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# Heart of Asia

*Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region*

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**Pres. Ghani meets Karzai, Sayyaf, Abdullah on peace process**

President Ashraf Ghani on Tuesday discussed the peace process related matters with his predecessor Hamid Karzai, High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) chairman Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Hezb-i-Da'wat party leader Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf. A statement from the Presidential Palace said the Tuesday morning meeting discussed the current situation of Afghanistan, ceasefire, reduction in violence, political consensus and emphasized on ensuring a stable peace that could end the bloodshed in Afghanistan.

President Ashraf Ghani stressed the need for political consensus, permanent ceasefire and reduction of violence in the country and assured that in such critical ...

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**Iran Holds Talks with German, Russian, UN Envoys on Afghan Peace Process**

Mohammad-Ebrahim Taherian, the Iranian foreign minister's special envoy for Afghanistan, has held extensive talks with a number of world diplomats on the Afghan peace process as a Taliban delegation arrives in Tehran.

According to Iranian media, Taherian discussed the latest Afghan developments in a Tuesday conversation with the UN secretary-general's special representative for Afghanistan Deborah Lyons.

During the talks, the two sides conferred on the latest status of intra-Afghan negotiations, the peace process in Afghanistan, and the establishment of sustainable peace through diplomatic solutions.

Earlier on Monday, Taherian had discussed the issue with ...

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## U.S. Treasury: Al-Qaeda, Taliban still allied, alleges America



The U.S. Treasury Department said that the al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while "continuing to operate with the Taliban under the group's protection."

"Al-Qaeda broadly still depends on donations from likeminded supporters, and from individuals who believe that their money

is supporting humanitarian or charitable causes," it said in a report released on January 4.

The U.S. Treasury Department also said that "al-Qaeda capitalizes on its relationship with the Taliban through its network of mentors and advisers who are embedded with the Taliban, providing advice,

guidance, and financial support."

"Senior Haqqani network figures have discussed forming a new joint unit of armed fighters in cooperation with and funded by al-Qaeda," it said.

The report also said that the elements of al-Qaeda, including affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian

Subcontinent (AQIS), and "terrorist groups" targeting Pakistan, such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), continue to use the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region as a safe haven, adding that "AQIS likely receives funding from al-Qaeda senior leadership."

The report also mentioned that al-Qaeda maintains close contacts with the Taliban, providing advice, guidance, and financial support. Former U.S. President Donald Trump's administration signed a peace agreement with Taliban on February 29, 2020 and, according to the agreement, the Taliban must break ties with al-Qaeda.

On December 27, Afghanistan's First Vice President Amrullah said that the Taliban still maintains ties with al-Qaeda and that their separation "is harder than desalination."

Saleh on Twitter wrote that Afghan forces killed three al-Qaeda members in a Taliban compound in southern Afghanistan ten months after the Taliban committed to separate itself from the network as part of their deal with the United States. ...

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**Saleh rejects SIGAR claims of cash being smuggled out through airport**

Amrullah Saleh, First Vice President has rejected the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's (SIGAR) report over the smuggling of cash from the Hamid Karzai International Airport.

In his daily 6:30 am meeting, Saleh stated: "However a massive amount of foreign currency does exit Afghanistan's porous land borders by cross-border networks.

"The report on the flight of foreign currency from Kabul airport is not correct and substantiated," said Saleh. Saleh added that a large ...

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## EU, WHO pledge \$154 Million to Support Afghans in Fight Against COVID-19

The EU-Delegation in Kabul today announced an additional support of 35 million euros to tackle the ongoing pandemic and mitigate its socioeconomic impacts in Afghanistan.

EU in a press release said that since the start of the pandemic, the EU has mobilised almost 147 million euros to address the immediate health crisis and provide humanitarian assistance to the people in need.

"The pandemic has exacerbated an already grim situation in Afghanistan, creating even bigger needs in a country for decades plagued by war. Together with partners and in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, the EU's contribution aims to support those who suffer the most from this crisis. The three projects launched today will contribute to this further" says EU Ambassador Andreas Von Brandt. The World Health Organization's



COVAX programme has pledged \$112 million for COVID-19 vaccines to reach 20% of Afghanistan's population, an Afghan health official said on Tuesday.

The COVAX programme is a global scheme to vaccinate people in poor and middle income countries against the coronavirus. It aims to deliver at least 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 to cover 20% of the most vulnerable people in 91 poor and

middle-income countries.

