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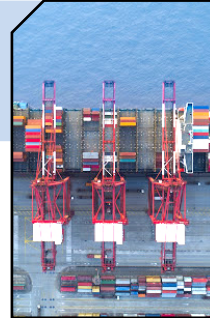
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# Heart of Asia

*Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region*

Monday, January 11, 2021

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## Govt spokesman killed in Kabul explosion

Three people including Zia Wadan, a spokesman for the Public Protection Force were killed and two others wounded in an explosion in Karte naw area of PD8 of Kabul city around 8:30 AM on Sunday morning, the Kabul police spokesman Tariq Arian confirmed. Kabul police said the incident took place when Wadan was on his way to the office. According to Kabul police, one person was injured in the incident. No group has claimed responsibility for the blast, but the Interior Ministry in a statement blamed the Taliban. President Ghani also condemned the attack and called it "a crime against humanity and against Islamic values." "The increase of violence by the Taliban shows that the group opposes the spirit of peace and is not committed to peace, and the group seeks to kill innocent people and damage public facilities," Ghani added.



## Afghan Cricket Team Trains in UAE for Ireland Matches

Afghanistan's national cricket team began their training on Saturday in the United Arab Emirates for the three-match ODI series against Ireland that kicks off on January 21. Afghanistan will play three One Day International (ODI) matches against Ireland on January 21, 24 and 26. Mohammad Nabi, a star on the national cricket team, is "on his way to UAE to join the national team for the Ireland series after a match-winning knock in BBL," the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) said. "Nabi is part of the squad that will take on Ireland as part of the CWC ODI Super League," it said. It's expected that Rashid Khan and Mujeeb Ur Rahman and other Afghan cricket stars who are also playing in Australia's Big Bash League (BBL), will join the team. The matches will be played at Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Cricket Stadium, ACB said. The series was scheduled to ...

# Nimroz Airstrike Kills 18 Civilians: Local Council Head



An airstrike in the western province of Ghazni on Saturday night left 18 people dead, all members of one family, said Baz Mohammad Nasir, head of the provincial council in the province. The airstrike took place in Munazari village in Khashrod district, Nasir said, adding that the "Taliban were also targeted but there are no reports on their casualties yet." Those who have been killed include eight children, seven women and three men, the council chief said.

Relatives of the victims took the 18 bodies to the city of Zaranj, the center of the province, seeking justice from the government. Local officials refrained from providing details on the incident, but the ANA 215th Corps in a statement said the reports of civilian casualties in Nimroz will be investigated. "The Taliban were targeted in an airstrike and suffered heavy casualties," the statement said. The army corps said that multiple

airstrikes were conducted by Afghan forces on Taliban targets in Khashrod district on Saturday night. "The airstrike has affected civilians. Many members of one family, including women and children, have been killed. This is sad," Nasir said. However, local government officials and security officials have not yet commented on the airstrike. "Eighteen members of my family were martyred. They were found in pieces. Who among them are the Taliban members? Look at

their hands. Are they Taliban? You call yourselves Muslims. This is not something done by a Muslim," said Saleh Mohammad, a relative of the victims.

"Seven of them are women and others are men and children. One of them was a recently married girl who was there as a guest along with three children who have also been martyred. There was no Taliban in the area, neither any Daesh, nor did anyone have ties with al-Qaeda," said Abdul Shakoor, an eyewitness. Ahmad, a resident of Khashrod who sustained injuries in the airstrike, said he has lost "18 members of his family in the incident."

"We were 15 members in our family. I was sleeping and did not notice that our house was attacked. When I woke up, I saw that the wall of our house was damaged and there were bullets around me," Ahmad said. The relatives of the victims said those who are behind the incident should be punished. "We don't know where to live. The government is bombarding our houses, the Taliban is threatening us. Where should the oppressed residents of Khashrod live? Let us know if there is any place," said Mohammad Daud, a resident of the area. ...

