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Heart of Asia

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5 top Afghanistan cricketers to play in PSL

Five Afghan cricketers have been bought in the Pakistan Super League's sixth edition, which will be held in Karachi and Lahore from February 20 to March 22. According to reports, about 20 Afghan players had applied for the PSL but only five cricketers were picked up by different franchisees.

During the auction, the Lahore Qalandars bought match-winner Rashid Khan, Karachi Kings snapped up Mohammad Nabi and Peshawar Zalmi opted for Noor Ahmad Lakanwal, Majeed Ur Rehman and Quetta Gladiators picked Qais Ahmad.

Afghan national team skipper Asghar Stanikzai had also applied for this season of PSL but he remains unsold.

On the other hand, Shapoor Zadran, Aftab Alam, Gulbaddin Naib, Rahmatullah Gurbaz and other Afghan players also remained unsold.

Earlier, Mohammad Nabi had ...

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ADB Approves \$100m Grant for COVID19 Response in Afghanistan

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a \$100 million grant to help the government of Afghanistan respond to the coronavirus disease.

"ADB reaffirms its full commitment to supporting Afghanistan in its fight against COVID-19 and reducing the adverse impact of the pandemic on the lives of Afghans and the economy," said ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa.

"The assistance will help strengthen the health system, expand social protection for the poor and vulnerable population while ensuring gender mainstreaming, and support macroeconomic stabilization and job creation in Afghanistan," he was quoted as saying in a press release.

Afghanistan's economic has deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic because of business lockdowns, a sharp drop in household incomes, and a downturn in regional trade and remittances.

Afghan Govt probes airstrike that killed civilians



Afghan authorities said on Monday they are investigating an airstrike at the weekend which local officials say killed more than a dozen civilians, including children.

Provincial officials said 15 people died on Saturday night when a rocket struck a house in Khashrod district of Nimroz province.

"We are aware of claims of civilian casualties in Nimroz. We have launched an investigation jointly

with local officials," the defense ministry said in a statement.

Provincial council member Nehmatullah Sediqqi told AFP that Afghan forces carried out two airstrikes in the district.

"In the first strike, six Taliban fighters were killed. The second strike hit a house that killed 15 civilians, including women and children," he said.

Nimroz public health official Nasir

Ahmad Haibat said bodies of 15 people were brought to a hospital on Sunday.

Another local official, who did not want to be named, said the house targeted in the strike belonged to a Taliban commander and security forces did not know there were civilians inside.

The latest bloodshed triggered international calls for an investigation into the strike.

"We call for a full investigation and if need be for accountability and justice," the French embassy in Kabul said on Twitter.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in a report in October that 2,117 civilians were killed and 3,822 wounded in the first nine months of 2020.

President Ghani did not mention the number of those who lost their lives in the airstrike but said that the Taliban and other groups are "using people's houses and public places as shields," which is the "main reason behind civilian casualties" and is a consequence of war and is "not acceptable."

The report said that about eight percent of the civilian casualties during that period were caused by Afghan airstrikes.

The Taliban and Afghan forces have clashed almost daily across Afghanistan despite peace talks between the insurgents and the government.

The second round of peace talks commenced last week in the Qatari capital, with government negotiators pushing for a ceasefire as violence continues unabated across the conflict-wracked country.

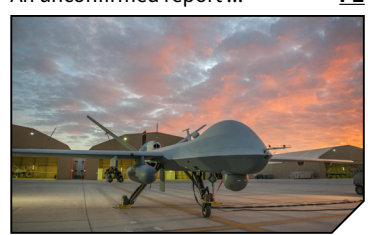
38 Taliban killed, incl 9 Pakistanis, in airstrikes in Farah and Nimroz

At least 29 Taliban militants were killed and seven others wounded in airstrikes by Afghan forces in western Farah province, the Afghan army said Monday.

The Afghan National Army (ANA) said in a statement that insurgents attacked several security outposts on Sunday night but "faced fierce resistance from the Afghan forces."

In response to the Taliban attack, the air force carried out airstrikes in the area, the statement said.

