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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Issue No. 904

www.heartofasia.af

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## Two Killed, One Wounded in Kabul IED Blast

At least two Police personnel were killed and one other was wounded in an IED blast in Kabul city this morning, security officials said.

The spokesman of Kabul Police, Ferdaws Faramarz said that a Land Cruiser type vehicle targeted by an IED in Kabul University road of PD3 at around 09:15am on Saturday.

No group has immediately claimed responsibility for the incident.

Police said investigations have started regarding the blast.



## Wolesi Jirga again rejects 2021 budget

The Wolesi Jirga on Saturday once again rejected the 1400 solar year budget with a majority of votes over government's failure to correct flaws and make changes to the draft.

The lower house had previously rejected the draft budget for 1400 solar year over elimination of 1,100 provincial projects and a surge in funds for government's codes.

The government resent a revised version of the budget draft to the lower house a week ago after adding 20 billion afghanis to the accounts.

Speaker Mir Rahman Rahmani said the government had not fixed 17 violations identified in the first draft and instead made two more violations in the second draft.

The speaker said the parliament's recommendation of equalizing salaries of government employees had not been included in the budget draft.

Imbalance, inclusion of national food program (NFP) in the draft, loan and hefty budget for some departments were cited as reasons for not approving the budget draft.

The lower house had earlier rejected the National Food Program.

Mir Afghan Safi, who heads the house finance and budget commission, told on Saturday (yesterday) session ... **P3**

# Taliban welcomes U.S. troops downsize in Afghanistan



The Taliban welcomed the downsizing of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, calling it an important step in implementing the Doha agreement. A spokesperson for the Islamic

Emirate of Afghanistan Political Office Mohammad Naeem Wardak, in a tweet, welcomed the downsizing of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, calling it an important step in implementing

the Doha agreement. "The full implementation of the Doha Agreement is in the interest of all countries and nations of the world," he wrote in the message. Taliban spokesman went on to say

that as the new U.S. administration takes office, the group, is committed to implementing the terms of the agreement and demands the same from the other side.

On Friday, the U.S. military said that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan has dropped to 2,500 despite congressional opposition. According to the Associated Press, Trump had previously claimed that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan had reached its lowest level in 19 years.

According to an agreement reached between the United States and the Taliban in Doha, all foreign troops must leave Afghanistan by May 2021 if progress is made in the inter-Afghan talks and the ground for peace is provided.

U.S. President-elect Biden, who insists that a small number of US troops remain in Afghanistan to ensure that al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups do not attack the United States, has faced many questions, including how to reduce foreign troops, however, Biden's policy towards Afghanistan has not yet been determined.

## NATO: We Stand Ready to Further Adjust Our Presence in Afghanistan

NATO in a statement reported that our position has not changed, we are carrying out our train, advise and assist mission in current configuration, with a headquarters in Kabul and our regional commands.

BNA quoting the statement reported, we are helping the Afghan security forces in their efforts towards lasting peace and ensuring that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for international terrorism, the statement added. NATO continues to support the Afghan peace process and as part of the peace process, we stand ready to further adjust our presence, in ... **P2**



## Afghan Migrants Found Almost Frozen in Romanians' Trucks in France and Germany

Two trucks driven by Romanian citizens carrying Afghan migrants have been detected in France and Germany this week.

On January 12 six Afghan refugees starving and frozen, with 4 of them minors, have been discovered in a truck coming from Romania, in a parking in Jura, France, prosecutor Lionel Pascal told France Info.

The young Afghans, aged from 17 to 20, would have been embarked in the truck's trailer against their will, most probably by people who are part of a criminal group.

Also on January 12, other 8 Afghan migrants have been found in Grüneberg, Germany in a truck registered in Bulgaria but driven by a 51-year-old Romanian driver, according to the German Police. The Afghans, with ages ranging



from 15 to 23yo, were discovered in the refrigerated trailer truck. The minors were taken in a special shelter, while the adults were handed over to the immigration bureau in Eisenhüttenstadt.

The Afghans said they had been boarded in the truck's trail in Romania. The Romanian driver was heard and was set free for the moment, with no further details available yet.

