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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Issue No. 872

www.heartofasia.af

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**Turkey renews support for Afghan peace**

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has pledged Turkey's continued support for the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

Erdogan renewed Turkey's backing for stability in Afghanistan at a meeting with the High Council for National Reconciliation chairman in Istanbul on Friday.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, visiting Ankara in response to an invitation from Erdogan, exchanged views with his host on the Afghan peace process.

A statement from Abdullah's office said the ongoing peace negotiations in Doha between Kabul and the Taliban and bilateral relations also came up for discussion.

Erdogan promised his country fully supported the peace process that was supported by the people of Afghanistan, Abdullah's office said in a statement. Abdullah said cooperative ...

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**Pompeo to Meet Peace Negotiators in Doha**

Amid signs of progress in the ongoing peace efforts in Doha, reports indicate that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will meet negotiators from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Taliban in Doha on Saturday.

Quoting the US State Department, AFP reports that Pompeo will meet separately in the Qatari capital Doha with Afghan and Taliban teams to the talks.

According to the State Department, Pompeo will also see Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani and the foreign minister on his stop to Doha.

Pompeo is on a seven-nation tour of Europe and the Middle East as US President Donald Trump shores up late-term priorities.

Sources familiar with the peace efforts on Friday said negotiators in Doha are close to an agreement on the procedural rules of the negotiations. Peace negotiator Fawzia Koofi ...

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## Wolasi Jirga Approves Nominees for 10 Ministries



The Afghan parliament on Saturday approved the candidates for 10 ministries, including two security agencies, amidst an increase in violence and concerns by people about lack of security in the country.

On Saturday session, 246 out of 248 lawmakers were present and the nominees needed 124 votes to be approved.

Mohammad Haneef Atmar was

approved by the lawmakers as minister of foreign affairs by getting 197 votes in favor.

Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal was approved as minister of finance by winning 205 votes in favor, 32 votes against and 9 unmarked votes.

Assadullah Khalid was approved by the lawmakers as minister of defense by getting 206 votes in favor, 17 votes against, 15 invalid

votes and 8 unmarked votes.

Massoud Andarabi meanwhile was approved as minister of interior affairs with 214 votes in favor, 25 votes against and 7 unmarked votes.

Fazl Ahmad Manawi was approved as minister of justice by getting 220 votes in favor, 9 votes against, 10 invalid votes and 7 unmarked votes.

The only woman nominee

Masooma Khawari was approved as minister of telecommunication and information technology with 154 votes in favor, 67 votes against and 25 unmarked votes.

Abbas Basir was approved as minister of higher education by getting 197 votes in favor, 22 votes against, 13 invalid votes and 14 unmarked votes.

Bashir Ahmad Tahyanj was approved as minister of labor and social affairs by getting 190 votes in favor, 40 votes against, and 16 unmarked votes.

Mohammad Qasim Halimi was approved as minister of hajj and religious affairs with 148 votes in favor, 41 votes against, 23 invalid votes and 34 unmarked votes.

Nisar Ahmad Ghoryani was approved as minister of industry and commerce by winning 213 votes in favor, 23 votes against and 10 unmarked votes.

According to officials, 13 more ministers and directors of two independent agencies, the National Directorate of Security and the Central Bank, will present their plans to the parliament in the coming weeks.

**Afghan war crime allegations disturbing: Morrison**

The Australian prime minister has regretted war crime allegations against his country's troops in Afghanistan as disturbing.

Scott Morrison, however, said in an interview that his administration had no plans to considering recompense for the victims and their relatives. Conducted by Major General Paul Brereton, the report confirmed Australian special forces could have killed 39 Afghan civilians or prisoners. Morrison told SBS News the ...

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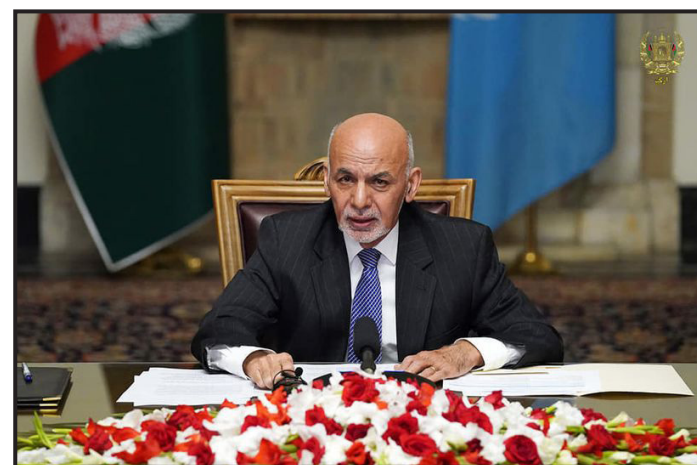
**Ghani: UN Does Not Recognize the Legitimacy of Taliban as a Government**

