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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

Issue No. 878

www.heartofasia.af

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UAE-Afghanistan Political Consultations Committee Discusses Enhancing Cooperation

Abu Dhabi has hosted the first virtual meeting of the UAE-Afghanistan Political Consultations Committee.

Co-chaired by Khalifa Shaheen Al Marar, UAE Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Political Affairs, and Meerwais Nab, Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan for Political Affairs, the consultations reviewed the two countries' experience in combating COVID-19, the UAE's humanitarian efforts in this regard, its assistance to affected countries, and the importance of international solidarity and international cooperation in curbing the pandemic.

The two sides discussed the development of relations and cooperation. They also addressed current regional and international developments and the two sides' positions.

The parties also discussed the latest developments in the Afghan peace talks, in addition to regional and international issues of common interest, in a way that contributes to conveying converging views to the international community.



Kabul scorns NYT article as unwarranted, baseless

The Afghan government on Monday spurned as unwarranted and baseless a New York Times article titled "Afghan leader digs in on peace talks despite progress".

President Ashraf Ghani had done everything possible to initiate and drive the process and would do everything within his constitutional power to end the suffering of the Afghan people, a statement from his office said.

Some of the views expressed in The New York Times article — based on known and unknown sources — were unwarranted and baseless, added the statement attributed to the government spokesperson. ... **P2**

Afghan Parliament Approves 6 Ministers, NDS Chief



The Afghan parliament lower house (Wolasi Jirga) yesterday (on Monday) approved the candidates for six ministries and the chief of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), and voted against the confirmation of the nominees for the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministry of Information and Culture.

In Monday's session, 244 out of 248

lawmakers were present and the nominees needed 123 votes to be approved.

Ahmad Zia Saraj was approved as head of the National Directorate of Security with 220 votes in favor, Haroon Chakhansuri as minister of Mines and Petroleum with 154 votes, Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi as minister of Agriculture, Irrigation

and Livestock with 189 votes, Noor Rahman Akhlaqi as minister of Refugees and Repatriation with 165 votes, Qudratullah Zaki as minister of Transport and Civil Aviation with 165 votes, Mahmud Karzai as minister of Urban Development and Housing with 154 votes and Najibullah Yamin as minister of Public Works with 149 votes.

Tahir Zuhair, the nominee for the Ministry of Information and Culture, was denied confirmation having received only 78 votes in favor, and Hasina Safi, nominee for the Ministry of Women's Affairs, came up short with 119 votes and thus was not approved by the Afghan parliament. The parliament speaker Mir Rahman Rahmani has asked President Ghani to introduce two new nominees for the Ministry of Women's Affairs and of Information and Culture, respectively. Before that, Wolasi Jirga in 21 November 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. 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 ... **P3**

Russia chides Australia over Afghan war crimes

Allegations of war crimes in Afghanistan have bruised Australia's international image, believes Moscow.

At least 39 Afghan civilians were killed by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, found an inquiry into the allegations. The soldiers may be dismissed.

A spokeswoman for the foreign ministry in Moscow claimed the Australian soldiers accused of murdering civilians might not be brought to justice.

The Australian Associated ... **P2**



China calls on Australia to apologize to Afghan people

China on Monday strongly condemned the killings of Afghan civilians by Australian soldiers, with Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying saying that the Australian government should feel "ashamed" by the murders.

A recent major report found that Australian special forces were allegedly involved in the murders of 39 Afghan civilians, in some cases executing prisoners to "blood" junior soldiers before inventing cover stories and planting weapons on corpses.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian earlier tweeted that he was shocked, alongside an image appearing to show a special forces soldier with a bloody knife at the throat of an Afghan child, whose head wrapped in an Australian



flag and is cradling a lamb.

The post angered Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who demanded an apology.

At the press conference, Hua fired back at the demand and questioned Morrison's response. "Does the strong reaction of the

Australian side to my colleague's personal tweet implicate that the callous killing of innocent Afghan civilians is justified while condemning such crimes is unreasonable?" she asked.

"The lives of the Afghan people are also 'lives' and what ... **P2**

China calls on...

the Australian government should do is to reflect deeply, bring the murderers to justice and make a formal apology to the Afghan people," the spokesperson added.

As for the image posted on Twitter, Hua said that more attention should be paid to the connotation instead of the source. "The purpose of the image is showing people's anger at such crimes," she said.

