



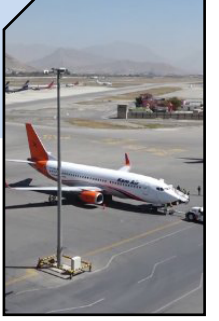
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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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Four Blasts Happen in Kabul; Two Killed

Kabul started the first day of the week with four explosions that happened in less than three hours in various parts of the city, adding to the panic among the people who have been witnessing similar incidents nearly every day over the last few weeks.

Police and security sources said that at least two security force members were killed and six more were wounded in the blasts.

The first explosion happened at around 7:02 a.m. on Saturday morning in the Chaman-e-Hozoori area in Kabul's PD8, leaving no casualties, according to police. The incident was a magnetic IED blast, police said.

The second explosion happened in the west of Kabul at around 7:05 a.m. in which a magnetic IED blast targeted a vehicle carrying a senior official from the VIP protection unit, police said. ... **P2**



Iran, Afghanistan Stress Expansion of Tourism

Iran's Deputy Tourism Minister and his Afghan counterpart conferred on the expansion of tourism between the two countries.

According to media outlets, Iran's Deputy Tourism Minister Vali Teymouri and his Afghan counterpart Mojgan Mostafavi discussed the expansion of tourism between the two countries in a videoconference on Friday.

Teymouri stressed the significance of promoting cooperation in the field of tourism education by holding training workshops.

Both sides further emphasized reopening the borders and resuming tourism activities with health protocols in place.

Iran's Deputy Tourism Minister also invited his counterpart to participate in Tehran Tourism Industries Exhibition which will be held in the upcoming months.

A number of other issues such as the challenges of obtaining visas as well as the importance of transportation infrastructure, including the opening of the Khaf-Herat railway were also discussed during the virtual event.

Peace Talks to Resume on Jan. 5, Abdullah Says



The chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation Dr. Abdullah Abdullah says the venue for peace talks should not be an obstacle.

At the second meeting of Reconciliation Council, Abdullah said: "The people of Afghanistan are determined to support and welcome the peace process.

"We and the people of Afghanistan are supporting the Islamic Republic's negotiating team and are looking forward for positive outcomes in the second phase."

He added the government team would report to HCNR and the Leadership Committee, "We are here to listen to you and support you at all levels. Leadership

Committee meetings will take place on a regular basis."

"You are representing the Republic of Afghanistan, & its great people. You can enter into talks with Taliban, & discuss all topics on the agenda. You have to demonstrate that peace is a priority for the republic."

The negotiation would resume

on the 5th of January 2021, & the venue for the talks should not be an obstacle, Abdullah commented. In the meantime, ex-President Hamid Karzai in his address at the second meeting of the reconciliation council's said, the negotiating team "did a great job" in the negotiations and that Afghans are in urgent need of peace.

Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, the former jihadi leader also said at the meeting that the Afghan side has the will for peace and that peace is the demand of every Afghan.

During the meeting, the first Vice-President Amrullah Saleh stated that the Afghan war is complicated and that its external dimensions are much bigger than its internal dimensions.

"The peace process will be further complicated if the Taliban continues to kill tribal elders, journalists and civil society activists," Saleh warned.

Meanwhile, Former Vice-president Younus Qanuni in his address at the 2nd meeting of Reconciliation Council said the war in Afghanistan is taking victims from people on a daily basis.

He urged the government officials to "find a way to save this land".

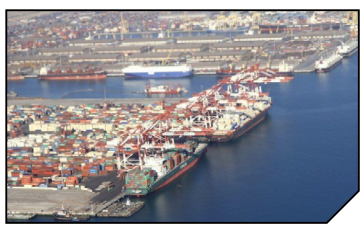
India to Invite Afghanistan for Next Meeting on Chabahar

Afghanistan will be invited to the next meeting of India, Iran and Uzbekistan on joint use of strategically-located Chabahar port, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs has said.

The dates for the meeting, to be hosted by India, were being finalised, External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said.

