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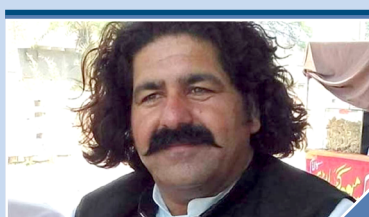
UN agency warns over growing Afghans' food insecurity

About 16 million Afghans, including 5.5 million who were lacking food insecurity, have been in urgent need of aids in Afghanistan, a UN aid agency warned Monday.

The Kabul-based Office for Coordination of the Humanitarian Aids (OCHA) said in a statement that 16 million Afghans will be in need of humanitarian aids in 2021.

The agency said over the past five years, the food security situation in the war-torn country, has steadily deteriorated and the percentage of insecure people doubled from 37 in 2015 to 76 in 2020.

"The number of people in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity has risen from 13.9 million ... **P3**



PTM lawmaker remanded in police custody

Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) lawmaker Ali Wazir has been remanded in police custody for 10 days.

Wazir has been charged with using provocative language against state institutions at a gathering in the port city of Karachi.

Police claim having booked and arresting PTM leaders, including Wazir, Noor Tareen, Sher Ayub Hussain and Basirullah, for using defamatory language the Pakistan Army at a rally on December 9.

The PTM legislator was arrested from Peshawar on the request of the Sindh police before being flown to Karachi on Friday.

He was produced before the administrative judge of an anti-terrorism court and the prosecution sought his physical remand for investigation.

The ATC judge remanded Wazir and his associates in police custody till December 30 with the direction to produce them on the next date.

Abdullah meets with Tajikistan PM to discuss peace process



Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, left Kabul on Monday bound for Tajikistan to discuss the Afghan peace process, his office said in a statement. He is accompanied by a high-level delegation.

"During his two-day official visit, he will meet Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, Prime Minister Qahir Rasoulzadeh and other Tajik

officials," the statement said. Abdullah will "discuss the Afghan peace process, regional support and bilateral relations" in his meetings in Tajikistan, the statement added. Timely Resumption of Talks

On Sunday, the High Council for National Reconciliation said that the result of the Republic team's five-day consultation with political leaders and politicians was to determine that

the second round of the negotiations should resume at the scheduled time, which is January 5.

The negotiators are expected to meet lawmakers, the leadership committee of the reconciliation council and the public during their stay in Kabul.

But the resumption of the negotiations in Doha on January 5 has raised many questions and

concerns among political figures in the country who say they hope that the talks are resumed in a timely fashion.

Critics said there is a need for a political consensus around the peace process to make it a success.

Reuters reported that the members of the Taliban's political office in Doha are expected to hold talks with their senior leadership in Pakistan where they are expected to share their grievances about the increased violence.

The US 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, according to his office.

Afghan NSA to Meet Iranian Officials in Visit to Tehran

The National Security Adviser of Afghanistan Hamdullah Mohib is to pay a visit to Tehran to meet and hold talks with Iran's Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani, Iranian authorities said. The Afghan official will arrive in Tehran on Tuesday for a one-day visit.

He will discuss bilateral issues, the Afghan peace process, and regional developments with his Iranian counterpart.

Mohib will also meet and hold talks with some high political and security officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



President Ghani Chairs Extraordinary Meeting of Cabinet

President Ashraf Ghani presided over the extraordinary meeting of Cabinet at the Presidential Palace and discussed issues pertaining to market building, economic development, and the disaster management operation plan to deal with emergency situations in the winter, on Sunday.

Members of the Cabinet strongly condemned the terrorist attacks across the country particularly recent attacks that targeted members of the parliament and the atrocious act of terror in Gilan district of Ghazni province. They instructed the relevant authorities to ramp up their efforts to prevent such tragic incidents and to reach out to the families of victims and those who sustained injuries.

Referring to his recent visit to Kandahar, President Ashraf Ghani ordered the pertinent authorities to immediately address the needs of



internally displaced persons in that province and give priority to them in the National Meal Program.

The Cabinet assigned an inter-ministerial committee to present specific measures and criteria to preserve the historic sites and landmarks and to prevent the people's orchards located near the Dahla dam from drowning. President Ghani instructed the relevant offices to focus on reducing air pollution in Kabul city.