According to the press release, the 35 million euros announced today will contribute to strengthening the response capacity of health systems, to test and treat patients, to improve infection prevention, to raise awareness and to reduce nutritional risks through three projects implemented by the World Health Organization, UNICEF and a consortium led by the ...

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### Pres. Ghani...

times, consultations with political leaders and the public regarding the peace process would continue.

The meeting comes a day after Hamid Karzai met with Dr. Abdullah.

The statement said the leaders discussed recent progress in the intra-Afghan talks and upcoming steps for the success of the peace parleys.

The Afghan government and Taliban negotiating teams after 80 days of negotiations have agreed on procedural rules.

The second round of talks between the sides began around two weeks ago on January 6th but the two teams have not yet reached an agreement.

The new US government says they would review the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban which was signed during Trump's administration.

### Iran Holds...

Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar as well as the German and Russian special envoys for Afghanistan.

In these conversations, the Iranian envoy underlined the necessity of reducing violence and the need for collaboration among the friends of Afghanistan in establishing sustainable peace through diplomatic solutions.

He also described intra-Afghan negotiations as the most appropriate way to end the crisis in Afghanistan and relieve the Afghan people's pains, and expressed Tehran's preparedness for any assistance in this regard.

By Jason Criss Howk

# Path to Peace in Afghanistan for the Biden Administration

The Biden administration is now getting a full picture of all the world problems the U.S. is involved in, and no foreign policy topic is more urgent than how to help the Afghan people achieve a durable peace that secures their human rights and societal gains as a constitutional republic. Right now, the U.S. military footprint stands at 2,500 uniformed service members and the NATO and coalition partners outnumber the US forces. Beyond the "advise and assist" military mission, the U.S. is deeply engaged in a diplomatic process to help the Afghan people secure a peaceful solution to the war being imposed on them by the Taliban (a Pakistani proxy force).

This is one of the most critical parts of any war effort, ensuring the ending secures the gains. In this case the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is leading the war effort and the diplomatic effort to end it. The U.S. as a long-standing and close partner to the Afghan government has an interest in the outcome of the peace negotiations, but ultimately the outcomes must meet the demands of the Afghan people. The best way for America to sustain the security gains of ousting the Taliban regime and AQ from Afghanistan in 2001, is to be a faithful partner to the wishes of the Afghan people. That is why for the next few months it is imperative that the team that President Biden hands this portfolio to, should be engaged in listening to all the Afghan voices on the issue.

I've gathered a few abbreviated options that can be mulled over by the Biden team as they move forward and listen to what Afghans are asking for. This is the fourth U.S. administration I have been involved in offering Afghan war options to from my first look at policy ideas in 2002, at MG Eikenberry's side based at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. I have watched all three previous president's teams pick and choose from amongst the options they were provided by Afghan-based specialists and options

requested by the Afghan government. I don't have a crystal ball or claim to know the best approach, but I do know what has failed in the past; and I have a very good understanding of what the Afghan people, from across various parts of society, are asking for.

**DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ACHIEVING PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN**  
In these options, I will use terms from my La Medici model of typically available U.S. government tools.

#### 1. The wise approach

The most likely avenue for success is a robust approach using the tools we already have in Afghanistan coupled with asking for more pressure on the Taliban and Pakistan of our partners to improve the negotiation process and decrease Afghan casualties.

This includes all legal and law enforcement tools and a likely increase in aid and development funding using the savings from the recent DoD withdrawals. Human rights promotion/enforcement, healthcare and education improvements, refugee resettlement, and governance accountability and delivery improvement will address many current and future Afghan problems.

This approach should also include continuation of current military endeavors. Advisory-work, long-term security partnership building, multinational counterterrorism efforts, and other tasks should continue with the forces on the ground today. The development of a regional counterterrorism and special operations school/center near Kabul that is run and owned by Afghans, funded and partnered with NATO, and open to all Afghan-partner Central and South Asia nation's militaries is a simple and low-cost effort for consolidating the anti-terrorism gains of the last 20 years. Much of the military effort in Afghanistan will decrease in price-tag this year and continued efforts to find the least expensive and most effective way of doing business is critical.