The statement did not provide details about the casualties of Afghan troops. An unconfirmed report ...



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WJ Harshly Reacted to President Ghani's Remarks on Next Year's Budget

The Lower House of Parliament on Monday's session harshly reacted to President Ghani's remarks about the authority of the House of Representatives to approve the draft budget and their request for personal projects in the fiscal year of 1400.

Mir Rahman Rahmani, the speaker of the House of Representatives, said that the president's remarks showed a "dark and ignorant view" of the law.

He stressed that the approval and adjustment of the draft budget is the exclusive competence of the House of Representatives, and that the House does not allow anyone with a personal interpretation of the law to embezzle public assets or use them for micro-programs, campaigns and group purposes.

According to Mir Rahmani, during a visit to Nangarhar last Thursday, President Ghani said that members



of the House of Representatives had requested 2,000 personal projects that should be included in the draft budget for the 1400 fiscal year.

Rahmani said that according to the constitution, the budget is the responsibility of the government, but that it is up to the House of Representatives to decide and approve it.

He called on the Ministry of Finance to resubmit the previously

rejected draft budget to the House of Representatives by amending and implementing the proposed amendments.

The speaker of the House of Representatives said that the amended draft budget should include a reasonable increase in the salaries of government employees. The House of Representatives has previously approved a plan to standardize the salaries of government employees.

38 Taliban...

indicates that at least nine soldiers were killed in skirmishes. Army officials, however, denied the report.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defense stated that at least 14 Taliban – including 9 Pakistani nationals – were killed in the Afghan force airstrike in Khash Rod district of Nimroz province on Saturday night.

At least six more insurgents were also wounded in the raids.

Conflicting reports indicate that 18 members of a family were killed in the air raid. But earlier the provincial media office said in a statement that Taliban fighters were killed in the air raids.

The relatives of those killed staged a protest however and carried 18 bodies to the city of Zaranj, the center of the province, calling for justice.

The Defense Ministry said claims of civilian casualties in the airstrikes would be investigated.

5 top Afghanistan...

played in the PSL, but as relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan were not good so Afghanistan Cricket Board previously did not allow Afghan players to play in PSL.

However, Hamid Shinwari, former ACB CEO, opposed Afghan cricketers to play in the PSL and asked the ACB not to allow these players to feature in the Pakistan league.

“ACB should not allow Afghan players to play in Pakistan League (PSL). Do not strengthen the economy of the enemy,” Shinwari said.

But former ACB director Azizullah Fazli called Afghan cricketers playing in foreign leagues as fruitful for Afghanistan.

Fazli tweeted: “The Afghanistan Cricket Board must stay away from politics. Afghan cricketers playing in foreign leagues is crucial for Afghanistan because it has economic benefits and a pride for Afghanistan.”

By Barnett R. Rubin

Biden can bring troops home from Afghanistan the right way

When President-Elect Biden enters the Oval Office, only 100 days will remain before May 1, which last year’s Doha Agreement with the Taliban sets as the deadline for the United States to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan.

That withdrawal, with its accompanying truce between the Taliban and U.S. forces, and the Taliban’s reciprocal commitment to prevent al-Qa’ida or any other group from launching attacks from Afghanistan, were to “pave the way” for intra-Afghan negotiations over “a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire” and an “agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.”

In a simultaneous joint declaration issued in Kabul, the U.S. and the Afghan governments committed themselves to “working together” for “a comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement” including those same four elements: U.S. troop withdrawal, Taliban counter-terrorist guarantees, a comprehensive ceasefire, and a political roadmap. The February 2020 agreement and declaration both stated that these components were “interdependent.” The agreement implemented that interdependence by, among other things, providing that negotiations over the ceasefire and political agreement between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan would continue over a period of thirteen months and three weeks — from March 10, 2020, to May 1, 2021 — before the completion of the U.S. troop withdrawal.

The withdrawal did not depend on the successful conclusion of those negotiations — no U.S. administration would cede sovereign control over troop deployments — but this schedule gave time for those negotiations to make solid progress before U.S. troops complete their exit.