President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani in a UN Security Council meeting on Afghan peace on Friday night said, that the only recognized legitimate state is the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and that the Islamic Emirate was not recognized by the United Nations.

The organization does not support the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate.

"Today's meeting on peace in Afghanistan demonstrates the strong commitment of the United Nations Security Council to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan," he said, and goals are reached for a peaceful solution.

"Afghanistan is at the forefront of the fight against global terrorism. We are fighting together to defeat terrorism and can only achieve



peace when we stand side by side," he said.

The international community today has come to the conclusion that Afghanistan must reach a political solution and be a sovereign, united and democratic nation, and the world, and

preserve the achievements of the past two decades, and expand it, he said.

He called on UN council to put pressure on The Taliban.

"I would request the council to stress the effective and thorough implementation of..."

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## Al-Qaeda...

reportedly told Arab News. However, Arab News said it spoke to another Pakistani official who said that Zawahiri was in Afghanistan and had been "extremely ill" but said he was not aware whether the Al-Qaeda leader was dead or not. To my knowledge he was extremely ill and had the issue of kidney failure," the intelligence official said. "He was unable to manage his dialysis but I still need to confirm if he has died."

## Pompeo to...

said they expect to include ceasefire as a priority in their agenda once the two sides agree on the procedural rules of the talks. The two sides of the talks have held more than 10 meetings in small group levels over the procedural rules. Their meetings have halted for more than a month. Negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban opened in Doha on September 12, but violence continues and even appears to be escalating since then.

## Turkey renews...

relations between the two countries were based on common values and would remain as such. Abdullah is in Turkey as part of his regional tour to strengthen consensus on Afghan peace. He visited Pakistan, Iran and Uzbekistan recently.

By Meghann Myers

# What does the new acting SECDEF mean for the war in Afghanistan?

When President Donald Trump fired former Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Monday, he chose to replace him with someone from outside the Pentagon, rather than elevate Esper's deputy to the acting SECDEF role.

He chose Chris Miller, a retired Special Forces colonel who had been serving as the National Counterterrorism Center's director. His resume includes a stint as the assistant defense secretary for special operations/low intensity conflict, as well as a battalion command back at 5th Special Forces Group, during the early days of the war in Afghanistan.

"He's somebody everybody's surprised about, except those who knew his name," one of his former soldiers, retired Special Forces Master Sgt. Scott Neil, told Military Times on Tuesday.

Miller arrived at the building Monday afternoon with one aide at his side, in an entrance so low-key and unassuming — save for the trip up the first step and a joke about breaking his ankle — that the public affairs staffer setting up the velvet rope outside didn't even realize it had happened.

"Why does nobody know a lot about Chris Miller? Is that a bad thing?" Neil said. "And it's because he was always a professional in what he was doing. He was never a personality in a position."

Neil described him as the prototypical "quiet professional" Green Beret, with a calm presence and humble leadership style.

"He listens to others very well, but he's always very bright and gifted when it comes to, kind of, building consensus and momentum," Neil said.

According to Miller's official bio, he enlisted in the Army Reserve as an infantryman in 1983. Ten years later, he transferred to Special Forces, where he served as a detachment, company and battalion commander with 5th Group at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

"He's not a personality that dominates," said Neil, who along with Miller was one of the first troops on the ground in Afghanistan in October 2001. "He's somebody that has always been able to get things done, but quietly."



Miller was serving in 5th Group when two teams landed in Afghanistan to link up with local anti-Taliban forces, fighting until the Taliban surrendered in early December.

"When we set out on this journey as a country, we envisioned our campaign against violent extremist organizations as a 'generational war,' not a 'multi-generational war,'" Miller told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in his prepared remarks for his NCTC confirmation hearing in July.

