



Page 2 | NATIONAL
President Xi Jinping's holistic view of national security Guides ...

Pakistan Fences Off Afghanistan, Impacting Families and Fighters

Families, traders, and guerrilla fighters have for generations moved freely across the porous border between Afghanistan and ...

Page 3 | ECONOMY

Water Intake Begins at Kamal Khan Dam



Page 2 | NATIONAL

Kabul
20 / 2



Herat
24 / 6



Nangarhar
24 / 9



Balkh
19 / 8



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10 afs



Taliban Delegation Met with Turkmenistan Deputy PM & Foreign Minister

Mohammad Naeem, spokesman for the Taliban's political office in Doha, said that Mullah Baradar and the group's delegation met with Turkmenistan's deputy Prime Minister and foreign minister this morning.

According to Taliban's spokesman, the two sides discussed major pipeline and railway projects and the Taliban delegation expressed their cooperation and confidence in the better implementation of these projects.

According to him, the current situation and peace and stability in Afghanistan were also discussed during the meeting.

This comes as the Taliban political delegation headed by Mullah Baradar visited Turkmenistan after their trip to Iran.



3 Senators Sentenced to 10 Years in Jail on Corruption Charges

Three members of the Meshrano Jirga, the Upper House of Parliament, were sentenced to 10 years and one month in prison each by the primary court of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center on charges of accepting \$40,000 in bribe money from customs officials in Balkh, the Attorney General's Office (AGO) said on Saturday.

Senators Mohammad Anwar Bashliq, Mohammad Azim Qoyash and Liyaqatullah Babakarkhil are accused of asking for \$60,000 in bribe money from customs officials in the Hairatan port in the northern province of Balkh, the AGO said.

They were arrested last year in December while accepting \$40,000 in bribe money, according to the AGO.

The AGO said that the primary court of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center made the decision based on seven reasons against the senators.

The senators were also fined \$40,000, the AGO said.

This comes Herat mayor and six others were each sentenced to three years ... P3

Taliban Abandoned Peace Talks in Doha: Govt



Afghan National Security Adviser (NSA) Hamdullah Mohib, says the Taliban have abandoned the peace talks in Doha and warned that the Afghan security forces are ready to fight them in the battlefields and defend the people.

"The Taliban want power and are

ready to destroy Afghanistan to gain it," NSA Mohib said in a press conference on Saturday. "If the Taliban do not want peace, we must defend our people. President Ghani is committed to peace; But the Taliban are the main obstacle to the peace process."

Mohib expressed hope that there would be a general peace in Afghanistan, but stated: "Anyone who is thinking of collapsing the system will not get what he/she wants. We will not allow them to collapse the system and carry out their nefarious goals here."

NSA said that the recent visits of the Taliban delegation to the regional countries indicate that no country supports the establishment of the Emirati system in Afghanistan.

In the meantime, the Interior Minister Massoud Andarabi at the same press conference said that the Taliban militants are incapable of falling districts and the city centers. "The Taliban have just started fighting in Kandahar; But they have no soldiers and have asked for people from other provinces. The defense and security forces have inflicted heavy casualties on them," Andarabi said.

The Interior Minister stressed that if the Taliban do not want peace, the security and defense forces will be fully prepared to suppress them.

This comes as nearly a month has passed since the start of the second round of peace talks in Qatar; But during this time, the two sides have held a formal meeting only once or twice, which has been more ceremonial. The Taliban delegation has recently begun trips to Iran, Russia and Turkmenistan, distancing themselves from peace talks.

Two Civilians, One Policeman Killed in Kabul Blasts

Three people, including two civilians and a police force members, were killed in three explosions in Kabul that happened in less than two hours on Saturday morning, police said.

The first explosion happened at a shop in the Baghe-Qazi area west of Kabul at around 9:40 am local time. The type of the blast is unknown so far, police said.

People and security forces were busy helping the wounded when a second blast happened in which two civilians, including one Afghan Hindu, were killed and five more, including two Afghan Hindus, were wounded, police said.