## Iran, Afghanistan to hold 14th joint exhibition in Kabul

Iran and Afghanistan are set to hold the 14th edition of joint specialized exhibition next month. Deputy Minister of Industries and the head of Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPO) Hamid Zadboum made the announcement on Saturday, saying that Iran-Afghanistan specialized exhibition will be held in Kabul on February 9-12. The TPO chief referred to Iran's \$3-billion annual exports to Afghanistan and said the ...



## Kabul, Ashgabat agree to expand regional connectivity, trade

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have signed two Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) to enhance foreign ministerial level interactions and cooperation in railway sector, a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said on Sunday. Atmar welcomed his Turkmen counterpart Raşit Meredow and his accompanying delegation to Kabul, describing Turkmenistan as a friendly neighbor and brotherly country.

Calling Kabul-Ashgabat ties as excellent and friendly, Atmar said that Mr. Meredow's visit and the new agreements signed between the two sides were steps towards further strengthening bilateral relations. The Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that expanding regional connectivity, strengthening trade,



transit, political and economic cooperation, and building regional consensus on the Afghan peace process were top priorities of Afghanistan's foreign policy. He noted that the expansion of ties among regional countries, especially with Turkmenistan, benefited peace and development in the region.

Pleased with brotherly relations between Kabul and Ashgabat, The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan thanked Mr. Atmar for the warm and cordial hospitality of Afghanistan during his visit to Kabul. Mr. Meredow stated that Ashgabat was committed to cooperating with Afghanistan in trade, ...



### Kabul, Ashgabat...

transit, commerce, and regional connectivity and considered the success of the Afghan peace talks vital for achieving those goals.

The Turkmen Foreign Minister assured Mr. Atmar of his country's firm support for the success of the peace process and the stance of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on regional peace and consensus. The two foreign ministers spoke in detail about the necessary preparations to open three projects to be inaugurated by the two countries' leaders in the near future.

The meeting was attended by the President's Chief of Staff Mohammad Shakir Kargar, Deputy Foreign Minister Mirwais Nab, Director of Afghanistan Railway Authority Yamma Shams, Deputy Minister of Agriculture Heshmatollah Ghafouri, and Head of Afghanistan Petroleum Authority Seyed Mahubollah Rabbani.

### Iran, Afghanistan...

country envisages to increase the figure to %5 billion by March 2022.

He said efforts are underway to compensate for the losses inflicted by the coronavirus in the past year and reach the economic plans in trades with the neighboring countries.

### Afghan Cricket...

begin on January 18 but will now instead start three days later following a request by the ACB.

Cricket Ireland agreed to the delay which was in part caused by the Covid-19 quarantine regulations.

By Monkey Cage

## Why the Taliban agreed to let more girls in Afghanistan go to school

In December, the Taliban agreed to allow UNICEF to open thousands of informal schools in parts of Afghanistan controlled by the armed group. The Taliban-initiated school talks have been ongoing for the past two years, and originally grew out of negotiations over polio vaccination campaigns inside Taliban territory. The program will establish community-based classes, reaching as many as 140,000 children — both boys and girls.

Why would the Taliban — a group known for the systematic destruction of women's access to education — not only agree to but initiate talks on the provision of education? The Taliban continues to fight the government of Afghanistan, and the armed group's political goal remains unchanged: To reestablish a strict Islamist system of government, a shift that would probably reverse many of the rights granted to women in the 2004 post-Taliban Constitution.

The group is in negotiations with the Afghan government in a bid to end the country's war. However, the Taliban did not get to the negotiating table through violence alone. Instead, the group waged a political campaign that required establishing support from Afghan citizens as well as a greater degree of international legitimacy — and both of these goals played into the recent decision to make a deal with UNICEF.

