



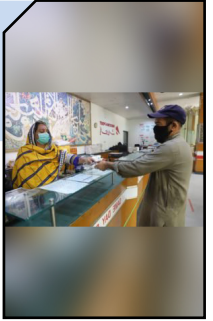
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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Monday, February 1, 2021

Issue No. 913

www.heartofasia.af

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Iran's Zarif calls for 'inclusive government' in Taliban talks

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has welcomed the idea of formation of an all-inclusive government with the participation of all ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan.

Zarif made the remarks in a Sunday meeting with a delegation of the Taliban, led by deputy head of the group's political bureau Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in Tehran.

"Political decisions could not be made in a vacuum, and the formation of an all-inclusive government must take place in a participatory process and by taking into account the fundamental structures, institutions and laws, such as the Constitution," the top Iranian diplomat said.

Foreign Minister Zarif also ...

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FM Atmar in Tashkent to Attend Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Pakistan Trilateral Summit

Leading a high-level government delegation, Afghan Foreign Minister Haneef Atmar arrived in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said.

MoFA in a statement said on Sunday that Mohammad Shaker Kargar, Chief of Staff to President, Nisar Ahmad Faizi Ghoryani, Minister of Industry and Commerce, Najibullah Yamin, Minister of Public Works, Ahmad Dawood Noorzai CEO of DABS, Kabir Khan Isakhel, Legal advisor to President and senior representatives of railways, and investment authorities and Deputy Minister of Finance are part of the delegation.

The purpose of the delegation's visit to Uzbekistan is to participate in a trilateral summit of Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Pakistan to strengthen regional connectivity, expand trade and transit, and promotion of regional cooperation.

Foreign troops to stay in Afghanistan beyond May deadline: NATO sources



International troops plan to stay in Afghanistan beyond the May deadline envisaged by the insurgent Taliban's deal with the United States, four senior NATO officials told Reuters.

The move could however escalate tensions with the Taliban which is demanding a full withdrawal.

"There will be no full withdrawal by allies by April-end," one of the officials told Reuters.

"Conditions have not been met," he said on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the

matter.

"And with the new US administration, there will be tweaks in the policy, the sense of hasty withdrawal which was prevalent will be addressed and we could see a much more calculated exit strategy."

The former Trump administration signed an agreement with the Taliban early last year calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops by May in return for the insurgents fulfilling certain security guarantees. Trump hailed the accord - which did

not include the Afghan government - as the end of two decades of war. He reduced US troops to 2,500 by this month, the fewest since 2001.

Plans on what will happen after April are now being considered and likely to be a top issue at a key NATO meeting in February, the NATO sources told Reuters.

Peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban began in September in Doha, but violence has remained high.

"No NATO ally wants to stay in

Afghanistan longer than necessary, but we have been clear that our presence remains conditions-based," said NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu. "Allies continue to assess the overall situation and to consult on the way forward."

She said about 10,000 troops, including Americans, are in Afghanistan. Those levels are expected to stay roughly the same until after May, but the plan beyond that is not clear, the NATO source said. Reuters reported that Kabul and some foreign governments and agencies say the Taliban has failed to meet conditions due to escalated violence and a failure to cut ties with militant groups such as Al Qaeda, which the Taliban denies.

The new US administration under Joe Biden has launched a review of the US-Taliban deal but a Pentagon spokesman said the Taliban have not met their commitments.

However, Washington remained committed to the process and had not decided on future troop levels, the Pentagon stated this week.

A State Department representative said Biden was committed to bringing a "responsible end to the 'forever wars'... while also protecting Americans from terrorist and other threats."

Afghanistan's presidential ...

P3

Three Groups of Migrants from Afghanistan Detained in Czechia

During last week, police in the Pardubice Region of northeast Czechia have detained three groups of migrants from Afghanistan hidden in trucks traveling from the Balkans, rmx.com reported.

The truck drivers claim they were not aware of their passengers.

According to the report, in just four days, 14 young migrants, mostly Afghans, were detained. All three cases had the same scenario: Afghans arrived hidden in the semi-trailers of trucks from the Balkans, without the apparent knowledge of the drivers.

