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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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10 afs



Aqina-Andkhai railway track 85pc completed: ARA

The Afghanistan Railways Authority (ARA) says 85 percent of construction work on the Aqina-Ankhai railway track has been completed and the railroad is expected to be inaugurated in the next few months.

Mirwais Mirzakwal, ARA deputy head, told Pajhwok Afghan News that the railway track was 31 kilometers long and so far its construction process had been 85 percent completed.

He said survey and design of the project had been completed last year and its construction was launched this ongoing solar year.

He said the construction contract of Aqina-Andkhai railway was signed between ARA and Industries and Communications Ministry of Turkmenistan in February.

This project is financed from the ARA development budget, Mirzakwal added, saying the railway track would ... **P2**



Australia to host Afghanistan for historic one-off Test next year

Australia will host Afghanistan for a single Test match in November next year as per the agreement between Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) and Cricket Australia (CA), CricTracker reported Sunday.

The ACB confirmed the development and said the historic Test was originally scheduled to be held in November this year but had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next year's Test will be the first-ever between Australia and Afghanistan. Afghanistan was awarded Test status by the ICC in 2017 and has played four Test matches so far – the first in 2018 against India.

While the one-off Test against Afghanistan had to be postponed, Australia has been able to restart matches and is currently playing a four-match Test series against India.

Both teams recently played three ODIs and as many T20Is. Australia won the ODIs before India won the T20I series.

Series of Explosions Target Afghanistan's Provinces



On Sunday, multiple explosions targeted several provinces of Afghanistan which include Kabul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Logar and Badakhshan.

In Kabul, at least nine people were killed and 20 more including a Parliament Member Khan Muhammad Wardak were wounded in an explosion which targeted

the vehicle of MP Wardak in PD5 at around 09:50am, the Minister of Interior Masoud Andarabi said. Minister Andarabi emphasized that the current figures are not the final one and it may change later.

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) in a statement said, "Today (on Sunday), terrorists carried out a terrorist attack in PD5 of Kabul. Children, women and

the elderly are among the injured in this incident, and the houses around the incident have been severely damaged."

Explosions in Other Provinces

In the meantime, the Jalalabad city in Nangarhar province, Pul-e Alam in Logar province, Helmand and Badakhshan provinces have also witnessed the horrifying blasts.

The spokesman of Badakhshan Police says at least one killed and two more were wounded in an explosion which took place in Baharak district of the province this morning. However, the nature of blast is not clear.

The Ministry of Defense (MoD) also said in a statement that two Afghan soldiers were wounded in car bomb blast near an army base in Nawa district of Helmand province.

In Jalalabad city of Nangarhar, one Policeman was killed and two more were wounded when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb in PD1 of the city this morning.

At least one civilian was also wounded in a roadside bomb blast in Pul-e Alam city of Logar province on Sunday.

The State of Qatar has expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the bombing that took place in the Afghan capital Kabul which led to deaths and injuries.

In a statement Sunday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's firm stance on rejecting violence and terrorism regardless of motives and causes.

The statement expressed Qatar's condolences to the families of victims as well as the government and the people of Afghanistan, wishing the wounded a speedy recovery.

Afghan delegation to visit Azerbaijan

A delegation, led by National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib, is scheduled to arrive in Baku on a three-day visit on December 20.

The Embassy of Afghanistan in Azerbaijan said the objective of the trip was to exchange views on the current level of bilateral political and economic relations.

Trend quoted a statement from the embassy as saying that the two sides would confer on cooperation in the field of security.

The team, including the chief of staff to the president, Mohammed Shakir Kargar, will meet senior officials in Baku.



U.S. Envoy Urges Swift End to Bloodshed

The U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in a series of tweets on Sunday reiterated his call on the Afghan warring parties to swiftly end the violence and agree to a political settlement to end the conflict as soon as possible.