The Taliban exercises control or influence over at least half of Afghanistan, and civilian support is important to the group's efforts to further consolidate control. Often during civil wars, armed groups provide services to civilians to win their support — and gain access to food, shelter, recruits and information. While armed groups could use force to extract these resources from civilians, territorial control leads armed groups to expect sustained interactions with civilians — and armed groups generally find it more efficient to develop a less coercive relationship with communities under their rule.

That shift seems to be taking place in Afghanistan. With many Afghans — 87 percent, according to one survey — believing that women should have the same educational opportunities as men, the Taliban has faced pressure from communities to change its policies toward education, which barred girls and women from schools in the past. The Taliban's change in strategy is in line with my research, which explains why armed groups tend to be pragmatic in



their governance strategies, and how civilians often shape rebel governance. In Indonesia, for instance, religious leaders pushed GAM — an ethno-nationalist group that fought a war to form its own state — to adopt an increasingly religious agenda. This change helped the rebel group gain wider support from its religious constituency.

Communities in Afghanistan appear to be leveraging the Taliban's need for support and finding new ways to push back on the armed group's rules. Some experts attribute the shift in the Taliban's narrative on girls' schooling to pressure from communities that want their daughters to have access to education. These demands might have persuaded the Taliban to take a more flexible approach. In some cases, village elders made subtle threats that they would turn against the group and provide information to the Taliban's foes if the Taliban did not respect the community's wishes. However, pressure from civilians has its limits, and has in some cases been met with violence on the part of the Taliban.

But there's probably a second reason for the Taliban's deal with UNICEF. Collaborating with organizations like UNICEF, political science analysis shows, can bolster the Taliban's international legitimacy, carrying the symbolic significance of imitating a country's external relations. Mullah Akhtar Mansour, a previous leader of the Taliban, reportedly was aware that the Taliban needed recognition from the international community to realize its political ambitions.

The Taliban recognized the consequences of being perceived as a pariah state in the 1990s. Despite

the Taliban's formal control of the government of Afghanistan from 1996-2001, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates formally recognized Taliban leadership. Two decades later, Taliban leadership has encouraged greater openness toward aid agencies, driven in large part by a hope for political recognition and an improvement in its public image.

The drawdown of international troops is probably central to the Taliban's growing openness toward education. The Taliban has historically perceived education as an extension of the government and international forces. With the international troop presence now largely reduced, the Taliban may feel less threatened by foreign-funded activities like the opening of schools.

The dwindling numbers of foreign soldiers also means the Taliban can no longer generate civilian support through claims of defending Afghanistan from foreign invaders. Instead, the group might be trying to gain civilian support by demonstrating the group's governing capacity. As the primary authority in many areas, the Taliban might see its civilian support erode when it actively prevents access to public services such as education.

The current negotiations also place an added spotlight on the Taliban, raising questions among Afghans about how Taliban leaders will govern at the local level. The Taliban may thus see these factors as presenting an ideal time for the group to take actions that will bolster its international legitimacy.

Despite the excitement surrounding the deal, ... **P3**

By Arman Sidhu

## What Does Future Trade Look Like in Light of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement?

Following several months of talks between trade representative from Pakistan and Afghanistan, the two countries appear poised to finalize a preferential trade agreement (PTA) by the end of January, just one month before the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) is set to expire. Previous discussions have struggled to resolve numerous trade-related concerns raised by both sides, leading to a sharp decline in bilateral trade between the two countries last year.

Trade remains one of the more complex aspects of the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul. Complaints of extortion by government officials,

customs obstacles, and insecurity has culminated in frequent border closures, compelling both sides to seek costlier alternative transit routes and ink multilateral trade deals that exclude one another.

For Pakistan, the opportunity to cultivate strong trade linkages with Afghanistan has little to do with access to the Afghan market. Instead, Pakistan views Afghanistan as a gateway to the more lucrative markets found in China and Central Asia. Having borrowed billions to improve its own transport infrastructure, Pakistan's economic success is contingent on directing the flow of goods to its maritime

ports, particularly the port of Gwadar. As the flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the port of Gwadar is particularly useful to landlocked Central Asian states like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, each of whom have seen their South Asian trade aspirations hindered by over 40 years of instability in Afghanistan, which remains the critical bottleneck in linking South and Central Asian supply chains.

