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ACB confirms Test matches against Zimbabwe in March will go ahead

Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) on Saturday said the Afghanistan national cricket team is expected to play two Test matches against Zimbabwe in March. "Test Cricket will resume for Afghanistan as the national team is scheduled to play its fifth and sixth Test matches this March against Zimbabwe," the ACB said in a statement. According to the cricket board the series will also be followed by a T20I series. Last year Zimbabwe Cricket called off a five-match Twenty20I series against Afghanistan due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The ACB also confirmed the decision at the time. This comes after Afghanistan took an unassailable 2-0 series lead over Ireland thanks to a seven-wicket haul in their second ODI in Abu Dhabi on last week on Sunday before going on to win the third match to secure the Kardan ... **P2**



"We Are Ready to Make Sacrifice for Peace": Wahid Omar

The Director General for Afghan Government's Office of Public and Strategic Affairs Wahid Omar says the Afghan government is willing to make sacrifices for peace. Wahid Omar in a press conference on Saturday said that the government is willing to make sacrifice for peace, if its outcome leads to the consolidation of the system, democracy, pluralism and elections. "Peace is the basic will of the people and government of Afghanistan; But a peace that results a stable, united, democratic and orderly Afghanistan," he said. "The current war is for the survival of the values of the past 20 years," Wahid Omar asserted. According to Mr. Omar, for a year now, the Taliban have stopped fighting the foreign forces, whom they call the occupiers; But the war against the Afghan people and public facilities continues. He stated that more than 20 days have passed since the start of the second round of peace talks in Doha; But the Taliban delegation has shown no ... **P3**

President Ghani Says He Is Not Obstacle to Peace



President Ashraf Ghani on Friday said he is not an obstacle to peace, but he is a champion in peace in Afghanistan, responding to the Taliban's remarks expressed early in the day who blamed the incumbent government for hindering the efforts to end the conflicts through a political settlement.

Addressing the ASPEN Security Forum, President Ghani highlighted the Afghan peace process, the fight against Daesh, and the rumors about the establishment of an interim government as a result of a potential peace agreement with the Taliban. Ghani rejected the prospect for

the establishment of an interim government in the country in the wake of the past experience and said that he has sworn in to uphold the constitution of the nation. He said election is the way forward to transfer of power. "We must agree on the date of the election so that we have the full

legal transfer of the authority. We have had interim governments. They've led to bloodshed. People of Kabul, Kabul was destroyed in 1992 by an interim government. A prime minister was bombarding his president and the president had to fight back with the prime minister. The prime minister, Mr. Hekmatyar, never came to Kabul," Ghani said. "The citizens of Afghanistan must be empowered... Where would I get the authority to dissolve the Republic? I have sworn to uphold the constitution," Ghani said, apparently referring to a key Taliban negotiator's remarks who said they will agree on peace when Ghani steps down from power. Ghani said the current level of violence should be considered when it comes to plans to withdraw forces from the country. "Now, robust diplomacy and a stand on condition-based approaches will enable us all hopefully to resume meaningful discussion and this would be a predictable process where all the US government, the military side, the intelligence side and the diplomatic side, ... **P3**

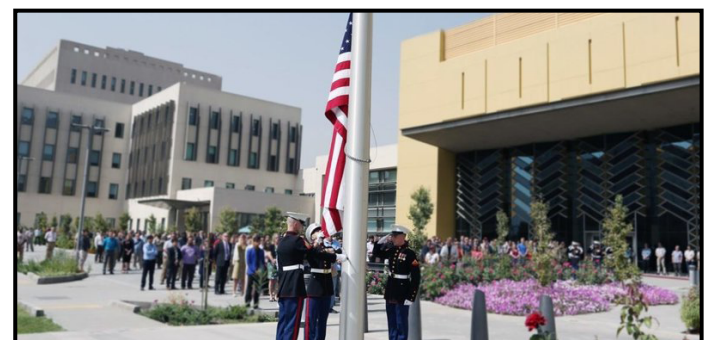
Eight Afghan Forces Killed in Nangarhar Blast: Official

