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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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10 afs



7 Civilians, 2 ANA Soldiers Killed in Faryab, Khost

At least seven civilians and two army soldiers were killed in two separate incidents in the northern province of Faryab and the eastern province of Khost on Tuesday, local officials confirmed.

Three civilians were killed and 10 more people, including five civilians, were wounded in a car bomb explosion in Dawlat Abad district in Faryab province, the provincial police spokesman Abdul Karim Yurish said.

The explosion happened on Monday night, Yurish said, adding that it was carried out by the Taliban.

The explosion has caused "heavy financial losses" to residents by damaging their houses, the spokesman said.

The Taliban has not commented on the incident.

Meanwhile, six people, including four civilians, were killed and six more were wounded in an explosion that ... **P3**



UN Secretary-General Appoints Ramiz Alakbarov of Azerbaijan As Deputy SRSG for Afghanistan

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has announced the appointment of Ramiz Alakbarov of Azerbaijan as his new Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), serving also as the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator.

UNAMA in a press release said that Mr. Alakbarov succeeds Toby Lanzer of the United Kingdom, to whom the Secretary-General is grateful for his dedicated service.

According to the press release, Mr. Alakbarov brings 25 years of experience in executive leadership, strategic planning and policy making, development programming and management, and humanitarian response, including as the Director of the Policy and Strategy ... **P2**

Ghani orders probe into journalist Nekzad's murder



President Ashraf Ghani on Tuesday condemned the assassination of journalist Rahmatullah Nekzad and asked security organs to investigate the incident and punish those involved.

Nekzad died in hospital after being shot injured by unknown gunmen in the capital of southern Ghazni province on Monday. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the killing and the Taliban said they

considered it a loss for the country. A statement from the Presidential Palace said President Ghani condemned the killing of Nekzad, a former Al Jazeera reporter and head of Ghazni union of journalists.

Nekzad was travelling in a car when unknown gunmen shot him dead near his home using a silenced pistol.

The president said targeting civilians, public facilities and media

workers were attacks on humanity. The Afghan government always stressed protection of journalists and supporting them and other media workers were his main responsibilities, Ghani said.

He directed security organs to investigate the nature of the attack and arrest the perpetrators. He also shared his sympathy with the family of Nekzad.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, chairman

of High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) also condemned the assassination of Nekzad and said, "Assassination of journalists and media workers shows the enemy fears freedom of speech and public awareness about their ominous plans and crimes."

He said journalists were a defenseless and vulnerable class in society but they were committed to their responsibilities.

Meanwhile, former president Hamid Karzai also denounced the incident and said, "I was informed with great sorrow that one of our talented journalists and head of Ghazni Journalists Union (Rahmatullah Nekzad) is martyred in an armed attack in (Ghazni) province."

Journalists' institutes also condemned the assassination of Nekzad. Abdul Moeed Hashemi, head of Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSF), denounced the attack and said that the international community was doing nothing to take action against such crimes.

Nai, an organization supporting free media in Afghanistan, also denounced the attack and said the government had failed to protect Afghan journalists in the country's big and small cities.

NSA Mohib Met Iranian FM in Tehran

Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib has held talks with Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif on Tuesday in Tehran.

During the meeting, Iran's FM said supporting the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the principled policy of Iran.

He highlighted the necessity for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and said, "We believe a comprehensive political solution with the presence of all Afghan groups will be the best guarantee for lasting peace in this country."