The first two cases took place on Monday, last week. ...

P3



EU, NATO, Diplomatic Missions Condemn Continuation of Violence in Afghanistan

The EU Delegation and the diplomatic missions of Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States in a joint statement strongly condemn the continuation of assassinations, kidnappings, and destruction of vital infrastructure - all which directly harm the Afghan people.

"The violence is targeted at civil society, judicial, media, religious, medical and civilian government representatives who are essential to a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan," the statement said.

The statement stated that the Taliban bears responsibility for the majority of this targeted violence, and its attacks undermine state institutions and contribute to an insecure environment in which



terrorist and criminal groups are able to freely operate.

"We call on the Government of Afghanistan to more actively and transparently investigate these attacks to ensure that those who instigate and carry out violence against the population are identified and brought to justice,"

the statement reads.

"The international community has invested heavily in energy, food security, water resources, and road infrastructure for the benefit of the Afghan people. We condemn the on-going destruction of vital infrastructure, including digging up roads, destroying cell ...

P3

Iran's Zarif...

expressed Iran's readiness to facilitate dialogue among the Taliban, the Afghan government and other Afghan groups, noting, "The noble people of Afghanistan have been wronged. The war and occupation of Afghanistan have dealt heavy blows to the Afghan people."

The senior Iranian diplomat further expressed hope that the Taliban would focus efforts on an immediate end to the pains and problems of Afghan people, so that the establishment of peace in Afghanistan would strip the outsiders of a pretext for occupation. At the beginning of the meeting, head of the Taliban delegation gave a report of the Afghan peace process and the intra-Afghan negotiations.

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar also noted that the relations between Afghanistan and Iran are based upon friendship and good neighbourliness, expressing hope for the expansion of relations between the two countries with the establishment of peace and calm in Afghanistan.

He also denounced the destructive role of ISIS in Afghanistan, expressed satisfaction with the process of intra-Afghan talks, and described the formation of an all-inclusive government with the participation of all ethnic and political groups as a necessary condition for the full establishment of peace in Afghanistan.

By Abubakar Siddique

U.S.-Taliban Deal Hangs in The Balance

A week after U.S. President Joe Biden's administration said it would review Washington's peace deal with the Afghan Taliban, the fate of the nearly year-old agreement is in the balance. The Pentagon announced on January 28 that the Taliban is not complying with the commitments the militant group reached according to the deal, including committing to reducing violence and renouncing ties to Al-Qaeda.

The announcement came in response to a U.S. Treasury Department memo that said Al-Qaeda was "gaining strength in Afghanistan" because it operates under the Taliban's protection -- a claim the Taliban has rejected.

The Afghan government, which is not party to the agreement but is greatly affected by it, is eager to exploit the growing fractures between the Taliban and Washington and is pushing to at the very least disrupt the agreement. All this adds to the uncertainty over the future of the deal that outlined a complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in return for Taliban counterterrorism guarantees and peace talks with Kabul. "We are in new territory. The review will be a first reality check in a process that at times seem to stray a long way away from reality," says Michael Semple, a former European Union and United Nations adviser in Afghanistan. "It will be a real challenge for this new administration to pressurize the Taliban toward a compliance with what the U.S. saw as the spirit of the deal while not precipitating a complete breakdown of the deal."

Semple spent years negotiating with the Afghan insurgents as a diplomat and scholar. He says the Taliban and Washington had different perceptions upon signing the agreement in the

Qatari capital, Doha, last February.

"The Taliban had told their supporters that the deal represented a U.S. acknowledgement of defeat and the Taliban were doing them a favor by helping them extricate themselves from Afghanistan," Semple said. "Whereas the U.S. has always said they want to see peace in Afghanistan and that's the way for them to withdraw their troops."

Al-Qaeda And The Taliban
The memo, sent by the Treasury Department to the Pentagon's lead inspector general on January 4, outlines terrorist financing and the current progress against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State militants. It has subsequently spurred a debate over the Taliban's compliance with the agreement.

