



Page 2 | NATIONAL
The problem with Afghanistan and needs for long(er) term planning

Can Washington sustain Afghanistan's positive peace trajectory?

The recent success between the Afghan government and the Taliban in agreeing to a "preamble of the [on-going intra-Afghan] ...

Page 3 | ECONOMY
Sher Khan Port: Most business closed due to insecurity



Kabul
2 / -7



Herat
8 / 1



Nangarhar
12 / 4



Balkh
12 / 2



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10 afs



Afghanistan-Iran Strategic Document to be Finalized Soon

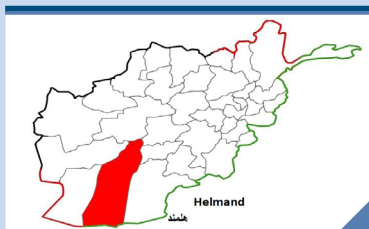
Hailing the role of the comprehensive strategic document between Iran and Afghanistan in strengthening relations between the two countries, Abbas Araghchi said that this document will be finalized soon.

On the sidelines of meeting with Afghan officials on Saturday night in Kabul, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi referred to the importance of intensive consultations between the two countries, stating, "Iran and Afghanistan are two neighboring countries and have common interests and concerns."

The people and government of Iran have always stood by the people and government of Afghanistan, he said and added, "The peace and stability in Afghanistan is Iran's peace and stability, and the well-being and development of the Afghan people is directly related to the progress of the Iranian people."

He also spoke about the ...

P3



Several Pakistani Nationals Among 26 Rebels Kill in Helmand

At least 26 anti-government militias including several Pakistani citizens were killed during latest clashes with Afghan security forces in southern Helmand province last night.

The conflicts took place, while Taliban fighters wanted to storm on Afghan security forces' checkpoints in various parts of Nahr Sarj, Nawa districts and Lashkargah city the provincial capital of the province.

Atal army corps in the south of the country by releasing a statement reported, 26 terrorists including their three commanders and four Pakistani nationals were killed and 10 others were wounded.

It has been said, three hideouts belonged to the insurgents along with all military equipment have been destroyed following the clashes. Taliban said nothing about the incidents so far.

11 civilians killed in Kandahar airstrike: Say locals



At least 11 civilians, including children and women, have been killed as a result of an airstrike in Arghandab district of southern Kandahar province, local people said on Sunday.

Security officials did not say anything about the incident so far. Local inhabitants said the airstrike

happened during a fierce fighting in DehSabz village of the district on Saturday night.

The people wanted to carry the bodies of the slain civilians to the governor's house but police stopped them in BaghPul area.

Abdul Samad, a relative of the victims, told Pajhwok Afghan News

11 people were killed as a result of air raid targeted a civilian house on Saturday night.

He said head of the family, his brother, women and children were among the victims of the overnight bombardment.

A security official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said Taliban

insurgents were stationed at the guest room of the house and the rebels also suffered casualties.

Pajhwok tried to contact local officials for their comment on the incident, but failed.

But the Ministry of Defence confirmed receiving reports of civilian casualties from Arghandab district of Kandahar. In a statement the ministry said that a joint delegation formed from 205thAtal Military Corps, police headquarters and local officials tasked to probe the incident.

On the other hand, MoD said Taliban insurgents conducted attacks on security check-posts in Dand, Zheri, Arghandab, Maiwand and Shah Walikot districts.

Following a strong resistance from security personnel, the ministry said at least 51 militants were killed and nine others wounded in the mentioned areas.

However, Taliban in a statement said that 13 civilians, including women and children, were killed during bombardment in DehSabz village on Saturday night.

QariYousafAhmadi, spokesman for the movement, said they strongly condemned the airstrike and vowed to avenge.

2 killed, as many wounded in Kabul explosion

Two people were killed and two others wounded on Sunday morning when a magnetic bomb hit the vehicle of a lawmaker in Kabul, an official said.

Police spokesman Ferdos Faramarz told Pajhwok Afghan News Wolesi Jirga member Tawfiq Wahdat's Land Cruiser was stuck by the magnetic bomb in front of Parwan Hotel in the 15th police district at around 7:40am. He said the legislator survived the explosion, which left two individuals dead. Two others were injured in the incident.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast.



Global Terrorism Index 2020: Afghanistan Most Impacted Country by Terrorism

The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) in its annual World Terrorism Index placed Afghanistan as the most-affected country on earth, imposing devastating loss to the country's economy.