He urged both Tehran and Kabul to enhance consultations ... **P3**



Abdullah discuss peace process with Tajikistan's president

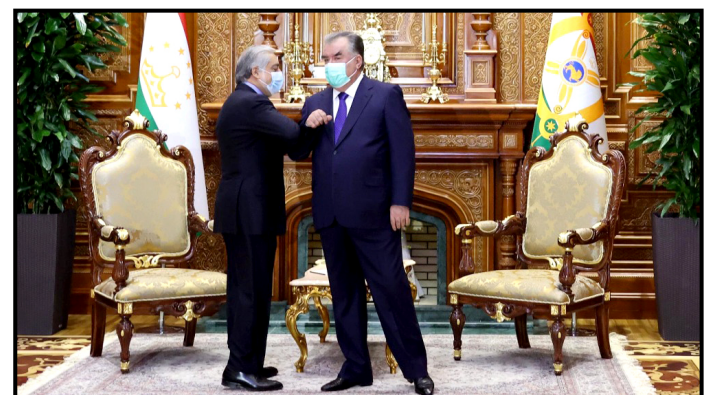
Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, met with Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon on Tuesday, along with other high-ranking officials, to discuss developments around the Afghan peace process.

Rahmon assured Abdullah, who arrived in Tajikistan on Monday, on an official two-day visit, of his country's full support for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The two leaders also exchanged views on intra-Afghan talks, and bilateral relations, Abdullah's office said in a series of tweets Tuesday afternoon.

Underlining the mutual bonds between the neighboring countries, Abdullah thanked Rahmon for their continued support for peace in Afghanistan.

In addition to his meeting with Rahmon, Abdullah also held



discussions with Siroddin Muhridin, Tajikistan's Foreign Minister.

"They exchanged views on Afghan Peace Process, talks with Taliban and bilateral relations," Abdullah's office tweeted.

On Monday, Abdullah met with Qohir Rasulzoda, Tajikistan's prime minister and said later in the day their meeting had been constructive.

"We discussed the Afghan Peace Process, peace talks, regional support for peace, bilateral relations. He assured me of his country's full support for the peace efforts," Abdullah stated late Monday.

This is yet another leg of Abdullah's regional tour as head of the reconciliation council, which has so far seen him visit Turkey, India, Pakistan and Iran.

UN Secretary...

Division in New York and the Country Representative in Haiti for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). "From February to July, he was Deputy Executive Director for Management and Assistant Secretary-General, ad interim, for UNFPA. Since August, he was the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Afghanistan, ad interim," the press release added.

India's Modi...

envisages that the development of the nation and society should not be seen from a political angle." The prime minister lauded the efforts of the university to strengthen India's relations with many countries of the world. "The research done here on Urdu, Arabic, and Persian languages, research on Islamic literature gives new energy to India's cultural relations with the entire Islamic world," he said, adding that this institution has double responsibility to further enhance the soft power of the university as well as fulfilling the obligation of nation-building.

Putin signs...

Russian Federation aged over 30 with an impeccable reputation, who permanently resides in Russia, who has no citizenship of a foreign state or residence permit or any other document substantiating their right to permanent residence in a foreign state can become a member of the Federation Council. Persons with convictions for grave offences, serious and moderately serious crimes will not be eligible for this position.

By John Allen and Michael O'Hanlon

Joe Biden should go slow on Afghanistan

When President-elect Joe Biden takes the oath of office on Jan. 20, he will face many issues demanding immediate attention. According to some, ending the two-decade-old U.S. and NATO military engagement in Afghanistan should be one of those. Many also argue that the Feb. 29 deal between the United States and the Taliban requires American forces to be out by this May. We disagree with both of these points. Biden should go slow on Afghanistan.

The frustration of many with the "forever wars" of the Middle East is understandable. Nineteen years since 9/11, we have not found the formula to build a stable and self-sufficient Afghanistan. More than 2,000 Americans have died there. About \$1.5 trillion in American taxpayer money has been spent. American allies have lost hundreds and spent hundreds of billions, too. Afghans themselves have been at war more than four decades, ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — when they defeated Soviet forces and helped end the Cold War.

Yet it is worth bearing in mind several key points as the Biden team considers future policy options: US role is valuable and sustainable

As counterintuitive as it may sound, there has been some success in Afghanistan. There have been no subsequent large-scale attack against U.S. or Western interests originating from that country since 2001. That this accomplishment seems obvious does not make it unimportant.