Questions quickly arose Monday about how Miller would manage his relationship with Trump, who has clashed both publicly and privately with two of his previous defense secretaries. Counting the temporary "acting" stints in between confirmations, there have been five.

One of the president's top priorities throughout his administration, but particularly in the run-up to the 2020 election, has been the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan after 19 years of back-to-back deployments.

"It would be, in my view, the height of irresponsibility to leave this conflict for our children to fight," Miller told senators of his feelings about prolonging the war.

The Trump administration this year forged ahead with a plan that would draw down troop levels from about 8,500 to 4,000 this month.

In the weeks before the election, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien insisted that number would come down again, to 2,500, early next year. Trump followed that statement up by tweeting that remaining troops "should" be home by Christmas. "I don't think there's anybody that knows more about these situations than Chris," Neil said. "Chris has been involved since the very first troops into Afghanistan, so he is the one to give the president the best counsel."

Miller's predecessor found himself trying to maneuver around the president's ambitious Afghanistan timeline, urging over and over that withdrawing below 4,000 troops would be based on conditions set out by ongoing peace talks between the U.S. government and the Taliban, as well as the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Esper's strategy had been to take the White House's ideas and try to finesse them into something that made sense for both national security and relationships with allies and partners.

"Imagine this: 'Disregard what the president said. This is still the plan,'" Esper suggested in a Nov. 4 interview with Military Times. "Now, if I were the president, I'd say, 'Really? Here you go. Here's a written piece of paper. You're coming home by December.'"

Eyes will be on Miller to see how he navigates ... **P3**

By Chris Nyamandi

## Afghanistan Needs More Assistance to Save Millions of Children

On a Saturday afternoon in late October, a suicide bomber tried to enter an education center in Kabul. Prevented from doing so by security guards, the attacker entered a nearby lane and set off the explosives. At least 24 people were killed including schoolchildren. Many more were injured.

A colleague's daughter survived the attack, but many more parents are still in mourning.

In the same month, an airstrike in the north-east of the country hit a school, reportedly killing at least 12 children. Insurgents were the intended target. Cold comfort for the grieving parents whose loved ones were killed in an act of fire and fury.

Attacks like this, that violate the laws of war, that directly impact children, are far too common in Afghanistan. If they occurred in the western world there would be widespread condemnation. Sadly, they

often go under-reported as a result of competing global news stories, such as the COVID19 pandemic and the US Presidential election.

As the UN revealed in its latest report on the civilian cost of the Afghan war, nearly 1,900 children were killed or maimed in the first nine months of 2020. This is truly shocking.

A 14-year-old Afghan girl told us, "When fighting breaks out, no place is safe in our village, but home is still better than outside. We hide in the corners of rooms."

The awful truth is that every child in Afghanistan today has grown up in conflict.

The escalation in violence has hindered the education of children, too. The Global Coalition to Protect Education under Attack recorded more than 300 attacks on schools between 2017 and 2019, which injured or killed at least 410 students and teachers.

Even before the COVID19 pandemic, an estimated 3.7

million children, almost half of all primary school-aged children, were out of school. The impact of this on children is severe.

Lack of access to education leads to an increased risk of abuse and exploitation. And we know that in Afghanistan 93 percent of late primary school-aged children are not proficient in reading. For 15 to 24-year-olds literacy is 65 percent.

The nation's under-investment in education, presently 78 percent less than the average for the South Asia region will have profound impact for years to come, but especially for girls.

Educated girls are crucial to the lasting peace of a conflict-affected country like Afghanistan. We know from experience that educated girls experience improved health and nutrition and contribute to better economic performance and growth.

We're extremely ... **P3**

## Fourteen Rockets Hit Kabul



Kabul witnessed fourteen missiles hitting in the early hours of today at the beginning of this week.

Eleven Kabul citizens, including women and children were martyred and thirteen others were wounded in the rocket attacks. The victims and wounded were all civilians.

The Ministry of Public Health confirms that only five people died in today's events. BNA correspondent Nematullah Raufi was among the injured in the incident. Raufi injured while he was making a report from the city.

But another source said that only 28 wounded and one martyr of today's events have been transferred to Emergency Hospital.

The rockets hit residential and crowded areas of Kabul, including the Sedarat

intersection, Shahr-e-Naw, the Zerzamani area Deh-afghanan and Khairkhana parts. The Zerzamani area, which is the busiest point of Kabul, witnessed the most casualties. Several vendors and two brothers selling pomegranate juice lost their lives and several passers-by were injured in the incident. Students towards the school gates in Khairkhana area has also caused problems and a number of students have sustained injuries.