"As of 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban's protection," the memo noted. "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," the report said, referring to the Taliban's military arm. In October, a senior UN counterterrorism official said Al-Qaeda is still "heavily embedded" within Taliban.

But the Taliban is now venting over criticism for its alleged ties with Al-Qaeda, which the movement had promised to sever as part of the deal. The group released a vitriolic statement on January 27, calling the claims "propaganda" that is "corrupting minds and creating unwarranted fears."

"Some circles are seeking the extension of this imposed war on the Afghan nation in pursuit of their interests and malicious objectives," the statement said. "[They] are sourcing information from warmongering individuals and parties before forwarding it to other departments."

In Kabul, officials are eager to see the Taliban blamed and held accountable for mounting violence. They maintain that the Doha agreement failed to garner any major concession from the Taliban, which is still firmly opposed to a cease-fire, and yet has fulfilled most of the Taliban's demands, including the release of thousands of Taliban prisoners and a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

Sensing an opportunity to advance their interests, Afghan officials are now pushing to keep a U.S. counterterrorism force beyond the May deadline for complete withdrawal. Biden has long advocated keeping a counterterrorism force in Afghanistan as a deterrent against possible terrorist threats.

"Afghanistan is now more of a base than a battlefield for Americans, and their presence is mutually beneficial," Roya Rahmani, Afghanistan's ambassador in Washington, argued in an op-ed for the Washington Post on January 27. "Similar to U.S. presence in South Korea, Germany and Kuwait, American troops in Afghanistan serve as a stabilizing force," she added, while calling on the new administration "to hold the Taliban accountable for its egregious violations of the agreement and fully commit to the U.S.-Afghan partnership."

Mawlawi Rahmatullah, a spokesman for Afghanistan's national security council, said a visit by the Taliban's top political leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, to Iran this week was an effort

to prevent the fallout from the Biden administration's review of the deal.

"The Taliban appear to be afraid of the review," he said in a video statement. "Instead of talking to [a] delegation of Afghanistan's Islamic Republic in Qatar, they are busy [with] foreign trips, which means that they are not committed to peace and do not care about prolonging the fighting that sheds Afghan blood." Hameed Hakimi, a research associate at London's Chatham House think tank, however, argues that the Afghan government's relief about a possible review will be short-lived.

"For all its problems and shortcomings, the deal spearheaded by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is the closest any U.S. administration has come to seeking a political solution for its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan since 2001," he told Gandhara, referring to the U.S. peace envoy who is considered the key architect of the deal. "It is difficult to envisage that the Biden administration will be able to make a successful case for a continued, unending commitment to a military presence in Afghanistan." Hakimi says the most important element under review will be the "secret annexes" to which only senior U.S. officials and Taliban representatives are privy.

"For the Americans, any Taliban compliance with the agreement will be based on those annexes, as opposed to what the other non-Taliban Afghan sides -- including the government -- consider a violation or lack of implementation of the deal," he noted. "Sadly, increasing violence impacting Afghans on a daily basis may not be the most important deciding factor of the Taliban's compliance with the deal." Hakimi says the Doha agreement is politically relevant for ...

P3

By Wang Yu, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan

The Communist Party of China's View on Governance

To understand China today, one must first know more about the Communist Party of China (CPC). The CPC is the world's largest political party and part and parcel of its country and people. By the end of 2019, the total membership of the CPC stood at 91.914 million.

The CPC is like a vigorously flourishing tree deeply rooted in the soil of Chinese society. It is the ruling party in China. Its members are pioneers and role models in all walks of life and active participants and contributors in all sectors. Under the CPC leadership, they seek happiness for the people and development for the country. The vast majority of them live and work at the grass-roots level, among ordinary people, and are themselves ordinary people.