At least eight security forces were killed in a car bomb blast that targeted a civil order forces unit in Shirzad district of Nangarhar province on Saturday morning, the provincial governor's office confirmed. The civil order forces unit operates under the Afghan National Army, according to local officials. The explosion took place in the Gandumak area in Shirzad district, a statement by the Nangarhar governor's office read. Meanwhile, Obaidullah Shinwari, the deputy head of the provincial council in Nangarhar, said that at least 14 security force members were killed in the attack. Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.



Taliban Warn U.S. Troops to Leave Afghanistan or Die

The Taliban dismissed the Pentagon's claim that the Afghan militant group is not in compliance with the agreement it reached with the United States in Qatar last year, warning Washington that American troops will be killed if they refuse to leave the country as required by the deal. In a tweet on Friday, Zabihullah Mujahid, a Spokesman for the Taliban, reacted to Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby's comments in his first news conference a day earlier about the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Kirby claimed "the Taliban have not met their commitments" under the deal they reached with the former U.S. administration in Doha last February, which would ultimately lead to a permanent cease-fire in exchange for cutting the number of American troops in Afghanistan in phases to go to zero by May 2021.



The U.S. troop drawdown began under ex-President Donald Trump, who reduced the number of American boots on the ground from approximately 13,500 to 2,500 before leaving office in mid-January. Kirby, however, stated the U.S. will not proceed with the drawdown unless the Taliban comply with the Doha agreement. He added that new Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was reviewing the matter and had discussed the path forward in the

war-torn country with NATO allies and partners. Mujahid, however, said the Pentagon's claim about the Taliban's non-compliance was not true. The Afghan group, he added, "is committed to all articles of the agreement and is honoring its side". "Implementing the Doha deal is the only solution to the current challenge," the Taliban's Spokesman continued, noting, "We want the Americans to honor the ... **P3**

ACB confirms...

University Cup. These three matches formed part of the ICC Cricket World Cup Super League. Last time Afghanistan and Ireland met in an ODI was in May 2019 in Belfast, where the visitors won by 126 runs. The Afghans were also the team to cut Ireland's World Cup dreams short three years ago when they knocked them out in the qualifiers back in 2018.

Door should be...

imposed by US against Turkey and said, "Islamic Republic of Iran condemns sanctions imposed by US against Turkey. Unfortunately, the US government has been addicted to sanctions and this wrong policy will cost dearly for the whole world." In the meeting, constructive talks were held between Iran and Turkey in the fields of transit, trade, business and energy, according to Zarif, adding, "Settling problems facing investors and traders of the two countries is the main aim which is followed up strictly." Zarif also said a trilateral meeting of Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan will be held in Tehran to discuss regional cooperation.

Putin signs bill...

for five years. On January 26, Moscow and Washington exchanged notes on extending New START. Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia and Joseph Biden of the United States welcomed the move in a telephone call. On the same day, Putin submitted a bill on extending New START for five years to the State Duma (the lower house of parliament).

By Wang Yu, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan

China Plays an Active and Constructive Role in Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Process

The year 2020 was a tough one for both China and Afghanistan. It was also a year of change and progress for both. In the COVID-19 pandemic and amid major changes unseen in a century, the global economy is mired in its deepest recession since World War II and multilateralism and the international order are confronted with unprecedented challenges, which has created considerable obstacles to China's development in the economic and other fields and added many uncertainties to the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. Fortunately, thanks to the support of the peace-loving Afghan people, regional countries and the international community, intra-Afghan negotiations have officially begun, opening a window of opportunity to end the long-running conflict in Afghanistan. In this process, China has been playing an active and constructive role.