Meanwhile, an explosion targeted a police vehicle in Hese Awal area north of Kabul in which one security force member was killed, Kabul police said. This comes amidst a sharp increase in targeted attacks in Kabul in the last two months.



Afghanistan gets first batch of new banknotes notes from Poland



Afghanistan received its first batch of new banknotes from Poland last week, following an agreement signed with Warsaw early last year.

The Polish Embassy said in a statement that the banknotes have been printed on paper that has an anti-pollution coating, making it more

resistant to pollution and chemicals than the previous banknotes.

The pictures and the design also now "put them pretty much on par with the crisp currency notes anywhere in the world," the statement read. The bank notes have been produced using the latest

technology which ensures more durability and the notes have a higher protection level against chemical solvents which prevents them from soiling, the embassy stated.

Afghanistan awarded the \$8 million contract to Poland early last year - to the Polish Security Printing Works (PSPW).

WHO chief...

unprecedented times and we applaud those manufacturers that have pledged, for example, to sell their vaccines at cost."

He encouraged the world's vaccine manufacturers to share their dossiers with the WHO faster and more fully so that the latter can review them for emergency use listing.

As the world is struggling to contain the pandemic, vaccination is underway in some countries with the already-authorized coronavirus vaccines.

Meanwhile, 238 candidate vaccines are still being developed worldwide – 63 of them in clinical trials – in countries including Germany, China, Russia, Britain and the United States, according to information released by the WHO on February 2.

Chinese premier...

Li noted that the newly established businesses have shown a robust performance, contributing 2.5 trillion yuan to the tax revenue last year.

The surviving and thriving of hundreds of millions of market entities has furnished a solid foundation for keeping employment stable, meeting people's basic needs, and stabilizing the fundamentals of the Chinese economy, he said.

The high-level dialogue was moderated by Peter Mandelson, former European trade commissioner and British first secretary of state, and attended by business leaders representing close to 30 leading European companies including VOLVO, Airbus, JCDcaux, AstraZeneca, L'Oreal, BASF, and SAP.

By Wang Yu, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan

President Xi Jinping's holistic view of national security Guides China-Afghanistan Security Cooperation to a New High

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Chinese President Xi Jinping has, on the basis of a deep understanding of the trend of history, put forward a series of new strategic, forward-looking and science-based ideas and concepts to unite and lead the Chinese people of all ethnic groups towards building a moderately prosperous society and ending absolute poverty in their new journey, to build China into a modern socialist country in an all-round way. In 2014, Xi put forward the creative concept of overall national security, laying out plans for China to improve its security work system, enhance its capacity and capabilities for national security and strengthen regional security cooperation, which will guide China-Afghanistan security cooperation to a new high.

The overall national security concept embodies the national security values, approaches, institutions and mechanisms with Chinese characteristics. It represents the pursuit of an integrated national security system covering the political, homeland, military, economic, cultural, societal, science and technology, information, ecological, resource and nuclear aspects in response to today's complex security challenges. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China's has been guided by the overall national security concept in its fight against the pandemic. With President Xi's forward-looking views on non-traditional security such as those on biological security, the Chinese government has stuck to the people-centered approach with a sense of urgency and a fighting spirit and worked resolutely to successfully control the pandemic, thus safeguarding the safety and health of the Chinese people and contributing to the protection of people in other parts of the world.

According to the overall national security concept, China consistently pursues common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in its exchanges with the neighboring countries. To be more specific, security should be universal and equal, with the security interests of each and every country respected and protected; it should be comprehensive, covering both traditional and non-traditional fields protected in a coordinated way; security in all countries and regions should be achieved and promoted in a cooperative way through dialogues and consultation;

and it should be made sustainable and durable by putting equal emphasis on development and security. A wise man adapts himself as circumstances change. Unlike the old security concept of building military alliances and strengthening armaments, the concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security is aimed at achieving lasting peace and common development in the region through cooperation and openness rather than confrontation or alliance. It involves multiple dimensions and takes into account differences in security situations among countries, complex contradictions in non-traditional fields and imbalances in socio-economic development. Its approaches and connotations are more in line with the historical background and complex current situation of national security problems in the region, such as that in Afghanistan. Such a concept provides methods to address the most prominent security problems and offer an approach to deal with various potential threats in a coordinated way. Bearing it in mind, China has contributed its wisdom and propositions to tackle the Afghan question and other regional hotspots.