The Cabinet assigned the relevant

authorities and offices to present their plans and detailed programs to the High Economic Council in order to expedite implementation of Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II and to promote market building as one of its main components.

The Cabinet approved in principle the disaster management operational plan and commended the First Vice President and the State Minister for Disaster Management for devising it.

Russia officially...

In the past, the Kremlin repeatedly denied Russia's involvement in cyberattacks of this nature, calling on the US government to abandon baseless accusations. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov recalled that Russian President Vladimir Putin had offered Washington to sign an agreement on cybersecurity partnership. According to Peskov, this could help both countries cooperate and counteract any cyberattacks, attempts at cyber espionage and so on.

European...

"to avoid the spread and mutation of COVID-19" in the country. Saying that he has spoken to British officials about recent developments, Alexander Schallenberg added: "We have to take this radical decision to protect our people from danger." Turkey, on Europe's southeastern borders, and the Gulf state of Kuwait also moved to ban flights from the UK. Other European states are also said to be mulling steps to cut off transportation links, according to local reports, as senior leaders of the EU's 27 member states were videoconferencing to start planning a coordinated response. In Greece, stopping short of a ban, the General Secretariat for Civil Protection announced that a seven-day quarantine will be imposed on anyone arriving to Greece from the UK starting Monday 6 am. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Saturday announced new restrictions over the fast-spreading strain covering London, the southeast and the east of England.

By Daa Hadid

'Our Houses Are Not Safe': Residents Fear Taliban in Afghanistan's Capital

In a mosque on the outskirts of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, a preacher crowded to assembled men and boys: The Taliban, with their primitive guns, brought foreign forces to their knees, he said, and the Afghan government is next.

"America with her rich and modern weaponry knelt down to us mujahedeen. So how will you defy us?" shouted the preacher on a sunny Friday in late October. He only permitted NPR to use his family name, Mazloum, and requested the mosque's name and its precise location remain anonymous, so it would not be targeted by Afghan government forces. "The world is realizing the power of Islam and the mujahedeen, but not a few stupid puppets here," Mazloum said, referring to the country's Western-backed government. "Soon, Allah will grant us the Islamic government that our nation deserves."

The Taliban once lurked on the outer fringes of Kampany, a busy Kabul district with unruly traffic and roads that peter out into the countryside. But in recent weeks, they have been openly preaching in the district.

It is one of the ways the Taliban have been emboldened since signing a deal with the United States that will lead to American and allied foreign forces withdrawing from Afghanistan by spring 2021. Already, U.S. forces have downsized from 12,000 to 4,500 since the deal was signed in February. President Trump ordered the forces cut back to 2,500 troops by next month, largely cementing the withdrawal before Joe Biden assumes the presidency on Jan. 20. The drawdown is being accompanied by peace talks between the Taliban and Afghanistan's government. On Monday, the architect of those talks, U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, said the two sides would take a 20-day hiatus. Even if they are to succeed, they may take months, likely years, to negotiate.

But few are optimistic, because as foreign forces withdraw, the Taliban have waged violent attacks on Afghan government forces across the country, despite pleas to stop. Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, became the latest senior U.S. official to call for "an immediate reduction of violence" following a meeting with Taliban leaders on an unannounced trip to Qatar on Thursday. Yet the Taliban's violence continues, and there are signs that the government is losing control over Kabul. Streets empty after dark

The city's jammed streets empty out after dark, residents fearing militants and criminal gangs. Dozens of rockets slammed into the city in two incidents in November and December, killing more than 10 people.

Shadowy assailants target security officials, judicial workers and journalists, with no militant claiming responsibility for the attacks.

On Tuesday, the deputy governor of Kabul was killed by a magnetic bomb attached to his vehicle.

ISIS fighters, who were dormant for months, did claim responsibility for two deadly attacks in recent months: On Nov. 2, they stormed the Kabul University campus, killing 35 people, mostly students. A week earlier, on Oct. 25, one of their suicide bombers detonated himself outside a tuition center, killing 24 people. Taliban inside the gates

The preacher publicly vowing to restore the Taliban's harsh version of Islamist rule over Afghanistan was yet another show of defiance around the capital. Mazloum wore the white garb of a Taliban cleric as he addressed a crowd who gathered in late October to celebrate a dozen young men who had memorized the entire Muslim holy book, the Quran.