I have been Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan for over a year. In the past year, I have worked here in Afghanistan and met many people. I have participated in all previous international conferences on Afghanistan and witnessed with my own eyes the peace process getting on track and making progress. I have in this course gained a deeper appreciation of the role of China, Afghanistan's friendly neighbor connected by mountains and rivers, as an important supporter, mediator and facilitator in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process.

China firmly supports the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process. The Afghans must take control of their own destiny. No external force is to impose itself on Afghanistan or use Afghanistan for its own selfish gains. Both China and Afghanistan have suffered enormously from colonialism, imperialism and bullying. China shares the Afghan People's desire for peaceful development. All along, the Chinese side

has firmly supported all stakeholders to the Afghan question to achieve peace by political means. It has actively participated in and promoted the Afghan peace and reconciliation process in bilateral and multilateral arenas and pushed the international community to foster common understandings. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi has made the following proposals for intra-Afghan negotiations: First, stick to the fundamental direction of a political settlement. Dialogue and negotiation are the only way out for the Afghanistan question. All parties to the peace talks are brothers. They should follow the trend of the times and the voice of the people, dissolve old grievances and differences and achieve genuine reconciliation. It is hoped that the political parties in Afghanistan will have firm confidence, patience, sincerity and determination in the peace talks.

Second, adhere to the basic Afghan-led principle. The destiny of Afghanistan is in the hands of the Afghan people themselves. The Afghan-led, Afghan-owned concept should be earnestly upheld. No country should engage in a geopolitical contest in Afghanistan and no one should seek selfish gains from the Afghan question.

Third, pursue unswervingly an extensive and inclusive framework goal. The parties to the negotiations should work together to build a widely representative and inclusive political power structure with equal participation and power-sharing among all Afghan parties, groups, ethnicities and religious sects, which combats terrorism with unwavering determination and pursues a foreign policy of peace and friendship. Fourth, seek solutions that address both the symptoms and root causes of the Afghan question. In addition to the war and related chaos as the biggest challenge, Afghanistan also faces difficult problems such as poverty, refugees and drugs. All parties in the



negotiations need to pool their wisdom and work together. We hope that all parties concerned will take stock of the overall interests of the country and the people's livelihood and collaborate with one another to create a virtuous circle of peace and development in Afghanistan. Fifth, sustain international efforts to uphold justice and fulfill responsibilities. The international community and countries in the region should uphold justice and support the negotiations to achieve peace instead of moving away from peace. Foreign military forces should be withdrawn in an orderly and responsible manner and care should be given to preventing terrorist groups from seizing the opportunity to create chaos and ensuring a smooth transition in Afghanistan.

China has been mediating between all parties to the Afghan question. As State Councilor Wang put it, as a close neighbor and sincere friend, China hopes more than any other country for Afghanistan to achieve peace and stability. China sincerely hopes that the two sides of the Afghan peace talks will focus on their common interests, resolve their differences and turn their swords into ploughshares in continued pursuit of a political settlement and an extensive and inclusive framework goal. China and Afghanistan have never fought any war or engaged in any conflict with each other since ancient times. The two sides have long treated

each other with mutual respect and help. China has developed profound friendship with all stakeholders to the Afghan question, facilitated talks and promoted peace between them. Its positive role has won wide acclaim. China has contributed its wisdom and propositions and facilitated such mechanisms as the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan foreign ministers' dialogue, the China-Russia-US consultation, the China-Russia-Iran-Pakistan special representatives meeting and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan Liaison Group, all designed to serve as a platform and create conditions for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

China actively facilitates the Afghan peace and reconciliation process. We follow closely the latest developments in the process and worked actively and constructively for it. We call on all parties in Afghanistan to put the interests of their country and people first, engage in negotiation and find therein a result and peace. China will continue to provide assistance within its capacity for the second round of intra-Afghan negotiations. We are ready to provide a platform for dialogue and exchanges among all Afghan parties and assist in the peace and reconciliation process on the basis of respect for their own wills. China calls on the international community to take full account of the current situation in Afghanistan, ... **P3**

By LUKE COFFEY

Biden needs to address the situation in Afghanistan

Whether you agree with his actions or not, it is hard to argue that President Joe Biden and his team have not hit the ground running. In recent days there has been a flurry of executive orders on a wide range of issues. Significant policy changes (or reversals) have also been announced, and dozens of personnel appointments have been made. However, there is one major foreign policy matter that needs to be addressed urgently: The Biden administration's position on Afghanistan.

