



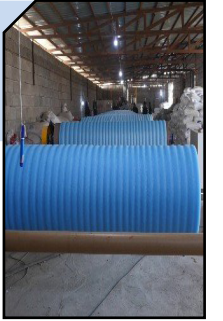
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Heart of Asia

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President Ghani Sacks Finance Minister Arghandiwal

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has removed the Finance Minister Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal and replaced him with Khalid Payenda, the President Administrative Affairs Office (AAO) said on Saturday.

The Presidential Deputy Spokesperson, Fatima Morchal in a video message cited at least five reasons behind the presidency's decision.

"Delay in the collection of taxes, lack of cooperation in an assessment by a joint team of illegal appointments in the Ministry of Finance and prevention of the assessments, weak management, lack of commitment to good governance values, not obeying the article 77 of the Constitution in his activities, and violating decrees and directions of the High Office of the President were among the reasons," Morchal said.

Arghandiwal was appointed as acting minister of finance last year ...

P3



Andarabi claims Taliban 'playing for time'

Masoud Andarabi, Minister of Interior Affairs, said Saturday the Taliban is playing for time in the ongoing peace negotiations in Doha and waiting to see what the new US administration decides following the inauguration of Joe Biden last week.

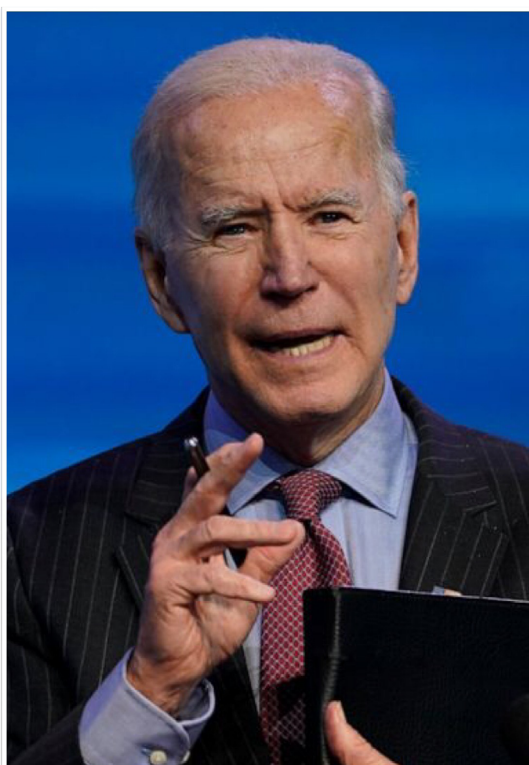
Biden's administration has confirmed that they will review the US-Taliban agreement signed in February last year and that they will assess whether the Taliban has met the conditions as per the deal, which includes ensuring a reduction in violence and the cutting of all ties with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

According to the deal, if Taliban meets the conditions, Washington will withdraw the last of its troops by May. Andarabi meanwhile said in an interview with BBC, that the Taliban has increased the level of violence and ramped up targeted attacks across the country in a bid to pressurize the government into giving in to their demands.

He said the group wants the government to release the remaining ...

P2

Biden to Keep Zalmay Khalilzad in Place for Now



US-Taliban peace agreement until the new team reviews it in detail and fully develops their own Afghanistan policy.

Khalilzad has been on the job for more than two years. His negotiations with the Taliban led to an agreement between the US and the group that was signed in February 2020.

Khalilzad is a diplomatic veteran, having served as a US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the United Nations. He is well known in foreign policy circles.

CNN says that the State Department did not comment when asked about Khalilzad staying on board.

During his confirmation hearing, Anthony Blinken, President Biden's pick for secretary of State, reiterated Biden's commitment to ending the war in Afghanistan but indicated that he had not yet been briefed on the US-Taliban agreement in a detailed way, the report says.

Khalilzad was in Kabul this month where he met with Afghan politicians, including Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation.