A Kabul police source told BNA that the rockets were fired from a Suzuki vehicle that had stopped near the Tahya Masskan area, images showed the vehicle burning.

This issue has been widely reflected on social media.

Rocket launching from a car has now become a tactic for terrorist groups.

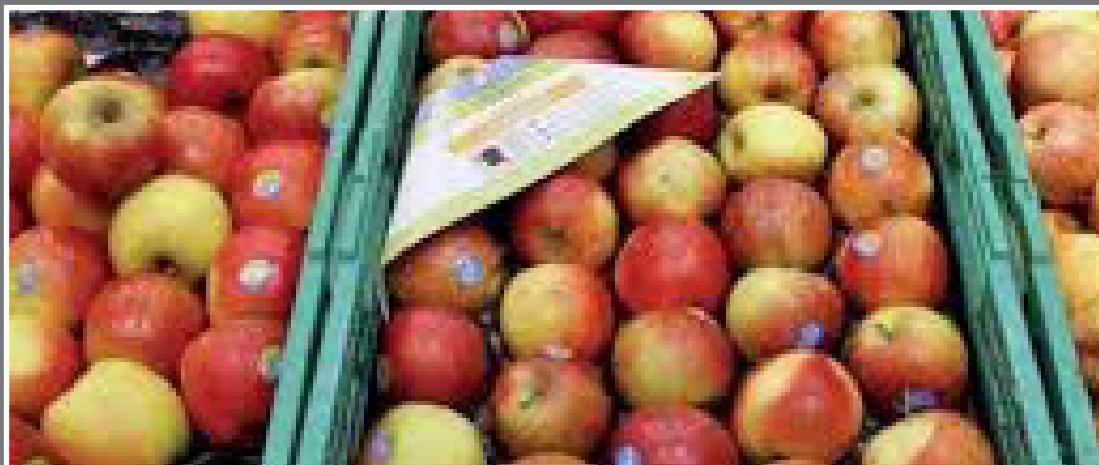
# Apple Purchase Contract for Army, Police Awarded to Local Firms

As farmers across Afghanistan prepare to harvest their apple crops, the country's Chamber of Agriculture and Livestock states that a contract for the purchase of apple for the army and the police was signed between by the ministries of Defense and Interior Affairs with the Afghan Union of Apple Producers.

In the terms of the contract, the Afghan Union of Apple Producers will provide 15,000 tons of the fruit to the two ministries.

Afghanistan is expected to harvest 250,000 tons of apples this year, according to agriculture officials, the fruit has increased by 10%.

Officials of the Afghan Union of Apple Producers said the challenges farmers face today have undermined and affected their international exports as well as their prices.



According to this year's statistics, 140,000 tons of apples were harvested only in Maidan Wardak province in central Afghanistan.

"We only sell 15,000 tons of apples to the national police and national army while we harvest 140,000 tons of apples only in Maidan Wardak. We request for more contracts and

buyers," stated Mirwais Hajizada, the head of Afghanistan Chamber of Agriculture and Livestock.

"Through the implementation of more agricultural projects, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock will create 71 stocks for Maidan Wardak's apples. These will be operational in the next

few days," said Akbar Rustami, a spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock.

The Afghanistan Chamber of Agriculture and Livestock stated that besides contracts for apples and rice, all other contracts have been given to businessmen who import the goods from abroad.

### Afghan war...

alleged war crimes detailed in the report was "disturbing" and "distressing"

Afghan forces and Australian Special Forces Group conducted a deliberate operation to clear a Taliban stronghold in the Shah Wali Kot district of southern Kandahar province.

The war crime allegations must be dealt with by the Australian justice system rather than the government, the prime minister argued.

"We ensured that between the time of the receipt of the report and the announcement of the findings, we engaged a lot with our overseas partners.

"There are always risks out there, and it's always important Australia stays on the front foot to get ahead of these risks."

### Ghani: UN Does...

sanctions regimes as a key instrument for the success of the negotiations with the Taliban. The Taliban has yet to fulfill the conditions set," Ghani said, "Sanctions can only be effective if implemented by all."