"I think what the Australian government should do is face facts and further investigate whether or not its troops have committed such atrocious crimes in Afghanistan," she added, saying the reaction from the Australian side to the condemnation is not a "mature and rational approach."

Russia chides...

Press quoted Maria Zakharova as saying the incident raised questions about Australia's commitment to protecting a rules-based world order.

Earlier in the week, China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian shared an image of alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan.

The image, purporting to show a special forces soldier slitting the throat of an Afghan child, was captioned: "Don't be afraid, we are coming to bring you peace."

Angered by what was called a doctored image, Australian Prime Minister Morrison denounced the image as utterly outrageous.

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff

Afghan Leader Digs in on Peace Talks Despite Progress, Officials Say

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan has refused to let peace talks move forward even though the Taliban and government negotiators have reached a tentative agreement on the talks' guiding principles, Afghan officials say, further stalling the process despite nearing an apparent breakthrough after months of effort.

The Taliban exposed those fault lines on Saturday when the insurgent group announced on social media that both sides had agreed to the nearly two dozen points under discussion earlier this month — a framework for how talks would go forward, including points of protocol and how issues would be presented.

But some government officials immediately pushed back on that claim, insisting that details still needed to be worked out and that no agreement had been reached. They say the Taliban were pressured by Western officials to signal a breakthrough.

Three Afghan officials with knowledge of the talks said that Mr. Ghani took exception to at least one detail, insisting that the government side be referred to by its formal name, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, rather than by a more generic reference.

Such details have broken down efforts to negotiate before. The Taliban's past insistence on being referred to as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan — the name of their government when they were in power — derailed an effort at talks in 2013 and was a sticking point in the talks between the United States and the Taliban that eventually led to a deal opening the way for a troop withdrawal, officials said.

That the Taliban were not sticking to that title in the guiding framework this month — agreeing to less specific references to the government and insurgent sides, and to other more

central points of contention — was seen as an important accomplishment.

Now, the talks have been cast into further doubt by Mr. Ghani's demand, officials and analysts said.

In a statement on Monday, Sediq Sediqqi, an Afghan presidential spokesman, said that Mr. Ghani was "steadfast in his resolve to make the peace talks succeed and that "some of the views" in this Times article were "unwarranted and baseless," but he did not elaborate further.

"At this stage the whole process has shifted to both sides' convincing an international audience that the other side is disingenuous," said Ibraheem Bahiss, an independent Afghan research analyst. "But long term, it could strengthen the hand of those within the Taliban that advocate for a military solution and view the current process as fruitless."

American and Western diplomatic officials have not publicly responded to the breakdown. But people with direct knowledge of the talks in Doha, Qatar, have described diplomats as being frustrated with Mr. Ghani's stance, and have suggested that the government negotiating team has been functionally split between loyalists to Mr. Ghani and other officials who are frustrated with him.

The introductory talks, which opened in hope and spectacle in Qatar in September, have unfolded over months of brutal violence back in Afghanistan. The Taliban have intensified their offensives in crucial provinces, leading the government to accuse the insurgents of holding the talks hostage with their violence.

On Sunday, a stolen Humvee laden with explosives and crewed by a suicide bomber rammed into an Afghan military base in Ghazni Province, killing at least 30 security force members, government



officials said.

There may be other crucial reasons that Mr. Ghani and his aides are digging in, as well.

If Mr. Ghani accepts the text that refuses to mention the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan "he opens the door for the nonrecognition of the Afghan republic," said Torek Farhadi, a former Afghan presidential adviser. "President Ghani has resisted this concept from the start because there is no guarantee that he would remain president otherwise."

Mr. Ghani may also see the delay as a calculated move in the hope that the incoming Biden administration might either change course on the continuing U.S. troop withdrawal or alter its approach to overseeing the peace negotiations. Under the Trump administration, Afghan officials complained that they were being heavily pressured by the Americans to accept painful compromises. Both sides had agreed to a guiding document's outline for the talks this month, according to the officials with knowledge of the talks.

The agreement, mediated by members of the Qatari, Pakistani and U.S. governments, resolved two contentious issues, the officials said: Both sides

were stuck on which school of Islamic thought to use for resolving disputes, and on whether the Feb. 29 U.S.-Taliban deal would be referenced as a basis for the ongoing negotiations.