Located in the Sistan-Balochistan province on the energy-rich Iran's southern coast, the Chabahar port is being increasingly seen as a fulcrum of connectivity to Central Asia.

"Afghanistan as a major stakeholder will be invited for this meeting," Srivastava said. ... **P2**



Talks without ceasefire an exercise in futility: EU

The European Parliament's Committee on Relations with Afghanistan has termed the ongoing peace negotiations as the only way to steer Afghanistan out of conflicts, asking the Taliban to agree on ceasefire as talks without truce would turn out an exercise in futility. Petras Auštrevičius, head of the committee, in an interview with Pajhwok Afghan News said they would cease financially supporting a government based on extremism in Afghanistan.

He also stressed over protection of gains made over the past two decades in Afghanistan. "Spike in violence in this country is also a matter of concern and reduction in violence should be a goodwill gesture towards peace", he said.

"We see the peace talks as a proper way for achieving a stable and lasting peace, not only a ceasefire. If peace negotiations continue with



goodwill, there would be no need for truce. The Afghan people are traumatized by four decades of conflicts and spike in violence."

Auštrevičius said he hoped the Afghan people would see a stable and inclusive peace in near future. "I want the Taliban to accept ceasefire; because talks without ceasefire would end up futile, besides that, the Taliban should think about the future, you cannot destroy all the gains made. NATO

and EU have spent millions of dollars in the past two decades for reconstruction and stability in Afghanistan..." he said.

He added that the Taliban should respect the rights of women, humans and children as the EU was supportive of women to have an active role in society and children's education. "We want a civilized and free Afghanistan with a great future," he said.

Clare Daly, a member of ... **P3**

Four Blasts...

According to police, two police force members were wounded in the blast. The third explosion happened in Deh Sabz area in the east of Kabul. Police said it was a roadside bomb blast that targeted a police vehicle in which three security force members were wounded. The fourth blast happened in Deh Bori area in the west of Kabul at around 9:05 a.m. in which a police vehicle was targeted, police said. Police added that two police force members were killed and a civilian was wounded in the blast. Photos on social media show that some houses and shops have been damaged in the explosion in Deh Bori area. The increase in blasts and violence in various parts of the country come amidst peace efforts.

Iran says US...

for drivers breaking the curfew. Officials have cautioned that the danger of a resurgence in infections looms large. US President Donald Trump pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers in 2018 and imposed new sanctions on the country. President-elect Joe Biden's coming to power has raised the possibility that Washington could rejoin the agreement.

India to Invite...

The port is being developed by India, Iran and Afghanistan to boost trade ties among the three countries in the wake of Pakistan denying transit access to New Delhi. The port can be easily accessed from India's western coast, bypassing Pakistan.

By Dominic Tierney

No Exit: The Illusion of Leaving Afghanistan

For the youngest U.S. soldiers, America is about apple pie, Abe Lincoln, and Afghanistan. They have never known a United States that wasn't at war in Central Asia. Since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, America has spent hundreds of billions of dollars and suffered thousands of deaths, with precious little to show for it. Finally, however, Washington has signaled that America is leaving. In October, President Donald Trump tweeted that all U.S. soldiers should depart Afghanistan "by Christmas." The Pentagon announced that troop levels would fall from around 4,500 to 2,500 by early 2021. National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said, "Americans need to come home." Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller wrote, "We are not a people of perpetual war—it is the antithesis of everything for which we stand and for which our ancestors fought. All wars must end." The yearning to return home is a bipartisan impulse. During the 2020 campaign, Joe Biden promised to "end the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, which have cost us untold blood and treasure." But as with many conflicts in history, the idea that the war will be over by Christmas is an illusion. And by Christmas, I mean Christmas 2025. The United States is not really leaving Afghanistan anytime soon. Americans traditionally see war and peace as opposites. Peacetime is the norm, and wartime is distinct and exceptional. In the national imagination, a conflict starts when the cruel enemy attacks the United States. U.S. citizens reluctantly take up arms, America wins a decisive victory, the adversary surrenders, and everyone goes home—with the archetype being World War II. However, the United States will find it difficult or impossible to close the book on the Afghanistan War. If Washington seeks to come home from Afghanistan, it must first work out how many U.S. soldiers are deployed there—and this is less obvious than you might think. In November, Jim Golby, a former special advisor to Vice Presidents Joe Biden and Mike Pence, put the number of troops at "roughly 5,500." In October, O'Brien said, "As of today, there are under 5,000." The New York Times reported the current deployment was 4,500. The figure is slippery because it depends on whether you count covert units and personnel temporarily stationed in the country. Another problem is that official guidance isn't always accurate. In 2017, the