Among the crowd were preachers from neighboring mosques. Young loyalists distributed Taliban glossies, including Trench, which highlights — and exaggerates — the exploits of the insurgents. Others directed traffic around the mosque.

"The Taliban are not only at the gates of Kabul, but inside the city gates," said Andrew Watkins, senior Afghanistan researcher at the International Crisis Group. He said it was "as ominous as it sounds and as terrifying as it indeed is, in many scenarios for a security environment, for the protection of minority communities, and so for many other reasons, it's certainly alarming news," he said.

Across a tributary of the fetid Kabul river from Kampany, other Afghans watching the rise of the Taliban say they are arming themselves.

The sprawling neighborhood of Dasht-e-Barchi is predominantly made up of Hazaras, a Shiite Muslim minority, who are targeted by Sunni militants.

In recent years, ISIS fighters have battered the area; but during a pitched phase of the Afghan civil war in the 1990s, before the U.S. invasion, it was the Taliban who targeted them.

They say they aren't waiting to be targeted again.

"When our houses are not safe, when our educational academies are not safe and our mosque are not safe, we have to make plans," said Mustafa Nikzad, an activist for Hazara rights. "We have active groups in the area, and if we are attacked, they are willing to defend us."

Nikzad said several militias had formed in Dasht-e-Barchi, with more than a thousand gunmen between them, their members purchasing weapons on the black market.

He said one of the largest militias was "Fedayeen Baba Mazari" and one of its leaders, Jayhoun, had his men patrol religious Shiite gatherings, which are often targeted by Sunni militants.

"Recruitment sped up"

Murtaza, a 29-year-old clerk who practices martial arts, said several strongmen were trying to recruit young men through gyms dotting the area. He asked to use only his first name because he did not want intelligence officials to identify him.

Murtaza said the groups began forming after militants beheaded a 9-year-old Hazara girl in 2015. "But this year, recruitment sped up. They're equipping themselves with weapons more quickly. It feels like this process will accelerate," he said.

Afghanistan's government also funds some local gunmen in Dasht-e-Barchi, largely to guard mosques, although there are complaints it is not enough.

"Naturally, we are disappointed," Mohammad Daud, 42, a guard assigned to protect the Imam Zaman mosque on a side street of Kabul, said of the government's response. He said the community asked the government two years ago to help them defend about 100 Shiite mosques in the area but only received weapons and paid fighters for 16. "The mosques still don't have security guards, there are still threats and the people are still coming to the mosque to pray. They are 100% at risk."

The mosque where Daud is stationed has blast walls, a watchtower and a guard to search worshippers. It was targeted by an ISIS suicide bomber in 2017, killing 39 men, their names etched in the court yard. The mosque still receives ISIS threats, as recently as late November, Daud said.

Afghanistan's government, meanwhile, says it is trying to keep the country safe. "Our forces will be here to face the threat that the Taliban and other terrorist groups are posing," said Javid Faisal, ... **P3**

By Emran Feroz

In Afghanistan, the freedoms of the press are under attack

Even as Joe Biden was announced as president-elect, many Afghans wondered how new administration thousands of miles away would affect the course of their own nation and its long-running conflict. After eighteen months of negotiations, the Afghan Taliban and the U.S. government signed an agreement last February in Doha, Qatar, which paved the way for a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Afghans and non-Afghans alike saw the deal as a step toward peace in the war-torn country. But though the U.S. military ceased most of its operations, the intra-Afghan conflict they entered, escalated, and in many instances precipitated continues unabated. Afghans did most of the fighting and dying prior to the Doha deal; they now do all of it, save for the emergency U.S. air strikes called in to stiffen the resistance of the Afghan national security forces against

their ever emboldened Taliban enemy.

As always, most victims are civilians caught in the perpetually expanding crossfire. Schools, mosques, and other educational centers are frequently targeted by all parties, each of which reliably blames the other.

Journalists, writers, and intellectuals are also being specifically targeted not just by both sides, but often also by clandestine forces that remain yet unknown. In November, Yama Siawash, a prominent ex-journalist, was killed in the middle of Kabul by a car bomb. Shortly afterward, Elyas Da'ee, a reporter who worked with the U.S.-funded Radio Liberty network, known locally as Radio Azadi, was murdered in the southern province of Helmand while his brother, also a journalist, was injured. In December, Malalai Maiwand, another journalist, was killed in Jalalabad.