One of the hangups was over a reference to the Hanafi school of Islamic thought, one of the four major Sunni schools, which is also the foundation of the current Afghan Constitution, the officials said. Initially, the two sides were at odds on a formulation that does not alienate other sects, particularly Afghanistan's Shiite minority. The officials said that dispute was resolved in favor of the Afghan government's approach.

The second point was the inclusion of the Feb. 29 agreement between the Taliban and the U.S. government as a basis for the current talks, officials said. The February agreement prompted the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in exchange for counterterrorism pledges from the Taliban and the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners.

The Afghan government balked at the inclusion of the February deal as a starting point, as the government was not a party to that agreement. To resolve the issue, the deal is mentioned, but the guidelines also included references to at least one other framing ... **P3**

By Jim Golby

Trump Is Leaving Biden a Mess in Afghanistan

Since the day he entered office, President Donald Trump hasn't been able to make up his mind about whether the United States should keep fighting in Afghanistan. His most recent decision to arbitrarily reduce U.S. troops' presence to a nice, round number by January 15 was no different. Far from ending what he calls an "endless war," Trump has only put the 2,500 troops who will remain in Afghanistan at greater risk. The situation was already bad, but he made it worse—just in time to hand the problem to President-elect Joe Biden.

Trump, a self-proclaimed dealmaker, campaigned in 2016—and again in 2020—on ending the war, which began in 2001. Instead, he grudgingly followed the advice of his military advisers and added 4,000 troops in August 2017. But that policy debate took its toll. Trump began to realize that the officers whom he describes as "my generals" weren't his after all. Like Barack Obama before him, Trump felt boxed in by the

Pentagon.

When Trump became bored with the generals' approach, he handed the keys to special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan. Trump tasked Khalilzad with striking a deal with the Taliban that would remove U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan while securing American counterterrorism objectives. In February, Khalilzad did just that.

In exchange for guarantees that the Taliban would stop targeting U.S. forces and major Afghan cities, start peace talks with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, and refrain from allowing terrorist groups to use Afghan soil as a base for international attacks, Khalilzad committed to withdrawing all U.S. and NATO troops by May 2021. But despite the special envoy's repeated reassurances to NATO allies that future troop withdrawals would be tied to conditions on the ground, the Taliban never lived up to what the Pentagon and allied military leaders

expected. Casualties spiked in recent months and intra-Afghan talks remained stalled as the number of U.S. troops dropped to roughly 5,500 today. And the Taliban has still refused to break ties with al-Qaeda—an initial U.S. demand that was not part of the final deal. With the support of military leaders, then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper urged Trump to halt further troop withdrawals until the Taliban fulfilled its promises. But that advice, coupled with several other policy clashes with Trump, merely sealed Esper's fate. The president removed him and other top Pentagon leaders shortly after the election. After firing and replacing three top civilian officials in the Pentagon, the consequences of the Afghanistan decision are now entirely Trump's responsibility. Try though he might, the president can't lay the blame for this last gasp at a coherent policy at anyone else's feet. Any credibility remaining for Khalilzad's deal has ... **P3**

Kabul scorns...

It added Ghani had not just arranged the talks; he had done everything possible to initiate and drive the process and he would do everything within his constitutional power to end the suffering of the Afghan people and bring durable peace to the country.

The peace talks in Doha are an important opportunity to bring durable peace to Afghanistan. Ghani has been at the forefront of efforts to bring momentum to the peace talks.

According to the statement, the president took a courageous step to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners to give impetus to the talks — a move which was unfortunately not reciprocated by the insurgents.

Taliban's response to that important gesture was an unprecedented hike in violence against the Afghan people.

Despite increased public demand for the government's negotiating team to abandon the talks and return home because of Taliban's major offensives in Helmand and Kandahar, the president took the bold step to continue the talks.

On the 24th of November, at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference, Ghani said: "The Afghan people, government and the international community share a vision of a sovereign, unified, democratic Afghanistan at peace with itself, the region and the world, capable of preserving

and expanding the gains of the past two decades."

The president added: "We have shown commitment, courage and conviction. We have maintained our defensive position on the battlefield, even in the face of a surge in violence against our people since February.

"We agreed to the release of over 5,000 Taliban prisoners guilty of crimes against humanity," said the president.