Pentagon revealed that the troop level in Afghanistan was not 8,400—as it had previously claimed—but actually 11,000. Accounting tricks had been used to create the appearance of a smaller force and sidestep administration constraints. Similarly, Jim Jeffrey, the former special envoy for Syria and the fight against the Islamic State, admitted that he deceived Trump about the real number of U.S. soldiers in Syria to maintain a greater force than the White House wanted. "We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there." Jeffrey concluded, "What Syria withdrawal? There was never a Syria withdrawal." Let's say we get an accurate handle on the troop levels—it's still not clear when the final cohort of American soldiers will actually depart. Under the terms of a February 2020 deal between the Taliban and the United States, Washington is supposed to withdraw its forces by May 2021. But this is conditional on the Taliban living up to its promises, including to prevent terrorist attacks from being launched from Afghan soil and to enter talks with the Afghan government. Using benchmarks to guide an exit inherently means a longer commitment. There's grave doubt about whether the Taliban is genuinely committed to the peace process or is simply trying to get the Americans out as a stepping-stone to victory. In September, the Afghan government and the Taliban finally began talks, but progress has been extremely slow, and even in a best-case scenario, it could take years to hammer out an agreement.

If the United States does decide to remove its remaining ground troops, the physical process of withdrawing—known in the military as retrograde—will be complex and time consuming. Packing up the weaponry, air conditioners, and TGI Fridays for even a few thousand troops can take weeks or months, especially in a country like Afghanistan, where there's no port nearby and the soldiers may be dodging bullets as they leave. In any case, we're much too focused on the headline troop figure, which is only one part of the overall American presence. This figure doesn't include U.S. intelligence operatives who likely number in the hundreds and work with local Afghan militias to hunt for ISIS and al Qaeda. Even a complete withdrawal is not really complete. At a minimum, Washington will maintain a security force to protect the U.S. embassy and others strategic sites. Afghanistan will likely stay under the shadow of the drone—the signature weapon of the forever war. George W. Bush launched 57 known drone strikes; Barack Obama increased the number of attacks tenfold, to 563. Indeed, if U.S. soldiers depart, air strikes in Afghanistan could cause even greater Afghan civilian deaths because fewer troops mean less intelligence about targets and less capacity to take prisoners (and therefore greater incentive to pull the trigger). The Biden campaign promised to "bring the vast majority of our troops home from Afghanistan and narrowly focus our mission on Al-Qaeda and ISIS." But that's not the same as leaving, ... **P3**

By Ovunc Kutlu

U.S. continues to pardon war criminals in Iraq, Afghanistan

U.S. President Donald Trump announcing this week a wave of pardons was the latest in a series of wielding his clemency powers over the years for war criminals that were convicted of killing civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. As U.S. presidents have used their authority for more than two hundred years to offer second chances to some Americans, Trump has issued 70 pardons during his time in the White House as of Wednesday. Trump's executive clemency, however, keeps adding controversial military figures after he pardoned four employees of an American private military company who killed civilians in Iraq and were found guilty by a U.S. court in 2014. Employees of Blackwater Security Consulting, now known as Academi, shot at Iraqi civilians, killing 17 and injuring 20 in Nisour Square, Baghdad on Sept. 16, 2007 as they were escorting a U.S.