According to the report, in 2019, deaths from terrorism fell for the fifth consecutive year, after peaking in 2014. "The total number of deaths fell by 15.5 percent to 13,826."

"Afghanistan was the country with the highest economic impact, equivalent to 16.7 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP)," said the report, as TOLONews quoted.

Out of 20 deadly terrorist attacks worldwide in 2019, at least six were recorded in Afghanistan.

"The largest fall in the impact of terrorism occurred in Afghanistan, which recorded 1,654 fewer deaths from terrorism in 2018, a 22.4 per cent decrease from the prior year," the report said. "However,



Afghanistan remains the country most impacted by terrorism, after overtaking Iraq in 2018."

While security threats remain high in Afghanistan, the IEP described the Taliban as one of the deadliest groups on earth.

"Afghanistan accounted for 41 percent of deaths from terrorism globally, with the Taliban being responsible for 87 per cent of these fatalities," the statement read.

"The Taliban remained the world's deadliest terrorist group in 2019. However, terrorist deaths attributed to the group declined by 18 per cent to 4,990. Whether the peace talks in Afghanistan have a substantial impact on terrorist activity remains to be seen," says the report.

Taliban, IS-K and Al-Shabaab are the four terrorist groups responsible for most of deaths in 2019, according to the report.

ICC prosecutor...

close, said she also was ready to seek authorization for a full-scale investigation into the conflict between Nigerian forces and the Boko Haram extremist group. She said that with her office stretched financially and facing the challenge of working amid the global coronavirus pandemic “we will need to take several strategic and operational decisions on the prioritization of the Office’s workload, which also duly take into account the legitimate expectations of victims and affected communities as well as other stakeholders.”

Iran, India,...

discussed how to overcome the lack of overland connectivity. Mirziyoyev gave his in-principle concurrence to joining the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) when Modi reiterated a proposal on Uzbekistan’s participation in the project.

“We would welcome any initiative that increases connectivity between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan or with other Central Asian countries,” Swaika said.

Chabahar Port, the only Iranian ocean port, is a strategic port with unique opportunities that can attract investments from Iranian and foreign private sectors.

The development of the Chabahar Port is important for the economic development of regional countries and in this regard endorsing regional agreements with neighboring countries are of significant importance for Iran so that it can increase its transit share to connect the shores of the Indian Ocean to Russia, northern Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

By Craig Tiedman

The problem with Afghanistan and needs for long(er) term planning

Rumours are running rampant regarding a US withdrawal from Afghanistan, before the end of the Donald Trump administration. This has inspired a frenzy of opinion pieces from think-tanks, policymakers, and practitioners alike in assessing and predicting outcomes. It is in these times of change and speculation that we take a page out of China’s playbook and plan for the future.

Whether the Trump administration initiates a proper full withdrawal, or simply yet another reduction in forces, is significant. Yet, this has been a goal for the United States since the first Obama administration. This is nothing new, as Americans have a short tolerance for lengthy wars and interventions—especially twenty-year engagements. The price of blood to treasure is simply too high as a likely Biden administration will understand, and America’s four-year presidential election cycle and relatively short and overlapping Congressional election cycles encourage new administrations to seek programmes which yield maximum impact in the shortest amount of time.

Two years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I was serving in the US government on a political appointment through the Bush administration. Depending on circumstances, a President appoints between 4,000 and 7,000 appointees in the government, all of whom are expected to “get results” and bypass the bureaucracy if and when necessary. I ended up at the Pentagon, where I was appointed as an economic advisor to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA).

One of the projects that I managed was a comprehensive geophysical mapping survey from 2005-2007. Current Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had been serving as the GoIRA Finance Minister at the time, and he had helped to pull together the financing of the initiative. The US Naval Research Laboratory and NASA flew aircraft with high-technology sensors and our interagency US Government and GoIRA team triangulated data with multiple sources including NASA satellite data, Russian maps, and US Geological Survey ground surveys. It is probably one of the most comprehensive mapping projects ever performed in history.

From a US government perspective, the millions of dollars in investment in the programme were seen



as a small price to pay for the projected returns that would include a valuation of Afghanistan’s natural resources and the inspiration for investment in the extractives industry sector. Our way of thinking was that building the sector as a viable and sustainable economic development incentive would help the overall objectives to stabilise Afghanistan and enable investment by building upon the country’s natural resources. Ultimately, the results of the programme had been surprising—it is estimated that the natural resources of Afghanistan are upwards of \$1 trillion (2011 estimate). So, who is the customer base and how can Afghanistan build a future?