## Nepal soil...

India's Ministry of External Affairs said a joint commission "comprehensively reviewed all aspects of multifaceted cooperation between the two countries and explored ways to further strengthen the traditionally close and friendly ties".

The commission emphasized the need to "facilitate cross border movement of people and goods" and said, "India conveyed that it would undertake two more cultural heritage projects in Nepal, with grant assistance."

"The close cooperation between the two sides in combating the Covid-19 pandemic in the region was noted. Nepal congratulated India on the remarkable success in production of Covishield and Covaxin vaccines in India and requested an early provision of vaccines to Nepal," it added.

## NATO: We Stand...

line with our conditions-based approach, the statement further added.

In the months ahead, we will continue to assess our presence based on conditions on the ground. NATO Defense Ministers will discuss our presence in Afghanistan at their meeting in February. Whatever path we choose, it is important that we do so together, in a coordinated and deliberate way, the statement concluded.

The US had already stated that they would reduce their presence in Afghanistan to 2,500 troops. They also made clear that they would continue to provide their enablers to Resolute Support Mission.

## Palestinians..

Following the 2006 polls, clashes between Fatah and Hamas raged for more than a year, culminating in Hamas's 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip, where it still reigns despite an Israeli-Egyptian blockade and three wars with Israel.

By Frud Bezhan

# Would an Afghan Interim Government Help or Hinder Peace Efforts?

Peace talks between Afghan government representatives and the Taliban have been painstakingly slow, bogged down for months by disagreements over minor issues.

The warring sides have agreed on the rules and procedures for the negotiations. But they have yet to settle on an agenda for the talks. Negotiations over the substantial issues -- including a permanent cease-fire and a power-sharing formula -- are far off. Progress has been hampered by deep mistrust and animosity. A huge gulf remains on key issues between the sides, which have conflicting priorities in the negotiations.

Those divisions have been exacerbated by soaring violence. Both sides have intensified military operations, particularly the Taliban, which sees violence as its main source of leverage against the government.

Amid the bloody impasse, there have been growing calls for President Ashraf Ghani to step down and a neutral interim government that includes the Taliban to take over.

That transitional authority could pave the way for a political settlement, proponents say, including the future distribution of power and changes to the constitution.

The idea has been floated privately by U.S. officials and has been supported by the Taliban, Pakistan -- the militant group's main foreign sponsor -- and some Afghan opposition figures. But the proposal is deeply controversial and has been strongly rejected by Ghani and his allies.

Supporters of the idea say it would stop the escalating violence and allow the warring Afghan factions to reach a settlement, given the Taliban's refusal to recognize Ghani's administration.

But critics describe it as premature and a risky ploy that could trigger chaos and state collapse. Opponents say the idea is being pushed by opposition figures who want to gain a stake in power.

A political settlement is a key part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement signed in February 2020 that is aimed at ending the war.

That deal calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces in Afghanistan by May in return for counterterrorism guarantees from the Taliban, which is to negotiate a permanent cease-fire and a power-sharing arrangement with the internationally recognized



government in Kabul.

It is unclear if President-elect Joe Biden, who takes office on January 20, will stick to the deal. The Afghan government and the Taliban have effectively put peace talks on hold in recent weeks as they wait for signals from the new U.S. administration.

'Undeniable Topic'

Calls for an interim government have grown since Afghan and Taliban negotiators reconvened for talks in the Gulf state of Qatar on January 5, following a 20-day hiatus.

The talks have turned toward setting an agenda for the talks -- what and in which order issues should be negotiated by the sides.

But the discussions have stalled.

The government is prioritizing a permanent cease-fire. The Taliban wants to discuss power-sharing, insisting it will only agree to a cease-fire when progress is made on the form of a future power-sharing government.

"An interim government is an undeniable topic of discussion, because we want a cease-fire and the Taliban aren't ready to agree to one with the current government," said Hafiz Mansur, a member of the government negotiating team, on January 3.

Amin Ahmadi, another government negotiator, said in an interview on January 7 that the international community backed an interim government, adding that "we cannot say no to the world's demand."