Economic tools and diplomatic efforts might be the most consequential parts of the puzzle. While the military holds the Taliban in peace talks, the economic carrots and sticks should make the talks more fruitful. How much pressure the U.S. (and our allies) are willing to place on Pakistan is the key. A Pakistani general admitted publicly at CENTCOM in 2020 that their existential threat is their weak economy, not India or Afghanistan—use that leverage. Diplomatically the U.S. must lead every nation we can to apply maximum pressure to get the Taliban to enter a ceasefire now. The Afghan people are rapidly losing faith in the peace process and the Taliban and their terrorist partner's extreme violence against civilians is only sapping any remaining Afghan faith daily. This should be the test the Biden Administration assesses the Taliban sincerity upon. No one trusts the Taliban are truly committed to achieving peace, because they have not upheld their Doha commitments and are not decreasing violence against Afghan civilians.

The final 3 tools—intelligence operations, cyber operations, and information operations are critical now and in the future relationship with Afghanistan. Especially lacking is the information operations and strategic communications effort. Right now, the Taliban can run an Op-ed in the New York Times on what seems one day's notice. Meanwhile the Afghan republic has trouble getting their views into the press anywhere outside Afghanistan. The U.S.

should double its efforts to improve their own and Afghan informational tools. One major intelligence operations realignment should be to ensure all their para-military efforts are in line with the Defense and State department strategy. Civilian casualties and unrestrained violence will extend the length of the Afghan war, no matter who is at fault. Making sure our intelligence operations are not at odds with the safety of the Afghan people is crucial too.

Risk: This is the least risky of the options for the U.S. (security-wise). It is an increase in the use of tools already in-country, and we frankly don't have many resources in Afghanistan at this point compared to military efforts in places like Korea or Europe. It does have domestic risks for Team Biden as there is a loud political base (in all political parties) calling for total withdrawal from Afghanistan and elsewhere now. While increased pressure on Pakistan may drive them closer to China, I think that ship has already sailed, as they now refer to each other as the "iron brothers."

#### 2. Gamblers approach

A betting-man might try to quickly withdraw all the remaining military members outside the U.S. Embassy team, and cease all advisory work and counterterrorism efforts. This puts the full weight of the war on the shoulders of Afghans and our NATO partners. It would also place more power in the intelligence community's hands to handle security and we all know how that has gone for the region, ... **P3**

By Ayaz Gul

## Afghanistan: Taliban See Ghani as 'Obstacle' To Peace

The Taliban warned Saturday that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's resolve to remain in office until the completion of his tenure was detrimental to peace talks aimed at finding a negotiated end to four decades of war in Afghanistan.

The insurgent group's warning came on a day when its leaders held fresh discussions in Qatar with representatives of the Ghani government on developing "a joint agenda" for what are officially known as intra-Afghan negotiations.

The talks between the two Afghan warring sides have led to media speculation that Ghani might have to relinquish power to allow for an interim government to oversee the peace process.

But the Afghan president in an apparent rebuttal repeatedly vowed this week that he was legally bound to transfer power to

his "elected successor."

"This [presidency] is not mine. This seat belongs to the nation of Afghanistan. This system has dignity. You all voted for me," Ghani told a public gathering in eastern Nangarhar province Wednesday.

"My basic goal is to be able to hand power, through the will of the people, to my elected successor," he told CNN in an interview broadcast Friday.

'Nothing but poverty, misery' The Taliban in their commentary said Ghani's insistence on clinging to power could obstruct the way to a "negotiated and peaceful solution" to the long Afghan war. "Ashraf Ghani's rule has brought nothing but poverty, misery, bloodshed, notoriety and problems to Afghanistan," the insurgent group said.

For its part, the Afghan government condemns the Taliban for

intensifying insurgent activities and killing thousands of civilians and security forces across the country. The United Nations again held the insurgents responsible for causing most civilian casualties in 2020.

The intra-Afghan peace negotiations started in September. The process stemmed from a deal U.S. President Donald Trump's administration signed with the Taliban in February 2020 to encourage a political settlement to the war and bring American forces home.

The U.S.-Taliban agreement requires all U.S. and NATO-led troops to leave Afghanistan by May 2021. In return, the insurgent group has pledged to sever ties with the al-Qaida terror network and prevent other transnational terrorist groups from using Afghan soil as a sanctuary.

The Taliban have also promised to negotiate a political power-sharing deal with rival Afghan groups in order to end the conflict.

'Peace of the graveyard'

"One thing needs to be clear: Afghan society is not willing to go back, and we are 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," Ghani said in his CNN interview.

The Afghan president referred to the Taliban's harsh Islamic rule in most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, barring girls from seeking education and women from working outdoors, among other controversial restrictions.

The Taliban were ousted from power in late 2001 when a U.S.-led international military alliance invaded the country to punish the Islamist group for harboring al-Qaida leaders accused of plotting the deadly September 2001 attacks on the United States.