"Over the past two years, Afghans created a national consensus on the need to achieve enduring peace via a political settlement with the Taliban— a peace that is in line with the values of our constitution and international standards of human rights.

"Despite our suffering, I want to be very clear that our commitment to negotiations with the Taliban remains firm. Our negotiating team remains steadfast in their commitment to talks in Doha. We must bring an end to the violence that is haunting our lives and robbing our children of the joys of childhood".

The negotiating teams have agreed on all 21 articles that provide guiding principles for the negotiations. At this time, they continue to debate the preamble, in which some issues need further clarification.

The president is said to be steadfast in his resolve to make the peace talks a success, mainly because he initiated these talks and remains the main architect of the process.

Afghan products go on display in Turkey

Products of Afghan businesspeople have gone on display at an international trade fair attended by 500 global companies. Ten firms from Afghanistan attended the event in Turkey, according to the Afghan Consulate in Istanbul. The Afghans displayed saffron and dried fruits, said Hasina, CEO of the Akram Zaeefi Company. "Such exhibitions have their own impacts, but COVID-19 has its own. We are optimistic," remarked Hasina, CEO

of the Akram Zaeefi Company. ToloTV quoted Rahmatullah Rahmani, CEO of the Herat Saffron Company, as saying: "Turkey has always been a good market for Afghan products. So this exhibition has created a good opportunity." Zakaria Barikzai, the Afghan consul-general in Istanbul, said: "Afghans have been able to find their way to Turkish markets. 'The Afghan Consulate General is prepared to do what it can in this regard,'" the diplomat promised.



Afghan Leader Digs...

document, the officials said. One official added that Mr. Ghani wants a mention of a March United Nations Security Council resolution stating that the United Nations does not recognize the Taliban as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan nor condone its restoration. But this progress was seemingly derailed when Mr. Ghani recalled members of the republic's negotiating team, Abdul Salam Rahimi and the head negotiator, Masoom Stanekzai, to Kabul last week and insisted on the inclusion of the Islamic Republic's name in the guiding documents, among other issues, the officials said. Mr. Ghani's resistance to the talks has pushed the United States and the European Union to push harder for the immediate staffing of the organization charged with leading the talks, the High Council for National Reconciliation, led by Abdullah Abdullah, who has yet to weigh in definitively on the current situation. Mr. Abdullah, who has been Mr. Ghani's opponent in two bitter and contested presidential elections, was appointed to lead the council following his decision this year to concede the presidential election to Mr. Ghani and negotiate a power-sharing agreement earlier this year. Mr. Abdullah has the ability to guide the talks absent Mr. Ghani's office, but the council remains unfilled. And Mr. Abdullah's public absence during this chapter of the negotiations has only confused Western officials who are patiently waiting for him to take a more dominant role in the talks, officials said.

Afghan Parliament...

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.

Trump Is Leaving...

been destroyed, and Trump's barely hidden desire to withdraw the troops all along—as well as his feckless management and inability to choose a policy vision and stick to it—has been revealed. The deal with the Taliban did more damage than if Trump had simply ordered troop reductions. Even if 14,000 American troops were stationed in Afghanistan—as was the case in 2018—the U.S. would have no path to victory over the Taliban there. As unpalatable as it sometimes may seem, putting U.S. troops in harm's way isn't always about winning or solving problems. Sometimes it's about managing risk—keeping minor problems from turning into major crises. For years, America's de facto policy in Afghanistan has been to maintain enough troops to prevent the Taliban from overrunning the U.S.-backed government in Kabul and allowing terrorist groups to use the country as a base of operations again. During his tenure, Trump—for all his rhetoric about wanting to withdraw—has been no more willing to fully repudiate the basic U.S. policy than to defend it. Trump's decision to withdraw more troops even though the Taliban is flouting its commitments may score some political points with Americans weary of the conflict, but it puts the remaining U.S. troops in a riskier situation. Trump's mishandling of the conflict has other consequences as well. During my time as a defense-policy adviser at the United States Mission to NATO, I saw how Trump's lack of commitment to the deal put his own NATO ambassador, Kay Bailey Hutchison, in the impossible position of trying to reassure NATO allies and Afghan partners that the U.S. would involve them in major decisions. It hasn't. Recent sharp comments by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg—who warned that "Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands"—reveal allied leaders' frustration. Trump's willingness to ignore the conditions his own envoy had placed on the Taliban disrespected our allies and partners, who—despite not being attacked on 9/11—stuck by us for 19 years, sacrificing more than 1,000 of their soldiers