In the world of great power competition, let us consider alternative futures and imagine who the new key stakeholders will be. China is a resource-hungry power that is seemingly unstoppable in its quest for dominating key sectors, including the extractives industry. Resources are needed to boost China’s growth and to roll out its relentless march to create the new Marshall Plan 2.0—the ubiquitous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—the Chinese version of a trade regime towards a new world order against which the West has failed to offer a counter-alternative.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has developed a highly effective and profitable grand strategy:

let the Americans and their coalitions “of the willing” spend their blood and money intervening in resource-rich countries, and when they tire and withdraw, we will take the treasure at a low cost. China’s engagement with Afghanistan in recent years reflects this clever strategy. In 2006, China started making inroads in Afghanistan’s economy as they supported exploration of minerals. Chinese state-owned Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) “won the bid” on the very Aynak Copper Deposit that we had surveyed and assisted the GoIRA with on developing a fair market tender process. Alas, the Chinese outmaneuvered the other bidders through what some have charged as “unorthodox methods” and now hold the rights to the concession for a \$3.5bn price tag. And who do you think was quick to win the bid for the “undiscovered” oil and gas resources in Afghanistan’s Amu Darya basin blocks that our USGS team had assessed? You guessed it: in 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation won the bid for three Amu Darya basin exploratory blocks in Afghanistan.

So, what is the appeal of Afghanistan to China besides the obvious geopolitical reasons? It is all in the value chain and a pipeline of resource wealth. As far as resource-rich countries go, Afghanistan is relatively easy to lock in contracts for the development... **P3**

By Hannan Hussain

Can Washington sustain Afghanistan’s positive peace trajectory?

The recent success between the Afghan government and the Taliban in agreeing to a “preamble of the [on-going intra-Afghan] negotiation” encourages mutual focus on more concrete conflict-resolution goals, such as a long-term ceasefire. Despite the Taliban steering clear of explicit ceasefire guarantees, the formation of a joint agenda-setting committee makes it difficult for any party to fall out of favor with peacemakers, sidestep ceasefire propositions, and ultimately compromise their own formal endorsements of peaceful progress.

It is against this backdrop that Washington must also promptly address the seasonal shifts within its own troop drawdown narrative. By touting two vastly divergent positions on military withdrawal in recent times, United States risks generating a rift with the emerging intra-Afghan priorities of Taliban

insurgents, as well as those of the Afghan government.

The Afghan government’s emerging priorities on post-conflict stability are driven by two expectations. First, a demonstrated recourse to nonviolence by Taliban fighters, through a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire agreement. Negotiators consider the move critical to avoiding a high trust deficit. Second, government negotiators are open to exploring the legitimacy of integrating Taliban fighters into a post-conflict governance setup.

Note that the Afghan government has consistently joined the United States Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad, in demanding “reduction in violence” from the Taliban. In the event that a full-scale ceasefire is unlikely, violence reductions have come across as fallback goals to offset peaking civilian collateral in

the country.

But the compounding factor is Khalilzad’s deep-seated commitment to the Taliban, which endorses the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan by May 2021. In the current context of Doha talks, such a commitment enables the Taliban to navigate present-day prospects of ceasefires, and attack Washington’s aversion to peace at a later stage if it falls short on its commitment to withdraw all troops by the agreed date.

Consider the insurgents’ early signs, warning the incoming Biden administration that the “implementation of the [U.S.-Taliban bilateral] agreement is the ‘most reasonable and effective tool’ for ending the conflict between both our countries.” The catch is that the Taliban’s newly announced breakthrough deal with the Afghan negotiators is deprived of such highly preferential endorsement, suggesting... **P3**

No flexibility acceptable in tax collection: Ghani



unacceptable, asking the Ministry of Finance to collect unpaid taxes from all government and non-government institutes.

A statement from the Presidential Palace received by Pajhwok Afghan News said that president Ghani chaired a meeting of National Revenue Board in the palace today morning.

The sources said that the meeting discussed problems regarding collection of taxes. The president expressed his dissatisfaction from the Ministry of Finance for its failure to collect the target amount of taxes this fiscal year, the source said.

Pointing to the government’s pledges to the Afghan people and the international community, Ghani said, “No flexibility and excuses are acceptable in collection of taxes, all problems in this area should be fundamentally resolved.”

He directed the Ministry of Finance to collect unpaid tax from Kam Air Airlines, Roshan Telecom, Afghan Telecom, Petroleum and Gas Company and other government and non-government organs. The ministry should speed up its efforts for achieving the targeted amount by following a clear plan for collection of taxes, he concluded.

