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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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## Educational Curriculum Needs Changes, Says Pres. Ghani

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Saturday said that he discussed with the delegation of the leadership of the Ministry of Education (MoE) of Afghanistan about the reforms and improvements of the structures of this ministry.

The Presidential Palace in a press release said that President Ghani stated that Afghanistan's curriculum needs to be changed and that the natural sciences should be in line with international standards and the social sciences that are the source of Islamic traditions and traditions of Afghanistan should be strengthened more.

According to the press release, the Acting Minister of Education, Rangina Hamidi during the meeting said that the ministry is working on a national policy and seeking for ways to crack down on corruption in the ministry.



## NDS Prevented Assassination of Journalist in Khost

The National Directorate of Security (NDS) says its operatives have prevented the assassination of a journalist in Khost province.

NDS in a statement said that its Special Forces have arrested two individuals who were trying to assassinate a reporter of Gharghast TV.

According to the statement, the two detainees were identified as Dindar and Rahmatullah who were belonging to the Haqqani network.

NDS stressed that the terrorist groups are attempting to target media activists. So, 2020 was a bloody year for journalists in Afghanistan. Eight journalists were killed and 19 others were wounded during the year.

Afghanistan journalist center (AFJC) said in a statement that targeted assassinations of journalists and escalation of self-censorship in Afghanistan have increased to an unprecedented rate.

This comes as, on the first day of 2021, a journalist was killed in Ghor province. However, the Interior Ministry ... **P2**

## Arg Reacts to Pompeo's Remarks on Zero Number of U.S. Troops' Casualties in Afghanistan



Afghanistan Presidential Palace has reacted to the recent remarks by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who said that no US troops were killed in Afghanistan over the past year.

Presidential Palace (Arg) in a press

release on Sunday said that the Taliban group is currently fighting against the Afghan government and people.

President Ghani's deputy spokesman, Dawa Khan Mina Pal said that the casualties of foreign

forces reduced to zero because the Afghan security forces manage and lead the war zone alone.

According to Mina Pal, the Taliban are still fighting against the people and the government of Afghanistan and the number of casualties are

still very high.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a series of tweets on Saturday night said that no American soldiers have been killed in almost a year in Afghanistan, following the US-Taliban Doha deal in which the Taliban pledged to avoid attacks against US forces in the country.

Pompeo defended the Trump's initiative as an "incredible progress".

"Afghans are finally discussing peace and reconciliation among themselves. Such incredible progress," he said.

The Taliban stopped attacks on foreign forces after signing an agreement with the US in Doha on February last year, but attacks on Afghan security forces still continue. Previously, Ahmad Zia Saraj, the director general of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), said that over the past year, 5,000 terrorist attacks had been carried out in the country, both militarily and non-militarily, mostly by the Taliban.

Saraj did not specify the exact number of casualties, but said civilians had been killed in large numbers.

## Five Killed, 9 Wounded in Kapisa IED Blast

At least five civilians were killed and nine others were wounded including head of Kapisa's Ulema Council in a magnetic IED blast at the center of the province, local officials said.

The spokesman of Kapisa Police, Abdul Sheyq Shoresht told Reportery that the incident happened when an IED blast targeted the vehicle of Mirwais Karimi, head of Kapisa Ulema Council in Sayad area of Mahmoud Raqi city at around 02:00pm on Sunday.

He said that Karimi was on his way from Kapisa to Kabul that the incident happened.

No group has claimed responsibility for the incident so far.



## Cold, poverty grip 6,000 displaced Badakhshan residents

Internally displaced families in northern Badakhshan province on Sunday said they were concerned about harsh winter, economic problems and lack of facilities and urged the government to help them. According to the provincial Department of Refugees, there are currently 6,000 internally displaced people in the province.

Many of these families were forced to flee homes after Taliban's takeover of Warduj, Yamgan districts, parts of Juram, YaftalBala, Raghistan and Kuhistan districts.

The families have moved to neighboring districts and Faizabad, the provincial capital.

Some of these families live in rented houses and a number of others live in tents amid poor living conditions in cold winter.