Meanwhile, Atta Mohammad Noor, a powerful

regional leader, said on January 7 that "we should not oppose" the idea of an interim government "but further develop it for the sake of national unity."

Those calls came as U.S. envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad visited Kabul last week where he held talks with senior Afghan officials and key power brokers to gauge their support for an interim government, Afghan media reported. Ghani did not meet with the U.S. diplomat.

Gul Rahman Qazi, a close aide to former President Hamid Karzai, with whom Khalilzad held talks, said "three options" were discussed.

"The first one is to include the Taliban in the present government, the second option is to merge this government with the Taliban, but both of these options aren't acceptable for the international community. The third option was to establish an interim and inclusive government."

Ross Wilson, the most senior U.S. diplomat in Kabul, denied that Washington had "advocated" for the creation of an interim government.

"We have not advocated, and the United States is not advocating, an interim government," Wilson said in a tweet on January 13. "The outcomes of Afghanistan Peace Negotiations are up to Afghans & we believe those outcomes should reflect the wishes & aspirations of the Afghan people."

'Peace Of The Graveyard'

Ghani ruled out an interim government with the Taliban last week, saying he would complete ... **P3**

By Scott Peterson

## Talk or fight? In Afghanistan, signs Taliban now prefer victory

In the streets of Kabul, Shogofa Sediqi knew she was being stalked by Taliban killers.

As the chief director for Afghanistan's Zan TV (Women's TV), she had grown accustomed to militants sending her threats, telling her in real time what she was wearing and what time she left home, and warning her to stop her work as a journalist.

"We know you are back, at the airport," read the first message that popped up on her phone last summer, after a month in India. Later, men waiting in a car outside her house rammed her vehicle as they tried to run her over.

Ms. Sediqi, like many Afghans desperate for an end to such threats and decades of war, had hoped that the danger to civil society and women's rights posed by the Islamist Taliban would soon recede when the insurgents and government began intra-Afghan peace talks last September.

But an unprecedented surge in targeted assassinations in Kabul and other urban centers -- which have left dozens of journalists, civil society activists, and officials dead,

in almost daily killings since autumn -- combined with sluggish peace talks and an accelerating U.S. troop withdrawal, is deflating her hope of a peaceful future.

The killings are one more signal to analysts, too, that any initial Taliban strategy to negotiate peace with the Western-backed government -- whose freedoms and existence the Taliban reject as un-Islamic -- has been replaced by renewed determination to achieve military victory and seize full control of the country after American troops withdraw this spring.

The Taliban "have not changed" "They are targeting journalists and civil society because they are the loud voices of the nation," says Ms. Sediqi, whose network has been forced by a multitude of threats to stop live broadcasts and switch to recorded programming, while most staff work from home.

"The Taliban is the same Taliban as before. They have not changed. They do not accept women's activists and civil society," says Ms. Sediqi. "The situation has become worse; we've lost so many. ... We don't know who

is our enemy. When we come out we don't trust anyone."

Few of the assassinations have been claimed, and the Taliban officially deny any role. But on Jan. 4, for the first time, the U.S. forces spokesman in Kabul explicitly blamed the Taliban, stating that its "campaign of unclaimed attacks and targeted killings ... must also cease for peace to succeed."

And this week Afghan commandos reported discovery of a bomb-making center in Logar province with hundreds of mortar rounds and homemade magnetic "sticky" bombs -- a tool favored for use on cars stuck in traffic -- which they linked to a Taliban assassination cell known as Obaida Karwan.

Ahmad Zia Saraj, head of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, told lawmakers Dec. 29 of the existence of Obaida Karwan, tasked with carrying out targeted killings, and said 70 suspects charged with that mission had been arrested. Blindfolded suspects have also been put before cameras at press conferences, to describe their role in Taliban-ordered

assassinations.

Preparing for authoritarian rule "The best way to make sense of what the Taliban are doing by taking out civil society, is it's part of them preparing for power," says Michael Semple, an Afghanistan expert at Queen's University Belfast who lived and worked for years in the country. For the Taliban, the killings both spread panic and undermine confidence in the government.