and billions of dollars from their treasuries. Trump's approach only makes cooperation more difficult, and it makes the U.S. appear less reliable. Trump's maneuverings have also weakened President Ghani, while legitimizing the Taliban as a credible negotiating partner. Ghani, now in his second term, was declared the winner of an election last fall that went unresolved for months. In addition to the Taliban, he faces rival power brokers within Afghanistan and even within the government he leads. Instead of helping him resolve these conflicts, Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pressured Ghani into making unnecessary concessions to the Taliban while gaining nothing enduring in return. The annual fighting season is drawing to a close, and the Taliban is almost certain to feel emboldened—and Ghani's government hobbled—when offensives begin anew in the spring. Nearly two decades of war have now passed with little to show in terms of sustainable progress. Many Americans—especially service members who have fought and sacrificed in Afghanistan—might have understood, or even sympathized with, Trump's inclination to rush for the exits. In my own research with Duke University's Peter Feaver, more than 40 percent of Americans chose not to even offer an opinion when asked about the conflict. But a complete withdrawal would likely have devastating results. The war in Afghanistan would dramatically escalate, with the burden largely falling on innocent Afghan citizens. Although the imminent threat from terrorist groups—including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—is sometimes overstated, the chaos that would follow a total U.S. withdrawal would give them room to reestablish their capabilities. These potential consequences—as well as the logistical challenges of removing troops quickly—are likely what dissuaded Trump from withdrawing U.S. forces altogether. Now, by ordering all but 2,500 American troops to come home before an arbitrary deadline dictated by Biden's inauguration, Trump is leaving behind an unsustainable presence in Afghanistan, a crisis for the Afghan people, and a mess for the Biden-Harris

administration. NATO allies and partners will almost certainly decrease their troop commitments as well. U.S. and NATO bases will necessarily consolidate to fewer locations, primarily around Kabul, with only limited capability to advise Afghan commandos and pilots outside the capital. U.S. military commanders will likely prioritize their counterterrorism mission and air support to help Afghan security forces defend key population centers. In characteristic fashion, Trump has spurned the example of his immediate predecessors, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Bush, facing a decision about whether to increase forces in Afghanistan in 2008, deferred the decision so Obama could implement the strategy of his choosing. Similarly, Obama, in his final days in office, avoided making a major call on whether to arm Kurdish forces in northern Syria for an attack on the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, leaving the new administration room to chart its own course. Trump, however, seems intent on making the path forward in Afghanistan as difficult for Biden—and thus for American troops on the ground—as he possibly can. The reality is that conditions for a full withdrawal from Afghanistan are likely to remain unfavorable for the foreseeable future. Even if Biden wants to continue only a long-term counterterrorism presence, troops will need resources to protect themselves and prevent government collapse. In any case, the new administration should set more realistic expectations about the length and nature of our commitment than Trump has. Perhaps by design, perhaps by incompetence, perhaps out of sheer spite or arrogance, Trump has created the circumstances for another Bay of Pigs, Black Hawk Down, or Benghazi—situations where the United States inserted itself into overseas conflicts enough to draw lethal opposition but without sufficient strength to protect its people. Afghanistan was already in a dire state before Trump announced the latest round of troop withdrawals, but the departing president has made a bad situation worse—and probably untenable. The new administration will have to act fast to clean up Trump's mess.

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EU to seek new post-Trump global alliance with U.S.

The European Union wants to forge a new alliance with the United States to bury the tensions of the Trump era and meet the challenges posed by China, the Financial Times (FT) newspaper reported, citing a draft plan.

The plan proposes rebuilding ties, with common fronts on issues ranging from digital regulation to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, the FT said.

Relations between the US and Europe have been strained under President Donald Trump. The EU and most of the bloc's states have congratulated President-elect Joe Biden following the November 3 election.

"As open democratic societies and market economies, the EU and the US agree on the strategic challenge presented by China's

growing international assertiveness, even if we do not always agree on the best way to address this," the FT cited the draft plan as saying.