Not long ago, the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) held an international seminar on joint response to terrorism under the new circumstances. Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui attended and addressed the meeting. He pointed out that non-traditional security threats require transnational responses, which should be based on a coherent and sustainable approach, with a long-term view instead of knee-jerk reaction. Opting for unilateralist and bullying practices, a certain country has politicized counter terrorism and turned it into a convenient tool. This has caused serious disruption to international counter-terrorism cooperation, and we all need to be on high alert. In international counter-terrorism cooperation, it is important to uphold international consensus, adopt effective measures, follow a unified standard and deny terrorism its breeding ground. Participants agreed that the pandemic has complicated and aggravated the international counter-terrorism situation, but the international community should strengthen solidarity and jointly deal with non-conventional security threats including terrorism. We should apply a unified standard and

reject double standards unequivocally. We should firmly defend international consensus and oppose the selfish politicization and instrumentalization of counter terrorism. We should adopt comprehensive measures to address both the symptoms and root causes of terrorism, pay attention to preventive counter terrorism and deradicalization, and strive to eradicate the breeding ground for terrorism. We should be open-minded and inclusive and avoid linking terrorism with any particular countries, ethnicity or religion.

Afghanistan has been in protracted war for 40 years. History reminds us again and again that the aggressors have never able to walk away from the country unscathed and that the hegemon has never been able to profit here. China has always respected the sovereignty, independence and national dignity of Afghanistan and has never bullied it. In the security community of China and Afghanistan, the security and stability of Afghanistan serve China's interests. In November 2020, at the 20th meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), President Xi Jinping once again stressed the importance of Afghanistan to regional security and stability and reaffirmed the Chinese commitment to help Afghanistan to achieve peace and reconstruction. Over the years, China has strengthened its counterterrorism and security cooperation with Afghanistan through bilateral channels, reaffirmed at the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral foreign ministers' dialogues its determination to combat terrorism, and agreed to sustain the joint operations against ETIM as well as its supporters and facilitators. China supports Afghanistan in its counter-terrorism efforts through the SCO and the quadrilateral cooperation and coordination mechanism in counter-terrorism by the armed forces of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, actively participates in the international multilateral mechanisms on the Afghan question, supports the various decisions made by Afghanistan, oppose any intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan by any external force under any pretext, call for an orderly and responsible withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, and support the realization of lasting peace in Afghanistan. In addition, China supports Afghanistan's ... **P3**

By Frud Bezhani

Pakistan Fences Off Afghanistan, Impacting Families and Fighters

Families, traders, and guerrilla fighters have for generations moved freely across the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The disputed 2,670-kilometer frontier traverses some of the world's most forbidding terrain, snaking through desolate deserts and towering mountains more than 4,000 meters high.

Drawn by British colonial officials in the 19th century, the arbitrary border also splits the estimated 50 million ethnic Pashtuns living on either side of the so-called Durand Line.

"Every day, people from my village went to the Afghan side for work, to drive taxis, or to sell goods," says Abdul Yousaf, a trader from Pakistan's Kurram district, which borders Afghanistan's southeastern Khost Province.

But that began to change in 2017, when the Pakistan military started to erect a pair of 3-meter-high metal fences topped with razor wire along

the entire border. It closed scores of informal crossings and limited cross-border travel to 16 official posts.

Despite the formidable logistical challenges, Pakistani officials announced in January that some 90 percent of the fence was complete. It is scheduled to be finished by June.

The Pakistani Army has credited the new barrier with reducing cross-border militant attacks in the South Asian nation of some 220 million people.

But Pashtun communities straddling the border say it has divided families and sunk businesses.

Islamabad's unilateral move has also triggered condemnation in Afghanistan, which disputes the border and claims some swaths of Pakistani territory.