Without even President Donald Trump's latest abrupt cuts, which Biden might need to consider partly reversing, the United States has reduced American forces in Afghanistan by 95% relative to the peak of 2011 (when one of us had the privilege of commanding U.S. and NATO forces there).

American casualty rates have declined even more sharply in percentage terms — and that was true even before the Taliban stopped taking aim at our forces as part of the Feb. 29 accord. Any loss of American life is too much. But compared with what could happen to this country if al-Qaida or the Islamic State gained a solid foothold in a future Afghanistan, taking advantage of either turmoil or Taliban rule, a small enduring presence could be our least bad option.

The recent cost of the U.S. operation in Afghanistan has been \$10 billion to \$20 billion a year — hardly



cheap, but a far cry from the triple-digit figures of earlier periods, and it's less than 3% of the U.S. defense budget.

The U.S. role in Afghanistan is part of a larger NATO effort that the Biden team, rightly eager to rebuild America's alliances, should approach multilaterally. Yes, we should do so while putting America's own interests first — but that does not mean we should treat allies as afterthoughts. And Pakistan could be showing a greater willingness to be helpful in peace talks than before, though it is too soon to be sure.

Over-the-horizon counterterrorism, say from ships in the Arabian Sea, is oxymoronic. Counterterrorism requires partnership with indigenous forces and quick reaction times for tactical operations. U.S. forces in country need not be big, but for the foreseeable future they do need to be present.

Preserve gains for girls and women

The intra-Afghan peace process is going very slowly. For some, that is reason to pull the plug. But it would be strange to risk handing over the country to the principal perpetrators of violence in Afghanistan as a reward for their intransigence at the talks in Doha, Qatar, and their unwillingness to reduce violence during the peace process.

Moreover, the Taliban's ongoing ties to al-Qaida elements mean that it is not in compliance with the terms of the Feb. 29 accord. That point the Biden team should make early, even as it undertakes a broader and patient policy review.

The Taliban have also been unwilling to propose any serious ideas for power sharing with the government of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. They have not, for example, talked about an accord that might freeze the security forces of the two sides in place, invite in a small United Nations observation presence to monitor the cease-fire and gradually create a loose coordinating command mechanism to integrate the forces over time. Such ideas would prove seriousness. They have not yet been voiced.

Ultimately, working with a U.N. mediator perhaps, the United States and international community will need to help the peace process along with these kinds of suggestions. As another example, under any eventual peace deal, Afghans who face legal issues may be given the choice of the existing court system or a Taliban-controlled sharia system. Also, mechanisms need to be found to preserve gains in education for girls, and more broadly the role of women across ... P3

By Ali Latifi

COVID-19 has not left Afghanistan but in Kabul, people are just ignoring it

When Kabul first went under coronavirus lockdown in late March, Atiqullah, a watani burger seller, feared the mysterious illness that he had heard was nearly bringing down the economies of the United States and United Kingdom.

But after a few weeks of shutting himself inside the house with his elderly, ailing parents, Atiqullah was back in his usual spot, near a bustling market where hundreds of men and women, most without masks, perused through stacks of second-hand winter clothes.

"Do you know who were the first people to get it, those rich politicians and businessmen who shut themselves away in a corner," said Atiqullah, 24. He pointed to the death in July of a high-profile businessman and special advisor to President Ashraf Ghani as an example.

"I put my faith in God and came back out on the streets with the rest of my people."

It's not just 20-somethings like Atiqullah who have resumed

their normal lives. All across Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, life has seemingly returned to normal.

Gone are the thermometers and hand sanitizer that greeted people at the entrance of banks and shopping malls. Restaurants have resumed business, with dozens of people, nearly all of them without a mask, sitting next to each other while drinking tea and smoking shisha. Wedding halls where upwards of 1,000 people convene in a single night are now once again packed.