I fear a similar fate may befall

even me. For months, I have received regular death threats from anonymous accounts on social media. One account that stated it was affiliated with officials in the Afghan government, and which shared government information, kept asking me about my next visit to Kabul. The account had thousands of followers. The messages mentioned my uncle, Waheed Mozhdah, a political analyst, writer, peace activist, and public intellectual, who had been killed in Kabul a year ago. "You will share the same destiny," it read. Mozhdah, gray-haired and sixty-six years old with a melancholy affect, was killed on November 20, 2019, in front of our local mosque in Kabul's Darul-Aman area by two gunmen on a motorcycle. People from all political backgrounds—liberals, democrats, secularists, former Communists, royalists, and Islamists alike—came to his funeral. "You could not ... **P3**

Afghanistan Set To Get New International Cricket Stadium In Kabul



The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) is eyeing to host international cricket in its soil after securing land for a new stadium in Kabul.

Afghanistan president Ashraf Ghani on Sunday allocated 120,000 square meters of land in Alokhal area of Kabul for the construction of a state-of-the-art stadium that will be known as the Kabul International Stadium.

Though it is not clear how long it will take for ACB to complete the construction but Cricket board chairman Farhan Yusefzai is confident that it will be a major step towards hosting international cricket at home.

"With the construction of this ground, we will be able to host international cricket and our people will watch international

players playing at their ground in the centre of the capital Kabul," said Farhan Yusefzai.

"Kabul will be home to a standard state-of-the-art international cricket stadium. I express my special thanks to Mr. President who has always supported the development of cricket and encouraged our players. After initial formalities, the construction of the stadium will also commence and we will ensure it is done with best quality," he said.

The stadium will include a five-star guest house, a standard swimming pool, indoor and outdoor academies, canopies for crowd, health clinic, mosque, car parking, administrative block and other such facilities while the stadium will have a capacity to host 35,000 spectators.

More Than 20,000 Families Benefited from Afghan National Relief Program

Officials at the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development Affairs say that in the first phase of the national relief (Dastarkhan-e-Milli) program, which previously began across the country, humanitarian aid, including food and medical supplies, have been distributed to more than 20,144 families. Mujibur Rahman Karimi, the Acting Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, said in a press conference on Monday that more than 20,000 families have received assistance in the first phase of the national relief program, and that 12,000 "poor" families are expected to receive assistance at this stage and the humanitarian aids will be distributed to 896 villages including 1.8 million people across the country.

Karimi noted that the aid packages for each family that are considered at this stage include flour, rice, oil, beans, chickpeas and soap, which is equivalent to four thousand Afghanis.

According to him, 11,200 villages out of 12,896 villages have been completed so far, and the package distribution and monitoring committees have been formed for 9,700 other villages.

According to the Acting Minister of Rural Rehabilitation, plans have been made to distribute aid packages in 9,200 villages, and the money have been transferred to the development councils of 3,000 villages, bringing the total amount of money transferred so far to \$ 25 million.

Karimi stressed that the first phase



of the national relief program will be implemented throughout the country within the next three months, and the total cost is about \$ 86 million, which will be paid by the World Bank.

He added that after the completion of the first phase of the National Relief Program, the second phase will begin, in which 20,397 villages

in 235 districts, including 2.5 million households across the country, will be covered by the humanitarian aids.

The Afghan government has earlier launched the Dastarkhan-e-Milli program to help "90 percent population" in Afghanistan to cope with the Coronavirus induced economic and financial woes.

'Our Houses Are...

a political adviser to the Afghan National Security Council. He added that the government is arming local communities under the army's command structure, as part of its efforts to strengthen security.

To stay or go

None of this seems to reassure many Afghans, and young idealistic graduates who once believed they would help build their country are eyeing the exits, like Shakira Yazdani. She's 22 and studies law at Kabul University. She is a graduate of business administration and was hoping to become a commercial arbitrator in Kabul.

"I have never been interested in living abroad," said the young woman. "But if the situation in Afghanistan gets worse — we wouldn't have any solution or any other choice, but finding a way to go outside Afghanistan to live in a peaceful environment."