The Taliban, however, have since

waged a deadly insurgency, taking control of or extending their influence on nearly half of Afghanistan territory. The insurgents justify their violent campaign by arguing the existing governance system in Kabul is illegitimate and a product of "U.S. occupation" of the country. However, the U.S.-Taliban deal has ended attacks on international troops in Afghanistan. The number of U.S. soldiers in the country is expected to drop to around 2,500 by mid-January from more than 12,000 at the time of the signing of the pact.

During his election campaign, President-elect Joe Biden spoke in favor of a U.S. military drawdown in Afghanistan but stressed the need for maintaining a small counterterrorism force.

The Taliban have said presence of even a single foreign soldier on Afghan soil beyond the agreed-upon deadline would mean continuation of the war.

# 200,000 eligible people to get jobs next year: Govt

Labor and Social Affairs Minister Bashir Ahmad Tayang on Monday said 54 percent of the country's population was jobless due to the outbreak of coronavirus, but next year 200,000 eligible people would be provided with work opportunities.

Tayang said this while briefing reporters about his ministry's last year's activities and next year's plans as part of the "Government Accountability to the Nation" program. The "Government Accountability to the Nation" program was launched 14 years ago during former President Hamid Karzai government.

Since then, every year government departments share their annual performance reports with the media. The Afghan Railways and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs briefed reporters about their activities in the past year and their plans for next year

on Monday.

Ting said in fiscal year 1399, at the time of the outbreak of the coronavirus and quarantine measures in the country, 54% of the population were unemployed but according to central statistics released about a month ago, the figure has dropped to 40 percent. He expressed the hope that the unemployment rate would be greatly reduced by May of this year and added that in cooperation with the private sector in fiscal year 1400, employment would be provided for 200,000 eligible workers.

Ting said sending Afghan workers abroad was another major program of the ministry this fiscal year. According to him; under agreements about 5,000 Afghan workers will be sent to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Iran.

He said preparing practical plans and



identifying and analyzing the situation of the ministry, strengthening women's participation and supporting their presence in workplace, combating corruption, facilitating employment, providing social services in kindergartens and supporting centers of vulnerable children, financial reforms and implementation of open government participation" are among the main programs of the current fiscal

year of this ministry.

He added the draft policy of workplace safety for women, the provision of emergency food assistance, the prohibition of begging and the collection of beggars in the city, and the survey of children indulged in hard labor are also among the most important achievements of the policy and legislative department of the ministry during last fiscal year.

### Saleh rejects...

amount of cash was flowing out of the country to Pakistan. "The strict anti-money laundering regulations have created a dark parallel market. Let's be real," he emphasized. Last week, SIGAR reported that the unchecked flow of cash out of Afghanistan still exits at the Kabul airport due to poor screening procedures.

According to the report, cash counting machines, which were funded by the US government, are not being used for the purposes intended and the only cash counting machine confirmed to be working is in the arrival entrance, instead of the departure area where strict cash controls are most needed to help prevent cash smuggling.

In addition, the machines lack connectivity to the Internet, which in turn prevents Afghan investigative authorities from tracking currency suspected of being laundered.

"The absence of fully functional and strategically positioned cash counting machines, and declaration forms in the VIP section along with the limited screening of VIP passengers - who are most likely to have large amounts of cash - severely limits the Afghan government's ability to fully implement its anti-money laundering laws at the airport," John F. Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction stated in the report.

### U.S.: Al-Qaeda,...

However, at that time, Mawlawi Abdul Hakim Shararee, a member of the Taliban's leadership council, said that the group would not allow any foreign fighters to use Afghanistan's soil against any other country.

On October 2020, A senior UN official said that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has maintained close ties with the Taliban despite the Taliban's assurance to the United States to cut ties with the group.

"Senior figures remain in Afghanistan, as well as hundreds of armed operatives," the coordinator of the United Nations monitoring team for Daesh, al-Qaida and the Taliban, Edmund Fitton-Brown said during a webinar on the future of Afghanistan as quoted by VOA.

### Path to Peace...

and U.S. security, in the past. Even if we tried to finish the withdrawal before the Taliban met their Doha commitments, while ramping up the use of every other tool in the American toolbox, things can go horribly wrong.