In a nation still highly dependent on foreign aid, where social services are almost non-existent, it is easy to believe that the most destitute had no choice other than to return to work and resume their normal lives. But what of the more well-to-do, educated people who either continued to patronize shisha bars -- passing the pipe from mouth to mouth -- or quickly began to gather, mostly mask-

less, in restaurants as soon as they reopened?

According to the Public Health Ministry as of December 19, there have been a total number of 50,536 COVID-19 cases in the country. Of those, a third are in Kabul. Since the first reported cases in early 2020, there have been at least 2,054 registered deaths from the illness. However, with access to health care still being a major issue in the country overall and the fears of overcrowding in hospitals, large numbers of Afghans remain untested and instead choose to self-isolate and treat themselves at home if they feel they may indeed have coronavirus. Because of this lack of easily-accessible, proper nationwide testing facilities, the Public Health Ministry estimates the actual number of positive cases could be much higher. A survey conducted by the ministry over the summer found that as many as 10 million Afghans may have contracted and recovered from the illness. ... P3

Azerbaijan, Afghanistan enjoy great potential for developing cooperation



"There is great potential for developing cooperation between Azerbaijan and Afghanistan," said Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov as he met with National Security Advisor of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Hamdullah Mohib and Chief of Staff to the Afghan President Mohammad Shaker Kargar.

Minister Jeyhun Bayramov hailed the existing bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, as well as cooperation within international organizations. Noting that Afghanistan has always supported Azerbaijan's position based on international law, Bayramov stressed that the political support of the brotherly country was clearly demonstrated during the 44-day Patriotic War. The minister noted that the Azerbaijani people appreciated this support.

National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib noted with satisfaction the meeting with President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. He noted that the personal relations between the leaders of the two countries play a special role in developing bilateral ties. Congratulating Azerbaijan on the victory, Hamdullah Mohib stressed that Afghanistan has always supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

The sides exchanged views on cooperation in economic, security, transport and other areas between the two countries, including the development of the Lapis Lazuli transit route, the Trans-Caspian fiber-optic communication line, as well as opportunities for Afghan youth to study in Azerbaijan, and other topics.

The sides also discussed other regional issues of mutual interest.

Turkmenistan to sell Afghanistan more power

Turkmenistan will enhance the supply of export to Afghanistan's various routes to northern Afghanistan at reduced rates, says a media report.

The two countries are all poised to conclude additional agreements to operating contracts on electric power exports to the energy-deficient nation.

Orient news agency reported on Monday a resolution on enhanced

power exports had been signed by President Berdimuhamedov.

In line with the document, Turkmenistan will boost electricity exports through different routes to Afghanistan's northern provinces of at reduced rates.

As its power-generating capacity continues to grow, Turkmenistan produced 14.7 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity in 2007 and 22,5 billion kilowatt-hours in 2019.



NSA Mohib...

at bilateral, regional and international levels.

Zarif expressed satisfaction with the inauguration of the Khaf-Herat railway which came on stream recently, and added the project will pave the way for closer cooperation between the two countries and facilitating connections with regions in the East.

In the meantime, NSA Mohib in turn, presented a report on the latest developments pertaining to peace talks in his country, and appreciated Iran's backing for the Afghan government and people.

He stressed the necessity of boosting political, economic and security cooperation.

The Afghan official also expressed hope linking routes such as the Khaf-Herat railway will further boost regional cooperation.

Among other topics on the agenda during the meeting were mutual cooperation on political, economic and security fronts, holding a meeting of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Committee and following up on other ongoing projects as well as closer cooperation in the water sector.

Iran says Canada...

Mohsen Baharvand, Iran's deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs, told the Tehran Times in November that Canada's unilateral steps and statements against Iran on the plane crash is hampering Tehran's efforts to clarify the truth.

Describing Canada's behavior against Iran as "strange", Baharvand said the Canadian government has begun to take unilateral actions in order to "politicize" the plane crash incident.