Yazdani said she began thinking seriously about leaving, at least for a few years, after the ISIS attack on Kabul University. She was on campus and had to flee. Some of her friends were killed.

"This country has invested in me and I have to pay it back," she said. "But the increase of violence in Afghanistan really put me in a doubtful situation, whether I can live here or not."

Another law student at the American University of Afghanistan, Ali Yaqubi, 24, echoed Yazdani's hesitations. He had planned to run his own business and enter politics — to help his community in Dasht-e-Barchi. He also has a degree in public policy, works as a consultant and volunteers in a charity that helps street children.

Now though, he said, "if I have the opportunity, legally to go to other countries, I would definitely go. At least to have security and to be alive."

Yaqubi spoke to NPR in a cafe near his office in central Kabul. "You can't guarantee a minute, even here," he said. A few days ago, "there was a rocket attack next to this café."

But for now, he's in Kabul. Every morning, his mother gives him money to give to poor people on the street — so they'll pray for his safety. That follows a Muslim belief that God hears the prayers of the oppressed.

Yaqubi said he doesn't really believe it will do anything, but at least it makes his mother feel like he is safe.

In Afghanistan,...

say which political background he had. He was loved by all sides," his younger brother said. His murderers have not been caught. When my cousin and I checked the jacket he had been wearing at the time of his death, we were puzzled. We saw no blood, no signs of a gunshot. When we examined the cloth closely, we found tiny holes—we were told by military analysts that these can be the signs of highly specialized weaponry, not often available on the black market.

I, and others in my family, suspect that Mozhdah, a well-known critic of the Kabul government and its backers in Washington, was killed by powerful people who considered his uncomfortable views, well-expressed, a threat. The Afghan government did not investigate the assassination.

IN 1979, MOZHDAH had taken up arms in the war against the brutal Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. He fought mainly with his pen. He started to work as a journalist and wrote a poetry book about his experiences. In 1992, after the Afghan Communist regime in Kabul collapsed and the Mujahideen rebels took over, Mozhdah started to work in the country's foreign ministry. In 1996 the Taliban movement, religious extremists who had risen to power promising to defend Afghans against the brutal warlords who oversaw much of the nation, overthrew most of the Mujahideen.

But Mozhdah, amid the chaos, decided to stay in his post. The experience led him to write a book, Afghanistan Under Five Years of Taliban Rule, which became a crucial work on the

militant movement and its roots, quoted by researchers and journalists across the globe. He also had deep knowledge about the proliferating jihadist movements in Afghanistan and their chief ideologues, including Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, whom he met in Peshawar in the late 1980s, before he rose to prominence, without giving him too much thought or attention.

In 2001, when the Taliban regime collapsed after the United States and its allies entered Afghanistan, Mozhdah still stayed put. But the new rulers in Kabul, the government of Hamid Karzai, kicked him out of the ministry.

He took a bureaucratic job at the Supreme Court in Kabul and focused on the research, analysis, and writing of his nation's past and present. He retained a global perspective on the war on terror, and its attendant Islamophobia.

He understood that extremist movements are a by-product of a larger problem: the chaos, corruption, and inequality that plague Majority-Muslim nations across the world, and the brutal regimes that oversee it all.

He was a vehement critic of the American-led occupation of Afghanistan. He believed in the freedom and sovereignty of his nation. As Kabul became a hot spot for media groups mainly financed by Western governments and NGOs or private investors tied to the political elite, he became a dissident voice.

His phone calls were monitored by the security services. The newspaper Hashte Sobh, which was then close to those in power, released a conversation he had had with a Taliban

official about the dangers of a security agreement with the U.S. His objection was that the agreement stipulated total impunity for foreign soldiers who were accused of war crimes. The release seemed designed to paint him as an extremist or a radical. But it was quite natural that he talked to people from all sides. He had always done it.

A wave of stories followed. I sat beside him in our living room in Kabul while media outlets reported that he had fled to Pakistan, the stories designed to imply some nefarious Taliban connection. Later, security officials picked him up and interrogated him for a whole night.