Whenever the people encounter difficulties or disasters, the CPC always commands party members to serve at the forefront. In 2020, 39.144 million party members fought on the front lines against the COVID-19 pandemic. They did their utmost to prevent the people from being infected and

save the patients, erecting an iron-clad great wall to stop the virus. China is one of the best performing countries in pandemic response. On another front, China announced on December 3 the completion of the poverty eradication task on schedule. After eight years of sustained hard work by hundreds of thousands of First Secretaries and several million designated poverty reduction officers working in villages, all rural poor people have been lifted out of poverty and all registered poverty-stricken counties have ended poverty. With nearly 100 million poor people lifted out of poverty, China has achieved a major victory that has impressed the whole world and reached, ten years ahead of schedule, the poverty reduction target set in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Chinese people wholeheartedly support the CPC. The leadership position of the CPC has been the choice made by history and the people. Since its founding in 1921, the CPC has led the Chinese people

to realize the great leap forward of the Chinese nation from standing up, getting rich to becoming strong. In that course, China no longer suffers chronic poverty or weakness across the board. On the contrary, the country enjoys development and prosperity and its people enjoy happiness and well-being. According to independent polls conducted repeatedly around the world by leading international organizations, China has long been leading the world with over 90% support rate for the CPC and the Chinese government. Under the strong leadership of the CPC, the Chinese people have won a strategic victory in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and their satisfaction with and support for the CPC and the Chinese government has reached an all-time high.

The CPC has been actively engaging and developing relations with political parties in other countries and promoting the healthy and stable development of relations between China and other countries, thus making its due contribution to world

peace, economic development and human progress. In the process, the CPC cares nothing about ideological or institutional differences but follows the four cardinal principles of independence, equality, mutual respect and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. It fully respects the independent status of any other political party and their right to choose the social system and development path for their own countries. It advocates that all parties, big or small, should treat each other as equals and that no party should impose its own views or practices on other parties. All parties should respect the experience of the parties and the people in other countries and respect the domestic and foreign policies the other parties' choose in the light of their own national conditions and party circumstances. The internal affairs of any party should be handled by the party itself and no foreign political party should be allowed to interfere in its internal affairs. Inter-party relations should not be used to interfere in other countries internal affairs.

The CPC persists in a correct path and leads a great cause, demonstrating the spirit of internationalism to fight for the cause of peace and justice for all mankind. It has always shared

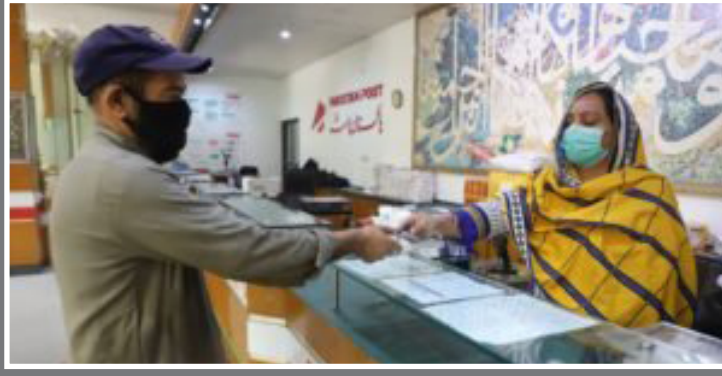
weal and woe with people pursuing progress all over the world. At present, the CPC has established various forms of contacts, exchanges and cooperative relations with more than 600 political parties and organizations in more than 160 countries and regions in the world, including Afghanistan. On July 1 last year, on the occasion of the 99th anniversary of the founding of the CPC, more than 100 political parties around the world, including the main political parties in Afghanistan, sent congratulatory messages. They praised the glorious course in the 99 years since the party's founding and the country's tremendous achievements in development. They believe that under the CPC leadership, China will surely move towards a more glorious future and make new and greater contributions to the progress of human society. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. For a party fighting for the eternal well-being of the Chinese nation, the centenary only ushers in the prime of life. While the COVID-19 pandemic, unseen in a century, facilitates accelerated major changes, the CPC will continue providing new directions, plans and choices with regard to maintaining world peace, promoting ...

P3

UNHCR Provides Cash Aid for 75,000 Afghan Refugee Families Impacted by COVID-19 in Pakistan

United Nations High Commission for Refugees has completed disbursement of emergency cash assistance for 75,000 vulnerable Afghan refugee families badly hit by coronavirus pandemic in Pakistan. In a press release, the UNHCR Representative in Pakistan, Ms. Noriko Yoshida said cash assistance to 75,000 refugee families is about leaving no one behind as COVID-19 pandemic does not discriminate.