Those negotiations, however, started six months late, in September rather than March 2020. Delays in the implementation of other elements of the agreement threw off the planned timetable. The Biden administration should reaffirm the U.S. commitment to the agreement, while seeking to build an international, regional, and Afghan



consensus in favor of a one-time, six-month adjustment of the deadline for withdrawal to reinstate the interdependence of the peace process’s components as provided in both the agreement and the declaration. U.S. troops should withdraw at the end of this six-month adjustment regardless of the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks. As usual in Washington, public debate on Afghanistan policy has myopically focused on only one factor, U.S. troops, and specifically on whether the Biden administration should implement the agreement’s provision for withdrawing all U.S. troops by May 1. During the campaign, President-elect Biden said he would prefer to withdraw all combat forces and leave a small counter-terrorism force, but such a unilateral decision would abrogate the Doha agreement, in a way that would be reminiscent of President Trump’s abrogation of the nuclear agreement with Iran. The Taliban would stop the talks with the Islamic Republic on

a ceasefire and political roadmap, return to war against the United States, and argue they are no longer responsible for the counter-terrorist guarantees.

Under such circumstances, the Taliban would likely enjoy more extensive international support than before. Thanks to the efforts of Amb. Zalmay Khalilzad, the outgoing administration’s special representative for Afghan reconciliation, Russia, China, and Pakistan have supported the Doha process, while Iran, albeit critical, has not acted as a spoiler. These positions were predicated on Washington’s commitment to withdraw its troops, which these Asian powers perceive as a core national interest. If the United States abrogates the agreement, these countries will support the Taliban’s demand for withdrawal.

Russia would also be likely to restart the Moscow Process, a series of international meetings that it launched in December 2016. ...

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By Chris Reynolds

Afghanistan: expect anything except peace

Joe Biden will take over as president from Donald Trump on 20 January with the USA in the midst of its second or maybe third attempt to extricate itself from Afghanistan.

After the 11 September 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, the USA sent troops and support to help Northern Alliance warlords in Afghanistan to drive out the Taliban, which then controlled most of the country and provided a reserve base for Al Qaeda.

The Northern Alliance won quickly. The Taliban abandoned the capital city, Kabul, which they had ruled since 1996, before Northern Alliance troops even got there, and the people poured onto the streets to cheer.

There were only a couple of thousand US troops in the country then. After military mopping-up, by May 2003 Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defence for US president George W Bush, declared an “end to major conflict” in Afghanistan.

Yet the Taliban had regrouped in areas of north-west Pakistan largely outside the control of Pakistan’s government. It had support from some elements at least of Pakistan’s military. From the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, it went back on the offensive and regained ground.

Bush increased the US military presence, bit by bit, to about 30,000. Barack Obama became president in January 2009 with a policy of pulling

US troops out of Iraq, but putting extra troops into Afghanistan.

He suggested that he wanted something like the US troop “surge” in Iraq in 2007, which did have military success against the Sunni-sectarian resistance, though only to stabilise a Shia-Islamist regime in Baghdad which was closer to Iran than to the USA. That Baghdad regime, by its Shia bias and its corruption, would create the conditions for the Sunni-sectarian resistance to regroup around Daesh and take Mosul and much of northern Iraq in June 2014. As Obama’s vice-president, Joe Biden announced early in 2009 that Washington was conducting a “strategic review” on Afghanistan with a view to setting “clear and achievable” goals. An official told The Guardian that the US would now be “much more realistic”, and that for the US to withdraw Afghanistan “doesn’t need to be a democracy, just secure”.

In 2014 the US and NATO officially handed over responsibility to the Afghan army, and stepped back to an advisory and supplementary role. But the “surge” in Afghanistan, in which the US military presence had risen to over 100,000 by 2010, had had not even the limited and short-term success the 2007 US “surge” in Iraq had had. High civilian casualties and the corruptness of the Kabul government drove people in rural

Afghanistan towards the Taliban.