"We condemn the ongoing high level of violence and we condemn all those who authorize and carry out such attacks across Afghanistan, creating terror and bloodshed," Khalilzad said.

Referring to the recent explosion in a religious gathering in Ghazni province, Khalilzad said both the Afghan government and the Taliban must respect the demands of the Afghan people and agree on a political settlement soon.

Khalilzad said: "The news from Ghazni of the deaths of so many innocents, almost all of them children, is heart-breaking. We share the sorrow and grief that the victims'



families bear at this moment." "The Islamic Republic and the Taliban must respect the demands of their people and reach a political agreement as soon as possible. The United States stands with the people of Afghanistan," said Khalilzad. "With the US-Taliban Agreement, broad international support for peace and start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the intra-Afghan war and killing have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the overwhelming number of Afghans who need and

yearn for peace and security," Khalilzad said.

"We call for all sides to reduce violence and move quickly to a ceasefire. Together and with international support they must also deal with menace of unexploded ordnance and mines across the country to save precious lives, children and adults," he said.

This comes two days after at least 15 civilians were killed and 20 more were wounded in an explosion at a gathering in Gelan district, Ghazni province, on Friday. ... **P3**

Britain, EU...

Coveney was quoted as saying by the Sunday Times newspaper.

Coveney added that he found it difficult to see the EU fishing states of Ireland, France, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands supporting an agreement that goes beyond the offer that is currently on the table.

European Parliament on Saturday repeated its call for a deal to be reached no later than this weekend, to give it time to properly ratify the agreement. David McAllister, head of the parliament's Brexit group, said the chamber could hold an emergency plenary on December 29 if a deal was struck no later than this weekend.

"This requires that on Sunday evening at the latest we get a text, in order to start our prepared measures and work" he told German broadcaster NDR.

The EU has long said it wants to safeguard the parliament's right to exercise democratic oversight by voting on any deal sealed by the EU and UK negotiators.

However, if a deal arrived later than this weekend, the 27 EU member states could still endorse it on their own to allow for "provisional application," a scenario that would be likely to upset European lawmakers.

Aqina-Andkhai...

play an important role in creating a connectivity of railway network inside the country.

A few days back, the Herat-Khawaf railway between Herat province and neighbor Iran was also inaugurated.

According to ARA, eight railway stations are currently active in the country, which include Hairatan, Taza Omid, Nayeb Abad, Mazar-i-Sharif, Aqina, Torghandi stations.

By Dr. Manoj Kumar Mishra

Afghanistan: Challenges for Joe Biden Administration

The incoming Joe Biden's administration will have lesser options in dealing with the Afghan insurgency. It cannot choose to go offensive, despite the fact that the peace table has not registered any notable progress thus far and insurgency continues unabated.

Considering the protracted nature of insurgency and squandering of American resources, will power and popular support after almost two decades of military entanglement, the new administration will not choose an unsuccessful strategy of the outgoing Trump administration which sought to address the Afghan situation by adopting an offensive gesture soon after assuming office through measures like increasing the number of American troops and resuming drone strikes – a strategy which was later discarded and Washington was forced to open direct talks with the Taliban in view of unremitting insurgency in many pockets of the country and mounting civilian as well as troops' casualties. Thus, the Biden administration has no alternative except throwing its complete weight behind the peace process.

Ironically, even while the peace talks are very much on between the American and Taliban representatives with a temporary pause until January 5, 2021, the supporting conditions are far from being attained. The Biden administration will have the challenge to handle the existing lacunas with dexterity and enlist support from other regional stakeholders in the process. The administration cannot hope for a hasty yet successful peace process considering the fact that the Taliban cannot be viewed as the only Afghan stakeholder in the process.

Challenge of Regional Cooperation

The American efforts at shaping the contours of the Afghan peace efforts excluding the influence of geopolitical

rivals like Iran and Russia fell squarely with its geopolitical ambitions of using Afghanistan as a bridge to the resource-rich Central Asian region and becoming a predominant player in energy politics.