So far, the administration has not been clear on its approach to Afghanistan. Antony Blinken, the new US secretary of state, announced this week that US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad will remain in his position. This is good news, as he was the one who brokered the peace deal last year and he has a personal rapport with all the key players in the Afghan government and Taliban.

agreement made last year to determine whether the Taliban is meeting its commitments. As he told reporters this week: "One of the things that we need to understand is exactly what is in the agreements that were reached between the United States and the Taliban, to make sure that we fully understand the commitments that the Taliban has made as well as any commitments that we've made." This makes good sense. Some aspects of the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban were kept secret and will need to be reviewed by the new administration.

Wondering whether the Taliban is living up to its side of the agreement is a legitimate question. After all, there have been many signs in recent months that violence and attacks by the Taliban against the Afghan military and civilians have not decreased. After the Afghan government made the goodwill gesture of releasing thousands of Taliban prisoners, hundreds have

already been recaptured during recent fighting, even though those who were released promised they would not take up arms again. Recently there has been a spate of assassinations of journalists in the country, along with several suicide bombings of civilian targets.

President Trump was correct to pursue a policy of negotiation with the Taliban, and to encourage intra-Afghan talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban to achieve a peaceful settlement. History shows that most insurgencies end, if they end at all, with some sort of a political settlement.

However, one of the flaws of the Trump administration's strategy toward Afghanistan was the emphasis on ending so-called "forever wars." At times, it seemed that President Trump did not really care about the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks, as long as US forces could leave the country. Now President Biden needs to decide quickly what he is going to do. According to the agreement

between the Trump administration and the Taliban last year, all US forces are due to leave the country by this spring. Right now, there are only 2,500 American troops left there.

The Biden administration needs to determine whether the deal with the Taliban can be salvaged and whether it should redeploy more troops back to the region — not only to send a strong message of support to the Afghan government and the Afghan people, but also to send a message about US determination to the Taliban.

It is in America's interest that Afghanistan is stable and secure, and that it has the capability to provide its own security with minimal help from the US or the international community. Even though there have been many ups and downs along the way, good progress has been made since the Taliban was ousted.

Though there are now only 2,500 US troops on the ground in Afghanistan, the Afghan military has been able to hold its own against the Taliban. The group's reach across the country is nowhere near what it was at its peak on Sept. 10, 2001 when it controlled almost 90 percent of the country, the capital city and every major urban center.

History shows that most insurgencies end, if they end at all, with some sort of a political settlement.

Luke Coffey

Now is not the time for the US to turn its back on Afghanistan. The Biden administration has to operate in the world it is in and not in the world it wants to be in. This means that while there will be a lot of focus on the domestic situation in the US, the administration cannot ignore the pressing international issues. Afghanistan has to be a top priority. The US military needs to know how to plan in Afghanistan and the broader region. America's friends and allies in NATO must plan too. The Afghan government — and indeed the Afghan people — deserve clarity on the new administration's approach.

There remains only a skeleton force of US troops in the country. The deadline for the complete withdrawal of international forces is only months away. Seemingly, little progress has been made on the intra-Afghan talks and the levels of violence across much of the country remain high. The Biden administration cannot ignore this problem. It must act quickly and with clarity.

Afghanistan Generates 4.2 Billion AFN in Revenue from 95 Mining Contracts

Afghan Minister Mohammad Haroon Chakhansuri said the Afghan government generated 4.2 billion Afghanis in revenue from 95 mining contracts.

He also announced that the Afghan government has signed and processed 37 small-scale mining licenses this year.

