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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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**'NATO Will not Leave  
 Afghanistan before  
 Time is Right'**

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Monday said no ally wanted to stay in Afghanistan longer than necessary, but the alliance will not leave before the time is right.

"Our common goal is clear, Afghanistan should never again serve as a haven for terrorists to attack our homelands," he said ahead of NATO defense ministers meeting which will discuss Afghanistan on Thursday.

He said that NATO strongly supports the peace process in Afghanistan.

This is the best chance for a lasting political solution and all parties must accelerate progress to seize this historic opportunity. NATO has significantly adjusted our presence as part of the peace process.

However, peace talks remain fragile and the level of violence remains ... **P2**



**Germany, Pakistan  
 Inaugurate Urban  
 Cohesion Hub for  
 Afghan Refugees**

German Ambassador Bernhard Schlagheck and Pakistan's Federal Minister of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) Sahibzada Muhammad Mehboob Sultan have inaugurated the 'Urban Cohesion Hub' for Afghan refugees in Rawalpindi on Monday.

According to Pakistani media, the Hub is a community centre which will serve as a place for encounters between urban Afghan refugees and Pakistani host communities residing in Rawalpindi and Islamabad and will thereby help to foster social cohesion.

Funded by the German Federal Foreign Office, the Hub is set to support more than 30,000 refugees and host community members with integrated services in health, education, skills training, legal support, and recreational activities.

While welcoming all community members, the initiative emphasises supporting vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, working children, elderly people, youth, and women.

## Taliban Say Committed to Women's Rights, Free Speech



The Taliban have reiterated their commitments to politically resolving the conflict in Afghanistan, Doha agreement, women's rights and freedom of expression in line with Islamic teachings.

In an open letter to the American people, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, head of the Taliban's Qatar office, reiterated the group's

commitments to a political solution to the Afghan conflict, implementation of the Doha Accord.

The letter says the Taliban were committed to women's rights and free expression in the light of Islamic teachings.

Dr. Mohammad Naem Wardak, Taliban political office spokesman,

published the letter in his tweeter and a website belonging to the movement.

The Doha agreement was signed between the Taliban and the US on Feb 29, 2020 with the aim that all foreign military forces along with their non-diplomatic personnel, private contractors, advisors, trainers and service providers

withdraw from Afghanistan within a 14-month timeframe.

In return, the Taliban would reciprocate by committing themselves to preventing all threats to the security of other nations from Afghanistan.

"I would like to clarify a few points for the effectiveness and success of the ongoing peace process," Naem said.

1 - The past nineteen years have proven beyond any doubt that the Afghan issue cannot be resolved through the use of force or by alternating military strategies and generals.

2 - Just as this war - the longest in US history - has caused great tragedies and sufferings for the Afghan people, it has also caused America heavy human and financial losses, damaged its reputation and continues to inflict harm on both parties.

3 - After nineteen years of experiences, both reason and logic dictate that genuine efforts be made and commitments undertaken implemented to bring a comprehensive end to the ongoing conflict. The Taliban are ... **P3**

**Rashid Arrives  
 in Karachi as He  
 Prepares for Pakistan  
 Super League**

Rashid Khan, the ICC T20 player of the decade, arrived in Karachi on Monday to join Lahore Qalandars ahead of the start of this year's Pakistan Super League (PSL). In an interview with Geo Sport, Rashid said he was very excited to be in Pakistan and that he hoped to be able to make his Pakistani fans proud.

The 22-year-old bowler said: "I've received a lot of love from Qalandars' fans since I was picked by them in draft. I am so excited to be here. I will try to produce results that LQ fans want from me. I hope once COVID-19 is over I can get a chance to meet the fans as well."

Rashid told Geo Sport he has ... **P2**



## FEFA Voices Concern Over IEC's Failure in Bringing Electoral Reforms

The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) has expressed concern over the failure of the Independent Election Commission (IEC)'s in presenting a plan to amend the election law and bring the electoral reform.

FEFA has said that the continuation of this situation will have a negative impact on the electoral process, public trust in the elections, obtaining global aid and the outcome of the elections.

A statement issued by FEFA on Tuesday stated that (IEC), as the body responsible for conducting and administering the elections, had not taken any significant steps to pave the way for electoral reforms.

According to the statement, the IEC has not been able to finalize its plan to amend the electoral law, which is a significant part of electoral reform and paves the way for legal



electoral reform, several months later.

FEFA cited that in the past few months, the Electoral Commissions had not been able to use the opportunity to come up with a comprehensive plan to amend the election law and submit it to the Ministry of Justice.

Recently, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said in a report that the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) has

always suffered from weak leadership, unqualified staff, minimal accountability for fraud, and inadequate decision-making structures.

In the meantime, FEFA has said that the IEC, instead of working and focusing on electoral reform, which is a good precondition for elections, focused on holding four elections (Ghazni parliamentary elections, provincial council, district council and municipal elections in major cities).