It did not stop him. He criticized the presidential elections in 2019, a few days before his death, and decried what he saw as the corruption of political elites who were not interested in peace, but in the continuation of war for their own interests. (Many Western observers, including foreign officials working within embassies in Kabul, shared a similar opinion.) Many of those elites attended after his death. Some of them cried and said they felt partly responsible for what happened. I realized that, though the Afghan media had improved, and the notion of freedom of speech had spread, both were contingent on agreeing with those who wield political power in Kabul.

It is why, even after American troops leave, even after U.S. president Donald Trump has left office, even after my uncle's death, Afghanistan will remain a dangerous place to be a writer who dares to question orthodoxy.

UN agency...

in November 2019 to 16.9 million, or 42 percent of the population in November 2020," the statement read.

According to OCHA, the economic and social conditions created by the

COVID-19 pandemic have also exacerbated protection risks for vulnerable families.

Many Afghans, according to the source, had already depleted limited financial, mental, and social coping capacities due to prolonged conflict or recurrent natural

disasters. Financial strains and fear of catching COVID-19 meant that facility-based primary health and trauma services were underutilized in 2020, resulting in deteriorating health needs in 2021, the statement noted.

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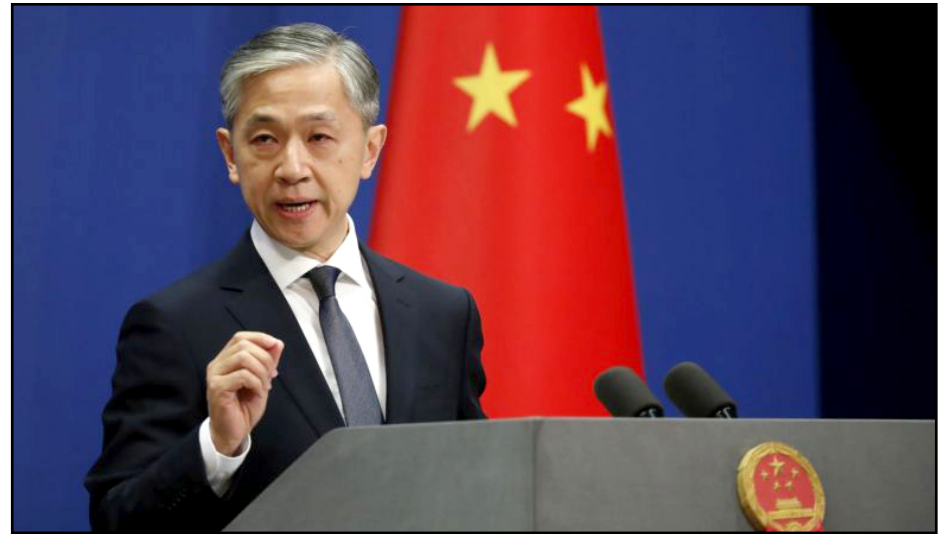
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China criticizes U.S. corporate auditing penalties

China's government on Monday called on Washington not to enforce a measure that might expel Chinese companies from U.S. stock exchanges if they fail American government audits. The law, signed Friday by President Donald Trump, is a response to complaints Chinese companies were failing to comply with stricter U.S. government oversight imposed following the 2008 global financial crisis. It applies to companies from any country but sponsors cited complaints Beijing was blocking American regulators from reviewing the work of auditors for U.S.-traded Chinese companies. The Foreign Ministry complained U.S. authorities disregarded efforts by Chinese

regulators to supervise corporate audits. "We urge the U.S. not to implement the discriminatory provisions in the law concerning China" and "stop the wrong practice of politicizing securities supervision," said a ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin. The law would bar companies from trading shares on U.S. exchanges if they fail to comply with an audit by the U.S. Public Companies Accounting Oversight Board for three straight years. Chinese corporate giants including Alibaba Group and oil producer PetroChina Ltd. have raised billions of dollars from U.S. investors. Companies increasingly are pursuing listings on exchanges in China or Hong Kong but still want exposure to Western investors.



A look at the world

Rwanda, Russia send troops to Central African Republic to help secure electoral process: host government

With less than a week before the presidential and legislative elections in the Central African Republic (CAR), the government on Monday said Rwanda and Russia have deployed forces in the CAR to secure the electoral process.

According to government spokesperson Ange Maxime Kazagui, Rwanda and Russia have both sent "several hundred men" to the country.