Risk: The risk to Afghans and American security interests is high in this scenario. It would be too rapid of a withdrawal based on the conditions on the ground. Security has not improved since Doha in Feb 2020 because the Taliban have not cut ties with and started fighting terrorists, the Taliban have not entered into a cease-fire with the Afghan republic, and the Taliban have not engaged in peace talks seriously. The Taliban will use any more U.S. troop withdrawals to harden their positions, not soften them. A rapid withdrawal based on a calendar date, and not the Taliban progress in the Doha and Afghan peace negotiation process, will end in more violence and likely more terrorist targeting of U.S. and NATO members in Afghanistan.

#### 3. Reckless approach

If the U.S. removes the DoD element from the U.S. Embassy, cuts ANDSF funding, and reduces all other development funding, while shifting its efforts only to intelligence, diplomacy and information operations there will be a cost-savings in money. There will not be a cost-saving in lives (U.S. or Afghan); and the Taliban, at Pakistan's request, will increase their violence in an attempt to overthrow major cities and populations centers. The Taliban are counting on another near-total withdrawal by the U.S. and their NATO

and coalition partners. This approach will sell-out our Afghan partners in civil society and government and doom them to a full-scale war beyond the current scale of violence.

Risk: The risk of shifting to a very small embassy team footprint is easy to see. It will not remedy any of the Afghan or U.S. security concerns and will only embolden the Taliban and their proxy masters in Pakistan.

#### 4. Disastrous approach

The final idea, being talked about in extreme circles, is to close our embassy again, remove all U.S. citizens, and wash our hands of Afghanistan completely. It is really a non-starter, but worthy of recognizing as an option. We have basically done this before. Risk: This approach will start a full-scale withdrawal of nations and NGOs from Kabul and their outposts across the nation. The U.S. is Afghanistan's most dependable partner right now and a U.S. departure spells the end of the republic and a return to civil war as necessary-funding to keep any Afghan government in business (the current republic or a returned Taliban regime) is the key to future peace.

#### RECOMMENDATION

The wise approach is the only logical choice at this moment in time. It can be reassessed at the end of 2021 when we will know more about the outcomes of the Afghan peace negotiations. The Afghan-led international coalition of military forces should stay engaged in warfighting as needed. That means advising, supporting, and even combat—as requested. In the mean-time every other tool in the U.S. government

and Afghan-partner nation's toolboxes should be used to help the Afghan people stand firm on the front line of battling terrorism and securing human rights for the Afghans. Most importantly the U.S. and Afghanistan must partner more closely to lead the global diplomatic effort to severely pressure the Taliban into getting serious about the peace negotiations. Pakistan and their proxy the Taliban have the most to lose if the talks fail completely. The world needs to help them see that this is one of the best opportunities they have for a peaceful future for their grandchildren. Not one more young person needs to become a possible war criminal fighting for Pakistan by intentionally killing Afghan women and children.

We must all remember that "wanting the peace process to work" is not the same as "the peace process is working." Most everyone would like to see the current Afghan peace negotiations increase security and lead towards a more peaceful future that safeguards Afghan societal gains of the last nearly 20 years. BUT, diplomats cannot start to see the negotiations as a capitulation contest to see how much of the future the Afghan government can throw away, with no concessions from the Taliban. It is okay if this round of peace talks doesn't bring peace. Most initial attempts do not. It is quite possible that hostilities will continue and peace delegations will go home for a while to reformulate a strategy to attempt another round of peace talks.

### EU, WHO pledge...

Aga Khan Foundation. "As preparation for vaccine rollout signals new hope in Afghanistan's fight against COVID-19, continued investment in testing, surveillance, clinical care, protection of health workers and essential health services reins vital for containing the spread of the virus in addition to offering quality

medical care" says David Lai, Officer in Charge at the WHO. The press release stated that the import restrictions and widespread unemployment have worsened food insecurity, and through the support of the EU and its partners 300 000 children and their mothers will also receive community nutrition services. "The COVID-19 pandemic has

put additional strain on the already weak health system and worsened underlying health and gender vulnerabilities. This generous EU funding will allow UNICEF to respond quickly to this secondary wave of challenges which profoundly affects the health and safety of children and women" says Sheema Sen Gupta, Representative a.i, UNICEF Agender-based.

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# China, New Zealand sign free trade deal upgrade protocol

China and New Zealand on Tuesday signed a protocol on upgrading their 12-year-old free trade agreement (FTA), which is expected to bring more benefits to the peoples of the two countries.

Chinese Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao and his New Zealand counterpart signed the protocol via video link.

In 2008, China signed an FTA with New Zealand, the first FTA between China and a developed country. The two sides announced the conclusion of their three-year negotiations on the upgrade in November 2019.