embassy convoy. The incident caused five investigations. The FBI found that at least 14 of the 17 Iraqis killed were shot without any cause, including 9- and 11-year-old boys. Thirty witnesses from Iraq, the largest group of foreign witnesses to travel to U.S. for a criminal trial, had described in the court that the four American men initiated unprovoked shooting at Iraqi civilians with heavy gunfire and grenade launchers. In the 2014 trial, Nicholas Slatten from the state of Tennessee, a sniper, was found guilty of first-degree murder as prosecutors had said he started the incident by opening fire. Paul Slough from Texas was found guilty of 13 counts of voluntary manslaughter and 17 counts of attempted manslaughter. Evan Liberty from New Hampshire was found guilty of eight counts of voluntary manslaughter and 12 counts of attempted

manslaughter. And, Dustin Heard from Tennessee was found guilty of six counts of voluntary manslaughter and 11 counts of attempted manslaughter. While a murder charge carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison, each voluntary manslaughter count carries a maximum sentence of 15 years, and attempted manslaughter counts carry seven-year maximum sentences. "Seven years ago, these Blackwater contractors unleashed powerful sniper fire, machine guns and grenade launchers on innocent men, women and children," Ronald Machen, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, said in his 2014 statement. Blackwater had a \$1 billion government contract to protect American diplomats during the war in Iraq. In a 2007 congressional hearing on Blackwater misconduct, then-owner Erik Prince refused his employees to be defined as "mercenaries" ... **P3**

Last US Troops in Afghanistan Will Be Special Operations Forces: Miller

Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller after visiting US forces and American military leadership in Kabul on Tuesday said that special operations forces were the first deployed in the war in Afghanistan and likely will be the last troops to leave the country, according to a Stars and Stripes report. The report said that Miller traveled to Camp Morehead, located south of Kabul, where US special operations forces train Afghan commandos, to hear from troops about the war from the ground. "I went there on purpose because I'm going to get the real deal from these guys. And their smart-ass comments and their insights led me to the conclusion we're in a good place," Miller said, without going into detail. During his visit, he also met with Army Gen. Scott Miller, the commander of US and coalition forces there, and President Ashraf Ghani to discuss the US commitment to that country's security and the ongoing withdrawal of roughly 2,500 US troops by Jan. 15. Miller said he had talked to Gen. Miller "extensively" about the work special operations troops will conduct in the next couple of months as all US forces are expected to leave the country by May 2021, the report said. They will likely be the last US forces in the country to continue counterterrorism operations against al-Qaida and support the Afghan security forces, he said. "I thought special operations and irregular

warfare capability should have stayed in Afghanistan. [For] Iraq, the decision was made to do that. It should have been big Army, big Air Force...and I think we probably would have had a little different outcome in Afghanistan if we would have done — maintained what we were doing then and are doing now," Miller said to reporters on the trip with him. With the war in Afghanistan winding down for the United States, Miller said the takeaway for the military is about strategy. "I think we gave it our all, we sure did. I think there's some cautionary strategic lessons that I don't know whether the military will learn them or not," he said without specifying what those lessons are. During a luncheon at Hamid Karzai International Airport before his meetings with U.S. and Afghan leaders, Miller told U.S. troops and civilians about the importance of their work for the drawdown. Miller told the luncheon audience that he was there to thank Afghan leadership for their work and a hope for a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. "[Ghani's] in a tough position but I think he holds the keys to — the war winding down, it's hard you know. It's never easy. Very rarely do you have total victory like you did in World War II. Most of these insurgencies... gets a little rough towards the end and everybody has to come together and compromise," Miller added.

Kam Air Hopes to Continue India Flights Despite Hurdles

Afghan carrier Kam Air hopes to continue its flights to New Delhi—once a week—despite a new decision that will allow state-owned companies to conduct the flights starting from next month.

Kam Air deputy chief Farid Paikar said on Friday the company has received permission for its flights to New Delhi that will start in January 2021.

He said that the Afghanistan Civil Aviation Authority has also vowed cooperation in this respect.

“The Civil Aviation Authority has vowed cooperation to resolve the issue. We have got permission from the civil aviation authority of India,” Paikar said. Mohammad Qasim Wafaezada, head of Afghanistan Civil Aviation Authority said that the Indian government has decided on the flights, not the Afghan government.