The Trump administration heavily relied on a containment policy toward Iran and Russia by reversing the nuclear deal with Iran and imposing multiple sanctions on both Iran and Russia on various ambiguous grounds. However, the divergences of geopolitical interests drove these regional powers to maintain contacts with and embolden the Afghan Taliban to move flexibly and negotiate from a position of strength. The Biden administration may soon realize that the internal political dynamics ran in favor of the Taliban and the US could only acquire a predominant position in the Afghan scenario by turning the tide of external dynamics by bringing in the influence of Russia, Iran, China and Pakistan to the Afghan peace efforts.

Besides, while the US Afghan peace interlocutor Zalmay Kalilzad is seeking guarantees from the Taliban that the group would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a launching-pad for terror operations, this assurance from the Taliban cannot guarantee the end of insurgency by various other militant groups operating within Afghanistan. According to the statistics put out by a Pentagon report in the first half of 2019, there are as many as 20 prominent militant organizations active in Afghanistan. Thus, inclusion of Afghan government and support from regional powers in the peace talks would go a long way in addressing such a gloomy scenario.

Inclusion of Afghan Government

The Biden administration will have the challenge to persuade the Taliban and enlist the inclusion of the internationally recognized Afghan government in the peace process which has been



sidelined in the entire gamut of the process due to the Taliban's insistence that it is merely an American puppet and the insurgent group's territorial control and far-reaching influence has restricted the leeway of the external powers in nudging the Taliban from its firm position. Exclusion of the Afghan government from the peace process not only indicates cornering of the present political institutions representing the country's fledgling democratic multi-ethnic structure, the Taliban's intentions remain unclear as to whether the group would work with others to take whatever socio-economic and political gains have been accrued all these years ahead. Exclusion of the Afghan government from the peace process so far means that the process is gravitating toward the Taliban's agenda which largely remains unclear.

Addressing Pakistan's Double Game

Another challenge would be to ensure continued and perceptible support from Pakistan in the peace process. The outgoing Trump administration's experiments with tightening of screws over Pakistan to end its double game (it was committed to fighting terrorism on the one hand by joining the War on Terror whereas it threw its weight various insurgent groups on the other) were not effective as there was a surge in

the incidents of terror attacks propped up by Pakistan as a retaliatory response to US action as well as to demonstrate its influence over the insurgents in Afghanistan.

For example, after Kabul ambulance bombing death toll reached beyond hundred, the head of Afghanistan's intelligence service, National Directorate of Security (NDS) Masoom Stanekzai stated that these actions were deadly attempts by the Pakistani backers of the insurgency to show they could not be sidelined. Neither the Obama's policy of aiding Pakistan nor did the Trump's strategy of withdrawing aid work to attain success in Afghanistan in the past. Laxity on fighting terrorism on its soil and failure to meet the counter-terrorism standards set by FATF led to the chances of blacklisting of Pakistan by the watchdog which it narrowly escaped this year. Pakistan would use its influence over the Afghan Taliban as a way to gain strategic depth against India and may prefer an unstable Afghanistan to see its interests served.

Challenge of Democratic Deficit

Continuing insurgency by different militant groups including the Taliban has not only targeted foreign troops and Afghan government, rights of civilians and role of civil society organizations have been indiscriminately... **P3**

By Luke Coffey

Crucial stage in the Afghan peace process

This week a Taliban delegation, led by its deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, met with Pakistani officials in Islamabad. While in Pakistan it is expected that Baradar will meet with senior Taliban leadership too. This visit to Pakistan comes on the heels of a mutually agreed 20-day pause in the ongoing intra-Afghan peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Even though peace talks have been largely stalled since commencing in September, in the past few weeks there have been some positive developments. Since September there has been a disagreement on which version of Islamic Law would govern the talks. The Taliban favored a version largely observed by Sunni Muslims and not Shiite. Since Shiite Muslims form a sizeable minority in Afghanistan, the Afghan government was reasonably concerned by this. After months of negotiations, both sides finally agreed to the legal framework in which to conduct the intra-Afghan talks.

