rejected by the Taliban.

"All contents of the US-Islamic Emirate agreement are unambiguous, but the opposite side has violated its commitments on numerous occasions, are engaging in provocative actions," the Taliban said in a statement on Sunday, warning that "all responsibility and consequences from continuation of such actions shall fall squarely on the shoulders of the American side".

The US military swiftly dismissed the Taliban's accusation.

"U.S. airstrikes in Helmand and Farah have been and continue to be solely in defense of the ANDSF as they are being attacked by the Taliban," Leggett said on Twitter, referring to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). "The entire world has witnessed the Taliban's offensive operations in Helmand - attacks which ... **P3**

By Riyaz ul Khaliq

## 'Regional consensus can drive peace in Afghanistan'

Consensus among regional countries can drive peace in Afghanistan with people of the war-torn country in the driver's seat, speakers said at an international virtual conference said.

"The Afghan peace process seems long, [and] complex with the bumpy road," said Oguzhan Ertugrul, Turkey's ambassador in Kabul, at the conference hosted by Ankara-based Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) on Friday.

In February, the US reached a deal with Taliban to end the war. The US promised to withdraw all troops within 14 months if the Taliban uphold the deal. The deal followed the intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha last month. Afghanistan needs peace and stability, asserted Murat Aslan, the moderator of the conference -- titled Wise Talks: Security and Societal Compromise for Prosperous Afghanistan.

"Turkey is ready to lend its support to facilitate the two sides - Republican [Kabul administration] and Taliban," the Turkish envoy said.

"However, no third country should impose themselves on the negotiating teams," the ambassador said emphasizing the level of violence spiked in recent months which needs

to be reduced soon.

But, Ertugrul said: "It is not easy to generate regional consensus for peace in the country [...] There are competing interests of the regional players."

'Lack of political unity in Kabul challenging'

The Turkish ambassador said he is "cautiously optimistic about the future as the peace process is long."

"It needs all-inclusive peace to sustain - to meet the demands and expectations of the Afghan society. [But] lack of political unity is the big challenge in Kabul," he pointed out. Afghanistan held general elections in September 2019 but results were declared in February 2020 and the Cabinet was announced just three days back.

"Government is yet to take a vote of confidence and Afghan High Council for Peace is yet not fully operational," the envoy said.

"It is really difficult for Kabul team in Doha to defend its achievements of the last 20 years," he said.

Ertugrul, however, added that consensus among the "regional countries was important which will help peace to sustain."

"Regional process is missing to back

Doha process. Through the regional process, regional consensus will be generated," he added.

Istanbul Process praised The speakers acknowledged that Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process had brought all stakeholders together on Afghanistan.

Turkey-led Istanbul Process was initiated in 2011 and its last summit was held in Istanbul last year. Khan Wali Khan Basharmal, Afghanistan's ambassador to Turkmenistan, while detailing the country's "nature of tolerance" in past, said that times have changed for the country.

"There is too much difference between 1999 and 2020," said Basharmal, referring to the time before the US-led international forces' invasion.

"Region is changing [...] outdated infrastructure of Asia needs to be changed with modern infrastructure and the regional players see towards US behavior in Afghanistan and we do believe the US is playing a positive role in the peace process," he said.

"International partners [must be] committed to values achieved in the last 19 years; if that does not happen, the region does not have a ... **P3**

## New clashes...

World powers want to prevent a wider war that draws in Turkey, which has voiced strong support for Azerbaijan, and Russia, which has a defense pact with Armenia.

Differences over the conflict have further strained relations between Ankara and its NATO allies, with Pompeo accusing Turkey of fueling the conflict by arming the Azeri side. Ankara denies it has inflamed the conflict.

Pompeo had said ahead of Friday's talks that he hoped

the "right path forward" could be found.

But Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said he saw no diplomatic resolution of the conflict at this stage, and Aliyev has described the prospects of a peace settlement as "very remote."

About 30,000 people were killed in a 1991-94 war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenians regard the enclave as part of their historic homeland; Azeris consider it an illegally occupied land that must be returned to their control.

## UN: Nuclear...

as UN Day.

"The United Nations was formed to promote peace with a goal of the abolition of nuclear weapons," Fihn said. "This treaty is the U.N. at its best - working closely with civil society to bring democracy to disarmament."

The treaty requires that all ratifying countries "never under any circumstances ... develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive

devices." It also bans any transfer or use of nuclear weapons or nuclear explosive devices - and the threat to use such weapons -- and requires parties to promote the treaty to other countries.