"It may also be about silencing civil society," says Mr. Semple. "The Taliban are not going to brook any criticism, either in their campaign to topple the government, or once they are busy putting in place their own regime. Don't expect freedom of speech, when they are back." And the Taliban coming back, in total control -- as they ruled their self-declared "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" in the late 1990s, with an iron hand -- is the premise of current Taliban thinking, he says, despite past public statements about moderating their strict policies.

"They are setting about imposing the Taliban version of Islam ... forced at the barrel of a gun," says Mr. Semple. "From what I pick up, on their political thinking about when they take over later on in the year, they are looking at authoritarian

rule. The Taliban will be solely in charge, and that means any of the old freedoms and guarantees will be gone."

Targeted killings of officials and members of the Afghan security forces have been a frequent Taliban insurgency tactic since the jihadists were ousted from power by the United States in 2001. The Taliban now control or have influence over half the country, and field a wide network of loyal agents.

Justification for the shift to high-profile civil society targets -- even as peace talks continue -- is clear in recent Taliban propaganda videos. One posted by a Taliban spokesman on Twitter on Dec. 28 shows five rifle-toting, thickly bearded fighters standing in a row. One of them -- citing a verse in the Quran -- declares that "it is permissible to kill the [U.S.-backed] puppet regime of Kabul" because it has taken "Jews and the Christians as allies." He says jihad against them is obligatory.

Accelerated U.S. withdrawal Contributing to the apparent change in Taliban calculations -- and slow progress at intra-Afghan talks, which resumed this week in Qatar after a recess, but without two top Taliban negotiators who failed to return -- is the accelerated withdrawal of U.S. troops to 2,500 by Friday. ... **P3**

# Herat Exports \$16 Million Worth of Cumin Worldwide

Herat exported 9,857 tons of green cumin and 94 tons of black cumin to various countries this year, according to Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment. Compared to last year's 2,540 tons of green cumin and 20 tons of black cumin, this year's exports were being up by 80%. The spice was exported to Kazakhstan, Germany, the US, UAE, Turkey, Sweden, Austria, Bangladesh,

Iran, Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Herat harvested 5,000 tons of cumin this year, indicating a 10% increase from last year's 4,000 tons. Black cumin is a rare spice that's known for being more flavorful than green cumin. In addition to being an essential spice in various cuisines, black cumin also has a long history of medicinal uses. It's grown in the wild and hand-picked by farmers and foragers.



### Exchange Rates

76.95	\$	77.05
93	€	93.1
103.1	£	103.2
478	Rp.	479
20.85	₹	20.95
1035	₹	1045

### Contact Numbers

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Kabul Ambulance - 112

Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital

0202301360

Ata Turk Hospital

0202500312

Corona call center - 166

### Talk or fight? In...

A U.S.-Taliban withdrawal agreement signed last February committed American and NATO forces to a complete pullout by May 2021, in exchange for Taliban counterterrorism steps and ending cooperation with Al Qaeda, which the U.S. and United Nations say the Taliban have failed to do.

The U.S.-led withdrawal is meant to be conditional on the Taliban lowering levels of violence by as much as 80%, but President Donald Trump sped up the pullout, despite the Taliban's unabated attacks, which included two massive assaults on southern provincial capitals Lashkar Gah and Kandahar last fall.

Amid that violence, the intensified assassination campaign brings its own messages.

"All these [assassination] groups are under the control of the Taliban," says retired Brig. Gen. Abdul Raqib Mubariz, a former commander of the Afghan Crisis Response Unit who has dealt with scores of Taliban and Islamic State attacks. The Obaida Karwan cell - named after a Taliban commander in Logar province - is "very small," he says, but includes many "professional people."

The killings aim "to show the Taliban have become important, to show the world they are strong," says General Mubariz, speaking in Kabul. "Even if there is peace, there will still be violence. The Taliban are focused on conflict ... on making their own separate government."

A woman on Taliban's target list

Despite such concerns, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted on Jan. 2 about "incredible progress" in Afghanistan. Experts were surprised that Mr. Pompeo boasted "We did it," given the ongoing high levels of Taliban attacks.