The refugee department says it has begun distributing food and non-food items to the displaced families



in cooperation with foreign aid agencies.

Rozatullah, a 48-year-old resident of Dara Khostak, said: "We migrated to Faizabad eight months ago after our areas became insecure due to the presence of Taliban and foreign fighters and now we are living in a very bad situation, we wonder what to do. The weather is very cold and

we have nothing to warm ourselves". He said the situation of many displaced people was worrying and their children would die of cold if the government did not pay attention. Farishta, a 36-year-old resident who was displaced from the 8th security district of Faizabad to the 6th district due to clashes between government forces and militants, said ... **P2**

## NDS Prevented...

says that it has taken steps to protect journalists. Afghanistan journalist center registered 112 cases of violence against journalists in 2020, including deaths, injuries, physical violence, insults, humiliation, pressure, and intimidation. "During 2020, 11 cases of physical violence, 45 cases of threats, six cases of detention, six cases of kidnapping, and four cases of armed acts against journalists were recorded," AFJC said in a statement on Saturday. According to the AFJC, ISIL, the Taliban and unknown groups are responsible for killing and injuring journalists. However, the Taliban, government officials, police, national security forces, and local militias are involved in some cases of violence against journalists.

## UK PM Johnson...

two weeks. The government, which oversees schools in England, has already decided to keep all schools in London closed next week to try to stem new infections. Unions want the policy extended across all of England, expressing fears about the health of both teachers and children. The UK on Saturday hit a daily record for new coronavirus infections, 57,725, according to Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and looked set to soon overtake Italy once again to become the worst-hit country in Europe. The fear is that with rising infections, the number of deaths will also grow over the coming weeks. The UK has recorded its five highest infection numbers over the past five days, all above 50,000 and double the number of only a few weeks ago, with a total 2,607,541 cases according to the latest data from JHU.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China

## Press Conference by Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang-related Issues in Beijing

.....Xu Guixiang: On your first question, as you said, there are lots of foreign media reports about Xinjiang. Many media outlets have visited Xinjiang and conducted interviews there, most of them took a neutral and fair position, reporting Xinjiang in an objective, positive and well-intentioned manner. However, there are some institutions and personnel misleading the international community with groundless pictures pieced-together from nowhere and fabricated rumors in order to provoke attention and to serve their ulterior motives. To rebuke some media's disgusting acts, we have taken a series measures. First, hold press conference on Xinjiang related issues. We have held 20 of such events so far this year, citing numerous facts, data, cases and videos to expose the US and other Western anti-China forces' lies and falsehoods on Xinjiang, such as the region "establishing camps to intern and persecute a million ethnic minorities," "demolishing mosques," "instituting massive forced labor," "forced sterilization" and "performing genocide." The press conferences are reported through radio, TV, foreign language websites and news apps in 15 languages, including English, Japanese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Turkish and Arabic, with overall viewership hitting 200 million so far. Second, produce and air television documentary series. CGTN has released three English documentaries on counter-terrorism: Fighting Terrorism in Xinjiang, The Black Hand: ETIM and Terrorism in Xinjiang, Tianshan Still Standing-Memories of Fighting Terrorism in Xinjiang, which presented a deep analysis on the disasters and chaos caused by the terrorist organization ETIM, and displayed the sufferings brought about by violent terrorism and religious extremism to Xinjiang. The documentaries have been viewed over 100 million times on social media and related readings hit 1 billion times. The documentary, Lies and Truth-Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang, which was telecast on China Central Television on Aug 24, sheds light on the truth of vocational education and training work with real stories and scenes, showcases the great changes brought about by the vocational education and training to the minds and lives of the trainees, and refutes with facts attacks and slanders by US and Western anti-China forces on the vocational education and training centers. Third, publish a series of white papers on Xinjiang related issues. Since last year, the the State Council Information Office has released four white papers on Xinjiang related