These licenses include mining

of construction stones, marble, travertine and gravel that generate an annual revenue of 240 million Afghanis and provide direct job opportunities for 1,000 people.

He added that the ministry leadership has enhanced efforts to design programs aimed at boosting transparency, national revenue and job creation.



Latest Syria...

political freedom and political parties, freedom of association," said Bahra.

"We talked about the state of law, judicial authority and independence, and other issues regarding group and personal freedoms."

He spoke of the difficulties in dealing with the regime side.

"We need to deal with this regime. Despite the fact we do not like the way they work or the slow pace they adopt, this is the reality, and we need to deal with reality. This does not mean we are abandoning our objectives."

Kuzbari accused the opposition side of introducing new "pre-conditions."

"Now the ball is in the court of the international community, the United Nations, the Special Envoy, Mr. Pedersen, and the members of the Security Council," he said.

Pedersen said he would meet other leaders involved in the peace process and was also likely to hold talks with members of the new US administration under President Joe Biden.

President Ghani...

would be engaged and the decisions would be predictable which would allow us to adjust," Ghani said. "We must ask what is required to preserve the legacy of the US presence in Afghanistan."

President Ghani said that no one should underestimate "our resolve" and that "none of us has plans to live somewhere else or abandon this country that has suffered so much."

Ghani said there should be a strong verification mechanism for the Taliban's commitments.

"You have to have ironclad agreements and verification mechanisms... Many peace agreements are Trojan horses. They promise the moon and deliver the opposite," he reiterated.

"We Are Ready..."

interest in continuing the talks.

"We hope the Taliban will increase their presence in Doha and focus on peace talks," Mr Omar said. "We hope the Taliban accept the current situation in Afghanistan and do not come up with old plans."

Recently, Abbas Stanekzai, the deputy head of the Taliban delegation leading a delegation to Russia, said that the current government led by Mohammad Ashraf Ghani is the main obstacle to peace in Afghanistan.

According to Stanikzai, if President Ghani resigns from power, peace will be established in Afghanistan.

Taliban Warn...

Doha agreement as well."

In a phone conversation with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Thursday, new U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said

Washington was reviewing the agreement with Taliban to see whether the Taliban was fulfilling commitments to "cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders".

In recent weeks, deadly attacks and high-profile assassinations have seen a rise in Afghanistan. The Taliban have denied responsibility for the killings, but Afghan and U.S. officials have pinned the blame on the group.

A part of the deal, the Taliban promised to break ties with Al-Qaeda and not allow any other armed group to use the Afghan territories under their control to attack the U.S.

However, the memorandum from the U.S. Treasury Department to the Department of Defense, released on January 4, claimed, "as of 2020, Al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban's protection".

That claim was also rejected

by the Taliban, with its deputy peace negotiator, Shir Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, stating the Afghan group has no ties to terrorist outfits, including Al-Qaeda.

"We are acting based on the agreement [with the U.S.] and do not allow foreign militants to have presence in Afghanistan," he told Russian media on Friday during a visit to Moscow.

Stanikzai noted such claims are intended to mislead the world community and serve as a pretext to justify the U.S. military's continued presence on Afghan soil.

He added that the 2020 agreement with the United States was also meant offer American "invading" troops a "safe passage" out of Afghanistan, and that the Taliban expects new U.S. President Joe Biden administration's so-called review of the document will not lead to its destruction.

"We hope that when they are reviewing it they will come to the same positive [conclusion]," Stanikzai stressed.

The Taliban negotiator once again rejected a New York Times report in June 2020 that accused Russia of paying the militant group to kill American troops in Afghanistan, delivering a stern warning to the U.S. against attempting to keep its

forces on Afghan oil in defiance of the Doha accord.

"We do not need anyone to give us reward for the killing of Americans. Americans are the invaders and we are [have been] killing them since 2001," he continued.