'Improved Pakistan's Security' The Pakistani military began constructing the fence following a series of deadly

army operations in the country's tribal areas starting in 2014.

The largely lawless tribal areas had been a stronghold for extremist groups after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, including Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban.

The army offensives forced TTP militants, who had waged a deadly insurgency against the Pakistani armed forces and state since 2007, to flee to Afghanistan. The other extremist outfits, with alleged support from the Pakistani Army, remained or resettled in other areas of Pakistan.

The operations, which also displaced millions of civilians and killed thousands, were credited with curbing the soaring number of militant attacks in Pakistan.

Pakistan witnessed 319 terrorism-related incidents and 169 associated deaths... **P3**

Blinken discusses...

was a first chance for the ministers to discuss the issues.

According to CNBC, the meeting came after President Joe Biden's National Security Council met Friday afternoon to discuss the administration's approach to Iran.

"The meeting today is part of an ongoing policy review. It is not decisional," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Twitter.

Biden, who took office last month, has said that if Tehran returned to strict compliance with the 2015 nuclear pact, Washington would follow suit and use that as a springboard to a broader agreement that might restrict Iran's missile development and regional activities. Tehran has insisted that Washington lift sanctions before it resumed compliance, and ruled out negotiations on wider security issues. But Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hinted on Monday at a way to resolve the impasse over who goes first by saying the steps could be synchronized.

"JCPOA has a mechanism built into the deal that is the Joint Commission. And the Joint Commission has a coordinator. The coordinator has two hats – it used to be Federica Mogherini now it is Josep Borrell. He has two hats: One hat is he is the high representative of the European Union for foreign defense policy. The other hat is the coordinator of the Joint Commission. He can put his hat as the coordinator of the Joint Commission and sort of choreograph the

actions that are needed to be taken by the United States and the actions that are needed to be taken by Iran," Zarif said in an interview with the CNN late on Monday.

Exactly one year after Trump quit the deal and started to implement his "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, the Islamic Republic announced that its "strategic patience" is over and started gradually remove limits on its nuclear program at bi-monthly intervals. At the time Iran announced that if the remaining parties to the JCPOA, especially the European trio – Germany, France, and Britain –, protect Iran from the sanctions Iran will reverse its decisions.

Zarif, a former Iranian ambassador to the UN, said that Iran has acted in accordance with dispute mechanisms written into the JCPOA, since the U.S. withdrawal. "Iran used the mechanisms in the nuclear agreement in order to limit its cooperation. If you read paragraph 36, we acted in strict accordance with the nuclear agreement," Zarif said in his interview with CNN.

(Paragraph 36 provided a mechanism to resolve disputes and allows one side, under certain circumstances, to stop complying with the deal if the other side is out of compliance.)

Analysts say it is the U.S. that must first return to the JCPOA because it was the U.S. that left the agreement.

Iran is still a party to the nuclear deal and is still implementing some terms of the agreement.

Water Intake Begins at Kamal Khan Dam

Water intake has started at Kamal Khan hydroelectric and irrigation dam and is expected to help farmers irrigate more lands and expand agriculture production, officials said on Thursday. The Kamal Khan Dam, built on the Helmand River in Chaharbarak district of Nimroz province, will irrigate 174,000 hectares of land in three districts and will also supply water to the provincial center.

"Water intake has started at Kamal Khan dam, which is one of the key and major projects of National Water Affairs Regulation Authority," said Nizam Khpulwak, a spokesman for National Water Affairs Regulation Authority. "The dam will be inaugurated in the next few days."

"By benefiting from the Kamal Khan

dam that is expected to be inaugurated in the next few days, agriculture sector will develop in Nimroz, business activities will also increase and jobs will be created for the people," said Zmarialai Ahadi, the Nimroz governor. Nimroz residents celebrated the progress in construction work of the dam.

"This is a moment of happiness... This is good news for farmers because we will have water in every season to expand our agriculture production and get rid of foreign products," said Mohammad Ibrahim Amini, a Nimroz resident.