The deployment was made "within the framework of bilateral cooperation," the foreign ministry said in a press release dated



Sunday but made public early Monday. Last Saturday, the government accused former president Francois Bozize of an "attempted coup," saying he organized armed groups and foreign mercenaries in the west of the country as a "clear intention to march with his men on Bangui," the CAR capital.

A spokesman of Bozize's Kwa Na Kwa party denied the government accusation, calling it a strategy to taint Bozize's image.

Bozize, who served as head of state for 10 years, was ousted in March 2013 by the Seleka rebel coalition. After six years of exile, he returned to the country discreetly in December 2019 to compete in the coming presidential election.

However, the Constitutional Court invalidated his candidacy in early December, saying he faces an international arrest warrant and United Nations sanctions. Tensions have since intensified in the CAR. Last week, some major armed groups created a new coalition, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), against the government of President Faustin-Archange Touadera, who is seeking a second term.

Local observers say the CPC has a strong link with Bozize.

European states move to ban UK flights over new strain



Hours after Britain announced a harsher lockdown due to a fast-spreading coronavirus strain, France, Germany, Italy and other European states rushed to limit the new strain's reach, cutting off transport links.

Across the channel, France suspended all traffic to and from the UK starting Sunday midnight for at least 48 hours. Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari said on Twitter that the decision was taken over the new fast-spreading strain, adding: "We are now working to build a harmonized European health protocol."

The decision to ban rail, road and flight transportation for passengers and freight goods was taken in an emergency Sunday night meeting of a health defense committee remotely chaired by President Emmanuel Macron from his quarantine and recuperation from COVID-19 symptoms.

Germany is also halting all flights from the UK and South Africa, Health Minister Jens Spahn told ARD television on Sunday, saying the step comes "in view of the reports of mutated viruses."

With Belgium and the Netherlands making similar moves, Italy on Sunday also banned flights to and from the UK.

"As a government, we have the duty to protect Italians. So for this reason, after alerting the British government, together with the Health Ministry we are about to sign an order to suspend flights with Great Britain," Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio wrote on Facebook.

New strain found in Rome A hospital in Rome, the Military Polyclinic of Celio, also announced that the new strain has been found on a patient who recently returned to Italy from the UK.

The patient and a companion, who flew into Rome from the UK last week, are now isolated and have undergone, with their relatives and close contacts, procedures mandated by the Health Ministry, said the clinic.

Austria's foreign minister also announced a ban on flights from the UK ...

P2

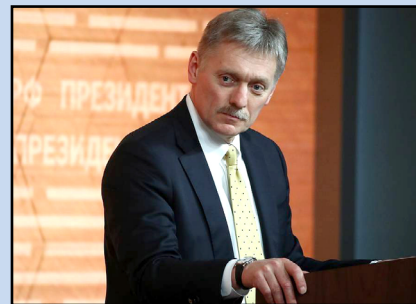
Russia officially denies involvement in hacker attacks on US institutions – Kremlin

Moscow is not involved in hacker attacks on US government bodies and companies, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Monday.

"Russia is not involved in such attacks, namely this one. We state this officially and firmly," he said.

According to the spokesman, "any accusations of Russia's involvement are absolutely baseless, they are more likely to be a continuation of blind Russophobia that is resorted to in case of any incident."

Peskov noted that the discussion of hacker attacks "is gaining steam in the United States, because it was the United States that



fell victim to this hacker attack." "Definitely, this discussion has nothing to do with us," he stressed.

When asked about possible US initiatives in this situation, the Kremlin spokesman stated that "lately, it has been hard to predict US actions."

Hacker attacks in the US

It was reported earlier that the Orion software belonging to the SolarWinds company was hacked back in March 2020. The hackers were able to infiltrate a virus into an Orion update, which was then uploaded and used by thousands of SolarWinds clients, including leading US government institutions and over 400 major US companies.

The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency informed last week that the cyberattack "poses a grave risk" to US federal, state and local governments, as well as private organizations.

On Friday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told The Mark Levin Show that Russia may be behind the attack. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump said on Saturday that the media had blown the incident out of proportion. He disagreed with media reports claiming that a group of hackers working for Moscow may be behind the attack, implicating China instead. ...

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