And the costs were huge. The US’s military spending on Afghanistan was \$120 billion in 2011, and over 2001-20 has been maybe \$800 billion. Its total related spending, maybe \$2,000 billion over those 20 years. With essentially nothing to show for it.

Obama turned to winding down and hoping for the best. He announced a plan to withdraw completely by 2016. At the end of his term of office there were still 8,400 US troops in Afghanistan, and Obama said he would leave it to his successor to decide what next.

Donald Trump took office promising to withdraw from Afghanistan, but initially increased troop numbers to 17,000.

In 2019-20 he made another drive to get out, more or less anyhow. In February 2020 the USA signed a peace deal with the Taliban over the heads of the Afghan government. From September 2020 the USA finally strong-armed the Kabul government and “civil society representatives” into faltering direct talks with the Taliban.

There are now around 4,000 US troops in Afghanistan (in a total of 11,000 NATO troops, in contingents from 38 countries), and Trump officials say they plan to have that number down to 2,500 by mid-January.

One condition in the February 2020 agreement was that the Taliban would not attack US troops: it hasn’t, but then those troops have been keeping out of harm’s way. Another was that the Taliban would break links with Al Qaeda. It hasn’t done that, though it has clashed with Daesh, which is now also organising in Afghanistan, at odds with both the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The US is keen to get out. Asked in July 2020 whether rapid withdrawal would indict the US as responsible for the Taliban regaining power, Joe Biden replied: “Zero responsibility. The responsibility I have is to protect America’s national interest and not put our women and men in harm’s way... that’s what I’d do as president”. It will probably not be so simple. Pakistan may be happy with the Taliban regaining power, but all the other important powers, including China, Russia, India, Iran, want a deal which limits the Taliban. On the other side, the Taliban is probably stronger than ever. It has 60,000 full-time fighters, and a solid economic base in the opium trade from the areas it controls. In the absence of any credible alternative social programme, its religio-political programme grips people, or enough people to keep it strong. Attacks in Kabul, whether from Daesh or from covert Taliban operators, have increased. On 2 November 2020, an Islamist attack on the Kabul University campus killed 20-odd or 30-odd students; on 15 December

the deputy governor of Kabul was killed by a car bomb.

On all indications, the Taliban will continue its war despite all talks and agreements, seeing no reason to stop short of fully regaining power.

It is not certain it can do that. Before 2001, it never gained control of the whole country. The old Stalinist (PDPA) government in Kabul, under Mohammad Najibullah, held on to the city for three years after USSR troops withdrew in 1988-89, and was defeated (initially by a looser Islamist alliance, to be supplanted by the Taliban in 1996) only after Russia withdrew all aid in January 1992. Kabul now has a population of over 4 million. Even if most of them have no memory of the Taliban’s rule in Kabul in 1996-2001 (42% of Afghanistan’s population is under 14, and Kabul’s population was down to 500,000 in 2001), the vast majority will fear and oppose Taliban reconquest.

But the US presence, despite all the billions spent, has been maybe even less successful in nurturing a substantial and coherent modernising force in Afghan society than the USSR’s disastrous war in 1979-1989 was. Solidarity has for many years supported US withdrawal from Afghanistan. But not because it will be liberation if the Taliban win, or because the US presence can be accurately described as colonial or semi-colonial. No: the longer the US stays, the worse the prospects for after its withdrawal, inevitable some day, become. ...

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190 onion cold storages established in Laghman

The Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock Department on Monday said 190 cold storages for onion have been built in eastern Laghman province under the Agricultural Products' Management project. Mohammad Jamil Khushal, Laghman agriculture department head, told Pajhwok Afghan News the storages were built in the capital city Mehtarlam, Qarghayi, Alishing and Alinigar districts. He added construction of the storages cost 72 million afghanis. On the other hand, farmers praised the development and said they

would store thousands of metric tons of onion in these storages and deliver them to the market at a convenient time. Abdul Qayoom, a resident of Shamt district, told Pajhwok Afghan News that they would also store potatoes in the storages. "I hope onion storages will solve economic problems of the farmers," he added. Wahedullah Niazi, a farmer in Mehtarlam, said they would be able to store their products for a long time in these storages. The cold warehouses would result in a 10pc



increase in onion cultivation. Enayatullah Faryad, an economist, called establishment of storages as important and efficient because they resulted in an increased cash income. "Farmers will be able to receive up to

75pc revenue every season," he said. "The longer products stay in storages means more prices," he added. Laghman exports thousands of tons of onions to capital Kabul and other provinces.