It is unclear when the talks will next

begin again in earnest. There has been no specific date announced for the resumption of talks after the 20-day hiatus ends. Regardless of when the next round of talks might be, there has been calls by some, led by Afghanistan's National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, to have the talks moved from Doha to somewhere in Afghanistan.

In a statement Mohib stated "Peace talks within Afghanistan will help create a credible exclusive security zone and enable the Afghan people to own and oversee peace and negotiations. Negotiators will be better aware of the grievances and demands of their countrymen and will avoid additional costs in the process." While this position might seem perfectly reasonable to most, the Taliban has rejected this proposal outright. Even so, the Afghan government has said they will not let this disagreement postpone the next round of talks. The U.S. has encouraged both sides to get back to the table as quickly as possible.

One of President Trump's most

surprising, if not courageous, decisions of his presidency was seeking a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. While his two predecessors paid lip service to a negotiated settlement in the past, only President Trump was able to get the process started in any meaningful way.

It is likely that the next round of intra-Afghan talks will take place near the time of the presidential inauguration in the U.S. on January 20. In order to build on the progress from the Trump administration there are four steps a Biden administration should take.

Firstly, the next administration should pause any remaining troop withdrawals already in the pipeline from the previous administration. While President Trump was right to start negotiations with the Taliban, he has proven a little too keen to remove U.S. troops before deadline next April. With violence still at relatively high levels in Afghanistan withdrawing US forces from before the deadline would send the wrong signal. Secondly, the next... **P3**

Afghan Government Dissolved State Ministry for Human Rights



The Minister of the State Ministry for Human Rights Affairs, Dr. Sima Samar on Sunday said that the government has dissolved the ministry.

Dr. Sima Samar stated that no consultation was made with her about dissolving the ministry.

She expressed ignorance about the reason of government's decision over dissolving the Ministry.

Previously, Sima Samar worked as the head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

Qatar to Build Residential Complex in Kabul

The contracts for construction of residential buildings within 'Qatar Residential Complex' was signed in the presence of the leadership of the Ministry of Urban Development and Land (MUDL) between the Al-Gharrafa Charity Foundation and construction companies during a ceremony at the Kabul Serena Hotel here yesterday. The construction of the Qatar Residential Complex would cost USD 110 million which would be paid and financed by the Al-Gharrafa Foundation, the MUDL in a statement said.

At the beginning of the ceremony, executive director of Al-Gharrafa foundation, expressed his gratitude for the immediate cooperation of the Ministry of Urban Development and Lands in transferring the required land and arranging a detailed plan for the construction of the township and pledged to implement the project at the earliest time, the statement

added. Subsequently, the Minister of Urban Development and Lands, Mahmoud Karzai, called the construction of the township a commitment of the government leadership to provide houses to the people in need, adding that the Ministry of Urban Development and Lands in coordination with Al-Gharrafa Foundation will spare no efforts to implement this important project. Meanwhile, the Minister of Urban Development and Lands said that government was ready to provide lands for the foundation, anywhere in Afghansitan for their investments. Similarly, the Ministers of Economy and Hajj and Religious Affairs thanked Al-Gharrafa Charity Foundation for this project, emphasizing the economic importance of the project and called the role of the Ministry of Urban Development and Lands vital in the construction of the Qatar



Residential Complex.

Recently, Aziz Ahmad Golestani, Deputy Minister of Urban Development and Lands, while providing detailed information on the construction of the Qatar Residential Complex, called the implementation of the project a practical step towards the effective use of government lands.

Qatar Residential Complex would be built in a total area of 32 acres of land including 8 blocks of 12 residential floors with 768 residential units, 3 commercial blocks of 7 floors, a mosque, two male and female schools, an orphanage and two commercial centers of 5 floors in the fifth district of Kabul.