She said with the support of government of Pakistan and international community, emergency cash assistance has made a difference in the lives of refugees during this very challenging time. UNHCR's emergency cash programme has supported a total of 450,000 Afghan refugees in Pakistan. One out of every three Afghan refugees has benefitted from this support.



Foreign troops...

palace did not respond to a request for comment, Reuters reported.

Meanwhile, according to Reuters, two Taliban sources said the group has become increasingly concerned in recent weeks about the possibility that Washington might change aspects of the agreement and keep troops in the country beyond May.

"We conveyed our apprehensions, but they assured us of honouring and acting on the Doha accord. What's going on, on the ground in Afghanistan, is showing something else. And that's why we decided to send our delegations to take our allies into confidence," a Taliban leader in Doha told Reuters.

A Taliban delegation this week visited Iran and Russia, and the leader said they were contacting China.

Although informal meetings have been taking place between negotiators in Doha, progress has stalled in recent weeks after an almost one-month break, according to negotiators and diplomats.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters the insurgents remained committed to the peace process.

"No doubt that if the Doha deal is not implemented there will be consequences, and the blame will be upon that side which does not honour the deal," he said.

"Our expectations are also that NATO will think to end this war and avoid more excuses for prolonging the war in Afghanistan."

NATO and Washington will have a challenge getting the Taliban to agree to an extension beyond May.

Three Groups...

People driving by alerted police to migrants jumping out of the trailers in the industrial zones of Semanín near Česká Třebová and Staré Čívce near Pardubice.

They were all young men, often under the age of 18.

"I do not remember so many cases in our region in such a short period," said regional police spokeswoman Eva Maturová.

According to the witnesses, people were jumping out of the moving trucks and fleeing on foot. The police, with the help of trained dogs, tracked down three Afghans in Semanín and six Afghans in Čívce.

Afghans have asked for asylum in both Romania and Bulgaria, some even in both countries at the same time.

"In both cases, Romania was the alleged starting point for the trucks. Both drivers stated that they had no idea about the foreigners in their cargo area; they drove the truck through Hungary and Slovakia to the Czech Republic. They also said that the cargo door was not sealed inside the EU and that nothing was checked after taking over the truck in Romania. The inspection took place only after it was discovered that they had uninvited passengers inside," said Maturová.

U.S.-Taliban...

Washington as it eyes an eventual exit from Afghanistan.

"It is also highly unlikely that President Biden will be on a phone call with the Taliban leadership -- unlike the warmth shown to them by President Trump," he said.

Finding A Way Out

The Biden administration wants to avoid getting locked into an interminable war in Afghanistan, says Semple. "I think they will find some way to keep the deal alive but to lengthen the timelines as a reflection that it does take longer to reach peace," he noted.

In an indication of some continuity of policy, the new U.S. secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said on January 27 that the administration has asked Khalilzad to remain in his position.

But he also said Biden's administration had not seen certain parts of the accord that were not made public.

"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," he told journalists.

In a January 28 call with President Ashraf Ghani, Blinken reiterated "his desire for all Afghan leaders to support this historic opportunity for peace while preserving the progress made over the last 20 years with regard to human rights, civil liberties, and the role of women in Afghan society," according to a readout of the call by department spokesman Ned Price.

John Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman, however, went further and said the Taliban is not complying with its commitments in the Doha agreement.

"The Taliban are not meeting their commitments to reduce violence, and to renounce their ties to Al-Qaeda," he told journalists on January 28. "Without them meeting their commitments to renounce terrorism and to stop the violent attacks on the Afghan National Security Forces ... it's very hard to see a specific way forward for the negotiated settlement, but we're still committed to that."

For now, the Taliban is adamant that it is in full compliance with

the agreement.

"We consider the full implementation of the Doha agreement a logical solution to the ongoing problem, and also in the interest of both the American and Afghan people," the Taliban statement said, adding that the group "shall remain committed to all clauses of the Doha agreement, not allow anyone to pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies from the soil of Afghanistan or build bases here."