He said that based on the Indian government’s decision, state-owned aviation companies—Ariana Airlines from Afghanistan and Air India from India—will have one flight every week. The Afghan Civil Aviation Authority in a

letter lately announced that the Kabul-Delhi and Delhi-Kabul flights will be conducted by Ariana Afghan Airlines starting from January.

Following the decision, the Civil Aviation Authority in a letter warned

Kam Air, a private-owned Afghan company, to stop its flights to India. Analysts said this week that the decision will pose huge challenges to aviation companies in the country if it is implemented.

U.S. continues to...

and did not share information about his “private” company. Blackwater was renamed as Xe Services in 2009, and known as Academi since 2011 after it was acquired by a group of private investors for around \$200 million.

Stabbing wounded prisoner

Trump in December 2019 ordered the U.S. Navy not to remove Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher from its elite SEALs special operations force, and reversed his July 2019 court-martial demotion, saying: “This case was handled very badly from the beginning.”

Gallagher was charged in September 2018 with 10 offenses, some of which included murder, attempted murder, and other war crimes tied to his deployment to Mosul, Iraq. He was found guilty on a single charge -- stabbing to death a wounded 17-year-old Daesh/ISIS prisoner of war with a hunting knife, and posing with his corpse and sending the photo to his friends.

Gallagher, whose nickname was “Blade”, was also accused by fellow Navy SEAL snipers of randomly shooting two Iraqi civilians, a schoolgirl and an elderly man, while veterans reported his conduct to military investigators as being “OK with killing anybody that was moving” and “freaking evil”. Navy Secretary Richard Spencer was ousted by the White House after he criticized Trump’s intervention in Gallagher’s case.

Pardons in past

Trump also pardoned in 2019 three Army officers, two of them accused of war crimes in Afghanistan -- 1st Lt. Clint Lorange and Maj. Mathew Golsteyn.

Lorange in 2012 was charged with two counts of second-degree murder after he ordered his men to open fire on three Afghan men who were on a motorcycle. He was found guilty by a court-martial in 2013 and sentenced to 19 years in prison serving six before receiving Trump’s pardon.

Golsteyn, an Army Green Beret, was charged with murder after killing an Afghan civilian in 2010 who he claimed was a bombmaker for the Taliban killing two Marines. The army closed the case in 2013 but reopened it in 2016.

Trump in May 2019 had pardoned Army 1st Lt. Michael Behanna who was convicted of murder of an Iraqi man in 2008. He was sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment, which was later reduced to 15 years, and granted parole in 2014 after serving less than five years of his sentence.

No Exit: The...

and a limited mission will still require significant resources. Biden can maintain an indefinite presence in Afghanistan because there’s no real public or congressional pressure to end the war. A late 2019 Brookings Institution survey found that a plurality of Americans favored keeping troops at current levels, rather than increasing or decreasing the number. Americans are certainly weary of the struggle, from the traditional anti-war left to the Trump base, but there’s little organized opposition. Many people are neither hawks nor doves, but more like ostriches who prefer to bury their heads in the sand and not think about Afghanistan at all. One poll this fall asked people whether the United States had achieved its goals in Afghanistan: 41 percent had “no opinion.”

The United States is not leaving Afghanistan in the sense of ceasing its influence in the country. In Afghanistan, foreign aid has long been the key for regime survival. After Soviet troops left Afghanistan in 1989, few people gave the government in Kabul much hope. But Moscow continued to provide massive assistance to the regime, which ended up lasting longer than the Soviet Union itself—and only collapsed in 1992 when Moscow finally turned off the spigot of assistance. Today,

the government in Kabul is still dependent on billions of dollars in aid. The real value of U.S. soldiers for Kabul is not on the battlefield: a few thousand American troops can’t decide the course of a war fought between 300,000 regime forces and 150,000 Taliban forces. The real value of U.S. soldiers is that their presence ensures that Congress keeps signing the foreign aid checks.