U.S. Congress to...

and forbids them from being duplicated without congressional approval." But a senior Democratic aide said Toomey had agreed to "drop the broad language in his proposal that would have prevented the Fed chair from establishing similar facilities in the future."

The aide said the compromise language was being completed and a final agreement on the COVID package "is significantly closer." The Senate adjourned a rare Saturday session with a call from Republican leader Mitch McConnell to avoid last-minute disagreements that could delay new funding for Americans and small businesses.

"The American people cannot feed their families with, or pay their bills with, Congress's good-faith discussions. They need us to act," McConnell said on the Senate floor. "We need to conclude our talks, draft legislation and land this plan." In the 11 months since the first cases of the new coronavirus were documented in the U.S., COVID-19 has killed 311,000 Americans, by far the most in the world, and put millions out of work, with unemployment rising. Economists say growth will likely remain sluggish until vaccines are widely available in mid-2021.

"We're right within reach," Democratic House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi told members of her party on a call discussing the negotiations on Saturday, according to a person who was on the call.

Nepal president...

which may take a couple of weeks to decide its legality. Dozens of protesters gathered near the prime minister's office, calling the move unconstitutional. After his 2017 win, Oli had vowed to ensure political stability and fight corruption and poverty but has made little progress, especially since the pandemic. Coronavirus infections have reached 253,772, with 1,788 deaths, in the country of 30 million people. "PM Oli chose to betray the people's mandate for stability, development and dignity," former diplomat Dinesh Bhattarai tweeted.

Afghanistan...

compromised too. Mina Mangal, a prominent Afghan journalist, an advocate of women's rights to education and work as well as a cultural adviser to the lower chamber of Afghanistan's national parliament was assassinated indicating the macabre dimension of insurgency as well as the fragility of the peace process. Meanwhile, Afghan women's rights activists continue to complain that they

have not been represented in the peace process and fear that any American deal with the Taliban would jeopardize their freedom. The new administration will also have the challenge to work on the structure and nature of the political system that would ensue with the Taliban joining the mainstream political process which so far remains vague. For instance, Jalaluddin Shinwari, the deputy minister of justice under the Taliban

government in the late 1990s, and who still maintains contact with its leaders, maintains the viewpoint that the modern insurgency will not settle for anything less than the return of the Emirate, and has a fundamental distaste for democracy. The US as the oldest democracy with vibrant civil society groups will have the pressures to address the questions of democracy and pluralism during the peace process.

Crucial stage...

administration needs to plan for a strong US-Afghanistan bilateral relationship in the future regardless of the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks. A major focus on this relationship will be on security. Put simply, the US must continue to fund, at least in part, the Afghan military for the foreseeable future. The cost to the US taxpayer of doing so is far less than having tens of thousands of US troops on the ground. For example, at the height of the U.S. fighting in Afghanistan in 2011-12 Americans were spending \$120 billion a year. For 2021 the U.S. plans to spend only \$4 billion on funding the Afghan Ministry of Defense—or about the same amount it was spending in Afghanistan in 2011 every 12 days. Thirdly, the next administration needs to continue the progress made on connecting Afghanistan to the broader region through economic and trade integration. Landlocked Afghanistan suffers

from a lack of connectivity with its neighbors. Thankfully, there is a growing realization of this in Washington. The Trump administration's strategy for Central Asia published last February placed an important focus on Afghanistan's role in the region. Two of the six "policy objectives" directly deal with Afghanistan: "Expand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan" and "Encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan." The next administration should embrace the strategy continue regionally backed economic and trade initiatives like insert information. Finally, the next administration should not be afraid to acknowledge failure if the intra-Afghan talks breakdown. The US has legitimate national security interests in Afghanistan and the region. If a lasting peace cannot be brought through a negotiated settlement then America will need to take steps alongside the Afghan government to develop a new strategy. The