Quoting three sources familiar with the matter, CNN reports that the Biden administration will keep Zalmay Khalilzad, former President Trump's top envoy for Afghanistan peace talks, in place for the time

being. The report says that this move is not typical. The report says that traditionally an incoming administration replaces politically appointed officials with their own

team, particularly on foreign policy matters with such significance. Keeping the negotiator in place, at least for now, demonstrates the Biden team's initial commitment to maintaining adherence to the

U.S. can't prove Taliban-Moscow links: Kabulov

The Biden administration's attempts to find links between Moscow and the Taliban would not succeed, says Russia. In June, a major U.S. newspaper reported that the American intelligence community had informed then President Donald Trump about Russian efforts to place bounties on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan.

If a fair investigation was conducted, Washington would reach the conclusion that such allegations were just nonsense, Russia's special presidential representative for Afghanistan said.

Sputnik quoted Zamir Kabulov as saying on Friday: "They can ...

P3



Kabul hails U.S. plan to review deal with Taliban

The Afghan government is welcoming the new U.S. Biden administration moving to review the February 2020 deal with Taliban insurgents.

Presidential spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said in a statement Saturday that the U.S.-Taliban agreement has so far failed to deliver the desired goal of ending Taliban violence and bringing a cease-fire. "The Taliban did not live up to its commitments," he said.

His statement followed a telephone conversation between Jake Sullivan, the new U.S. national security adviser, and his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib.

The Biden administration on Friday said it is looking to review the deal between Washington and the Taliban.

In the conversation with Sullivan, Mohib said that they agreed to work toward a permanent cease-



fire and a just and durable peace in Afghanistan "capable of preserving the gains of the past two decades, protecting the rights of all Afghans, and continuing the reforms."

He said in a series of tweets on Saturday that Sullivan affirmed that the partnership with the government of Afghanistan and Afghan security and defense forces remains a priority and a key to U.S. national security

objectives. "We will continue close consultations in the days and weeks ahead," he added.

Last week, following the targeted assassination of two female judges in the capital Kabul, the U.S. Embassy warned the Taliban to cease attacks on civilians for peace to come to Afghanistan.

"The Taliban should understand that such actions for ...

P2

Andarabi...

Taliban prisoners and to accept an Islamic Emirate.

Andarabi also said the Taliban believes in conflict as a solution. "The Taliban are waiting for the withdrawal of US forces and the group is targeting civil society activists and journalists in order to [get the government to] release more [Taliban] prisoners, as well as to impose Islamic Emirate ideology in governing," he said.

The Interior Minister added that the Taliban attacks jeopardize all hard-won achievements of the last two decades.

"How committed are they (Taliban) to the values that we have gained with giving hundreds and thousands of sacrifices?" Andarabi asked.

The Taliban has not commented yet. The group, however, has frequently emphasized its commitment to bringing peace to Afghanistan.

China quits...

Chairman of Board of Directors and Managing Director of Bank of Industry and Mine as the guaranteeing body of the deal. A consortium comprising Mapna Group Company, some Iranian companies, and the Chinese side were to collaborate on this project.

Kabul hails...

which it bears responsibility outrage the world and must cease if peace is to come to Afghanistan," tweeted Ross Wilson, the U.S. chargé d'affaires.

The review comes amid the stalled intra-Afghan talks in the Qatari capital, Doha, which aimed at ending the nearly two-decade conflict in Afghanistan.

By JESSICA DONATI

The Hidden Cost of America's Forever War

Major Michael Hutchinson, a Green Beret with the 3rd Special Forces Group, was in charge of the secret operation to help Afghan commandos recapture Kunduz. It was his fifth combat deployment, counting three tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, yet he had never experienced such intense fighting.

The mission had been scrambled together after Kunduz had come under attack four days earlier. The Afghan army and police, plagued by corruption and poor leadership, had abandoned their posts and left the city to the Taliban with barely a fight. It fell within hours.

Hutchinson, as the other soldiers called him, worried that the slightest mistake or miscalculation could end in disaster. The Green Berets had reached the area by air and lacked armored vehicles. Some had driven into Kunduz on quad bikes. They had a single map between them, and no one had set foot in the city before.

After four days of fighting, they were still hunkered down at the city's police headquarters, where the American and Afghan teams had set up a command center. That wasn't the original plan: They were supposed to have established a foothold at the governor's office, but got lost in the dark. They were under attack from all sides, and only air strikes and the snipers on the walls were preventing the Taliban from overrunning the base.