"We are just witnessing that the dreams of residents of the province is coming true," said Nematullah Sediqqi, a member of Nimroz provincial council.



Experts said the Kamal Khan dam will ensure better management of Helmand River's water and the implementation of Hirmand water treaty.

"All construction works that are related to the management of water have been completed. The process of transferring the turbines and generators from India is also underway," said Assadullah Mal,

the Kamal Khan dam project director. The dam is expected to provide nine megawatts of power, and, in the first stage, it will store 52 million cubic meters of water, according to the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority.

The dam is 16 meters high and it will irrigate agricultural lands while also preventing flooding in the province.

President Xi Jinping's...

efforts to resolve security issues through development. Since the start of peaceful reconstruction in Afghanistan, China has attached great importance to cooperation with Afghanistan in such areas as economy and trade, infrastructure construction and energy development, opened up transport corridors and provided market access for specialty products such as pine seeds, saffron and carpets. Efforts have been made to promote connectivity between Afghanistan and the surrounding region within the BRI framework and help the country to make full use of its geographical advantages, build its own capacity and achieve self-sufficiency at an early date. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Afghanistan last year, China has given full support to its fight against the epidemic. Six batches of over 20 tons of pandemic response supplies have been delivered from China. We purchased and distributed essential foods for residents in Kabul when the prices skyrocketed. Recently, the Chinese side has started to provide winter supplies for the cold northern provinces. A large amount of Chinese food aid has also arrived. We hope to help the Afghan people to have a warm winter. China has never wavered in its determination to go hand in hand with Afghanistan. China will continue making use of its advantages and international status to assist the Afghanistan peace and reconciliation process to move forward in an orderly manner, work with Afghanistan to actively implement the Memorandum of Understanding on Jointly Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative and try its best to help Afghanistan in socio-economic development and security capacity building. We stand ready to work with Afghanistan for a happy and bright future.

3 Senators...

in prison by the Anti-Corruption Justice Center and were fined \$75,000, according to the Attorney General's Office. Last year in December, the Meshrano Jirga assigned a delegation to assess the arrests of the senators. The Afghan Senate has said that the three were members of the economy committee of the Senate and had traveled as part of a team to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in Balkh to monitor the security and economic situation in the province, especially the activities of the customs office.

Pakistan Fences...

of civilians in 2020, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, a New Delhi-based database tracking extremist movements in the region.

It marks a dramatic decrease compared to 2013, when there were nearly 4,000 terrorist-related incidents and over 2,700 deaths.

Pakistan's construction of the fence is seen as an attempt to safeguard those gains.

"From a military perspective, the fence has definitely improved Pakistan's security," says Ayesha Siddiqi, a Pakistani author and expert on the country's military. "It has allowed the Pakistani Army to secure itself against nonstate actors that are not under its control."

"You can be flexible with a fence," Siddiqi says. "You can allow your friends to cross over but not allow others who are your enemies."

While Pakistan has clamped down on homegrown militants waging war in Pakistan, Islamabad is thought to have backed other Pakistan-based Afghan and Kashmiri militants as proxy forces in Afghanistan and India.

The powerful Pakistani military, which has an oversized role in the country's domestic and foreign policies, has long been accused of supporting the Afghan Taliban to reach its longstanding strategic goals in Afghanistan: installing a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul and limiting the influence of its archrival India, which has close ties to Kabul.

Pakistan's ties to the Taliban date back to the 1990s, when it provided arms, training, and intelligence to the militants. Islamabad was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban regime that took power in Afghanistan in 1996. After its fall in 2001, many Taliban leaders took shelter inside Pakistan.

Reemergence Of The Pakistani Taliban

But many observers are skeptical that the fence alone will stop militants, considering the border spans such inhospitable terrain. Others also say local corruption and bribery of guards at the crossings are

problematic. Highlighting the obstacles, TTP militants have reemerged in their previous strongholds in the tribal areas and have staged dozens of deadly attacks in recent months.