incoming administration should not hesitate to make this point crystal clear to the Taliban. Right now, the Taliban think that no matter what happens in the talks come April 2021 all foreign troops will be gone. A genuine negotiated settlement is the only realistic way for Afghanistan to experience stability and peace. After almost 40 years of fighting, your average Afghan wants peace and the international community must help them along the way. There will be no enduring and meaningful deal unless there is an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In the long term it matters less what the U.S. agrees to with the Taliban; what matters most is what the Afghan government agrees to with the Taliban. The intra-Afghan talks is the most crucial stage in the peace process. There will be ups and downs but both sides, along with the international community, must stick with it.

U.S. Envoy Urges...

The explosives were loaded on a motorbike that was parked near a house in Agho Jan village in Gelan district where a group of people had gathered to attend a Quran recitation ceremony, the Interior Affairs Ministry's spokesman Tariq Arian said. On Saturday, six members of the Afghan Public Protection Force were killed and four more were

wounded in a Taliban attack on their outpost in Qala-e-Naw, the center of Badghis province, said Abdul Aziz Bek, the head of the Badghis provincial council. In northern Afghanistan, four civilians were killed in a roadside bomb blast in Balkh district in the northern province of Balkh on Saturday, the Ministry of Interior Affairs said. Also, in Parwan province, four

rockets hit the Bagram Airfield, a major US air base in Afghanistan, early Saturday morning but so far officials have not given details on possible casualties in the incident. The rockets were fired at Bagram Airfield from the Qalandarkhil area in Parwan province, said Wahida Shahkar, a spokesperson for the Parwan governor.

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Britain, EU continue post-Brexit trade talks as deadline looms

Britain and the European Union continued trade talks in Brussels on Saturday, without giving word on any progress made in resolving disagreements over fishing rights and fair competition rules, seen as the main obstacles to a deal.

With less than two weeks to go before Britain finally leaves the bloc's orbit on December 31, the two sides are under pressure to agree on a new relationship to safeguard almost \$1 trillion worth of trade from tariffs and quotas.

Talks continued at the expert level on Saturday in Brussels, an EU official said.

Since Britain left the EU in January, the talks have been largely hamstrung over two issues: the bloc's fishing rights in British waters and creating a so-called level playing field providing fair competition rules for both sides.

There is little time left. Both sides need to get any deal approved by their parliaments, and with the talks in their final stages, it is expected that any conclusion will most likely come before

Christmas.

UK: No deal unless EU's concession

Britain reiterated on Saturday that it would prefer to leave the European Union with no trade deal rather than compromise its independence.

"We need to get any deal right and based on terms which respect what the British people voted for," said a UK government source. "Unfortunately, the EU are still struggling to get the flexibility needed from member states and are continuing to make demands that are incompatible with our independence."

The UK government source also told BBC that the UK is still trying to reach an agreement with the EU but Brussels needs to make a "substantial shift," otherwise, the UK will be leaving on World Trade Organization terms on 31 December.

During Thursday's phone call with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also noted negotiations are in a "serious situation" and



warned that no deal scenario "looked very likely" unless "the EU position changed substantially."

EU: 'extremely difficult' negotiations

EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier had said on Friday that "just a few hours" remained to reach a post-Brexit trade deal. He cited "extremely difficult" negotiations over how the EU could retaliate if Britain backpedalled on production standards to win a competitive edge for its

products, or if Britain cut European fishermen off from its fishing waters in the future.

It will be hard to reach a Brexit trade deal in the next 24 hours and the whole negotiation could collapse over an impasse between the two sides on fishing rights, Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney was quoted as saying.

"I don't see this being agreed easily in the next 24 hours. We may see a standoff over fish," **P2**

A look at the world

60% French unhappy with Macron: Survey

Nearly 60% of people in France are dissatisfied with President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Jean Castex, revealed the latest online survey.