Of course, when Americans talk about leaving Afghanistan, they mean Americans leaving. But U.S. intervention is part of a broader NATO and allied mission. Around 7,000 international troops are currently engaged in Afghanistan, mainly training regime forces, and it’s not clear how many will stay if U.S. soldiers head for the exit.

And it’s possible that U.S. troops may leave Afghanistan and then go back. In 2003, Bush was eager to topple Saddam Hussein and then leave as quickly as possible, but he ended up sending reinforcements to Iraq as part of the “surge” strategy. Similarly, Obama withdrew U.S. combat forces from Iraq in 2011, before sending soldiers back following the rise of ISIS. Biden could also escalate involvement in Afghanistan, if the alternative was the fall of Kabul and images of people being rescued by helicopter.

In the end, America may leave Afghanistan, but Afghanistan won’t leave America. The

soldiers bring the war home. The United States must live with the legacies of conflict for decades, from wounded veterans to Pentagon equipment being handed off to American police forces.

In Afghanistan, America fights without hope of victory. It fights for a lesser loss rather than a greater loss. And yet the answer is not simply to cut and run. Winding down a failing campaign is one of the great trials of leadership. It requires a cool-headed focus on safeguarding core interests and keeping costs manageable. The United States has real—if limited—interests at stake in Afghanistan, such as combatting extremist groups; keeping a lid on the great game of regional competition by India, Pakistan, and other countries; protecting Afghan institutions and the hard-won rights of Afghan women; and aiding the 2.7 million Afghan refugees (a displaced population that is second only to that of Syria). These interests justify a modest continued U.S. investment, including a long-term commitment of aid and a central role in peace talks to ensure that key regional actors have a seat at the table.

Fighting a war to lose less badly is a grim business. Next time America contemplates seizing the sword, Washington should create a strategy that doesn’t end in a quagmire, or alternatively, just say no.

Talks without...

the European Parliament who works with the Committee on Relations with Afghanistan, told Pajhwok that the Taliban should stop violence as peace negotiations without ceasefire were meaningless.

She said the EU supported an active role of women in the peace process and the Taliban’s mutability about women was yet to change.

“Violence has intensified more than ever and the Taliban refuse to talk to women. If the gains of the past two decades are not protected and girls are unable to attend schools or women barred from work or hospitals, then we are going back, I think

these talks in some points are only about speaking, nothing else,” she said.

Except Pakistan no any other country wants the return of Islamic Emirate and this country should be pressed for its support to the Taliban, she added.

Daly said the international community and the EU should also stop removing Taliban leaders from sanctions’ lists. “I think ceasefire should be one of the fundamental conditions for peace talks.”

About EU’s assistance to Afghanistan, Daly said, “For continuation of financial assistance, there is need for infrastructural development and transparent spending of

funds as well as officials should be accountable.”

She said the money should not be given into the hands of thieves as it would increase corruption.

“The assistance of \$13 billion in Geneva Conference is a great amount; but it should not be embezzled by authorities,” she added.

Geneva Conference on Afghanistan was held between November 23 and 24, and representatives of 70 countries and 25 international organizations had participated. Donors pledged \$13 billion in assistance for Afghanistan for a period of for years based on conditions.

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Putin declares 2021 to be Year of Science and Technology in Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin declared 2021 to be the Year of Science and Technology, according to a presidential decree, published on Russia's official web portal of legislative acts on Friday. The document says the move aims to promote "further development of science and technologies in the Russian Federation."

The head of state tasked his administration with setting up an organizational committee for the Year of Science and Technology, appointing Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko and Presidential Aide Andrei Fursenko as its co-chairs. "The Russian government should draft and approve the plan of main events within the framework of the Year of Science and Technology," the decree says.

Putin announced his plans to declare 2021 to be the Year of Science and Technology while attending a meeting of the Lomonosov Moscow State University's supervisory board on Thursday,

December 24.

However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan believes his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to be an honest man who keeps his word.

Earlier, Putin told his annual press conference that Erdogan is a person "who sticks to his word" despite the fact that their views "can differ on certain issues."