issues: The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang, Historical Matters Countering Xinjiang, and Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang, offering a comprehensive and systematic exposition on major issues concerning Xinjiang from perspectives of policy background, legal basis, measures and approaches, and substantial achievements. Fourth, publish a series of research reports. As to these-called "forced labor" claim, we've published reports, including The Forced Labor in Xinjiang Claim Violates Legal Principles and Facts, and Decent Work Under the Sun for All Ethnic Groups. The Development Research Center of Xinjiang has published The Investigation Report on Employment of Ethnic Minorities in Xinjiang, based on the field surveys by relevant experts and scholars into this issue, exposing the forced labor lies with solid statistics and sufficient evidence. The press conferences, documentaries, white papers and research reports reflect the real situation in Xinjiang, which is dynamic, developing and colorful. These materials are available multiple media portals and you are advised to refer to if interested. Lies, as a Xinjiang saying goes, never fool the locals. The feelings of people in Xinjiang are the most direct, real and, of course, trustworthy. If you wish, please turn a willing ear to more of their stories. Al-Ahram Gate: From the beginning to the present, how many people have benefited from the training center? What happened to them after finishing the education program? Graduated trainee Ablajan Ablat: My name is Ablajan Ablat. I am a graduate from the Vocational Education and Training Center in Wensu County, Aksu Prefecture. I now have a car repair shop of my own. I had fallen into the influence of religious extremism in the past, and wanted to join illegal religious activities with all my heart and even wanted to kill "pagans". I didn't find job to do, nor did any farm work. When I ran out of money, I asked my parents for help, and I would abuse them or use force towards them if they refuse. My father was so worried about me that his hair turned white, and my mother often wept for me. By after studying at the center, my Chinese efficiency has been improved a lot and I learned the skill of repairing automobiles. I have realized the danger of religious extremism and recognized the ugly face of extremists. I got rid of their control over my mind. They just used us to alienate our Uygurs from other ethnic groups, destroy our unity and arousing hatred. They wanted

to turn us into demons. After graduation from the center, I have started my own business and opened a car repair shop, which operates well with some 10,000 yuan profits a month. During the autumn harvest, my parents help me with the business and I managed to provide translation service for agricultural products buyers. With the Mandarin I learned at the center, I help them to contact and purchase local products such as corns, and earned 30,000 yuan. My life is getting better and better year by year. I got married this year and bought my wife a car worth 120,000 yuan. She drives to work everyday and we live a happy life. I plan to open two more branches next year and employ more young fellows, teaching them automobile repair technology. In this way, I can help them increase their incomes and expand the scale of my business. I want to do a chain operation. I think I'm lucky and happy enough, so do my classmates at the center. We all agree that if we didn't go to the center for study, we would be dragged down deeper and deeper and no one would know what kind of person we could change into. It was the government and our teachers who saved us. What we have now would never happen if we hadn't learn the skills and knowledge at the center. The vocational education and training center is the significant turning point and the new starting point of our life. For me, I will work harder to expand my business, earn more money and let my family live a happier life. Graduated trainee Tursunnisa Ali: My name is Tursunnisa Ali, I am a graduate from the vocational education and training center of Hotan County, Hotan Prefecture. Influenced by extremist thoughts, I didn't go to the government-run school. And I excluded other ethnic groups and didn't associate with them. I didn't watch TV or take part in any entertainment activities. Besides, I persuaded my neighbors to do the same. They didn't listen to me, so I abused them and even fought with them after quarrel. My parents felt very sad about my behaviors. Persuaded by them, I came to the training center. At the center, our courses were provided mainly on national common language, legal knowledge, occupational skills and deradicalization contents. Studying at the center helped me to realize that my previous thoughts were totally wrong for the extremism was like the virus that would erode my body and soul and the poison that would ... **P3**