"The current level of violence of the Taliban, especially against civilians, is unacceptable. it undermines the peace negotiations and a ceasefire is urgently needed" said Pekka Haavisto, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland during the meeting. This is coming at a time when Intra-Afghan talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Qatar are facing an uncertain fate and the war in the country has intensified.

### What does the...

those waters, but they should not expect to see a performative "standing up" to Trump, according to another of Miller's former colleagues.

"He may make decisions that other people disagree with. They have two options: they can do what he directs them to do, or after they've offered their advice, if they find it illegal, immoral, unethical, unadvisable, they can step down," retired Col. Mark Mitchell, who most recently served in the Pentagon as the principal deputy assistant defense secretary for special operations/low-intensity conflict.

Miller will be obligated to carry out the president's orders, Mitchell said, but he also has a reputation for thinking outside the box

"He's a brilliant mind and he is, as a Special Forces officer, he's not afraid of unconventional solutions," he said. "And the idea that, 'Well this is the way

we've always done it,' won't fly. He's willing to challenge the conventional wisdom and the bureaucracy."

Mitchell added that he resented the implication at the defense secretary should be expected to stand up to the president, or in his way, as the duly elected commander in chief.

"You either carry out your lawful orders or you resign," he said. "We don't get the option to 'stand up to him.'"

The trend of senior administration leaders, like former Defense Secretary James Mattis and former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, trying to protect their organizations from the president, was ill-advised, he added.

"I think Kelly and Mattis and several others conspired to not do what the president asked them to do and should have resigned a lot sooner," Mitchell said. "I don't think anybody wants Cabinet officials defying

the president."

Post-election, the Trump administration and Pentagon are now in a gray area, where Trump has not conceded the election, as President-elect Joe Biden's transition team gets working, and there's an acting defense secretary who's set to serve for at most 10 weeks.

So, will he and the White House push to accelerate the drawdown in Afghanistan? "I don't think there's anybody that knows more about these situations than Chris," Neil said. "Chris has been involved since the very first troops into Afghanistan, so he is the one to give the president the best council."

### Afghanistan Needs...

that despite a dramatic rise in humanitarian need, international aid to Afghanistan has tumbled. Donors have gradually funded less and less of the UN's annual pleas for humanitarian support, from 87.5% in 2016 to 76% in 2019. This year's appeal has so far only received a pitiful 40% of what is needed.

That's why in the upcoming day Afghanistan donor conference in Geneva is crucially important. At this conference, which takes place as nascent peace talks offer cautious hope for a political settlement to the war, the international community must deliver increased funding for education, especially for girls, as well as protect the interests of people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

There must be increased spending on public health

to dramatically improve life-expectancy outcomes of children, many of whom are having to live with life-altering injuries due to being caught up in the conflict.

The international community must work with the government of Afghanistan to ensure national laws related to the protection of children are fully resourced and rolled out nationwide. And it must continue to work to help secure an enduring peace settlement so that future generations of children grow up free from the fear of violence and death.

This and more must be our commitment to a nation whose people have endured decades of hardship, conflict and violence. Indeed, it is vital so that a country racked by decades of fighting and division is able to forge a better future for all its citizens.

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Print: Waygal Printing .Co - +93 - 202512626

# Trump options narrow as Michigan backs Biden win

Donald Trump has had a fresh setback in his bid to overturn his loss in the US election as Michigan lawmakers indicated they would not seek to undo Joe Biden's projected win in the state.

Two Republican legislators pledged to follow "normal process" in validating the vote after a White House meeting.

Earlier on Friday, Georgia dealt the US president another blow by certifying Mr Biden's razor-thin margin of victory.

The Democrat is set to take office on 20 January as the 46th US president.

Mr Biden's victory in the Electoral College system, which determines who becomes president, is projected to be 306 to 232 - far above the 270 he needs to win. His lead in the public vote overall stands at more than 5.9

million.

Mr Trump, who has had few public appearances since the 3 November vote, on Friday again falsely claimed victory. "I won, by the way," he said, while making an announcement on drug pricing. He has made allegations of widespread electoral fraud, without providing any evidence. His Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany accused the media and Democrats of hypocrisy.

"While in 2016 President Trump became the duly elected president, many sought to undermine him, discredit him, de-legitimise him and deny his victory. There were no calls for unity, there were no calls for healing," she said. "So, while every legal vote is counted let us not forget the inexcusable transition, or lack thereof, that President Trump had to endure in 2016 and for years into his presidency."