In one of the deadliest attacks, 11 Pakistani soldiers were killed in two blasts in South Waziristan on October 15. Six were killed after their vehicles struck roadside bombs. As another military vehicle rushed to the scene, a second explosion killed five more soldiers.

The TTP claimed responsibility for both explosions.

Militants have also attacked construction teams along the border and posted videos online showing them destroying sections of the fence and capturing construction supplies.

'No Afghan Government Will Accept It'

Siddiqi says there is also a "political dimension" to the Pakistani Army's fortification of the border.

"The fence is basically a de facto statement on the Durand Line," she says.

British India and Afghan King Abdur Rahman Khan agreed to the current border in 1893. Pakistan, which shed its status as part of British India more than 70 years ago, considers the line to be an international border, as does most of the international community.

But Afghanistan has never recognized the border and refers to it as the Durand Line.

Kabul has condemned Pakistan's decision to fortify the border, insisting that activities by either side along the Durand Line must be approved by both countries.

Pakistan's new border defenses have also triggered numerous deadly clashes along the frontier in recent years.

In July, at least 15 Afghan civilians were killed after clashes erupted between Afghans and Pakistanis at the Chaman border crossing. It was one of the deadliest incidents in recent years.

The clashes came after locals protested Islamabad's plan to introduce passport and biometric systems for cross-border travel.

Firefights have also broken out as Pakistan forces have attempted to erect military installations at the border.

Janan Mosazai, Afghanistan's former ambassador to Pakistan, says the fence will "adversely affect the bilateral relationship" and cause further "popular alienation" among Pashtuns on both sides of the border.

"Putting barriers that cut through communities straddling the Durand Line and aiming to divide a people that have the deepest social, political, and economic ties will not work, and no Afghan government will accept it," he says.

Afghan officials say the fence will not address militancy and terrorism in the region. They say the root cause is Pakistan's own policy of arming and sheltering militant groups that export terrorism in the region.

'Suffered A Great Deal' Those most impacted by the fence are Pashtun communities spanning the border who have lost the ability to cross freely to do business, visit family, or even attend school.

The fence has also brought tougher immigration regulations.

Travelers now need passports and visas to cross the border. Traders also need to pay customs fees, something that has angered many.

"Our businesses have suffered a great deal," says Haji Nazar Din, of Pakistan's North Waziristan district, complaining of high customs duties and long lines. "Crossing the border often takes days and weeks."

Din says he has been a trader since 1983, exporting wheat, flour, and sugar from Pakistan to the Afghan city of Ghazni and the capital, Kabul.

"It was easy in the past, but now these border arrangements halted everything," he says. The new border defenses are not just bad for business. Many have families and relatives on the other side of the border.

"The fence has divided our families," says Zohaib Wazir, a 33-year-old from Pakistan's South Waziristan district. "We cannot visit them for months. If there is a funeral or a marriage ceremony, we cannot join them."

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77.2	\$	77.3
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WHO chief calls on vaccine manufacturers to share production capacity

The World Health Organization (WHO) on Friday called on COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers to scale up production significantly and urged countries to share vaccine doses once they finish vaccinating their priority populations. Reiterating the negative impact of inequitable access to COVID-19 vaccines worldwide at a press briefing, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that globally the number of vaccinations has overtaken the number of reported infections, which he described as “a good news and a remarkable achievement in such a short timeframe.”

“But more than three-quarters of those vaccination are in just 10 countries that account for almost 60 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP),” while “almost 130 countries, with 2.5 billion people, have yet to receive a single dose,” he said.

“All governments have an obligation to protect

their own people,” Tedros said. “But once countries with vaccines have vaccinated their own health workers and older people, the best way to protect the rest of their own population is to share vaccines so other countries can do the same.”

“The longer it takes to vaccinate those most at risk everywhere, the more opportunity we give to the virus to mutate and evade vaccines,” he warned. “Unless we suppress the virus everywhere, we could end up back at square one.”

The WHO chief also urged vaccine manufacturers to ramp up production, calling on them to issue non-exclusive licenses to allow other producers to manufacture their vaccines, just as they did in the past to expand access to treatments for HIV and hepatitis C.