Though it has spearheaded a near 26-year old attempt to circumvent Afghanistan via the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA), Pakistan still ... **P3**

## ADB approves \$154mn for electricity supply to western Afghanistan

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a \$154.4 million grant to boost the supply of power in Afghanistan by extending the country's power grid into the western provinces of Herat and Farah, ensuring access to electricity for vulnerable communities in those provinces, a statement said on Thursday.

The assistance included \$36.4 million from the Asian Development Fund. The Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF) has supplied an additional \$118 million in cofinancing, contributed by the Government of Italy through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Afghan National Army Trust Fund.

AITF, administered by ADB, is a donor-financed fund established in 2010 to improve the livelihoods of the Afghan people through infrastructure development. "Herat and Farah are not connected to the national grid, leading to higher costs of doing business for people in these provinces, environmental degradation, and weak sustainable development indicators," said ADB Energy Specialist Takhmina Mukhamedova.

"Connecting villages in these two provinces to the grid will tangibly and sustainably improve health outcomes, living conditions, and economic opportunities for households living in the harshest conditions."

Electrification of Western Afghanistan is a priority for the government in order to reduce the significant social and economic costs associated with the lack

of clean, safe, and affordable energy sources.

The project will extend power supply from Turkmenistan under the ongoing power purchase and sales agreement between the two countries.

This includes supplying power transmission from local wind and solar photovoltaic projects of up to 100 megawatts and substituting electricity generated from diesel with renewable and imported gas-based grid power at a lower cost.

The project will also finance first time access to electricity in the targeted areas.

The project is aligned with the government's National Energy Supply Program, ADB's Strategy 2030, and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program's Energy Strategy 2030. It is also aligned with ADB's Afghanistan Country Partnership Strategy, 2017-2021, and its country operations business plan for Afghanistan, 2019-2021.

ADB is one of Afghanistan's largest on-budget development partners in the energy sector with cumulative commitments of \$1.77 billion in grants since 2002. The project is financed from ADB's Special Funds resources and is part of an overall \$1.2 billion Energy Supply Improvement Investment Program (2015-2024).

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region.



## China's Economic Growth Projected at 7.9% in 2021

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected China's economic growth in 2021 at 7.9% after concluding the annual Article IV review of the Chinese economy.

"The Chinese economy continues its fast recovery from the pandemic, helped by a strong containment effort and swift policy actions to mitigate the impact of the crisis," the executive board of the IMF said in a statement.

"Policymakers have provided financial relief and fiscal support to protect the most-affected firms while safeguarding financial stability," the IMF's executive board said, adding macroeconomic and financial policies have supported the economic recovery.

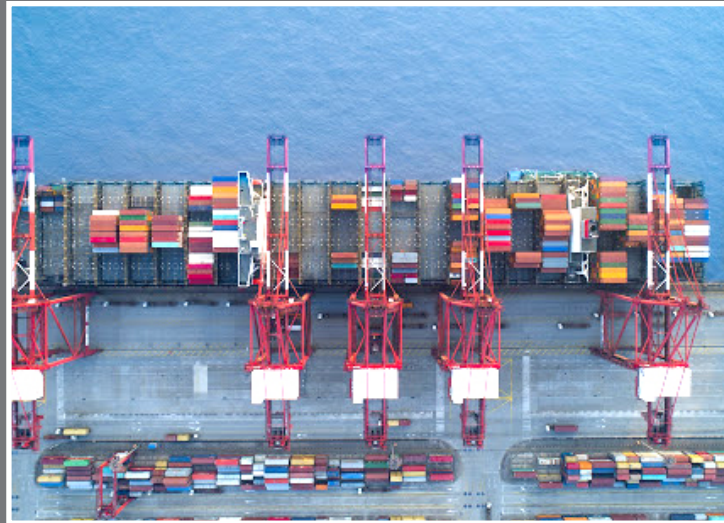
IMF executive directors called for a continuation of the "moderately supportive" fiscal and monetary policies until China's recovery is on solid ground.