"If they remain in Afghanistan after this [the agreed deadline] we will also kill them even if somebody reward us or do not reward us. We take our reward from God. We fight the invaders without a reward, without any bounty," Stanikzai warned.

The Taliban view the Kabul government as a U.S. agent and cite the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan as the main reason behind their continued militancy.

The U.S. along with its NATO allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 under the guise of fighting terrorism and dismantling Al-Qaeda.

The invasion — which has turned into the longest war in U.S. history — removed the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, but it only led to more militancy and violence as well as the emergence of Takfiri terrorism in the Central Asian country.

Over 2,400 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have also been killed in the war.

China is ready to continue playing a constructive role in this regard together with the rest of the international community.

China and Afghanistan are good friends, brothers and neighbors. We have been facilitating the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan with a deep belief that a major country must protect justice as its critical interests. China treats Afghanistan as its equal, pursues mutual benefit in our exchanges and sincerely hopes that peace will prevail in Afghanistan and that its people will embrace a better life and a bright future.

Five years ago, during the General Debate at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a five-in-one approach to building a community of shared future for mankind. Over the past five years, the China-Afghanistan community has further developed as our two countries engage in cooperation under the BRI framework, expand regional connectivity and join the common fight against COVID-19, with increased mutual trust, deeper people-

to-people exchanges and more fruitful results. Not long ago, on the 12th BRICS summit, China joined to write into the declaration: "[the leaders] call for long-term peace in Afghanistan, reiterate China's firm support to the Afghan people in building a stable, inclusive, peaceful, independent and prosperous sovereign state, welcome the launch of intra-Afghan negotiations, and will continue supporting the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process". The move reaffirmed China's firm support for the Afghan Peace and reconciliation process and its firm commitment to make due contribution to the orderly advancement of intra-Afghan negotiations.

As the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan comes to a crucial phase, China sincerely hopes that all parties on the Afghan question will seize the opportunity of peace, turn hostility into amity, and reach an agreement on domestic political arrangements at an early. These will help the Afghan people to get rid of the haze of war, usher in long-lost peace and embrace a bright future.

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Putin signs bill on extending New START into law

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed into a law a bill extending the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) until February 5, 2026, the Kremlin press service said in a statement published on its website.

"The federal law ratifies the agreement on extending the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States, dated April 8, 2010, which Russia and the US made on January 26, 2021, through an exchange of notes," the statement reads.

According to the Kremlin press service, the federal law enters into force on the day of its official publication.

"The extension of the treaty is in line with Russia's national interests as it makes it possible to maintain transparency and predictability in strategic relations between Russia and the US and preserve global strategic stability. Besides, it will have a positive effect on the international

situation, contributing to the nuclear disarmament process," the statement adds.

New START

New START, which was signed in 2010 and came into force in 2011, limits Russia and the US to no more than 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) and strategic bombers, no more than 1,550 deployed warheads and 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers.

Moscow repeatedly urged Washington not to delay a decision on extending the treaty, which was set to expire on February 5, 2021. However, the Trump administration was reluctant to extend the treaty and insisted on expanding it to include China, but Beijing rejected the idea.

Joe Biden administration took a different position. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at a briefing on January 22 that the US authorities sought to extend the treaty ... **P2**



A look at the world

Latest Syria talks' round 'a disappointment': UN envoy

The UN special envoy on Syria said Friday this week's peace talks were a disappointment. "To me, it has been a disappointment," Geir Pedersen, the UN Syria envoy, who was facilitating the five-day talks of the 45-strong Syrian Constitutional Committee, told journalists after the week-long talks ended, leaving the schedule of a new round uncertain.

"I gave a statement to all 45 committee members. I think it's fair to say it was an open, frank, and direct assessment of where we are.

"And I told the 45 members of the adopting body that we cannot continue like this. This week has shown that such an approach is



not working," Pedersen added.