Afghanistan: expect...

Only a working-class and democratic upheaval in Pakistan, cutting off the Taliban from its nurturing hinterland, could change that calculus. Some statistics look impressive. Most people in Afghanistan now have at least some electricity. Primary school enrolments, only about 20% of the age-group in 2001, are near 100%, on paper at least. GDP per head (purchasing-power-parity figures) has risen from \$877 in 2001 to \$2293 in 2019. The Afghan army, built largely from scratch after 2001, is now 180,000 strong (with more generals, apparently, than the US army).

But the judgement of a 2012 report on the economy still rings true: "Afghanistan [outside the subsistence-level agriculture still widespread in the rural majority of the population] has a service economy concentrated on cosmetic projects mainly driven by the donor community" (75% of the government's budget comes from international aid). "It lacks a long-term strategy... Thirty years of war and conflict have destroyed the minimal economic infrastructure and institutions this country once possessed... No efforts have been made to either reinstate the economic structure of the past, or to develop new ones that can help build a modern state and developed economy. Instead, energy is wasted on projects and activities in the name of privatisation and the free market, which have brought more harm than benefit to the country and the economy".

Although the country is estimated to have large mineral wealth, it has almost no exports beyond fruit and nuts to India and Pakistan. Unemployment is steadily 20-odd%. The country has more educated young people than it had, but they emigrate, scratch jobs in international-donor projects, or languish unemployed and discontented.

The presidential election of September 2019 drew only 1.8 million voters, out of 10 million registered. The result was not announced until February 2020, and then was rejected by the leading candidates, opening a crisis resolved only by them agreeing a power-sharing deal (as they had done after the previous election in 2014).

The Afghan feminist Malalai Joya puts it like this: "Just 19 years ago, the Americans and NATO, under the name of 'Fight against Terrorism', occupied our country. Their first work was to suppress the Taliban's medieval Emirates, but after two decades of killing and crimes [they have turned] Afghanistan into a ruined village..."

"From what is going on under the name of the so-called peace efforts in Doha [the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and "civil society"], expect every betrayal... except peace!"

Biden can bring...

These culminated in a February 2019 intra-Afghan dialogue in Moscow that included the Taliban and a broad group of Afghan powerholders. In March 2019, however, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced the suspension of the Moscow Process in support of Khalilzad's effort. During a December 2019 visit to Moscow, I learned that Russia is prepared to relaunch the Moscow Process on short notice should the Doha process stall or collapse. The Taliban and many Afghan political leaders would participate, along with the neighbors. In such a case, Washington's position would be weaker than it is now.

Weak Mechanism for Interdependence of Elements of Doha Agreement The delay occurred because the Afghan government insisted on additional guarantees before releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners, a Taliban demand incorporated in the Doha agreement (but not the joint statement) as a precondition for the start of negotiations. Those prisoners were held by the Afghan government, not the United States, and the Afghan government and public were justifiably concerned that, while the Taliban promised that the prisoners "will not pose a threat to the United States and its allies," they offered no guarantee they would not resume the war against the government. Resolving the dispute with the Afghan government over the prisoner release took six months. The Taliban could legitimately claim that Washington failed to fulfill its commitment to obtain the release of the prisoners, and the Afghan government could legitimately claim that it was not bound by an agreement to which it was not a party and which did not protect its interests.