By Hannan Hussain

## Bringing Afghanistan closer to peace

As Taliban fighters and Afghan government negotiators embrace a tense pause in groundbreaking negotiation progress, the country's post-conflict political stability deserves to be supported through the institutionalization of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program. Unlike previous failed attempts, it must be captured as a supplement to the recently agreed preamble of intra-Afghan talks, seen as the procedural ground rules mantra. The Taliban are less likely to agree to explicit ceasefire guarantees anyway, and have demonstrated their willingness to test-drive competing visions for peace under the joint working committee for agenda-setting. The inclusion of Afghan government negotiators within the same working committee lends optimism to some headway on what disarmament could actually mean from an insurgent perspective – taking the conversation on post-conflict security beyond inevitably confrontational Taliban profiling. The critical topic of constitutional legitimacy is likely to be discussed between both sides sooner than

later. Therefore, incorporating legal pointers – such as Article 149 of the Afghan constitution – can make the best use of the Taliban's start-stop peace imperatives in forthcoming agenda-drafting. Moving towards a well-resourced plan for disarmament is also important to describe what constitutes influence-building ahead of the next round of intra-Afghan talks. Courtesy of the United States' scramble for military influence in earlier years, the Taliban now view the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program with deep skepticism, despite its strengths being endorsed by the U.N. But by communicating the DDR as a chance for the Taliban to transition from a "self-interest" model of social control in Afghanistan to one of popular legitimacy, insurgents still acquire what they wish to unlock in the future: a new domestic incentive to placate contending factions for popular and effective legitimacy. Note that the Taliban's aversion to acknowledging the constitution stems from the fear that this would undermine their own ability to rationalize rule by will. DDR offers

a chance to generate concrete parameters, including pathways for debating and enforcing the "collective will" of a power-sharing setup, so that the sting of violent offensives is slowly taken out of a rebellious Taliban psyche. One of the reasons why the U.S.-led DDR program repeatedly failed in reining in Taliban fighters in the past was because DDR was neither constitutionally mandated, nor did it incentivize the Taliban to contemplate peace in conjunction with a reduction-in-violence pledge. That could change with the Taliban reportedly factoring territorial independence and fundamental human rights as part of a 24-item request list to government negotiators. As the push towards a short-term ceasefire pledge cedes ground to a series of softer agenda goals, the incentive to test-drive DDR's acceptance to Taliban ranks at present is vital. Second, government negotiators are not roundly averse to steering Taliban fighters into a post-conflict governance setup, regardless of the constitutional debate. This goes hand-in-hand with the ... **P3**

## OPEC+ meeting...

barrel – meaning producers paid buyers to take the oil off their hands. The climate between the two oil giants has eased since then, with the Russian and Saudi energy ministers meeting in mid-December in a display of unity. It remains difficult, however, to predict the evolution in demand as governments begin rolling out vaccination programmes against the coronavirus. Last month, OPEC predicted a slight rebound in the market while noting continued uncertainties, particularly in the transport

sector. Despite the heft of the OPEC+ countries, countries outside the system have a major effect on the oil market; principally the United States which is still producing 11 million barrels of crude per day. Even within its ranks, OPEC will have to pay attention to developments in the three members which have been granted exemptions from quotas – Libya, Iran and Venezuela. Libya's production had been almost wiped out by civil conflict but has spiked since October after the signing of a ceasefire deal.

## Cold, poverty...

if the government did not come to their rescue in-time, they would die of severe cold. Abdul Wahid Taybi, the Refugee Department head, said growing insecurity and Taliban's presence in several districts of Badakhshan led to an increase in number of displaced families. He said during the past two days, they provided cash assistance to 400 families with each receiving about 8,000 afghanis and in coming days 1,000 others will be assisted by the Ministry of Refugees.

"Unfortunately the number of displaced people in Badakhshan has reached more than 6,000 families." The official said they had distributed enough food and non-food items to the displaced families but providing them with shelter and other necessary facilities was beyond the capacity of the local government. About bad situation of the displaced families due to cold weather, Tayib said aid agencies were fully prepared to respond to a possible event from cold.

# Gwadar port important for Afghanistan: Dawood

The Gwadar port will provide Afghanistan and energy-rich Central Asian states big opportunities for regional trade connectivity, hopes a Pakistani official.

Prime Minister's Advisor on Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood said Pakistan was prioritising economic integration to promote regional trade.

In a series of tweets on Saturday, Dawood touted the own geo-strategic and economic importance the Gwadar deep-seaport in

Balochistan province.

A rail link from Gwadar to Kandhar and other parts of Afghanistan might be established to boost the value of the port, the advisor suggested.