Hutchinson was in contact with an AC-130 gunship, which was circling overhead, to provide air support to his Afghan colleagues who were preparing to hit a building believed to be a Taliban command and control center.

The Afghans didn't have radios, though, and were relying on limited cellphone coverage to make contact with Hutchinson. Communications were patchy, but this process had become routine. After hearing gunfire erupt, Hutchinson's interpreter was able to reach them and confirm they needed air support for the building they were attacking. Hutchinson ordered the gunship to fire.

A series of technical and communication failures aboard the aircraft had prevented the crew from preparing for the mission. It didn't help that Hutchinson's team had run out of the batteries needed for the video receivers typically used to communicate with the aircrew.



That meant he didn't know that things had gone seriously wrong. The building he had ordered the AC-130 gunship to strike was not a Taliban control center, but a trauma hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières.

There, Evangeline Cua was in between surgeries. She had her own practice in the Philippines, her home country, but had taken a break to work for the aid group over the summer. It had been an intense several months, but nothing compared with the past four days. The hospital had been flooded with patients since the city had fallen, and health-care workers were using hallways and offices to create space for makeshift beds. Her heart broke when entire families came in, and she couldn't save them all.

The first rounds from the AC-130 struck the hospital's emergency room. The operating theaters shook and the windows rattled. Cua looked up and exchanged glances with an assistant surgeon who had finished suturing a patient's wound. The doctors had grown used to the sounds of explosions and gunfire. They laughed uneasily. It was probably just another clash, she thought, exhausted.

But then a second blast struck with terrifying force. All three theaters were in use when it hit. The surgeons leapt up and fled down the hallway, leaving their

anesthetized patients on the operating tables. The doctors and nurses gathered across the hall, dragging tables together for cover, but it was too hard to breathe through the acrid smoke, so Cua groped her way back to the operating theater.

Her mind raced to understand what was happening. The hospital was supposed to be protected. All sides had recognized its impartiality. An air strike? Why? Another deafening blast shook the building, and the ceiling came crashing down, plunging them into darkness. She saw her patient's heart monitor flatline. We're going to die, she thought. Rounds hammered the building.

She imagined her remains being delivered to her parents in the Philippines in an urn. Or worse, what if her body was never found? She tried to focus on the patients' lives she had saved during her time in Kunduz, but all she could think of were her parents. I'm sorry, Mom, she thought. I'm sorry. Nearby, she heard her colleague praying softly. "Pray with me," he told her.

MSF's country director, Guilhem Molinie, was in Kabul when he received a call from the hospital reporting the air strike. He immediately dialed Bagram Airfield, praying for a quick response. He felt sick to his stomach. ... **P3**

By Imran Jan

Afghanistan's unclaimed attacks

Afghanistan has been getting battered with targeted assassinations, killings of journalists, civil society members, current and former security force members. Interestingly, these attacks remain unclaimed. Insurgencies and terror groups heavily tout their ability to create mayhem. They thrive in the limelight of violence. But this is a whodunit story. To clarify; plausible deniability is the oxygen of intelligence agencies, not insurgencies. Unclaimed attacks smell of the need for secrecy. One thing common between an insurgency and democracy is that both die in darkness. The Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, vehemently denied any role in these attacks. Labeling Kabul's allegations as "propaganda", Mujahid said, "We have condemned these killings and reject any involvement in these."

The noise pollution emanating from Kabul should never blind us to their ulterior motive: the derailment of the peace deal that the US and Taliban signed in February 2020. It is not the Taliban, but Kabul and New Delhi, that need an earthquake to change the status quo and shake the peace deal. That is what Zalmay Khalilzad was referring to when he tweeted, "Those perpetuating violence seek to undermine the peace process and the country's future. They do not reflect the will of Afghan people,

who yearn for peace." This is not the first time Khalilzad warned of spoilers.