As the recovery takes hold, the temporary measures supporting the financial sector should be replaced with policies to address problem loans and strengthen regulatory and supervisory frameworks, said the executive directors.

"Structural reform will be key to boosting potential growth, reduce external imbalances, and build a more resilient, green, and inclusive economy," they said.

"We're assuming under our baseline forecast the main driver of (China's economic) growth this year will be private consumption," Helge Berger, the IMF's China mission chief and assistant director in the Asia and Pacific Department, told Xinhua on Friday at a press briefing.

China's recovery so far has been proceeding "more rapidly than expected," and also supported by stronger-than-expected release of pent-up demand, said World Bank



Acting Vice President for Equitable Growth and Financial Institutions Ayhan Kose.

"As the Chinese economy continues to steadily recover from the COVID-19 shock, the authorities remain committed to pursuing prudent policies that will foster sustainable and high-quality growth going forward," Jin Zhongxia, IMF executive director for China, told Xinhua.

Citing the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement and the completion of bilateral investment agreement negotiations with the European Union (EU), Jin believed that China will continue to expand global economic linkages and cooperation to enhance its economic efficiency and resilience.

### Nimroz Airstrike...

"We have 18 killed and two wounded. The two wounded are members of the family who are the only survivors," said Zainullah Zwak, a resident of Khashrod district.

According to Maiwand 215 Corps, the airstrikes targeted a Taliban customs center on a highway that passes through Khashrod district, causing casualties among the militants.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi said 14 civilians were killed in the airstrike.

### Why the Taliban...

It's not clear whether this marks a clear break with past Taliban policy. The Taliban's policies toward girls' education remain inconsistent and somewhat unpredictable — local commanders' approaches vary by personality and according to their relationship with the local community. As a teacher in Wardak province explained, "Today, [a Taliban official] tells you that they allow girls up to sixth grade, but tomorrow, when someone else comes instead, he might not like girls' education."

More broadly, despite the leadership's rhetoric, the Taliban in the past has imposed tight restrictions on education for girls once they reach puberty, and it is difficult to find a secondary school open to girls in areas under Taliban control.

A related concern is whether the program will be successful in actually reaching girls in rural communities. There's some evidence, however, that the community-based education strategy proposed by the deal has been effective in enabling girls to attend school in areas where they are unable to attend government schools because of insecurity, family resistance or community restrictions.

While a surprise to many, the Taliban's deal with UNICEF suggests a growing recognition among Taliban leaders that the group will need to respond to the preferences of Afghans and the international community if it hopes to govern successfully.

### What Does...

remains Afghanistan's primary trading partner, accounting for over 40% of all Afghan exports. Furthermore, Pakistan's motives in maintaining a stable relationship with the Afghan government stems from its stake in the outcome of ongoing intra-Afghan dialogue. Given the strong possibility of the Taliban converting into a recognized political party in a potential peace deal, Pakistan's post-conflict relationship with Afghanistan will depend on its ability to operate within the Afghan state, giving it an opportunity to supplement its support base from the Taliban by appealing to a wider coalition of parties and officials.

In spite of their differences, both sides continue to affirm the need and desire to strengthen bilateral trade ties, particularly as it relates to formalizing border markets across the porous and insecure Durand Line. Border skirmishes remain a critical point of contention, as seen with instances like the July 2020 clash that resulted in the deaths of 15 Afghan civilians as well as Pakistan's unilateral decision to build

a 2,600-kilometer border fence that is scheduled to be completed in less than two months. For decades, trade talks have zeroed in on border issues, including the desire to formalize the booming black markets that have proven profitable for traders and militants that traverse the Durand Line to traffic stolen goods, arms, drugs, and humans.