"Strangely, the Canadian government has begun to take unilateral actions, and we see no good reason for that except that Canada intends to politicize the issue," the deputy foreign minister for legal affairs lamented.

Baharvand said, "In meetings between the foreign ministers of two countries, we have explained what cooperation Iran had done and their representatives visited the area where the plane crashed."

He added, "They participated in reading of the black box of the plane in Paris and any other cooperation. Iran has provided any necessary cooperation with Canada and other parties."

In his Monday press briefing, Khatibzadeh added Iran had not missed a single date in completing its investigation into the tragedy with the help of all of its relevant bodies in line with its domestic and international responsibilities.

COVID-19 has...

As with other countries, several high-profile figures in Afghanistan have tested positive for the illness. This included the former Minister of Public Health, Ferozuddin Feroz, and at least 17 attendees of an August assembly of politicians, leaders and civil society who met in Kabul to discuss a peace deal with the Taliban.

The consensus seems to be that, in Afghanistan, COVID is just one more difficulty that people have to navigate. Since the quarantine first started to loosen in mid-May, at the close of Ramadan, the country, including Kabul, has seen a dramatic rise in targeted killings of journalists, government officials and security forces. There has also been a dramatic rise in the use of IEDs along some of the capital's most heavily-trafficked road.

Sahar Ahmadi, the owner of the Saharpaz restaurant, put it plainly: "Here, we have thousands of other worries. There is still a war. There are rockets being fired in the city. There are suicide bombings and IEDs every step of the way. What's COVID to add to that list?"

But it's not just the decades-long conflict. Ahmadi says for more financially secure Afghans, the rush to resume normal life had as much to do with restlessness as anything.

Even at a more humbly-priced eatery where groups of four of five people sit next to each other to eat with their hands from a communal plate of rice, the sentiment is much the same. Hashmatullah Rahmani, said he too initially feared the disease, going so far as to lock himself in the home for more than three months, but eventually he also decided to return to normal life. "I looked out the windows and

"In Kabul we don't have 24-hour electricity, we don't have any green spaces for people to gather. There's simply not much to do here other than to go out to eat or shopping."

The 31-year-old, who caught the virus during the quarantine, said many young people like her initially lived in fear of the illness, but as greater numbers of people began to catch it their fears eased.

"In the beginning it was like a boogeyman, but eventually, we all got it and we saw that we survived," Ahmadi said sitting in her restaurant where groups of young people sat next to each other smoking shisha.

Ahmadi went on to say that even her friends who have yet to contract the illness had their fears allayed by their peers who did.

"They saw that we went through some unpleasantness and are back to normal."

Even at a more humbly-priced eatery where groups of four of five people sit next to each other to eat with their hands from a communal plate of rice, the sentiment is much the same. Hashmatullah Rahmani, said he too initially feared the disease, going so far as to lock himself in the home for more than three months, but eventually he also decided to return to normal life. "I looked out the windows and

saw the cars and people and thought to myself, 'this is stupid, why should I continue to hide away in the house?'"

The 25-year-old, who admits that he alone knew of dozens of people who caught the illness, said Afghanistan may be a successful case of herd immunity in action.

"When so many people catch it, the collective population's immunity goes up, we all got stronger together. It's like the whole nation was vaccinated through osmosis," Rahmani said sitting next to his friends on a wooden platform.

For those who lack the financial resources, returning to normal life, which includes work, was a necessary. When Kabul first went under coronavirus lockdown on March 28, Sayed Musa, a short-range minibus driver, wondered how he, the sole breadwinner, would provide for his wife and five children.

Initially, he tried to skirt the law and continue to operate his Toyota Coaster minibus, which transports up to 500 passengers a day at a rate of 13 cents per passenger. He wasn't alone, in the first days of the lockdown, taxis and buses carrying any number of passengers continued to rush through the streets. Many businesses also remained in operation throughout the capital.

7 Civilians,...

targeted a military vehicle in Yaqubi district, Khost province, this afternoon, police said.