The strategy of unclaimed attacks is serving Kabul to some extent, because for the first time, the US military finally blamed the Taliban for them, despite the IS claiming responsibility for some of them. However, unfortunate for the Kabul-New Delhi duo, the peace deal remains intact despite their collective shenanigans. At the start of 2020, there were close to 13,000 US troops in Afghanistan. That number has shrunk significantly, thanks to the peace deal. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "No US servicemen have been killed in Afghanistan in almost a year, and Afghans are finally discussing peace and reconciliation among themselves. Such incredible progress." Again, thanks to the peace deal. But the conflicting messages from US military and State Department are a cause for concern.

Every time major news outlets try to lend some veracity to Taliban being behind the attacks, they use phrases such as "officials said they have little doubt the Taliban is behind the surge of attacks" or "the timing makes most officials believe that the Taliban are" behind them. Who are these officials? They are members of the same criminal gang run by Amrullah Saleh with Ashraf Ghani's blessing.

The reality is not lost on the Afghan people, who can clearly see Kabul's fingerprints on this violence. Dawlat Waziri, a former Afghan general and military analyst, said there are those who "want the peace talks to collapse and support a civil war, because the more chaos and war in this country, the more they will benefit".

Lately, in Afghanistan, it has been designer violence — meant to achieve one thing: the furthering of the rhetoric that peace remains distant in Afghanistan and the Taliban are to be blamed for that. More importantly; America must not exit now. Davood Moradian, director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, said, "The Taliban are telling the new [US] administration, 'Don't you dare reopen the deal.'" It is more plausible that actually Kabul is sending that message. In October 2020, an Afghan reported on an Afghan forces' raid on a mosque school in Takhar, where 12 civilians were killed, mostly children. That person was arrested for practicing journalism. Saleh had then tweeted, "The person responsible for the spread of this venomous & fake news was arrested immediately." That person's identity remains unclear. Among the journalists and activists assassinated in these unclaimed attacks, I wonder if he was one of them?

India to supply...

assurance of vaccine cooperation. Recently, Nepal foreign minister Pradeep Gyawali was in India and ensuring vaccine supply was a big part of his agenda.

"Immunisation programme is being implemented in India, as in other countries, in a phased manner to cover the healthcare providers, frontline workers and the most vulnerable. Keeping in view the domestic requirements of the phased rollout, India will continue to supply COVID-19 vaccines to partner countries over the coming weeks and months in a phased manner. It will be ensured that domestic manufacturers will have adequate stocks to meet domestic requirements while supplying abroad," said a statement from the Ministry of external affairs.

The release added that India will continue to supply countries all over the world with vaccines. "This will be calibrated against domestic requirements and international demand and obligations, including under GAVI's Covax facility to developing countries."

Over the last year, India has provided essential drugs including hydroxychloroquine, paracetamol, remdesivir as well as antibiotics and vitamins to partner countries. India has also supplied ventilators, masks and diagnostic kits to partners.

India has also provided training to several neighbouring countries to enhance and strengthen their clinical capabilities, under the Partnerships for Accelerating Clinical Trials (PACT) programme. Separately, several training courses have been organised for healthcare workers and administrators of partner countries under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme.

Investors Seek End to Land Problem in Kabul Industrial Park

A group of investors on Friday called on the government to address the land problem in the Pul-e-Charkhi industrial park in Kabul, raising their concerns about the allotment of land to those who are not associated with any business.

Some of the investors said they pay \$3,000 per month for property rent at the industrial park.

The investors said less has been done by the government for the business community and factory owners in terms of land allotment over the last two decades.

"At least 60 percent of factory owners run their business on leased land," said Abdul Jabbar Safi, the head of

Industrialists Union.

The owner of a factory in the Pul-e-Charkhi industrial park, Sayed Mujtaba, said they are also faced with a lack of electricity

"We are faced with many problems... There are problems in the import of raw materials as well as the property rent is high," Mujtaba said.

"The government promised us to provide land for factories' construction, but it has not happened so far. We are faced with many problems," said Arifullah, an investor.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce pledged to find those responsible for leasing the property in the industrial park and address the



needs of goods for investors, retailers, and distributors in the industrial park. "The Ministry of Industry and Commerce will make sure to identify those who get land in the industrial

park and lease it to others. The land will be recovered and will be allotted to those who need it," said Fawad Ahmadi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

President Ghani...

in March. He was approved by the parliament as finance minister last year in November.