The plan, which will be submitted for endorsement by national leaders at a meeting on December 10-11, proposed the launch of a new transatlantic agenda in an EU-US summit in the first half of 2021, the newspaper added. Earlier in November, the EU imposed tariffs on up to \$4bn of US imports in retaliation for US subsidies for Boeing but said it was hopeful of an improvement in trade ties under Biden. EU trade chief Valdis Dombrovskis earlier said the European Commission, which coordinates trade policy for the 27 EU member states, had made some informal contacts with the Biden team.



A look at the world

China sanctions 4 Americans over Hong Kong interference

China on Monday imposed sanctions on four officials of US-based non-government organizations in response to Washington's sanctions on Chinese officials over Hong Kong affairs, media reports said on Friday. The personnel put on the sanctions list are John Knaus, senior director for Asia at the National Endowment Democracy; Manpreet Singh Anand from the National Democratic Institute, Crystal Rosario, National Democratic Institute's Director



of Hong Kong Office; and Kelvin Sit Tak-O, the office's project manager, according to Global Times.

Hua Chunying, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said these people are not welcome in China and will be banned from entering the country, including the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions.

Announcing the decision, Hua said that Hong Kong affairs are "purely China's internal affairs" and Washington should immediately stop interfering in the affairs of Hong Kong and China and "stop going further down the wrong path."

On Nov. 10, the US Treasury and State Department sanctioned four mainland and Hong Kong officials -- including Deng Zhonghua, deputy director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office; Edwina Lau, deputy commissioner of police in Hong Kong, and Li Jiangzhou and Li Kwai-wah, two officials at the newly established national security office in Hong Kong.

Biden chooses an all-female senior White House press team



President-elect Joe Biden will have an all-female senior communications team at his White House, reflecting his stated desire to build out a diverse White House team as well as what's expected to be a return to a more traditional press operation.

Biden campaign communications director Kate Bedingfield will serve as Biden's White House communications director. Jen Psaki, a longtime Democratic spokeswoman, will be his press secretary.

Four of the seven top communications roles at the White House will be filled by women of color, and it's the first time the entire senior White House communications team will be entirely female.

President Donald Trump upended the ways in which his administration communicated with the press. In contrast with administrations past, Trump's communications team held few press briefings, and those that did occur were often combative affairs riddled with inaccuracies and falsehoods.

Trump himself sometimes served as his own press secretary, taking questions from the media, and he often bypassed the White House press corps entirely by dialing into his favorite Fox News shows.

In a statement announcing the White House communications team, Biden said: "Communicating directly and truthfully to the American people is one of the most important duties of a President, and this team will be entrusted with the tremendous responsibility of connecting the American people to the White House."

He added: "These qualified, experienced communicators bring diverse perspectives to their work and a shared commitment to building this country back better."

Bedingfield and Psaki are veterans of the Obama administration. Bedingfield served as communications director for Biden while he was vice president, and Psaki was a White House communications director and a spokesperson at the State Department.

UN special envoy for Syria: No deadline in Geneva talks

The UN special envoy for Syria has said peace talks will start Monday in Geneva but without a set deadline for outcomes.

Geir Pedersen said at a news conference that the fourth session of the talks focusing on a new constitution will run through Friday and then resume in January.

"I think here, the important thing to say there is no deadline, there is no exact timeline for the discussions," said Pedersen.

"And that is partly because we know from experiences from other processes that, if you set a timeline, so far, no one has been able to respect that timeline."

He said that the two co-chairs of the talks had agreed to continue with the same schedule



as the previous meeting "discussing so-called national foundations and principles".

Hadi al-Bahra is heading the opposition, while Ahmad Kuzbari is representing the Syrian regime.

"After nearly 10 years of conflict, there is a deep lack of trust between the parties," said Pedersen.

"We knew that we would have to overcome this deep mistrust. We knew that that would take time. I hope that what we have achieved is actually the beginning of starting to build trust between the parties."

He said that the building of trust could then be a door to a broader political process. The special envoy said that for the talks to succeed, they also need international support.

Before they began, he met members of the Syrian regime and the opposition, held talks with Turkish authorities in Ankara, the Arab League secretary-general, and the foreign ministers of Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, and held a meeting in Dubai.

Syria has been embroiled in a vicious civil war since early 2011 when the Bashar al-Assad regime cracked down on pro-democracy protests with unexpected ferocity.

Since then, over 5 million civilians have become homeless.



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