Tuesday was more deadly for Afghan civilians compared to recent days, as incidents occurred in at least four provinces: Kabul, Kunduz, Khost and Faryab.

Also, four people were killed and three more were wounded in a clash over the ownership of a shop in the central province of

Parwan on Tuesday afternoon, said Mohammad Sadiq Hashimi, a provincial police officer.

Saleh Omar, district chief for Chardara district in Kunduz, was killed in a Taliban attack on Monday night, local media said quoting sources.

According to the reports, Taliban attacked Araba base in the district center on Monday night. "When Omar was on the way to provide assistance to the forces, Omar and three other soldiers

died in a Taliban ambush," the reports said.

At least eight other soldiers were wounded in the Taliban attack on the base.

However, some other media said that at least 10 soldiers including Saleh Omar were killed and four others wounded in the ambush.

The source said that Taliban also captured two bases in the Araba area and seized all equipment and weapons

Japan sets...

Japan is also placing advanced Aegis radar systems on two new destroyers to reinforce missile defenses after scrapping plans to build land-based Aegis systems due to technical problems.

The 2021 budget would also spend 731 billion Japanese yen (\$700 million) to develop Japan's own next-generation F-X stealth fighter to replace its aging fleet of F-2s.

Japan's Defense Ministry is currently negotiating with the

U.S. and the UK for cooperation in engine and electronics production.

Japan's defense spending now ranks among the world's top 10, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Joe Biden...

will likely take years. But we can be patient. The issue has already been relegated to the kind of second-tier national security matter consistent with its importance for U.S. national security. The level

of the American presence and effort in Afghanistan are now sustainable. President-elect Biden does not need to prioritize this issue in his first 100 days in any rush to get out the door.

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Japan sets record military budget to boost defense weapons

Japan's Cabinet approved a ninth straight increase in the nation's defense budget as the government bolsters funding to develop longer-range cruise missiles and stealth fighters.

The record 5.34 trillion Japanese yen (\$51.7 billion) defense budget planned for fiscal 2021 is the first under Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and is a 1.1 percent increase over the current year's budget.

It is set for parliamentary approval early next year as part of a 106 trillion Japanese yen (\$1.03 trillion) national budget totaling for the fiscal year beginning in April.

A large chunk of the budget plan goes to reinforce the country's missile capability, including 33.5 billion Japanese yen (\$324 million) to develop extended-range anti-ship missiles that can be fired from destroyers or fighter jets, as well as 14.9 billion Japanese yen (\$144 million) to purchase JSM extended-range missiles loaded on F-35s.

stealth fighters.

That's part of Japan's new missile plan adopted by Suga's Cabinet last Friday that would allow Japan to expand its missile deployment.

Suga's government is carrying on the priorities of his predecessor, Shinzo Abe. During Abe's nearly eight-year tenure, Japan expanded its military's international role to ensure regional security.

Under Abe's leadership, Japan also has increased its purchases of expensive American stealth fighters such as F-35s and missile defense systems as its Self Defense Force increasingly operated alongside American troops. Abe in 2015 reinterpreted Japan's pacifist constitution to allow the use of force in defending itself and its allies.

For fiscal 2021, Japan will spend 65 billion Japanese yen (\$630 million) to purchase two F-35Bs and four F-35As as part of the country's plan to have more than 150 F-35s. ... **P3**

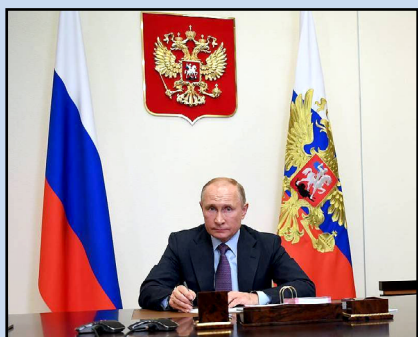


A look at the world

Putin signs law enabling ex-presidents to become lifetime senators

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed the law on the updated rules of the formation of the upper chamber of parliament, which, among other things, enables former presidents to serve as lifetime senators if they wish to do so. The document was published on Tuesday on the official legal information portal.