To Pakistan's chagrin, the Afghan government has been unwavering in its demand to incorporate the trade of Indian goods in the terms of its deal with Pakistan. Lobbying pressure from Afghanistan's private sector and industry groups have demanded that their government work out an arrangement that would allow Afghan traders to use overland routes through Pakistan to access India via Wagah border, which splits the Indian and Pakistani halves of Punjab province.

Among the main gripes cited by the Afghan business community include inadequate market access and expensive transit costs in its trade with India, which is Afghanistan's second largest trading partner. The existing trade routes available to

Afghanistan and India include an expensive air corridor and the circuitous use of Iran's Chabahar Port. Barring an abnormal modification in its foreign policy, Pakistan is unlikely to grant accession to such a provision, making it likely that the status quo will persist unless Afghanistan can make several favorable concessions to Pakistan.

The nature of the Pak-Afghan trade relationship underscores the formidable obstacles to both intra-regional trade within South Asia and extra-regional linkages between Southern and Central Asian supply chains. In spite of its natural geographic advantages and the potential for mutually beneficial trading arrangements, the essential prerequisite lies with the trajectory of intra-Afghan talks, where Pakistan remains the most important foreign stakeholder. In the absence of a political compromise, the litany of trade woes afflicting both sides are unlikely to fade, exacerbating infrastructure gaps and the ability to attract and sustain investment to the region, putting it at a further disadvantage to other emerging markets.

### Facebook...

companies that promote their products, the rights group said, providing pages of the Burmese military.

Facebook has not acted on Burma Campaign UK requests to remove the pages, despite a UN report detailing how military-owned companies help fund violations of international law.

"Facebook appears to have double standards," said Farmaner. "If you incite violence in America you get

banned from Facebook, but if you recruit people to commit violence in Burma you still get an official Facebook blue tick." -Persecuted people

According to Amnesty International, more than 750,000 Rohingya refugees, mostly women, and children fled Myanmar and crossed into Bangladesh after Myanmar forces launched a crackdown on the minority Muslim community in August 2017.

Since Aug. 25, 2017, nearly 24,000 Rohingya Muslims have

been killed by Myanmar's state forces, according to a report by the Ontario International Development Agency (OIDA). More than 34,000 Rohingya were thrown into fires, over 114,000 more were beaten and as many as 18,000 Rohingya women and girls were raped by Myanmar's army and police said the OIDA report, titled Forced Migration of Rohingya: The Untold Experience. Over 115,000 Rohingya homes were burned and 113,000 others vandalized, the report added.

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# Parliamentary elections kick off in Kazakhstan

Kazakh voters headed to parliamentary polls on Sunday to elect deputies for the lower chamber of parliament for five-year terms. About 12 million registered voters in the country started to vote at 7 a.m. (0100GMT) local time, while citizens living abroad will vote at the same time. The voting will end at 8 p.m. (1400GMT). Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, voters are being checked for high temperatures and getting their hands disinfected before entering polling places nationwide. The election is being followed by nearly 400 observers from 30 countries and 10 international organizations, including

delegations from the Turkic Council and the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking States. A total of 312 candidates are running for 107 seats in parliament from the ruling Nur Otan Party, Ak Zhol Democratic Party, Auyl Party, and Adal Party. After casting his vote, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said authorities did everything to ensure free and just elections, providing equal opportunities to all candidates. The Kazakh parliament has a Senate and a lower chamber, the latter consisting of 107 deputies who all serve five-year terms.