The agreement requires the Taliban not to allow al-Qa'ida or others to use Afghan territory to attack the United States and its allies, but it does not specify how implementation of this commitment is related to the other parts of the agreement. When confronted with charges that they have not cut all ties with al-Qa'ida, the Taliban insist both that they have not allowed

any attacks to take place and that they will comply more broadly only when Washington complies with its obligations by withdrawing troops, obtaining the release of remaining prisoners, and lifting sanctions. The agreement does not include any timetable or other provision specifying the mechanism for insuring the interdependence of the U.S. troop withdrawal and the Taliban's counter-terrorism guarantees.

The delay has rendered other provisions of the interrelationships of the agreement's components null and void. Upon the start of Intra-Afghan Negotiations, the United States was to begin a review of the Rewards for Justice list with the goal of removing all Afghan Taliban names from it by August 27, 2020. Likewise, it was to start diplomatic engagement with the aim of lifting all UN Security Council sanctions against the Taliban by May 29, 2020, and gain the release of all remaining prisoners after the initial release of 5,000 by June 10, 2020.

Washington could seek to adjust the agreement by negotiating a one-time, six-month recalibration of the deadline for troop withdrawal together with recalculated target dates for its other obligations, including the Taliban's counter-terrorism commitments, keyed to the actual rather than putative start of the negotiations. To make it clear that rescheduling the deadline is a step toward implementing rather than reneging on the agreement, the Biden administration should seek to form an international consensus in support of such a change before approaching the Taliban and Afghan government. China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan have all at one time or another indicated that they want a "responsible" troop withdrawal that helps stabilize Afghanistan. If they are treated as partners and taken into our confidence in the decision-making, they might support a six-month recalibration of the agreement's target dates. The Taliban will respond differently if the other regional powers support this plan rather than oppose it.

Implementation of Policy Adjustment The first step could be to win the support for this proposal from U.S. allies at the NATO ministerial

scheduled for February 12. Next, Washington could convene the "troika plus," a grouping formed by Khalilzad that includes the United States, Russia, and China (the troika) plus Pakistan. Iran has so far declined to join, but its position might change after the Biden administration re-enters the nuclear deal (JCPOA) and rescinds sanctions. The troika plus could issue a communique supporting the U.S. proposal while reaffirming the commitment to withdraw all troops. Qatar, which provides a base for the Taliban's diplomatic arm, could also help persuade the Taliban to accept the plan. If the regional states refuse to support such a proposal, Washington should proceed with the scheduled withdrawal while maintaining verification mechanisms and political support for the Afghan peace negotiations. Trying to leave a counter-terrorism force in Afghanistan against the will of both the Taliban and the landlocked country's neighbors, however, would guarantee the war's continuation. And, rather than limiting terrorism, it would intensify the conflict that provides international terrorist groups with access to Afghanistan.

If, on the other hand, the region agrees, the Taliban, which has spent years lobbying for international recognition and which relies on Pakistan for its leadership's safe haven and Qatar for its diplomacy, would be hard-pressed to resist.

Such a recalibration would increase the chances for a successful political settlement and a responsible withdrawal that would protect U.S. and global interests not only in Afghanistan but in the Asian regions surrounding it. Washington should use both revived diplomacy and the leverage of its remaining 2,500 troops to build the regional consensus required to implement an agreement or manage a continuing conflict. Such a consensus is the minimal basis for the cooperation the Biden administration will need to advance other objectives, including managing climate change, pursuing the campaign against ISIS, relaxing tensions with Iran, and engaging in constructive economic competition with China.

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U.S. designating Yemen's Houthis a 'terrorist' group

The United States will designate Yemen's Houthi rebels as a terrorist group, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, a late-term move that aid groups fear will worsen the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

With just 10 days left before President-elect Joe Biden takes office, the announcement on Sunday could complicate the new U.S. administration's efforts to restart diplomacy with Iran, which has ties to the Houthis and to reassess the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has led a brutal offensive in Yemen.

"The designations are intended to hold Ansar Allah accountable for its terrorist acts, including cross-border attacks threatening civilian populations, infrastructure and commercial shipping," Pompeo said in a

statement, using the official name of the Houthi movement.

It has led a campaign that has "killed many people, continues to destabilise the region and denies Yemenis a peaceful solution to the conflict in their country", he added.