It is worth mentioning that previously, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, in a letter issued to the Office of the President, opposed the dismissal of 59 employees of the Finance Ministry and the head of human resources of the Ministry of Finance by the President.

He has said that these individuals would continue to perform their duties in accordance with the law until the competitive recruitment process for their posts finalized. Earlier, AAO in a letter said that the recruitment of the director of human resources at the Ministry of Finance and 59 other employees of the Ministry was carried out in a non-competitive manner and that they have been fired under the instruction of the President.

Following these issues, the Attorney General's Office has announced that Mohammad Gholam Mulakhail, the director of human resources at the Ministry of Finance, had been arrested on charges disobeying Presidential orders and misusing authority.

U.S. can't prove...

only invent things, as such facts just don't exist. If the new administration has a desire to conduct an in-depth study, we can only welcome that..."

He insisted that if the investigation was carried out in a transparent way, the U.S. would understand they are just doing stupid things."

Kabulov reiterated attempts to find connections between Moscow and the Taliban could not be successful.

Biden to meet...

Canada's disappointment with the United States' decision on the Keystone XL pipeline," according to Canada's readout, which noted that Trudeau also brought up "the importance of the softwood lumber industry, and urged the removal of duties".

The long-running dispute saw the Trump administration impose tariffs against what it saw as unfair subsidies for Canadian exporters of softwood lumber, which is used in home construction.

The Hidden...

"The trauma center is under attack," Molinie told the U.S. officer who picked up. "You're bombing the hospital!"

The officer ran to the joint-operations center, pulled the battle captain aside, and told him about the call in a whisper. But Lieutenant Colonel Jason Johnston, the 3rd Group battalion commander, who was sitting in the next row, heard and leapt up. He asked the officer to repeat himself. None of them was aware the air strike was under way.

They tried reaching Hutchinson, but couldn't get through for several minutes. They identified a plume of smoke rising from the center of Kunduz over a video feed and pulled the coordinates to check them against the ones provided by the hospital. When Hutchinson called back, Johnston told him about the report. Hutchinson stopped to process the message. He replayed the past hour and didn't see how it could have happened.

"No way," he said. "That's not possible."

Hutchinson ordered the aircraft to stop shooting, but didn't mention the report to anyone else. As hardened as the other Green Berets were, it would deliver a terrible blow to morale, adding to the stress of the ongoing battle for the city. He told himself there must have been a mistake.

But in the first morning light, the destroyed hospital building was smoldering. Cua and the other doctors and nurses who survived the bombing set to work trying to save the wounded as the sun came up. In the end, 42 people, including 14 staff members, would be reported killed in the strike.

After a week-long battle, Kunduz was more or less back under government control. Afghan soldiers cheered as the Americans drove past. Hutchinson hadn't heard anything more about the air strike and, because he and his team had not visited the site of the blast, assumed the report was a mistake.

Hutchinson was elated. This was what he had secretly dreamed of since childhood: participating in a battle for survival with a small band of brothers. Every emotion he had suppressed during the

battle hit him at once. His men were high with the feeling of being alive. They felt like heroes in a movie. They had saved a city from ruin against the odds. They weren't prepared for the news. On TV back at the camp, the world's attention was indeed focused on Kunduz—but not on the Taliban's defeat. Every major outlet was covering the U.S. bombing of the hospital, and asking whether the air strike was a war crime.

Hutchinson still believed he and his men had done the right thing by going into the city, and tried to console Ben Vontz, the young Green Beret responsible for communicating with the gunship that night, who was distraught. If the mission had failed, the Taliban would be entrenched in Kunduz by now, he told Vontz, and a door to door battle to drive them out would have yielded an even higher human cost.

It had been 10 years since Hutchinson's first tour in Iraq. A decade was a long time to learn how to process the horrors of war. To him, it was clear the bombing was a mistake caused by equipment failure, exhaustion, and human error. Everyone had done their best in a situation they should never have been put in, he told Vontz. The combat controller was 25, and it had been his first time in battle. He was inconsolable.