### A look at the world

#### Al-Qaeda chief Al-Zawahiri is dead, reports Arab media

Al-Qaeda chief and Egyptian national Ayman Al-Zawahiri has died in Afghanistan from natural causes, Arab media reported on Friday.

The news reports came a few days after social media carried speculation that the Al-Qaeda chief had passed away. Zawahiri was last seen in a video message that was released by the militant group on the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in the US. Arab News stated in its report that it spoke to at least four security sources in Pakistan



and Afghanistan - who spoke on condition of anonymity - out of which two confirmed Zawahiri's death. An Al-Qaeda translator said Zawahiri had died last week in Ghazni. "He died of asthma because he had no formal treatment."

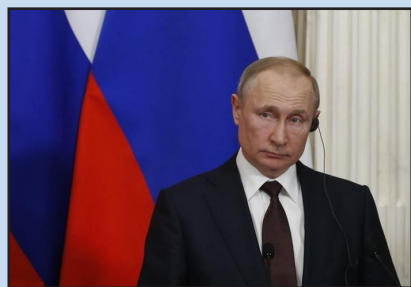
A Pakistani official has been cited by Arab News as saying that he believed Zawahiri had died, most probably by natural causes. Another source close to the Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan said Zawahiri had died this month and that a few followers had offered his funeral prayers.

He did not elaborate as to whether the funeral prayers were offered in absentia or as his body was buried in the grave. "What we know is that he was having some breathing issues and has passed away somewhere in Afghanistan," said the source.

"We have received the same information that Zawahiri died about a month ago," a Pakistani source, privy to anti-terror operations in Afghanistan, ...

P2

#### Putin warns of economic effects of coronavirus pandemic



Russian President Vladimir Putin said Friday that millions of people may drop into poverty because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Alarming trends are observed in the economy and social sphere, due to the decline in industrial production and financial troubles, tens of millions of people are at risk of falling below the poverty line," Putin said during a video conference of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

To help the most vulnerable nations, Putin once again suggested organizing "green corridors" free of restrictions and sanctions on food and medical supplies. "We believe that the implementation of this initiative would contribute not only to the relief of the humanitarian situation in the world, but also to the development of global trade," he said.

Putin also expects an escalation of economic contradictions between key global players because of the pandemic and stressed Russia is ready to work with everyone to prevent tensions.

He expressed a readiness to share Russia's experience in fighting the virus and developing anti-virus vaccines.

"I would like to remind you that two vaccines have been created and registered in Russia: Sputnik V and EpiVacCorona. The third vaccine is in the final stage of testing. Together with our foreign partners, we are actively working on the possibilities of their supply and localization of production in third countries," he said.

The APEC forum brings together 21 Pacific Rim countries, including China and the US, the world's two biggest economies that account for 60% of global GDP.

This year's virtual theme, "APEC Re-Imagined: Priorities in the Aftermath of COVID-19," focuses on urgent issues in the region and the wider world in the wake of the pandemic.

#### French Muslims face new crackdown

France's Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said Friday it would be a criminal offense for Muslim parents to be upset with a teacher for showing caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in lessons to their children.

"Parents who go to a teacher to tell them to stop teaching cartoons protected by freedom of speech, tomorrow that will be a criminal offense," he said during an interview with Europe 1. They could face prosecution, even deportation.

"And a judge can -- this is extremely important -- a judge will be able to say, 'If you're a foreigner who commits this crime,



you can leave this country.'"

French President Emmanuel Macron pledged a crackdown against what he called, "Islamist separatism" to defend France's secular values, and argued that controversial cartoons should be defended on free speech grounds.

Critics, however, accused Macron of politically exploiting recent terror attacks, adopting a populist far-right discourse about Muslims in an attempt to appeal to right-wing voters.

Macron took steps Wednesday to impose a "charter of Republican values" on the Muslim community and gave a 15-day deadline for the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) to accept the charter. Eight leaders of the CFCM met with Macron and Darmanin at the Elysee Palace for talks Wednesday.

In a return of good faith, the CFCM will create a National Council of Imams to offer official accreditation to imams living on French soil, according to media reports. Macron's charter of Republican values will forbid "foreign interference" in Muslim groups and will state explicitly that Islam is not a political movement but a religion.



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