Once it enters into force all countries that have ratified it will be bound by those requirements.

The United States had written to treaty signatories saying the Trump administration believes they made "a strategic error" and urging them to rescind their ratification.

# Team to Investigate Alleged Cronyism at MoF, Customs

President Ashraf Ghani has appointed a probe team to investigate appointments at the Ministry of Finance, according to a classified document seen by TOLONews.

According to the document, the president has threatened to take charge of the Ministry of Finance himself if answers are not provided about the allegations of irregular appointments at money-generating entities including the Ministry of Finance.

According to anti-corruption organizations, the high posts at Customs and the Ministry of Finance weren't advertised through a proper vacancy announcement process for the candidates, and all those individuals who have been appointed came on the direct order of President Ghani and Finance Minister Abdul Hadi Arghandwal.

"The Afghan government has so far not shared any clear program with the people for reform in these areas.

The Afghan president should prioritize bringing reforms to the Ministry of Finance instead of talking about a caretaker for the ministry," said Sayed Ekram Afzali, the head of Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA).

"It is clear they have been assigned to the jobs through the private relationships they have. There is a need for an investigation regarding this issue," said Karim Atal, a member of the Afghan parliament.

Based on the document, a five-member team comprised of members of the Independent Administration Reform and Civil Services Commission and the Presidential Palace have been tasked with investigating the case.

"We have not made any appointments at the Ministry of Finance contrary to the law, therefore the Ministry of Finance is fully prepared to cooperate in the investigation with any entity and organization," said Shamroz Khan Masjidi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Finance.



"The chiefs who were appointed by the reforms commission through a free competition, they (MoF) officials have replaced them with others, they don't have permission from the president, advisers have been appointed over the chiefs, it means the chiefs are required to report to the advisers," said Maiwand Rouhani, Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring Committee (MEC).

Previous reports indicate that customs revenues dropped 10 billion Afs.

However, the Ministry of Finance at the time said that the revenues dropped because of a decrease in the level of imports.

There is a perception that the corruption dominating the institution is the main cause of the decline in the national revenues.

### Hekmatyar: Formation...

is currently quite complicated. That's the reason I am here in India. I really hope that India will be more proactive because India has got power, it has got leverage, and it has got influence in the region," Noor said.

"If India does not do that, then this will give more ground to the Pakistanis. As the Americans are leaving, the Pakistanis are finding more space in Afghanistan," Noor said.

Until now, however, India's policy has been that it will not engage with the Taliban, as it continues to see the fundamentalist group as being aided by Pakistan.

### Senate asks...

have reached and refrain from deals behind the curtains," he said.

He said the killing of security forces in Takhar province was questionable, asking the Ministry of Interior to probe the incident and shared details with people.

Muslimyar also condemned a suicide blast that claimed the lives of students in Dasht-i-Barchi locality of Kabul and offered his condolences to families of the victims.

He termed the incident as un-Islamic and added the enemies of Islam again shamed history by committing such an inhuman crime.

### Qureshi: Afghans...

reduction in violence leading to a ceasefire," he said.

He also stressed the importance of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), noting that the mechanism provided the best platform to address all relevant issues.

The foreign minister also said there were enormous opportunities for trade and economic cooperation between the two countries which should be optimally utilised.

Rahmani also met Sadiq Sanjrani, chairman of the Senate of Pakistan. The parliamentary delegates exchanged views on topics of mutual interests including regional peace and economic cooperation.

### As violence...

injured and displaced thousands of innocent Afghan civilians," Leggett added.

Under the agreement, the Taliban said it would not attack cities while the US said it would refrain from assaults on the fighters except to defend the Afghan forces.

Afghan officials accused the Taliban of breaching the agreement with the assault on Lashkar Gah.

Naeem, the Taliban spokesman, told Al Jazeera that the US has "bombed places where there wasn't any conflict going on. Also they are bombing the places where the fighting is already stopped".

On Friday, the Taliban said it would stop its operations if the US halted its air raids in Helmand.

### What is happening at intra-Afghan peace talks?

The escalation in violence comes more than a month after Taliban representatives and

Afghan government delegates arrived in Doha for the intra-Afghan talks.

A "contact group" comprised of six members from each side was established to set the "terms and conditions", paving the way for the start of formal negotiations between the two sides.