Sher Khan Port: Most business closed due to insecurity

Businessmen in the Sher Khan Port of northern Kunduz province have complained against insecurity and said tens of business companies have stopped functioning due to insecurity and lawlessness.

Businessman Ziaulhaq said he stopped his work in the port due to insecurity.

"Government officials extort us in the port, the Taliban and police on the highway. There is no insurance of security therefore I stopped by business in Sher Khan Port," he said. Jalaluddin, another businessman, said besides insecurity the threat from robbers had increases on the road leading to Sher Khan Port.

"In the past there were check-points, but from the past two years we don't see those checkpoints. Robbers are here who take money and goods from businessmen at gunpoint," he said.

He said business and trade will flourish if security is ensured and



extortion comes to an end in the area.

Masoud Wahdat, the Kunduz Chamber of Commerce and Industries, said 145 companies had been closed in Sher Khan Port from the past two years.

He said: "No availability of Tajikistan Consulate General in Kunduz province, extortion, lack of

investment and insecurity forced 145 companies in the port out of 150 to close their business."

Wahdat said companies that stopped working in the Sher Khan Port have opened their business in other provinces.

Meanwhile, Police Chief Gen. Haqnawaz Haqyar claimed police have ensured the security of

businessmen in Sher Khan Port and on the highway.

"We tried our best to provide them security on highway and in the port but still if business person have any problem they could share it with police," he said.

Haqyar added if any policeman caught extorting businessmen, he would be dealt according to the law.

Armenians, Azerbaijan...

fully encircled by the Azerbaijani army, which controls the only road leading to them.

Nagorno-Karabakh lies within Azerbaijan but was under the control of ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia since a separatist war there ended in 1994. That war left Nagorno-Karabakh itself and substantial surrounding territory in Armenian hands.

In 44 days of fighting that began in late September and left more than 5,600 people killed on both sides, the Azerbaijani army pushed deep into Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing Armenia to accept last month's peace deal that saw Azerbaijan reclaim much of the separatist region along with surrounding areas. Russia deployed nearly 2,000 peacekeepers for at least five years to monitor the peace deal and to facilitate the return of refugees.

Azerbaijan marked its victory with a military parade on Thursday that was attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and involved more than 3,000 troops, dozens of military vehicles, and a flyby of combat aircraft. The peace deal was a major shock for Armenians, triggering protests calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who has refused to step down. He described the peace agreement as a bitter but necessary move that prevented Azerbaijan from taking over all of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Afghanistan-Iran...

comprehensive strategic document between Iran and Afghanistan, saying, "The comprehensive strategic document outlines the long-term relations between Iran and Afghanistan, determines the principles of these relations and plays an important role in strengthening relations between the two countries."

He expressed hope that this round of talks in Kabul would be the final round, as good progress has been made on the document.

According to Araghchi, the strategic document has 5 parts, 4 of which have been finalized, and the remaining security part of this document will be concluded soon.

Can Washington...

a predetermined slant towards the U.S.-Taliban bilateral agreement.

It is also worth considering that the Taliban can decide to limit their engagement with the Afghan government at a later juncture. This can take shape if Washington's current urgency to call back troops runs contrary to its own commitment of retaining those numbers deep into next year.

On the constitutional front, Washington's peace advocacy must center on the Taliban's embrace of the 2004 Afghan constitution, and the favorable consequences attached to the constitution's adoption. For instance, in the aftermath of this week's breakthrough Taliban-Afghan negotiation framework, U.S. Envoy Khalilzad wasted precious constitutional advocacy on rhetorical confirmations.

He chose to reiterate the expectation of "rapid progress

on a political roadmap and a ceasefire" during the intra-Afghan talks, emphasizing that the U.S. will "work hard with all sides for serious reduction of violence."

What Khalilzad missed was striking a significant chord by pointing out that the Taliban are yet to adopt any constitution to date, raising questions about its ability to come through on present prospects. No attempt was made by Washington to question Taliban's approach to peace under a "Sunni Hanafism" banner – a fundamentalist Islamic governance brand that the Taliban insist as a lifeline.

Thus, a split between the U.S. military establishment and Trump on withdrawal logistics prevent Washington from exercising its peace process advocacy for more tactful and promising gains. At the forefront of these gains lies a pulse of Taliban's compatibility with pre-existing constitutional frameworks for effective post-

conflict governance.