Washington might be mulling significant changes in its approach to the current stalemate in talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and the peace process as a whole. Semple says this could involve "a broader peace process which maintains the negotiations that have been started but does not depend on the negotiations in quite the same way that the Khalilzad approach did."

Washington's complicated struggle with the coronavirus pandemic, war weariness, and an imminent withdrawal date might, however, prevent it from redefining the Afghan war or adopting a different approach to ending it.

The Communist...

common development and improving global governance.

As CPC General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping put it, the CPC must honor its status as the biggest political party in the world with commensurate great deeds. The CPC does everything for the happiness of the Chinese people, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the peace and development of all mankind. It always contributes to world peace and tranquility. No matter how developed China will be under the CPC leadership, it will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism. The

CPC contributes to the common development of the world. It is ready to serve not only the Chinese people but also people of other countries. The CPC contributes to the exchanges and mutual learning between world civilizations. It has always treated the creations by other people with an open mind, been ready to carry out dialogue, exchanges and cooperation with the people and political parties of all countries, and supported people-to-people exchanges and friendship.

China and Afghanistan are friendly and close neighbors. Over the years, our two countries have stood by each

other and never invaded each other. China and Afghanistan have carried forward the fine tradition of building friendship and partnership with neighbors and promoting bilateral relations. The CPC, the Chinese government and people stand ready to strengthen exchanges with Afghan political parties, promote continued development of relations, enhance friendship and cooperation and work for an early realization of peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan towards a community of shared future for mankind jointly developed with China.

EU, NATO, ...

towers, and blowing up energy stations by the Taliban. These actions serve no purpose besides hurting the Afghan people who - largely due to decades of conflict - suffer from food insecurity and significant economic and development challenges, further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic."

"The Taliban must understand that their violent, destructive

actions outrage the world and must cease if peace is to come to Afghanistan. We are standing side by side with those who are committed to bringing about an end to the conflict through an inclusive political settlement that ensures this country remains sovereign, united and democratic, at peace with itself and its neighbors, and preserving the human rights, development and economic achievements made over the

past 19 years. We continue to be steadfast in our resolve to assist the people of Afghanistan in achieving peace, justice, and development. We expect the Taliban to demonstrate its support for the people of Afghanistan by ending the violence, stopping the destruction of vital infrastructure, and committing to a sustainable peace, for the benefit of all Afghans," the statement added.

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Print: Waygal Printing .Co - +93 - 202512626

UN announces candidates for temporary Libyan government

The UN Libya Support Mission (UNSMIL) announced Saturday candidates for leadership of the interim unity government that will govern until elections are held Dec. 24.

There are 24 candidates for the Presidency Council, which forms the executive authority, and 21 for the Prime Minister's Office, according to UNSMIL.

The interim executive authority consists of the Presidency Council -- the president and his two vice-presidents -- and the prime minister's offices. The names to be chosen for the new interim government, which will include four leaders, including members of the Presidency Council and the prime minister, will be determined by a vote by the 75 members of the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Geneva scheduled for Feb. 1-5.

Libya and Political Dialogue Forum

UN interim envoy to Libya, Stephanie Williams,

announced Jan. 3 the formation of an 18-member Consultative Council of the Libyan Dialogue Forum to draft a formal mechanism to select Libya's temporary executive.

The UN recognizes the government headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, also supported by Turkey, as the country's legitimate authority as Tripoli has battled warlord Khalifa Haftar's militias since April 2019 in a conflict that has claimed thousands of lives.

Diplomatic efforts have been underway in recent months to solve the Libyan conflict following victories by the Libyan Army against Haftar's militias.

Despite progress on the political and military levels between rival Libyan parties, the government documented several violations by Haftar's militias to a cease-fire reached Oct. 23 under UN mediation.