By this point, an investigation team had reached Kunduz; they wanted to see Hutchinson immediately. The investigators stared at him uncomfortably. The media were describing Hutchinson as a potential war criminal. He refused to flinch and promised to help with the inquiry.

Hutch called home. His wife answered.

"Is everything okay?" Tina asked. "Because they're calling it a war crime."

Hutchinson was relieved of his duties and sent to Bagram Airfield to await the results of the inquiry. He felt confident that the investigating officers would realize the soldiers had done their best. The strike was an unfortunate mistake made in the heat of battle. He planned to bravely accept whatever punishment the military saw fit to administer and move on.

When a chaplain visited from Kabul, he was shocked to find

Hutchinson in good spirits. He had been assessed to be a suicide risk. "I'm fine," Hutchinson told him, trying to sound upbeat.

But he had started to hear that some in the Army's headquarters believed he had violated the rules of engagement and wanted him to stand trial for murder. He tried to stay positive and kept to his gym routine to fight off the depression and negative thoughts nagging at him.

He couldn't tell Tina much over the phone, but he tried to reassure her that everything would be fine once the investigation had run its course. She was on her own, pregnant and juggling two kids.

Tina knew not to ask questions, but she was scared about what was going to happen to them. "I'm not going to jail," he promised her. She was worried. The images from the hospital were etched on her mind. She couldn't help but read the stories about the staff and patients who had survived, even if in her heart she knew that her husband had done his best.

The military changed its official story several times. The secrecy surrounding the investigation fueled the public's worst suspicions, that the hospital had been struck on purpose. Hutchinson felt that people would understand if they heard firsthand how the mistake had occurred. He asked to be allowed to explain publicly what had happened. The battalion told him it wasn't a good idea.

The investigators called Hutchinson in for questioning over and over again. Eventually, the investigating officer, Brigadier General Richard Kim, approached him. He didn't believe Hutchinson's version of events, he said. He thought that Hutchinson had broken the rules of engagement and illegally used pre-assault fire. "Would you like to change your story?" he asked.

Hutchinson was shocked. He could accept having made a mistake and that civilians had died as a result. He could accept that the tragedy was preventable. He was prepared to accept whatever punishment was meted out. But to be accused of trying to cover up a deliberate act? That was too much. It couldn't be real.

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Biden to meet Trudeau next month to discuss pandemic response

Canada's Justin Trudeau and US President Joe Biden plan to meet in person next month, the prime minister's office has announced, following a call between the two leaders in which they agreed to join forces to combat coronavirus in North America.

"The two leaders agreed to meet next month in order to advance the important work of renewing the deep and enduring friendship between Canada and the United States," Trudeau's office said in a statement on Friday.

In a separate statement, the White House said the two leaders highlighted the "strategic importance of the US-Canada relationship" and discussed cooperation on a wide-ranging agenda including combating the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing climate change.

It said Biden and Trudeau agreed to speak again in a month and did not mention plans for a meeting.

Trudeau, who has been keen to embrace the new president and turn the page on the often tumultuous Donald Trump years, was the first foreign leader to speak with Biden since Wednesday's inauguration.

"They discussed collaboration on vaccines and acknowledged that the two countries' efforts are strengthened by existing exchanges of medical personnel and the flow of critical medical supplies," according to a Canadian readout of the call.

The two also agreed to expand cooperation on continental defence and in the Arctic, and said their respective top defence and foreign affairs would meet at the earliest opportunity.

Trudeau earlier on Friday hailed Biden's arrival as a "new era" for bilateral ties but the relationship has begun with an early disagreement after Biden scrapped the Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada to the United States on his first day in



office on Wednesday.

The White House statement said Biden acknowledged "Trudeau's disappointment regarding the decision to rescind the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, and reaffirmed his commitment to maintain an active bilateral

dialogue and to further deepen cooperation with Canada".

Pipeline builder TC Energy Corp said it would eliminate more than 1,000 construction jobs in coming weeks due to the cancellation.

"The prime minister raised ...