The formation of the Russian Federation Council (upper chamber of parliament) is now in accordance with the updated Russian Constitution. Besides representatives of the legislative and executive branches of Russian regions, the Federation Council can now accept former Russian presidents as lifetime senators, and no more than 30



representatives of the Russian Federation appointed by the president, out of which no more than seven can be appointed lifetime senators. The rest of senators are appointed for six years.

The appointment of senators is a presidential prerogative, but not a duty, so the president can use it at any time. Under the Russian Constitution, the citizens distinguished for outstanding state and public services to the country could be appointed lifetime members of the Federation Council. The new law includes this provision.

The requirements for former presidents are envisaged in a separate clause. A Russian president, who has ended their tenure after a presidential term has expired or prematurely, will acquire the status of a senator immediately after sending an application, with all the required documents attached, to the Federation Council. The application may be submitted once within three months after the president leaves office. Along with this, the president whose tenure ended before the given bill is adopted may file this application within three months since the day the law enters into force. Under the bill, a citizen of the ... **P2**

Iran says Canada misusing the grief of Ukraine plane victims



The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Monday lashed out at Canada for misusing the unfortunate downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane on January 8 near Tehran, saying the Ottawa government "is trading" with the grief of the bereaved families.

An Iranian air defense unit mistakenly shot down Flight 752 of the Ukrainian International Airlines shortly after take-off from Tehran en route to Kiev.

167 passengers and 9 crew members were killed in the downing. The victims included 82 Iranians, 63 Iranian-Canadians, 11 Ukrainians, 10 Swedes, four Afghans, three Germans, and three British nationals.

The operator had mistaken the Boeing 737-800 with a cruise missile at a time when the air defense systems were at the highest level of alert following the United States' earlier assassination of prominent Iranian Commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told a press conference that since the first day of the incident Canada has acted irresponsibly in the process of investigation into the incident.

"Their behavior has been quite political and nonlegal," Khatibzadeh pointed out. Khatibzadeh's reprimand came less than a week after remarks by Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne concerning the tragic incident.

Speaking to CBC News Network, Champagne alleged that he did not believe that the mistaken downing of the airliner by Iran's air defense "can be blamed on human error". According to Press TV, Champagne also said he was concerned about the quality of information that was to be released by Iran about the tragedy.

"I invite the Canadian foreign minister and government to observe diplomatic manners and know their limits and positions," Khatibzadeh said, "Otherwise they will receive a different response." ... **P3**

India's Modi vows to focus on empowering Muslim girls

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said the government is focused on the education and empowerment of Muslim girls in the country.

Speaking at the centennial celebrations of India's world-famous Aligarh Muslim University via video conferencing, Modi said school dropout of Muslim girls in the country has reduced to 30%.

"The dropout rate of Muslim daughters was more than 70% due to lack of toilets... the government built separate toilets for the school-going girls in mission mode under Swachh Bharat Mission and now the school dropout rate of Muslim daughters has come down to about 30%," the premier said during his virtual address.



"The government is very focused on the education of Muslim daughters and their empowerment. In the last six years, nearly one crore [10 million] Muslim daughters have been given scholarships by the government. There should be no discrimination on the basis of gender, everyone should get equal rights, and everyone should get the benefit of development of the country."

Modi is the first prime minister of India in decades to address the Aligarh Muslim University.

The premier quoted the remarks of 19th-century reformer and thinker Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and the founder of the university: "The first and foremost duty of one who is concerned about his country is to work for the welfare of all people."

Irrespective of the caste, creed, or religion, Modi said, "the country is proceeding on a path where every citizen is assured of his or her constitution-given rights and no one should be left behind due to one's religion." He listed examples of the government schemes providing benefits "without any discrimination".

He added: "Vision of new India ... **P2**



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