"The Taliban are going around saying, 'We got all these things from the Americans, and gave them nothing in return. We understand the art of the deal,'" says Mr. Semple at Queen's University Belfast.

One prominent women's rights activist, who asked not to be named, says she received so many Taliban threats that she recently moved away for her safety. She appeared last week on a list of 100 names, labeled the "primary target" hit list of Obaida Karwan, which circulated on social media. "In the beginning of peace negotiations my analysis was that the Taliban changed, especially for women's rights and lowering violence, but unfortunately my analysis was wrong," says the activist in Kabul.

She waited in vain for a cease-fire, and now her name is published as a target.

"Every day all civilian activists and journalists receive new threats," she says. "We are calling on the U.S. and international community to take a guarantee from the Taliban to make peace with the Afghan government, otherwise they will not accept each other, and there will be a new crisis."

### Would an Afghan...

his five-year term as president. Ghani won a 2019 presidential election that was marred by record-low turnout and widespread irregularities.

Khalilzad had first proposed the idea of an interim government before the election but it was rejected by Ghani, the incumbent.

"My basic goal is to be able to hand power, through the will of the people, to my elected successor," Ghani told CNN on January 8. "We're not a type of society that the Taliban-type approach of the past can be imposed on us. That was the peace of the graveyard."

Second Vice President Sarwar Danish recently warned that an interim government would "mean rupture and the collapse and dissolution of the constitution."

Critics have accused Ghani and his allies of stalling the peace process to retain power.

Critics say the president has surrounded himself with staunch anti-Taliban figures, including First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, a former intelligence chief.

Ghani this month also reappointed as his adviser Mohammad Mohaqiq, a former anti-Taliban commander. Last year, the president dismissed Mohaqiq, a senior figure in the mainly Shi'ite Hazara ethnic community.

Critics have also accused Ghani of stalling the peace process in the hope that the Biden administration would reverse the withdrawal of U.S. forces or even renegotiate the terms of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal. Observers consider both scenarios unlikely.

That agreement excluded Ghani's government and is seen as skewed in favor of the militants.

'Collapse Of The State' Terek Farhadi, an analyst and former Afghan government adviser, says Ghani has become a "polarizing" figure who has postponed "peace possibilities" in Afghanistan.

The Taliban has called Ghani an American "puppet" and ruled

out joining the current political system.

"Because of the emergency situation we are in, Afghanistan can't afford for President Ghani to complete his term while dozens of Afghans are killed every day," says Farhadi. "It is not sustainable and over time it risks the collapse of the state after the exit of the foreign forces."

The solution, Farhadi says, is a transitional authority that oversees an end to hostilities and gives the warring Afghan factions the space to agree to a political settlement.

"To end this war, and because no side is winning it, I don't expect the Afghan government to join a Taliban government nor the Taliban to join the Afghan government," he says. "There is a need for a transitional governance structure including both."

'Further Fragmentation' But critics also say the idea of an interim government is premature, given that the Taliban has yet to show the willingness to make the significant compromises needed to reach a political settlement.

The Taliban has entered peace talks from a position of relative strength. Controlling or contesting roughly half of the country, the extremist group has the military advantage to drive a hard bargain at the negotiations, observers say.

Under the U.S.-Taliban deal, the militant group extracted substantial concessions from Washington, including a timetable for the complete withdrawal of all foreign forces, its core demand.

Afghan officials fear that the Taliban could simply wait out the United States and forcibly attempt to take control of the country after a complete pullout. The U.S. military has reduced U.S. troops to around 2,500 -- the lowest since the war began in 2001.

The United States also made controversial pledges on behalf of the Afghan government, including the release of 5,000 Taliban inmates. In return,

the militants made only small concessions.

Critics say the agreement gave the Taliban international legitimacy and recognition, while undermining the Western-backed government in Kabul.

Emboldened by what it sees as its "victory" in the war, the Taliban has intensified attacks on government forces and killed dozens of civic and political figures in recent months, seeking to further undermine the Kabul government.

Davood Moradian, the director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, a Kabul-based think tank, says an interim government should only be explored as a way forward if and when it is part of a mutual tradeoff or an overall peace deal.