The official believed that Central Asia, accessed through Afghanistan, could emerge as a key trade and transport route for the entire region. "Our trade must be based on secure, open, consistent, reliable and legal movement of goods across the Durand Line," the advisor stressed.



### Bringing Afghanistan...

potential objectives of the incoming Biden administration, as well as those of the U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan, suggesting that in the event a full-scale ceasefire is unlikely, violence reductions and disarmament imperatives may provide sufficient fallback cover.

In turn, a constitutionally-framed DDR proposition during on-going talks could enable the United States to proceed with its synchronized troop withdrawal into next year, and make the concept of legality a point of potential embrace between insurgents and the Afghan government negotiating team.

Other possible recommendations, such as a wishful push for explicit Taliban ceasefire guarantees, won't satisfy the same merits as the DDR. For instance, in the current context of Doha talks, pushing for explicit ceasefire guarantees may hamper the Taliban's objectivity in the joint agenda drafting. In turn, insurgents may redirect their energies – as they have in the past – to Washington, by calling it out for falling short on troop withdrawal commitments by the agreed date, circumventing the Afghan government altogether.

Unlike the ingredients of non-violent resistance proposed by political scientist Erica Chenoweth, the Taliban do not "confront" a perceived U.S. or Afghan government adversary through protests, demonstrations or noncooperation. Their intricate network of province-to-province armed offensives is central to producing violence-on-demand. Lofty goals risk affording accelerants to it.

It is also worth noting that some opposition to DDR may still stem from the Taliban's senior leadership, which often practices a change of guard on peace concessions once consulting associates beyond Afghanistan. Washington and Kabul cannot afford to misread the leadership's current consultation nuances at the hands of responsible neighboring powers. A lax view of peace could prove particularly troubling given that evidence on robust, internationally negotiated pacts shows that states can become constrained by their own commitment to peaceful behavior if they struggle to consolidate collective ownership under functional legal frameworks for peace. In Afghanistan's case, that means the constitution-DDR nexus. The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration imperative not only keeps the vital prospect of Taliban's transition towards nonviolence alive. It appears compatible with major articles in the current constitution, and appeals to the sanctity of fundamental rights to offset costs of a confrontational fallout – the emerging priority of both warring sides.

### Press Conference...

lead us to death in the end. I must stay away from it and live a normal life. I chose the sewing course at the center because I want to make myself nice clothes, make a living by the sewing and show my filial respect to my mother. Teachers taught us hand in hand. We practiced over and over again until fully grasp it. Later I can sew straight lines, circle lines and square lines, and I can also solve different problems encountered in the process of sewing with craftiness.

After graduated from the center, I found a job in a clothing company through the labor market and signed a working contract with it. Now my salary is 4,000 yuan per month and I am the workshop manager in charge of more than 180 staff. My job is to both manage my staff well and keep a technical quality check, no unqualified product should be taken to the market from my hand. I like making clothes as always, thus I like my job very much. I feel very proud for the progress my fellow workmates made after learning sewing skills from me. When it comes to weekends or holidays, I will get well dressed and enjoy my time with my friends. Now I am a happy Uygur girl.

Xinhua News Agency: Recently, Australian Strategic Policy Institute is a puppet for the US anti-China forces rather than a research body. It is notorious in the international community. Firstly, Australian Strategic Policy Institute is not an independent institution. Evidence proved that ASPI has long been funded by the US and some other governments as well as major weapons makers, which makes it full of anti-China ideology and keen to make and spread anti-China lies. It is loyal to its sponsors and willing to be a vanguard and puppet for the US anti-China forces. The Australian Financial Review

exposed the sponsors behind this "institute" and satirized it for being at the disposal of US anti-China forces. Australian Citizens Party also published an article to criticize this institution. Advertising itself as "independent" and "non-partisan" on its official website, the ASPI is actually an agent of intelligence departments in the UK and US to attack China. A report titled China Defence Universities Tracker by ASPI analyst Alex Joske, making false accusation that 32 Australian academics participating in China's Thousands Talents Plan are "giving the Chinese Communist Party access to their technology and inventions where there is the risk they could be used for military or intelligence purposes."