"In fact, these are the words that describe him [Putin - TASS] as well," Erdogan told reporters after his Friday prayer. "After meeting Mr. Putin, this is what I learnt about him. He is indeed an honest man."

Erdogan also stressed that Russia has become "a rare country to keep its promises." The Turkish leader also noted that "strong ties" were established with Moscow. "We [Turkey and Russia] are confidently moving towards our goals and I am certain we will continue to do so," he added.



A look at the world

Iran says US approved its funds transfer to buy COVID vaccines

Iran has secured an approval from the United States to transfer funds for coronavirus vaccines from overseas, the central bank chief has said, as its daily death toll fell to a three-month low. Central Bank Governor Abdolnaser Hemmati said an Iranian bank had received backing from the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control to transfer the money to a Swiss bank to pay for the vaccines.

"They [Americans] have put sanctions on all our banks. They accepted this one case under the pressure of world public opinion," Hemmati told state TV.

There was no immediate US reaction to Hemmati's remarks.

Hemmati said Iran would pay nearly \$244m for initial imports of 16.8 million doses of the



vaccines from COVAX, a multiagency group dedicated to assuring fair access to vaccines for low- and middle-income countries.

Iranian officials have repeatedly said the US sanctions are preventing them from making payments to COVAX, to which some 190 economies have signed up.

Iran's Shifa Pharmed began registering volunteers this week for human trials of the country's first domestic COVID-19 vaccine candidate, Iranian media reported, as a factional dispute appeared to be brewing over the use of imports.

"We do not recommend injecting foreign coronavirus vaccines to the personnel of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij [voluntary militia]," Iranian news outlets quoted Mohammed Reza Naqdi, a deputy head of the hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as saying.

Health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari earlier told state TV that 152 people had died of COVID-19 in Iran in the past 24 hours, the lowest number since September 18, taking total deaths to 54,308 in the worst-affected country in the Middle East.

The fall in deaths comes after more than a month of night traffic curfews and other restrictions in big cities. Police said 96,000 fines were issued nationwide on Wednesday ... **P2**

Boat accident kills 33 in Democratic Republic of Congo



At least 33 people died after a boat sank in Lake Albert in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), local authorities said Friday.

Eight people survived the incident that occurred Wednesday near the locality of Kolokoto in Mahagi territory of Ituri province, a spokesman for the provincial government told Anadolu Agency. Jean-Marie Nyolo blamed state services for issuing illegal travel documents to boat operators.

The borders between Uganda and the DRC have been closed for several months due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"The victims are traders who wanted to return to their country with goods from Uganda. We quickly carried out investigations and realized that our services, especially the migration department, might have issued documents illegally to allow this boat to cross," added Nyolo.

The tragedy occurred after a strong wind blew over the lake, said Vital Adubangu, a civil society leader.

"The bodies of the victims were handed over to their families for funeral," he told Anadolu Agency.

Lake Albert, Africa's seventh-largest lake, is sandwiched between Uganda and the DRC. Many from both countries, including traders, use the lake to transport goods.

The accident happened in the evening, though navigating the lake at night had been banned for over a year in the Central African country.

Boat accidents often result in heavy casualties and most accidents that happen in remote places are not even reported.

Most of the accidents occur mainly due to overloading, non-compliance with navigation standards and poor condition of vessels.

Food aid was provided to 1,000 families in and around Kabul.



German Aid Institute for Afghan Children in Afghanistan distributes humanitarian food and health aid to more than 1,000 families in Kabul and Kabul

The donations have continued since the outbreak of the Corona virus, which now covers nearly 10,000 families.

These include food and hygiene items that have been donated to 10,000 families since the beginning of quarantine. Dr. Reinhard Eros from Germany and their family are in

charge of this assistance. The head of this institute in Afghanistan is Mr. Haji Engineer Alam.

During the donations, Engineer Mohammad Alam Shahab added that the institute has built significant educational facilities in Kabul and the provinces since 2002, including the construction of Schools, universities, orphanages are educational and vocational courses He added that the assistance from the institute continues.

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