"Amid the Taliban's political advancement and military consolidation and expansion, talk of an interim government will only result in the further fragmentation of the government, which would not advance the peace process," he says.

Memories are still fresh of the anarchy and violence following the decision of former President Mohammad Najibullah, Afghanistan's last communist leader, to resign. Najibullah's announcement in 1992 was intended to pave the way for an interim government that would include the mujahedin, the U.S.-backed Islamist rebels that had fought against Soviet and Afghan communist forces.

Instead, state institutions broke down and a devastating civil war erupted that eventually paved the way for the rise of the Taliban. When the Taliban seized control of Kabul in 1996, it brutally tortured and executed Najibullah, who had been living in a United Nations compound.

"Dr. Najibullah made the mistake of his life by announcing that he was going to resign," Ghani said during a June event in Washington. "Please don't ask us to replay a film that we know well."

### Wolesi Jirga...

that in addition to the 8,300 posts reduced in the previous budget plan, another 1,300 posts had been reduced.

He added that 4.3 billion afghanis for the presidential

operational unit has been included in the budget plan, while the Wolesi Jirga has not yet approved the unit.

Finally, Mir Rahman Rahmani put the national budget to a vote, which was rejected by a majority of lawmakers, with

only 15 votes coming in favor of the budget.

With a total outlay of 452.6 billion afghanis, 295.8 billion has been set aside as ordinary budget and over 156.8 billion afghanis as development budget.

## Heart of Asia

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# Russia-US relations likely to remain extremely cold in coming years, says Medvedev

The relations between Moscow and Washington are likely to remain extremely cold with the new US administration that will continue a tough anti-Russian policy, the deputy chief of Russia's Security Council Dmitry Medvedev wrote in his op-ed published by tass.com on Saturday.

"Our relations are likely to remain extremely cold in the coming years," he wrote. "And right now we do not expect anything but the continuation of a tough anti-Russian policy," Medvedev said with reference to the upcoming start of the work of US President-elect Joe Biden.

"Russia, on the contrary, is ready to work with any US president, ready to restore cooperation in a wide range of areas," Medvedev noted, adding though that it can "hardly expect any reciprocal steps from the new American administration."

"We expect it is highly likely that the United States will consistently pursue an anti-Russian policy. In recent years, the trajectory of relations between Washington and Moscow has been steadily going

downhill, no matter who was at the helm in the White House," the deputy chief of the Security Council said. He added that "there was indeed some hope of reversing the negative dynamics during the Trump presidency." "After all, back in 2016, it seemed that relations between the two countries could not be any worse than those under B. Obama. However, the following years have dispelled this illusion. The Trump administration consistently strengthened the systemic confrontation between Washington and Moscow, continued its sanctions policy against our country wishing, inter alia, to force it out of the energy markets, and reduced our diplomatic contacts to a minimum. And this was done against the background of D. Trump constantly speaking about the desire to 'get along with Russia'. His words did not matter much, however, as numerous restrictive measures in the Congress were supported by both Democrats and Republicans," Medvedev said.



### A look at the world

#### Nepal soil will not be 'misused' against neighbors: Nepal's FM

Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali said Friday that his country will not be "misused" against any neighboring country. "We never compare our relations with our friends. We have ensured that our soil will not be misused for the illegitimate interests of any neighboring countries and we look at our location as an opportunity because being located between the two largest markets [India, China] of the globe, speaks volume," Gyawali said in response to a question about ties on India and China at an event organized at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) in New Delhi.

"It provides us to be benefited by the fastest economic growth of our neighboring countries. That is why we are strengthening



our relations with neighboring countries but we never compare our relations," he said. Gyawali arrived Thursday in New Delhi for an official visit as the first senior leader from Nepal to visit India since ties between the two countries suffered last year because of border issues.

Asked about the issuance of a new political map by Nepal, he said it "was a consequence." "It was a consequence because prior to that, the eighth edition of the political map of India was published," he said.

During an address to ICWA, he said Nepal and India have shown wisdom despite differences in one area.