“Expanding production globally would also make poor countries less dependent on donations from rich ones,” Tedros said. “These are ... **P2**



A look at the world

Chinese premier hosts high-level virtual dialogue with European business leaders

CCTVPlus-Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Friday hosted a high-level virtual dialogue with European business leaders in Beijing. Li started by giving an overview of the current state of the Chinese economy and its outlook, and exchanged views with participants on China-Europe trade and investment cooperation, China's business environment, COVID-19 response, climate change and other issues of mutual interest.

On China's economic situation, Li commented that facing the impacts of COVID-19 and a deep global recession, the Chinese government maintained a cool-headed approach and adopted timely, decisive and effective macro policies, which produced good results at a reasonable cost.

The Chinese economy achieved early and steady recovery, registering a year-round growth of 2.3 percent, he added.

According to Li, China's central and local



governments introduced targeted relief policies to address the needs of struggling market entities. Methods such as phased, large-scale tax and fee cuts were adopted to help market entities overcome their difficulties, especially the large number of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and household businesses in various sectors that are the hardest hit by the pandemic.

Last year, these policies saved more than 2.5 trillion yuan of business costs for market entities of all types, he said.

In the meantime, China has done much to improve the business environment and unleash market vitality, said Li, adding that China has further streamlined the business registration procedures and offered equal safeguards for all types of businesses to level the playing field.

Thanks to these steps, the number of MSMEs and household businesses rebounded in the second half of last year, with the total number of market entities reaching 130 million in China, Li said. ... **P2**

Palestinian groups hold talks with Iran envoy in Moscow



Delegations from Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad held talks in Moscow with Iranian Ambassador to Russia, Kazem Jalali.

The discussions dwelt on recent developments in Palestine regarding the announcement of general elections as a means to end Palestinian rift, Hamas said in a statement on Saturday.

The two sides also reviewed recent Israeli violations in the occupied Palestinian territories, the statement read.

Hamas' delegation to the meeting was headed by Mousa Abu Marzouk, while Islamic Jihad Secretary-General Ziyad al-Nakhala led his movement's delegation.

Last week, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov met with both delegations separately and discussed the developments in the inter-Palestinian reconciliation and the upcoming Palestinian elections.

According to a decree by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in January, parliamentary elections will be held May 22, presidential elections July 31 and Palestinian National Council elections Aug. 31.

The last Palestinian presidential election was held in 2005 which brought Abbas to the Palestinian Presidency, while the parliamentary polls, which were held in 2006 gave the Hamas group the majority.

Blinken discusses Iran with British, French, German ministers

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed Iran and other issues on Friday in a virtual meeting with his British, French and German counterparts as the group weighs how to revive the Iran nuclear deal, Reuters reported.

The U.S. State Department said beside Iran, other issues including the coronavirus pandemic, Myanmar, Russia, China and climate change were also discussed and Blinken “underscored the U.S. commitment to coordinated action to overcome global challenges.”

“We just had an in-depth and important conversation on Iran ... to handle together nuclear and regional security challenges,” French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Twitter.

Britain's Dominic Raab and Germany's Heiko Maas also took part in the meeting.

“The E3 and the U.S. discussed how a united approach could address our shared concerns



towards Iran,” UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said in a statement about the meeting, according to DW.

Shortly before Trump announced the U.S. would leave the deal, Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote an opinion piece in The New York Times urging Donald Trump to stay in the agreement, with Johnson calling withdrawal “a mistake.”

The high-level conversation is the latest step by President Joe Biden's new administration to explore how to restore the 2015 nuclear deal that Iran signed with world powers but was abandoned in 2018 by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

The nuclear deal limited Iran's uranium enrichment activity in exchange for termination of economic and financial sanctions.

In abandoning the deal approved by former President Barack Obama, Trump restored the U.S. sanctions it had removed and then piled on more.

Speaking before Friday's meeting, a source familiar with the matter said it was unlikely to delve into great detail on Iran and ... **P2**



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