On the basis of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, China will further expand its opening-up in sectors including aviation, education, finance, elderly care, and

passenger transport to New Zealand to boost the trade of services.

For the trade of goods, the upgraded FTA will see both countries open their markets for certain wood and paper products and optimize trade rules such as rules of origin, technical barriers to trade and customs facilitation, China's Ministry of Commerce said in an online statement.

New Zealand will lower its threshold for reviewing Chinese investment, allowing it to receive the same review treatment as members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

The two sides have also pledged to strengthen cooperation in the fields of e-commerce,



competition policy, government procurement, the environment and trade.

The signature of the protocol is a concrete action in China's practice of multilateralism and the construction of an open world economy, and marks an important step in

implementing the FTA upgrade strategy, Wang said.

The two sides will promptly implement relevant domestic procedures so that the upgraded FTA can be operational as soon as possible, said the commerce ministry.

## A look at the world

### Italian prime minister resigns as political crisis deepens

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte resigned from office on Tuesday, two weeks after a key coalition partner quit his government over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic and an economic downturn.

Conte quit in the hope to be granted a fresh mandate by the head of state,



President Sergio Mattarella, to form a new government after the coalition rupture left him without a majority in the Senate.

Mattarella is expected to hold two days of formal consultations with all the parties this week before deciding what to do next. The president will start consultations with party leaders on Wednesday afternoon, a statement from his office said, adding that Conte had been asked to stay on in a caretaker capacity as the talks continued. But once a prime minister resigns in Italy, there is no guarantee that a new coalition can form, and always a risk that early elections might end up as the only viable solution.

Italy's main governing parties have warned that snap elections, two years ahead of schedule, will be the only way out of the impasse unless a solution is rapidly found.

### U.S. looking to carry out assassinations in Turkey - ex-military intel chief



The Turkish government has proof that the United States is preparing assassination plans against opinion leaders in Turkey, the former head of Turkey's General Staff Intelligence Agency, the military's intelligence arm, said.

Ismail Hakkı Pekin, an ally of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, made the remarks during a discussion programme on Turkey's Ulusal TV last week.

The government has "intelligence reports" on the alleged attacks, Pekin said, and was "taking the necessary precautions."

"There are nerve endings of society in Turkey," Pekin said when asked who was on the list of the alleged plots. "There are opinion leaders. "And if you carry out an assassination against those leaders, then (Turkish) society will necessarily react to the state."

Ankara-Washington relations have been particularly strained since the July 2016 coup attempt, which Turkey blames on a U.S.-based Turkish cleric, whose extradition requests from Ankara have been denied by the United States.

The 2018 conviction of a senior executive of Halkbank, on charges of violating U.S. sanctions against Iran has exacerbated tensions, with Erdoğan labelling the case a "political coup attempt" and a joint effort by the CIA and FBI to undermine Ankara.

"Those who could not succeed in the (military) coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, (2016) are now searching for a different attempt in our country," Erdoğan said after the Halkbank CEO's conviction.

### Ethiopia asks Sudan to pull troops out for border talks

Ethiopia on Tuesday reiterated its call for Sudan to pull back from disputed territories its troops have been in since late last year. In late December, Sudanese soldiers reportedly moved up to 40 kilometers (25 miles) into Ethiopian-held territories, including the contested fertile agricultural region of Al-Fashaga, which Ethiopia called an act of blackmail by its western neighbor. Ethiopia then launched a diplomatic effort to get Sudanese forces out of the territories to promote a return to the normal mechanisms of dialogue to resolve the century-long border dispute.



"Ethiopia is committed to a peaceful resolution of the border differences with Sudan," Foreign Ministry spokesman Dina Mufti told a weekly news briefing.

Any possibility of mediation would require Sudan to pull its forces to positions prior to late December, when Ethiopia first signaled a breach of its borders, he added.

"We have had mechanisms, technical and political committees," he said, adding that the two countries need to get back to those resolution mechanisms through dialogue. Asked how long Ethiopia would maintain a diplomatic stance while Sudan remains in the contested territories, Dina said: "We will cross that river when we come to it." Sudanese military leaders have not shown any sign of heeding Ethiopia's call, though, and reiterate they reclaimed their own territories.

The Horn of Africa nation decries how Sudan, otherwise considered a friendly neighbor, took the move when Ethiopia's defense forces were busy dealing with the outlawed Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) after it stormed the federal army's Northern Command last year, killing soldiers and looting military hardware.



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