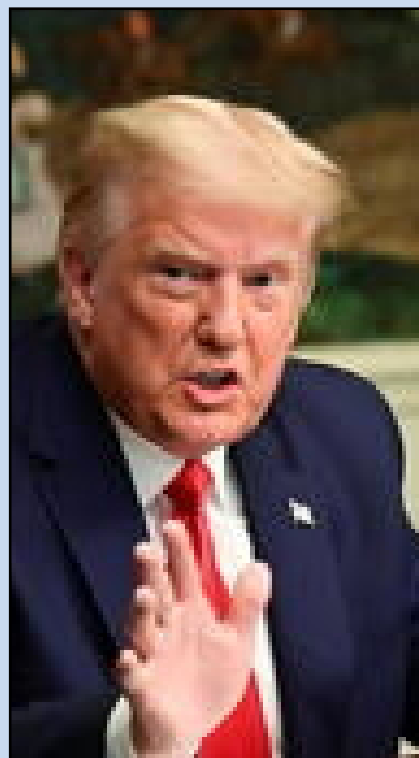
"While both sides have agreed to resolve the boundary question through talks, we have also shown wisdom that despite the difference in one area, the momentum of our overall engagement is continued," he said. "We are also mindful that we should not let any outstanding issue between us and be there forever and become irritant in an otherwise friendly relationship."

"Our foreign policy priority begins at our borders," he said. "Talking about India, our intention is to strengthen the foundation of our relations, to expand and consolidate it, and to bring the relations to the next level. Our objective is clear and unambiguous."

Earlier, Gyawali held talks with counterpart S. Jaishankar and they co-chaired the sixth meeting of the India-Nepal Joint Commission. A statement by ...

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#### Trump to leave White House before Biden sworn-in



Outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump will depart the White House for a final time on the morning of Inauguration Day, just hours before President-elect Joe Biden is sworn-in, according to a report published Friday. Trump had previously announced that he would not attend Biden's inauguration ceremony, breaking with precedent that dates back nearly 200 years. But the Washington Post newspaper reported that Trump will not only not attend, but will leave the executive mansion before the reins of power are formally handed over. Normally, the outgoing and incoming presidents ride to the Capitol together to take part in the inauguration ceremony in a display that embodies the U.S.'s peaceful transfer of power. The tradition has been in place "with few exceptions" since 1837, according to the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies. Outgoing Vice President Mike Pence is expected to attend the ceremony. Trump is bracing for his second Senate impeachment trial, the first time in history a president has been impeached twice, over his role in the riot that saw lawmakers taken into lockdown as the president's supporters stormed the U.S. capitol. Trump now accounts for half of all four impeachments in U.S. history.

#### Palestinians announce first elections in 15 years

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced parliamentary and presidential elections, the first in 15 years, will take place later this year in an effort to heal longstanding internal divisions.

According to a decree issued by Abbas's office on Friday, the Palestinian Authority (PA), which has limited self-rule in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, will hold legislative elections on May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31.

Palestinians' last parliamentary ballot in 2006 resulted in a surprise win by Hamas, widening an internal political rift that led to the group's seizure of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and contributed to a long delay in setting further elections.



Gaza has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when the Hamas movement started controlling the enclave.

"The President instructed the election committee and all state apparatuses of the state to launch a democratic election process in all cities of the homeland," the decree said, referring to the occupied West Bank, Gaza and occupied East Jerusalem.

The statement said Abbas expects polls "in all governorates of Palestine, including East Jerusalem", which was annexed by Israel following the 1967 war but is considered occupied territory.


Israel bans all PA activity in East Jerusalem, and there was no indication it would allow a Palestinian vote within Jerusalem, which it considers its "undivided capital".

Hamas has welcomed the announcement, saying in a statement: "We have worked in past months to resolve all obstacles so that we can reach this day."


Previous failed attempts Elections would pose a major risk for Abbas's Fatah party and also for Hamas as both faced protests in recent years over their inability to reconcile with one another, advance Palestinian aspirations for statehood or meet the basic needs of those in the territories they govern.

Fatah and Hamas have been publicly calling for elections for more than 10 years but have never been able to mend their rift or agree on a process for holding them. ...

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