But the discussions appear to have stalled due to disagreements to establish a basic framework for negotiations.

On Monday, Naeem said that the contact group met to discuss "disagreements and it was emphasised that a final understanding on the peace process should be reached as soon as possible".

However, Bashir Ahmad Shakir, a former member of the provincial council in Helmand, told Al Jazeera that Afghans have doubts about the Taliban's seriousness towards peace.

"They [Taliban] are talking about peace in Doha but are

doing the opposite by attacking houses, properties, roads and spreading fear among people. Afghan people - especially people of Helmand - don't want the Taliban presence here any more," he said.

"We doubt their sincerity towards peace talks."

The Taliban has been fighting the Afghan government since it was toppled from power in a US-led invasion in 2001. Washington blamed the then-Taliban rulers for harbouring al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda was accused of plotting the 9/11 attacks.

US President Donald Trump, who is seeking re-election on November 3, said earlier this month that all US troops in Afghanistan should be "home by Christmas".

His statement came hours after his national security adviser said Washington would reduce its forces in Afghanistan to 2,500 by early next year.

### 'Regional...

bright future in terms of regional connectivity," Basharmal added.

Despite Afghanistan's "rich history of social toleration", the Afghan envoy said paving the way for sustainable peace in Afghanistan is "not easy as public mindset, political and civil society were badly devastated, demolished through foisting proxy policies on Afghan people which furthered extremism."

After World War II, he said, Afghanistan would host 0.25 million tourists. He said Afghan women got voting right in 1921 and that Kabul University had established "Asia's first computer laboratory."

"But it was badly ignored during the Cold War era when the country had maintained a neutral position," he added.

Regional connectivity He said there are more than 4 million social media users in Afghanistan who "independently express their

ideas and not only criticize government policies but also come up with solutions to their problems."

"Connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia is a remarkable initiative and Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani offered regional connectivity to Pakistan. We are for promoting peaceful ties while getting together to meet the modern challenges," he said referring to the seven-point "peace plan" mooted by Ghani "for long time stability in Afghanistan".

He, however, regretted that Afghanistan was "left alone after 2014" by the international community.

"We are fighting 95% of the war ourselves [...] by the Afghan government and are now recruiting the youth in national army ranks," he said.

On generating regional consensus on Afghanistan, the Afghan diplomat asserted: "regional consensus should

respect the national will of Afghanistan."

In her comments, Tanya Goudsouzian, a journalist, said both great and small powers have "meddled in Afghan affairs" for long.

"Peace will continue to elude until regional rivals continue to use Afghan soil for their interests," she asserted referring to diverging roles of regional countries. Referring to visits by Afghan peace leader Abdullah Abdullah to Pakistan and India, she said: "it is to underscore and safeguard the sovereignty of Afghanistan."

However, she said Kabul needs to ensure that peace talks with Taliban "will not jeopardize its relations with neighbors".

"It is important to ensure that Afghanistan is not home to radicals [...] It is in the interests not only of the country but the whole international community which needs a collective approach," she said.

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# New clashes break out in Nagorno-Karabakh after Washington talks

New clashes broke out between Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenian forces over Nagorno-Karabakh a day after talks in Washington, D.C., U.S. in efforts to end the deadliest fighting in the enclave in more than a quarter of a century.

Azerbaijan's defense ministry reported fighting in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous part of Azerbaijan populated and controlled by ethnic Armenians. It said the areas of Lachin and Gubadli had come under rocket and artillery fire from inside Armenian territory.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, local officials accused Azerbaijan's forces of firing Smerch missiles into residential buildings in Stepanakert, the largest city in the region, which Baku denied.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had separately met with the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia on Friday in a new attempt to end nearly a month of bloodshed that Russian President Vladimir Putin said may have

killed 5,000 people.

The collapse of two Russia-brokered ceasefires had already dimmed the prospect of a quick end to the fighting that broke out on September 27 over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The defense ministry of Nagorno-Karabakh said the total number of Armenians killed in the weeks of fighting had risen by 36 to 963, the Russian news agency Interfax reported.

Azerbaijan said a 13-year-old Russian boy died on Saturday after being wounded in a rocket attack on the city of Ganja on October 17. Azerbaijan says 65 Azeri civilians have been killed and 298 wounded, but has not disclosed its military casualties.