P3

A look at the world

India to supply COVID-19 vaccines to six countries from today

From January 20, India will begin shipping COVID-19 vaccines to six nations—Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Seychelles under the grant-in-aid scheme. Three more countries in the neighbourhood—Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Mauritius—will be covered under the programme, however, the government is still awaiting confirmation of necessary regulatory clearances from them.

The government also began a two-day workshop for the recipient countries today, training them administrative and



operational aspects. The training of for immunisation managers, cold chain officers, communication officers and data managers of the recipient countries, both at national and provincial levels.

According to sources, the recipient countries have been gifted with the Oxford-AstraZeneca 'Covishield' vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India. Bhutan will receive 1.5 lakh doses, is the first country to receive the vaccine gift. Maldives will receive one lakh doses, enough to cover one in every five people in the archipelagic state. The government of Maldives will purchase its remaining requirements from the SII at commercial rates.

India had received requests from several countries for vaccine cooperation. As the established vaccinator of the world—over half the world's vaccines are made in India—countries from all parts of the globe are seeking supplies to get a grip over the pandemic. Ever since India rolled out its vaccination programme on January 16, there has been interest in how the government will live up to its ...

P2

Russia arrests dozens of protesters demanding Alexei Navalny's release



Russian police detained dozens of supporters of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny as more than 60 protests were planned across Russia over his imprisonment.

The OVD-Info organisation that monitors political detentions said at least 48 people were detained in cities including Vladivostok and Khabarovsk.

Organisers in Vladivostok said about 3,000 people turned out for the protest there. Large numbers of people were seen gathering in Moscow for an afternoon protest there.

Authorities have been taking measures to avoid demonstrations in support of the Kremlin critic including pressuring the social media app TikTok to prevent young audiences from being encouraged to attend protests.

Navalny's associates in Moscow and other regions have been detained in the lead-up to the rallies.

Opposition supporters and independent journalists have also been approached by police officers with official warnings against protesting.

Universities and colleges in different Russian regions have urged students not to attend rallies, with some saying they may be subject to disciplinary action, including expulsion.

Navalny is an anti-corruption campaigner and one of Vladimir Putin's fiercest critics. Police detained him last Sunday when he returned to Russia from Germany, where he had spent nearly five months recovering from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin.

On Monday, a judge jailed him for 30 days. He's accused him of violating the terms of a suspended sentence in 2014 over a conviction for financial misdeeds.

China quits Tehran-Mashhad railway electrification project

Iranian deputy road minister informed on Sat. that China has quit electrification project of Tehran-Mashhad railway.

As Saeed Rasouli told Mehr News Agency, a credit agreement had been signed with China to electrify the Tehran-Mashhad railway, and the Chinese had taken all necessary measures, issuing licenses and bank guarantees.

"But last year, the financier announced that it could not start the executive operation due to the problems it was faced with," Rasouli, who is Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (known as RAI) added.

"In addition to funding the project through financing, the Chinese construction company was to provide the construction equipment and fleet and earn the consumed expenses via



ticket sales revenue," he described.

The Iranian official informed that after China, the Islamic Republic will accomplish the project relying on its domestic financial resources, expertise, and capabilities.

The Tehran-Mashhad line is one of the prioritized railway lines undergoing electrification. With a length of 926 kilometers, the Tehran-Mashhad line is one of the most frequented railway lines of Iran and one of the few double-track lines of the country.

The railroad connects the capital city of Tehran to the eastern city of Mashhad in Khorasan Razavi Province.

The highest possible speed on this route is reportedly 160 Km/h which is set to increase to 200 km/h after the electrification project is completed.

In July 2017, a 1.5-billion-dollar financing contract for the Tehran-Mashhad railroad was inked at the presence of the vice president of China Exim Bank (Export-Import Banks of China), the time Ambassador of China to Tehran Pang Sen, the time Deputy Iranian Minister for International Affairs at the Ministry of Road and Urban Development Asghar Fakhrieh Kashani, Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways Saeed Mohammadzadeh, the time Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) for Foreign Exchange Affairs Gholamali Kamyab as well as Ali-Ashraf Afkhami, and the ...

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