Based on that, the Australian Research Council (ARC) wrote to universities demanding they investigate relevant individual academics, but the investigation did not find anything unusual. Australian independent news agency APAC News revealed that the ASPI report, which the ARC relied upon to launch its investigation, was entirely funded by a \$190,000 grant from the US State Department, and there's not a scrap of evidence to support the relevant accusation. The author Alex Joske was even forced to issue a public apology. This is a powerful example of the ASPI manipulated by anti-China forces and served for its financial supporters. Secondly, ASPI did not focus on academic research. Its reports on China-related issues are baseless, lacking academic value, and totally against professional ethnics. Their sources and clues are from US anti-China NGOs or unverifiable and untraceable "eyewitness evidence". They even used interactive maps as satellite images, which is quite absurd and groundless. Thirdly, ASPI is highly unpopular. Jocelyn Chey, Australia's former consul-general to Hong Kong, criticized ASPI's Clive Hamilton for lacking the basic knowledge of China's political system. Geoff Raby, former Australian ambassador to China, criticized ASPI as "very much the architect of the China threat theory in Australia;". Bob Carr, former Premier of New South Wales,

accused ASPI of pumping out a "one-sided, pro-American view of the world;". Australian Citizens Party also published an article on its weekly publication of the Australian Alert Service to criticize this institution. Its reports on Xinjiang were baseless. The false information fabricated by it was full of vicious lies and illusions, and was overturned by facts and truth multiple times. Let's take its report on so-called "Tracing the Destruction of Uygur and Islamic Spaces in Xinjiang" as an example. It claimed that the arch of Jama mosque in Yecheng County, Kashgar Prefecture has been demolished. The fact is that we have never demolished any mosques. On the contrary, we have take effective measures to protect the mosques. In September 2018, detected and identified by relevant organs, the arch and portal of Jiamy mosque in Yecheng County was in a state of disrepair. To protect the life and safety of believers and to guarantee the smooth normal religious activities, the arch and portal of the mosque have been improved and reconstructed in February 2019 with the approval of the religious bureau of Yecheng County. The local religious figures and believers were all satisfied with the improvement. Another example, its report of so-called "gene supervision" claimed that residents' DNA data have been collected under the guise of free physical checkup in Xinjiang. Actually, citizens' privacy is protected by law in China. The privacy of people of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang is protected by law at anytime, under any conditions. In order to improve people's health, the regional government has invested 5.324 billion yuan since 2016 in the health program. Medical and health organizations provide people across the region with annual free physical checkups which could realize early prevention, early diagnosis and early treatment of diseases. It was well applauded. There is no such thing as collecting DNA data or other biological information during the checkup. I wonder how did the ASPI come to the conclusion? And where is the evidence?

continue

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# UK PM Johnson could lose his seat and majority at next election – poll

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is at risk of losing his own seat while neither of the two main political parties is likely to win an outright majority at the next general election, not due until 2024, according to a new poll.

This is the first detailed survey of the UK public's perception of Johnson's handling of recently concluded Brexit talks and the COVID-19 pandemic after he reversed plans to allow families to meet up at Christmas in parts of southern England to combat the spread of the virus.

More than 22,000 people were surveyed in a closely watched constituency-by-constituency poll over a four-week period in December, which was conducted by the research data company Focldata and published by the Sunday Times. The so-called multilevel regression and post-stratification poll found the ruling Conservatives

would lose 81 seats, wiping out the 80-seat majority. This would leave the Conservatives with 284 seats, while the opposition Labour Party would win 282 seats, the poll showed.

The Scottish National Party, which wants to break away from the rest of the UK, is predicted to win 57 of the 59 seats in Scotland, meaning the party could potentially play a kingmaker role in forming the next government.

The prime minister is at risk of losing his own seat of Uxbridge, west of London, the poll found.

Johnson won a resounding election victory last year that allowed him to take Britain out of the European Union's orbit on New Year's Eve after almost half a century of close ties.