The alternative course would be to derive a more predictable set of results. For instance, cosmetic support and mixed withdrawal signals from the U.S. risk reviving the Taliban's interest in their lost Islamic Emirate of 2001, demanding that Islamic jurisprudence – known as the Hanafi fiqh – is accepted as the benchmark for post-conflict governance in Kabul. This could prove particularly troubling as Doha talks begin to take some shape in the coming weeks.

On the other hand, U.S. complacency could also introduce fresh fractures between insurgents and the Afghan peace negotiators, given that the latter endorse continuity in the current Afghan constitution. Hence, the Afghan government should not serve as the only party advocating constitutional merits, especially when pitted against a Taliban line-up that is brimming with skepticism.

The problem...

of minerals, oil, natural gas, or anything for that matter. The trick is managing the value chain, where several links are missing or broken. Sure, you can win a concession for Aynak copper, set up a mining structure and hire experts and labour, but how are you going to get the resources developed and transported to the market? In a land-locked country where security is a problem, railroads and roads are scarce, and economic value chains are, by default, severely under-developed, what are the options? This is where China's Belt & Road Initiative and its rapidly increasing ties with Iran and Pakistan come in. China would presumably include Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that would then connect to Kandahar via a new railway. The idea is that railroads would provide the necessary supply routes

needed to get the resources in and out of Afghanistan. It would be included in the New Silk Road.

So how would China solve the security situation in Afghanistan? By 2017, China was already entertaining Taliban leaders in Beijing and has now promoted itself as an alternative peace broker between the GoIRA and the Taliban—if and when America runs for the exit. China in many ways favours a Taliban-influenced Afghan government. It is China's way of doing business in developing countries that has become a winning model—and some developing countries are quite happy that China does not require "liberal democratic conditions" upon its client states. Human rights abuses? No problem. Corrupt trade practices? No problem. A Taliban-infused GoIRA will support China's BRI and its dominance in the extractives with the promise of riches. And

it will empower the Taliban in a new GoIRA that would revert to the "old ways" of life, and create its own base of wealth from rents. With that said, China will require that its new client state also not interfere in its internal affairs. This would require a Taliban-infused Afghan government to also look the other way when it comes to China's abuses of its Uyghur Muslim population.

America and its liberal democratic allies such as India need to hold steady whilst also developing a new blueprint with the current GoIRA—a government that has made enormous strides in economic, social and security development. Yes, twenty years is a long time for an intervention that never seems to end, especially for those of us who have witnessed the violent side of the war. But China surely has a plan, and the Taliban will surely be a keen partner to its plan. Our blood, their treasure.

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Heart of Asia

Chief Editor: M. Hamid Hamdard

Reporters: Safiullah Nasary, Shafiq Amirzay,

Jawad Temori & Hameedullah Hamidi

Graphic & Design: Arman

Phone: +93-202502100 - +93-777989696

Website: www.heartofasia.af

Email: heartofasiadaily@gmail.com

Address: Behind Rahman Baba High School

- Opposite to 3rd District,

Kabul - Afghanistan

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UN Chief: Every Nation Should Declare 'Climate Emergency'

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on every country to declare a "climate emergency" on Saturday, as world leaders marking the fifth anniversary of the Paris climate accord made mostly incremental pledges relative to the scale of the crisis.

Guterres made his call at a summit aimed at building on momentum behind the Paris deal, buoyed in recent months by renewed commitment from China and the prospect of US President-elect Joe Biden bringing the United States back into the pact.

Nevertheless, the dozens of leaders who spoke mostly offered tweaks to existing commitments or promises of bolder moves before crucial talks in Glasgow in late 2021, rather than breakthrough new policies to hasten the end of fossil fuels.

"Can anybody still deny that we are facing a dramatic emergency?" Guterres, a former

Portuguese prime minister who has made climate change his signature issue, said via video.

"That is why today, I call on all leaders worldwide to declare a State of Climate Emergency in their countries until carbon neutrality is reached."

With the impacts of climate change increasingly stark since the Paris deal was struck - ranging from wildfires in Australia and California to collapsing ice sheets - popular pressure has grown on leaders to listen to warnings from scientists.

Britain, co-hosting the summit, made one of the clearest new commitments, announcing late on Friday it would stop direct government support for overseas fossil fuel projects.

Campaigners hailed the move for putting pressure on other G7 economies to restrict support for oil and gas companies.



Renewed pledges to back Paris from countries such as India, Germany and France were welcomed less in terms of substance and more

for keeping alive hopes of faster action to meet the monumental challenge of halving global emissions by 2030 in line with the Paris deal.