Pompeo pointed to a December 30 attack on an airport in Yemen's second city Aden, which killed 26 people and was blamed by the Saudi-backed government on the Houthis.

The rebel group controls much of Yemen and is already under U.S. sanctions.

But a designation as a terrorist group is expected to scare away outside actors from carrying out many transactions with Houthi authorities, including bank transfers and buying food and fuel.

The Trump administration has been piling



on sanctions related to Iran in recent weeks, prompting some Biden allies and outside analysts to conclude that Trump aides are seeking to make it harder for the incoming

administration to re-engage with Iran and rejoin an international nuclear agreement. Both the Houthis and Iran condemned Pompeo's announcement on Monday.

A look at the world

China to allow WHO probe into COVID-19 origins

China announced Monday that a team of foreign experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) would be visiting the country to probe the origins of the novel coronavirus next Thursday.

A 10-member team of international experts is due in Wuhan city, where the virus was first reported in December 2019. It has since spread across the globe, infecting over 90



million people and costing more than 1.9 million lives.

China's National Health Commission said the WHO experts would arrive on Thursday and "cooperate with Chinese experts to investigate the origin of COVID-19," the Chinese Global Times daily reported.

Last week, Beijing had said it was still negotiating with the WHO about the visit.

"There has never been any problem in cooperation between China and the WHO. It's not just a visa issue, the two sides are in close communication on specific dates and arrangements for the team's China visit," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said in a press conference on Wednesday.

The statement came a day after WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus expressed his dismay over China not allowing members of the team to enter the country for the on-site probe.

Biden to nominate longtime U.S. diplomat Burns to lead CIA



U.S. President-elect Joe Biden will nominate former career diplomat and former deputy secretary of state William Burns to lead the CIA, his transition team said on Monday.

Burns served 33 years as a U.S. diplomat, including as U.S. ambassador to Russia and as lead negotiator in the secret talks that paved the way to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, under former Democratic President Barack Obama.

He is currently president of the international affairs think tank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"Ambassador Burns is a crisis-tested public servant who has spent his career working to keep Americans safe and secure," Biden's transition team said in a statement.

Biden's pick to lead the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency comes as he races to get a national security team into place after the transition was delayed by Republican President Donald Trump contesting the Democrat's November election victory.

Burns must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate, in which Biden's fellow Democrats narrowly hold the majority. Biden has asked Congress to confirm his national security team as close to his Jan. 20 inauguration as possible, but still faces the prospect of having few permanent appointees in place when he takes office.

Biden, who served as vice president under Obama, has said he would restore the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which Trump abandoned.

Iran plans to import AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines from India, China, Russia

Iran plans to import some two million doses of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines from India, China, and Russia by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20).

"The Iranian-made vaccine is more reliable than many foreign-made vaccines, but it takes a long time to be approved. So, the health ministry plans to import some two million doses of vaccines from India, China, and Russia by the end of the year," IRNA quoted Mohammad-Reza Zafarghandi, head of the Iranian Medical Council, as saying on Monday.

Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were never on



the agenda to be purchased by Iran due to their high prices, transportation problems, and the need to be kept extremely cold, Zafarghandi added.

"But, the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is produced by Sweden and only its scientific studies have been done in Britain's Oxford, can be purchased. Moreover, it is possible to be kept in Iran," he explained.

In a televised speech on Friday, Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei prohibited the import of American and British coronavirus vaccines to Iran, saying if the Americans were able to produce vaccines they weren't in such dire circumstances.

"I really don't trust them. They sometimes want to test the vaccine on other nations," Ayatollah Khamenei added.

Following the Leader's remarks, Mohammad-Hassan Qossian-Moqaddam, the Iranian Red Crescent Society spokesman, said that importing Pfizer vaccines made by the United States 'is no more the question'. "We are ready to cooperate, if necessary, in case the Ministry of Health puts in a request [for importing vaccines] from eastern countries," IRNA quoted Qossian-Moqaddam as saying.



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