But the pandemic has made the political landscape more treacherous for Johnson's premiership, which has already killed more than



74,000 people in UK, one of the highest death tolls since the first wave of the coronavirus, and has heavily crushed the economy. With daily coronavirus infections surging

as a result of a new virus variant, the British government faced mounting pressure Saturday from teachers' unions to keep schools in England closed for at least another ... P2

## A look at the world

### Saudi Arabia reopens borders, resumes international flights

Saudi Arabia has announced it will reopen its borders and resume international flights after a two-week suspension aimed at containing the spread of the new COVID-19 strain.

The kingdom ordered the lifting of "precautionary measures related to the spread of a new variant of coronavirus," the ministry of interior said in a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency on Sunday.

Authorities in the kingdom have to date recorded more than 363,000 cases,



including at least 6,200 deaths – the highest among Gulf Arab states. But the country has also reported a high recovery rate.

Riyadh suspended international flights and access through land crossings and ports on December 21.

Other Gulf countries, Oman and Kuwait, who had taken similar measures, have also lifted them in recent days.

But travellers returning from Britain, South Africa or "any country where the new variant of the coronavirus is spreading" are subject to more restrictions, the statement added.

Foreigners coming from those countries must spend 14 days in another country before entering Saudi Arabia, and show a negative test.

Saudi nationals returning from those countries will be able to enter directly, but must then spend two weeks in quarantine on arrival and be subject to tests.

Last month, Saudi Arabia was one of the first Gulf countries to launch a nationwide inoculation campaign using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

### OPEC+ meeting to decide oil production levels after a dismal 2020



Members of the OPEC group of oil producers and their partners will meet via videoconference on Monday to decide on production levels for February, hoping to turn the corner on a difficult year.

The OPEC+ ministerial meeting comes after oil consumption tanked in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Despite a pickup in prices towards the end of last year, the market levels for black gold remain uncertain.

After their last summit, from November 30-December 3, the OPEC+ members agreed to increase production by half a million barrels per day in January.

The 13 members of the OPEC cartel, led by Saudi Arabia, and their six allies led by Russia, also agreed to meet at the beginning of each month to decide on any adjustments to production volumes for the following month. Russia and Saudi Arabia are respectively the second and third-biggest oil producers in the world after the United States.

The decision illustrates OPEC's desire to maintain a strong influence on the oil market and the gravity of the situation for crude producers last year.

Before the pandemic, OPEC members were content with two summits a year at the organization's headquarters in Vienna.

"Finally, we saw a strong demonstration of OPEC+ will and capability to manage the market, laying the groundwork for Brent's recovery to over \$50 per barrel despite remaining demand uncertainty in the market," JBC Energy analysts said in a statement.

The two contracts of reference, North Sea Brent Crude and West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude both ended the week around the \$50 per barrel level, far lower than the prices seen at the start of 2020 but well up on the lows seen last year.

In March, Moscow and Riyadh embarked on a brief but intense oil price war which led prices to plummet.

On April 20, West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude collapsed to minus \$40.32 per ... P2

### Pakistan claims to shoot down Indian quadcopter

The Pakistan Army claimed to have shot down an Indian quadcopter Saturday that "intruded" into its airspace along the disputed Kashmir border.

The quadcopter was shot down after it encroached 500 meters inside Pakistan's territory along the Line of Control (LoC), according to an army statement. The LoC is a de facto border that divides the disputed Himalayan valley between the two nuclear neighbors.



It was the second quadcopter shot down by Pakistan in the last three days, the statement added.

Islamabad claims its border troops shot down 16 Indian quadcopters along the LoC last year amid escalating tensions between the two rivals, which are locked in a slew of disputes, mainly Kashmir.

Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir is held by India and Pakistan in parts, and claimed by both in full. A small sliver is also held by China.

Since they were partitioned in 1947, the two countries have fought three wars -- in 1948, 1965 and 1971 -- two of them regarding Kashmir.

Some Kashmiri groups in Jammu and Kashmir have been fighting against Indian rule for independence, or unification with neighboring Pakistan.

According to several human rights organizations, thousands of people have been killed and tortured in the conflict that flared up in 1989.



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