## A look at the world

### UN says foresees deployment of Libya truce monitors

Thu UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said Saturday it foresees the deployment of a limited number of international monitors to ensure the implementation of the cease-fire between Libya's warring rivals. In a statement, the UNSMIL said a meeting was held by the co-chairs of the Security Work Council to discuss the security situation in Libya and ways to support the work of the 5+5 Joint Military Commission. The statement called on Libya's rivals to accelerate the implementation of the cease-fire and the immediate repatriation of all foreign fighters and mercenaries.



"The Mission reaffirms that it foresees the deployment of a limited number of impartial, unarmed, non-uniformed, international monitors, to complement the Libyan monitors deployed by the 5+5 Joint Military Commission," it said. On Oct. 23, the UN announced a permanent cease-fire agreement between Libya's warring rivals during 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission talks in Geneva. The Joint Military Committee includes five members from the Tripoli-based internationally recognized government and five from the camp of eastern warlord Khalifa Haftar. Libya has been plagued by chaos since the ouster of late ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Based in Tripoli and currently led by Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj, the Government of National Accord was founded in 2015 under a UN-led agreement, but efforts for a long-term political settlement have failed due to a military offensive by Haftar. Al-Sarraj's government has been battling Haftar's militias since April 2019 in a conflict that has claimed thousands of lives.

### Facebook urged to prevent Myanmar army campaign



A Rohingya rights group strengthened its demands Saturday for Facebook to stop the Burmese military from using its platform to recruit members. It came after Facebook suspended US President Donald Trump's account for inciting violence. The rights group also urged Facebook to stop Myanmar's military from promoting its businesses on the site -- profits from which help fund genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, it said. About 1.2 million Rohingya Muslims have fled to Bangladesh in the face of Myanmar's military crackdown and are currently taking temporary shelter in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. "Donald Trump has been suspended for inciting violence, but the Burmese military commit violence against civilians every day and are free to use Facebook to recruit soldiers to commit that violence," said Mark Farmaner, Director of Burma Campaign UK. "Military owned companies are allowed to use Facebook to promote products, the profits from which fund the military and help fund violations of international law, including genocide of the Rohingya," he added. Facebook has faced severe criticism for failing to tackle hate speech against Rohingya and other minorities in Burma, and has removed some military pages, including Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military, read a Jan. 9 statement by Burma Campaign UK. But several military Facebook pages still exist, including some with an official Facebook blue tick. Burma Campaign UK asked Facebook to ensure the pages are not used for recruitment, but no action has been taken, it said. The Burmese military has significant economic interests in Burma, owning companies involved in a wide range of products including beer, mobile phone networks, tea, cement and ballrooms. There are dozens of pages for the ... **P3**

### Italy tops 500,000 vaccines doses injected

Italy Saturday topped 500,000 people vaccinated against COVID-19, becoming the country with the highest number of first doses administered in the EU. According to the latest data, out of over 900,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine delivered across Italy since Dec. 27, more than 55% have already been injected. Despite an acceleration in the vaccination campaign over the past week, the situation varies substantially from region to region, with some highly populated regions - like Lombardy - still lagging behind. On Saturday, Italy also reported 483 new coronavirus-related deaths, down from 620 a day before, after the government



strengthened restrictions in some regions to stop the second wave of contagion. The Italian Health Ministry also reported 19,978 new daily infections, up from 17,533 a day before. On Friday, the government decided to tighten anti-virus measures in the hard-hit Lombardy region and four other areas, as it tries to reverse a recent acceleration in the infection rate. Five regions - including Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia Romagna in the north, and Sicily and Calabria in the south - were listed as medium-risk "orange" regions, starting from Jan. 10. Amid the health emergency, the government of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte continues to face political instability, as the threat of his coalition partner Matteo Renzi to bring down the government remains concrete. A meeting among the main coalition forces on Friday did not produce any agreement, showing that the tensions within the ruling majority are still high. Conte aims for his Cabinet to approve next week a new version of Italy's economic recovery plan, which includes some of the requests presented by Renzi's Italia Viva party. But it is still unclear if that would be enough to ensure the government's survival.

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