Azeri forces say they have made territorial gains, including full control over the border with Iran, which Armenia denies. Nagorno-Karabakh's ethnic Armenian administration says its forces have repulsed attacks. ... **P2**



### A look at the world

#### Normalization deal with Oman 'soon': Israeli media

Oman will be the next Arab country to normalize relations with Israel, according to Israeli media on Sunday.

Israeli officials believe that Oman will soon sign a normalization deal with Israel under US sponsorship, Israeli Channel 12 reported.

The channel, however, said that the normalization of the Israeli-Omani relations would likely take place after the US election. Muscat so far has not commented on the Israeli media report.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed recently that "other countries will follow", in reference to Israel's normalization deals with the United Arab



Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Sudan.

Oman welcomed the Emirati and Bahraini moves to normalize relations with Israel.

In 2018, Netanyahu made a surprise visit to Oman and met with late Sultan Qaboos bin Saeed.

On Friday, US President Donald Trump announced that Sudan and Israel agreed to normalize their relations.

Sudan became the fifth Arab country to establish official ties with Israel following Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994 and both UAE and Bahrain in September 2020.

However, The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain welcomed on Saturday the announcement of normalizing relations between Sudan and Israel.

In a statement, the UAE Foreign Ministry described the announcement as "an important step toward enhancing security and prosperity in the region".

It said the move to normalize the Sudanese-Israeli relations "would expand the scope of economic, commercial, scientific and diplomatic cooperation".

The Bahraini Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, described the announcement as "an additional historical step on the path for achieving peace, stability and prosperity in the Middle East region".

#### UN: Nuclear weapons ban treaty to enter into force



The United Nations announced Saturday that 50 countries have ratified a U.N. treaty to ban nuclear weapons triggering its entry into force in 90 days, a move hailed by anti-nuclear activists but strongly opposed by the United States and the other major nuclear powers.

As of Friday, the treaty had 49 signatories, and the United Nations said the 50th ratification from Honduras had been received.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres commended the 50 states and saluted "the instrumental work" of civil society in facilitating negotiations and pushing for ratification, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

The U.N. chief said the treaty's entry into force on Jan. 22 culminates a worldwide movement "to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons" and "is a tribute to the survivors of nuclear explosions and tests, many of whom advocated for this treaty," he said, Guterres said the treaty "represents a meaningful commitment towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons, which remains the highest disarmament priority of the United Nations," Dujarric said.

Beatrice Fihn, executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize-winning coalition whose work helped spearhead the nuclear ban treaty, said: "This moment has been 75 years coming since the horrific attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the founding of the U.N. which made nuclear disarmament a cornerstone."

"The 50 countries that ratify this Treaty are showing true leadership in setting a new international norm that nuclear weapons are not just immoral but illegal," she said.

The 50th ratification came on the 75th anniversary of the ratification of the U.N. Charter which officially established the United Nations and is celebrated ... **P2**

#### France reacts after Erdogan questions Macron's mental health

France recalled its ambassador to Turkey for consultations after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said President Emmanuel Macron needed mental health treatment and made other comments that the French government described as unacceptably rude. Erdogan questioned his French counterpart's mental condition while criticizing Macron's attitude toward Islam and Muslims. His remarks at a local party congress were an apparent response to statements Macron made this month about problems created by radical Muslims in France who practice what the French leader termed "Islamist separatism."

"What is the problem of this person called Macron with Islam and Muslims?" Erdogan asked



rhetorically during his Justice and Development party meeting in the central Anatolian city of Kayseri.

"What else can be said to a head of state who does not understand freedom of belief and who behaves in this way to millions of people living in his country who are members of a different faith?" the Turkish leader continued. The French presidency reacted hours later with a statement that said, "Excess and rudeness are not a method" and "We are not accepting insults."

Using unusually strong language, the French presidency said, "We demand Erdogan to change his policy, which is dangerous in all aspects." The presidency point out that Erdogan, a devout Muslim, did not offer condolences following the beheading near Paris last week of a teacher who had shown in class some caricatures of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. French judicial authorities are investigating the killing as an Islamist terror attack.

Tensions between NATO allies France and Turkey have intensified in recent months over issues that include the fighting in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, a region within Azerbaijan that is controlled by ethnic Armenian separatists. Macron has notably accused Turkey of flouting its commitments by ramping up its military presence in Libya and bringing in jihadi fighters from Syria. France also has sided with Greece and Cyprus in tensions with Turkey over offshore oil and gas drilling in the eastern Mediterranean, prompting criticism from Ankara.



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