Conducted by the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP), a total of 1,936 people aged 18 and above participated in the survey.

According to the survey, 60% of people said they were not satisfied with Macron,



who is in quarantine due to coronavirus. As many as 59% said they were dissatisfied with Prime Minister Castex.

On Thursday, the French president's office said that Macron tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

The Elysee Palace announced the development in a statement, saying the president took a rapid PCR test, after experiencing mild COVID-19 symptoms.

The survey also showed that Macron's popularity dropped by three percentage points to 38% in December. The popularity of the prime minister fell two percentage points to 37%.

Another survey conducted in November also showed that seven out of 10 French people in the country did not trust the Macron administration in combating the pandemic. The survey also found the government's measures to combat the epidemic "inconsistent".

Nepal president dissolves Parliament, elections set for next year



Nepal's president has dissolved Parliament at the request of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's cabinet and announced that general elections would be held in April and May, more than a year ahead of schedule.

Sunday's move plunges the Himalayan country, which has seen revolving-door governance since street protests restored multi-party democracy in 1990, into political turmoil as it battles the coronavirus pandemic.

President Bidhya Devi Bhandari's office said in a statement the next vote will be held on April 30 and May 10, as recommended by the cabinet following an emergency meeting.

Oli, 68, pushed for a fresh mandate after the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) accused him of sidelining his party in government decisions and appointments. He had led an alliance with former Maoist rebels to a landslide victory in 2017.

"The prime minister has lost the majority in the parliamentary party, central committee and the secretariat of the party," said Bishnu Rijal, an NCP central committee member. "Instead of seeking a compromise within the party, he chose to dissolve Parliament."

Sandwiched between China and India, politics in Nepal is also influenced by the priorities of its giant neighbours. India has been pushing back against Beijing's growing clout in a country that New Delhi considers its own back yard.

Oli aide Rajan Bhattarai said the prime minister had acted in response to the backlash from his party, which had also asked him to consider quitting as its president.

Politicians and social media users said the ruling party should have tried out other political combinations to run the country instead of calling an untimely election when its tourism-dependent economy has been battered by the pandemic.

Nepal's 2015 charter does not give the prime minister the prerogative to dissolve Parliament without exhausting alternatives, constitutional expert Bipin Adhikari said.

"It is unconstitutional at the first sight," he said, adding that the decision could be challenged in the Supreme Court, ... **P3**

U.S. Congress to vote on COVID aid package after Fed compromise

The U.S. Congress appeared poised to vote on Sunday on a \$900bn coronavirus aid package after senators struck a late-night compromise to clear one of the final hurdles, a dispute over Federal Reserve pandemic lending authorities.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters at the U.S. Capitol late on Saturday: "If things continue on this path and nothing gets in the way, we'll be able to vote tomorrow."

Congressional leaders plan to attach the coronavirus aid package, which includes \$600 direct payments to individuals and a \$300 per week unemployment compensation supplement, to a \$1.4-trillion spending bill funding government programmes through September 2021.



A 48-hour funding extension expires at midnight on Sunday (05:00 GMT Monday), after which the government would shut down.

Senator Pat Toomey, a Pennsylvania Republican, had insisted on language that would guarantee that the central bank could not renew emergency lending programmes for small businesses and state and local governments after December 31, when they expire under the CARES Act COVID-19 relief legislation passed in March.

Republicans had said the programmes are unnecessary government interference in private business that politicises the Fed. They accused Democrats of seeking to extend them into 2021 as a backdoor to provide unchecked funds for state and local governments controlled by members of their party.

Democrats, in turn, accused the Republicans of trying to tie the Fed's hands in order to limit Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's options for boosting the flagging economy after he takes office on January 20.

Toomey spokesman Steve Kelly said the senator's agreement with Schumer "rescinds more than \$429bn in unused CARES Act funds; definitively ends the CARES Act lending facilities by December 31, 2020; stops these facilities from being restarted; ... **P3**



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