A look at the world

Iran, India, Uzbekistan to hold online meeting on Chabahar port

Iran, India, and Uzbekistan are going to hold their first online meeting on cooperation in Iran's Chabahar Port on December 14, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced.

The trilateral working group meeting will be jointly chaired by deputy ministers of Iran and Uzbekistan and a secretary from India, Hindustan Times reported.

The announcement came a day after Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed during a summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi that a trilateral meeting should be held with Iran to promote Chabahar port.



According to the website of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country welcomes Uzbekistan's interest in using Chabahar port, in southeastern Iran, as a transit port, which provides economic opportunities for traders in the region.

In addition to Uzbekistan, other Central Asian countries have shown interest in using the port.

"This would open up economic opportunities for the traders and business community of the region. Besides Uzbekistan, other Central Asian countries have also shown interest in using the port. India seeks to cooperate closely with regional countries on this issue," the statement by the Indian ministry said.

India currently operates one of the terminals of Chabahar port and offers loading and unloading services in the mentioned terminal.

"The strategic project has been given a waiver from sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Iran in view of its importance in shipping cargo and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan," the report highlighted.

Following an India-Uzbekistan Summit on Friday, Adarsh Swaika, joint secretary (Eurasia) in the Indian external affairs ministry, said the two sides had ... **P2**

ICC prosecutor ready to open investigation into Ukraine



The International Criminal Court's prosecutor said Friday that a preliminary probe has found "a reasonable basis at this time to believe" that crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed in Ukraine which merit a full-scale investigation.

The six-year preliminary probe by prosecutors at the global court looked at allegations of crimes starting with the brutal crackdown on pro-European Union protesters in 2013-14, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the drawn-out conflict in eastern Ukraine. Fighting there between Ukrainian forces and separatist rebels has killed more than 14,000 people in the last six years.

Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said the suspected crimes and the failure of courts in Ukraine and Russia to successfully prosecute them mean that the next step for ICC prosecutors will be to request authorization from judges to open a formal investigation. She did not give a timeframe for that to happen.

Ukraine is not a member of the court but has twice accepted its jurisdiction, asking it first to investigate the crackdown on protesters in 2013-2014 under former president Viktor Yanukovich and later extending the jurisdiction to cover conflicts in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Russia is not a member of the court and does not accept its jurisdiction. Without going into details of the alleged crimes, Bensouda said in a statement that her preliminary investigation found three "clusters of victimization;" crimes committed during hostilities, during detentions and crimes committed in Crimea.

"My Office furthermore found that these crimes, committed by the different parties to the conflict, were also sufficiently grave to warrant investigation by my Office, both in quantitative and qualitative terms," Bensouda said.

The ICC is a court of last resort that only takes cases when member states do not or cannot prosecute them in domestic courts.

Earlier Friday, Bensouda whose term as prosecutor at the ICC is drawing to a ... **P2**

Armenians, Azerbaijan Trade Blame Over Breach of Peace Deal

Armenian officials and Azerbaijan on Saturday accused each other of breaching a peace deal that ended six weeks of fierce fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan's leader threatened to crush Armenian forces with an "iron fist."

The new clashes mark the first significant breach of the peace deal brokered by Russia on Nov. 10 that saw Azerbaijan reclaim control over broad swathes of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding lands that were held by Armenian forces for more than a quarter-century.

Separatist officials in Nagorno-Karabakh said the Azerbaijani military launched an attack late Friday that wounded three local ethnic Armenian servicemen.



Russian peacekeepers deployed to the region to monitor the peace deal reported a violation of the cease-fire in the Gadрут region Friday. The report issued Saturday by the Russian Defense Ministry didn't assign blame.

Later in the day, the Armenian Defense Ministry also charged that the Azerbaijani army mounted an attack in the south of Nagorno-Karabakh on Saturday.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev blamed Armenia on Saturday for the new clashes and threatened to "break its head with an iron fist."

"Armenia shouldn't try to start it all over again," Aliyev said during a meeting with top diplomats from the United States and France who have tried to mediate the decades-old conflict. "It must be very cautious and not plan any military action. This time, we will fully destroy them. It mustn't be a secret to anyone."

Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry said in a statement late Saturday that its forces thwarted Armenian "provocations" and restored the cease-fire.

Armenian officials said the fighting raged near the villages of Hin Tager and Khtsaber, the only settlements in the Gadрут region that are still controlled by Armenian forces. They noted that the two villages have been ... **P3**



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