The envoy said he expects to address the UN Security Council on Feb. 9 and speak to the Bashar al-Assad regime after, he added, its co-chair had rejected a proposed compromise he suggested after the talks faltered.

Hadi al Bahra, the former Syrian head of the National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (SMDK), is the co-chair for the opposition, while the regime's co-chair is Ahmed Kuzbari, a lawyer.

The opposition group said it had offered a set of constitutional recommendations for discussions on the fourth day of negotiations expecting opposition from the government side.

"No sustainable political solution can exist, but the full and strict implementation of all international resolutions pertaining to Syria," said Bahra at a news conference.

"This is what led us to take part in the Syrian constitutional committee, shouldering our national responsibility, and fully committed to UN Security Council resolution 2254 of 2015."

"And based on those principles our delegation proposed about sovereignty, about the separation of power, about dignity and freedom of rights, about ... **P3**

Door should be open for all to join Iran, Turkey for coop.



Due to recent regional developments and having a new administration in US, it is important for Iran and Turkey to cement their cooperation and leave the door open for other states to join them to restore regional stability. Iranian Foreign Minister, Zarif, who visited Turkey as the last leg of his recent tour to Russia and the Caucasian region, has sat down for talks with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Istanbul on Friday morning. He also visited the country's President and discussed regional issues with him for two hours without presence of journalists.

Iranian and Turkish foreign ministers yesterday in a joint press conference stressed the need for close cooperation of the two countries to restore regional stability and security.

Turkish foreign minister pointed to the recent conflict erupted between Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh region and said that Iran and Turkey should make their utmost efforts to restore stability in the region.

Azeri President Ilham Aliyev proposed a mechanism which was agreed by the presidents of Turkey and Russia. Iran's Zarif before arriving in Turkey visited the republic of Azerbaijan, Russia, Georgia and Armenia and discussed the 6-party cooperation with the countries' officials.

During the press conference, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, for his part, pointed to the sanctions and coronavirus pandemic and said that level of trade and business cooperation between Iran and Turkey decreased due to the sanctions imposed against Iran and also spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic.

Effective steps have been taken in this regard in order to solve existing problems, he added. Zarif then pointed to the recent developments in Afghanistan and said that trilateral cooperation between Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan will be convened at the request of the Afghanistan government.

The two countries of Iran and Turkey enjoy high potentials and capabilities to develop and broaden the level of their cooperation on the issues of mutual concerns.

Zarif then pointed to the sanctions ... **P2**

France to close border to non-EU travelers

France will not enforce a new lockdown but will close borders for non-European Union countries beginning Sunday in a bid to control rising coronavirus infections, the prime minister announced late Friday.

Jean Castex announced the border decision after a last-minute health defense council meeting organized with top ministers and President Emmanuel Macron at the Elysee.

"Any entry into France and exit from our territory to or from a country outside the EU will be prohibited, unless there is a compelling reason, from midnight on Sunday," he said, adding entry will be "conditional requiring a PCR test, with the exception of cross-border workers."



Travel from EU countries was allowed earlier by presenting a negative COVID-19 test taken not prior to 72 hours before travel.

The new decision was provoked by British and South African coronavirus variants which pose a high risk of accelerating the epidemic, said Castex.

Also, non-food shopping centers of more than 20,000 m² (65,600 ft²) will also remain closed from Sunday and the government urged private companies to encourage "teleworking." Authorities will strengthen security to crack down on illegal gatherings, parties and openings of restaurants.

France was bracing for stricter lockdown measures in view of the steadily rising daily infections.

A total of 22, 858 new cases were recorded Friday with 355 deaths in hospitals.

Top ministers within the Macron administration, however, have opposing views on the need for a new lockdown.

Worsening psychological conditions, fatigue and the possibility of mass civil disobedience have been cited as reasons to not move in the direction of stricter restrictions.

Castex said the question of confinement arises legitimately but "we know the very heavy impact for the French from all points of view." "We can still give ourselves a chance to avoid it," he said, while still leaving the door open.



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