A look at the world

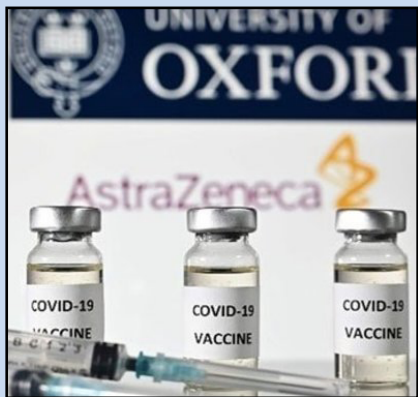
Pakistan to get 17M doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine

Pakistan has secured 17 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine under the COVAX scheme, a minister said on Saturday.

Delivery will start in February and about 6 million doses will arrive by March, according to Asad Umar, the federal planning minister who is leading the country's virus control efforts.

The remainder is expected to be received by the end of the year's first half, he said on Twitter.

The COVAX facility is an initiative by the World Health Organization to ensure fair distribution



of the coronavirus vaccines around the world. Islamabad "signed with COVAX nearly 8 months back to ensure availability," Umar added.

The development comes two weeks after Pakistan, where the virus caseload is over 543,200 and fatalities stand at 11,623, approved emergency use of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

Pakistan is expecting the first installment of 1.1 million doses of the vaccine developed by China's Sinopharm on Sunday.

Also, With Mexico becoming Thursday the third country in number of COVID-19 deaths in the world, the Americas have surpassed the dramatic milestone of one million casualties, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University.

America has become the first world region to reach that mark, with roughly half of the nearly 2.2 million world's deaths, followed by Europe with nearly 680,000 deaths, Asia (370,000), Africa (89,000) and Oceania (less than 1,000).

Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), said that those were "a million people with hopes, dreams and a truncated future. A million families in mourning, many unable to say goodbye, who will feel their absence forever". According to her, "The scars and lessons of this pandemic will remain with us".

Hundreds arrested in 50 Russian cities as thousands protest



Russian police arrested more than 1,600 people in protests across 35 cities in Russia by supporters of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Protests are taking place in multiple Russian cities, from Siberia and Russia's far east to St Petersburg and the capital, Moscow, in the biggest show of public dissent in Russia in years.

"My Russia is in prison!" a dozen demonstrators gathered in Vladivostok chanted, according to images published by the local branch of the organization of the Russian opposition leader.

"There are few people this time because the police and the riot police had blocked the place in advance," 25-year-old protester Andrei said. "But as you can see, no one is afraid".

Other chants targeted Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Over 1,000 were detained by police, according to a monitoring group, across Russia's 11 time zones. The largest number of arrests came in Moscow, AFP reported. Meanwhile, prominent associates of Navalny have been detailed along with opposition journalists, and in St. Petersburg barriers have been erected to deter protesters.

Navalny's arrest on January 17 sparked nationwide protests last week in about 100 cities, with nearly 4,000 people reportedly arrested.

His arrest came as he tried to enter the country after flying back from Germany, where he had spent five months recovering from nerve-agent poisoning.

Modi breaks silence on months long farm protests

India's prime minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday protesters that stormed New Delhi's Red Fort had caused "insult" to the country, his first public comments on a months-long farmers' agitation that turned violent last week.

Tens of thousands of farmers have camped on the outskirts of the capital for more than two months, protesting new agricultural laws they say benefit private buyers at the expense of growers.



A tractor parade on Tuesday's Republic Day turned violent when some protesters deviated from pre-agreed routes, clashing with police and breaking into the historic Red Fort complex in the capital. One died and hundreds were injured.

"The country was saddened by the insult to the Tricolor (Indian flag) on the 26th of January in Delhi," Modi said in a radio address on Sunday.

"The government is committed to modernizing agriculture and is also taking many steps in that direction."

Farm leaders say they were not responsible for violence, that was caused by a minority of those on the parade, and the government has left open the possibility talks between the two sides will resume.

Modi told opposition party leaders on Saturday an offer to freeze the laws for 18 months still stands, according to a government summary of the meeting.

Agriculture employs about half of India's labour force, and unrest among an estimated 150 million landowning farmers is one of the biggest challenges to Modi's rule since he first came to power in 2014.



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