### Rashid Arrives...

always followed PSL and also heard from the players about its high standards.

He said that as per history, the league has always been good for spinners but regardless of conditions available in Pakistan his main goal is to do well for his side. "I know there are top batsmen playing the league but I have an advantage that I've experience of bowling against them at various levels and I know their weaknesses and strengths. So, I will try to utilise that experience when I bowl against them in PSL," he said.

"But, I can't be complacent against anyone in the T20 format. My goal in PSL is to bowl as economically as possible. I am not eyeing any personal glory and stats and my target is to do what my team wants me to do. I know if I bowl with good economy, the wickets will automatically come my way. I always try to do well for my team and that's what I will be aiming when I take the field."

This year's PSL is scheduled to start on Saturday and will be the sixth season of the Pakistan Super League, a franchise Twenty20 cricket league which was established by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) in 2015. This will be the second season held entirely in Pakistan.

### 'NATO Will not...

unacceptably high including Taliban attacks on civilians.

The Taliban must reduce violence, negotiate in good faith and live up to their commitment to stop cooperating with international terrorist groups.

Stoltenberg that NATO defense ministers will continue to assess the situation on the ground and monitor developments very closely.

"We will continue to take all measures to ensure the safety of our troops. And consider next steps in a deliberate and coordinated way," he said.

By Anthony H. Cordesman

# Writing Off Afghanistan: Does Biden Have a Choice?

The United States has now spent nearly a year reducing its military, diplomatic, and aid presence in Afghanistan. It has never made the full scale of these reductions public, but it has talked about reducing its military presence to 2,500 military personnel by January 2021 and about closing many military facilities. UN and other reporting have also reflected a steady decline in aid activity.

The full scale of the cuts in diplomatic presence, U.S. aid workers, and various types of U.S. funded contractors—many of whom perform roles that belonged to the military in previous wars—has never been made clear. The same is true of the cuts in military and civil intelligence personnel as well as in military personnel who are not officially assigned full time to Afghanistan but who have been critical in supporting Afghan combat operations. There also have been no details about the cuts in the U.S. military train and assist personnel assigned to key frontline Afghan army and police units.

Moreover, these cuts are part of a peace agreement that is somewhat unique in the history of peace negotiations. The February 2020 agreement was made between the U.S. government and the Taliban. The divided Afghan central government was not present in the U.S.-Taliban negotiations that led to the agreement, and the Afghan central government has made it clear that it was not consulted about the details of the agreement. Yet, the agreement called for a full peace settlement between the central government and the Taliban as well as for an effort to create a new political, governance, security, and economic structure for Afghanistan that would allow both the central government and the Taliban to actually implement a peace.

Some 10 months into this peace process, there is no indication that either side has agreed on any aspect of what a peace should be, any form of interim government that can govern jointly, or some form of separation of the country. In fact, as of mid-January, President Ashraf Ghani had refused to meet with Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad—the chief U.S. peace negotiator—on trying to define a structure for any interim government.

Time is critical, and there can be no real peace until at least a new interim government is in place. Any successful effort to create a meaningful peace between truly hostile factions virtually always

requires one side to have won to the point where it can dictate the terms or the creation of an interim government, a clear agreement on what happens after the peace agreement, and some form of international guarantees.

By the time it takes office, the Biden administration will have only five months left of the deadline for completing the negotiations and defining a new structure for virtually every aspect of Afghan governance. Not a single detail of such an agreement now exists, and the Biden administration has been left a legacy that could make creating a real and lasting peace almost impossible.

The Biden administration will also have to deal with an Afghanistan where the fighting between the central government and the Taliban is still so severe that the war is actually still underway and where no peace seems likely to last unless the United States is willing to guarantee such a peace and finance it almost indefinitely. Even then, it is unclear that there will be any guarantee the fighting would really halt, that the Taliban will not deal with Al Qaeda or even the Islamic State, or that any effective structure of governance and rule of law will exist in most of the country.

The Biden administration should do its best to make this flawed structure work, but it should also be prepared to write the country off despite Afghanistan's 37 million people involved in a human tragedy. The challenges involved in staying have reached the point where the United States needs to make it clear to both the Afghan central government and the world that it will not continue to waste resources on a failed effort—both in terms of reaching a real peace and dealing with a failed and corrupt Afghan government.

The full scale of these failures is hard to measure. The Trump administration has systematically classified—or stopped reporting on—many of the data in Afghanistan. It now seems nearly certain, however, that any peace that both sides could agree upon would simply be a preface to an ongoing struggle between a weak, divided central government and an extremist Taliban—one that will try to exploit any "peace" to win the war by other means.

What is clear—in spite of the Trump effort to classify or cease reporting on key facts—is that:

- As of mid-January, the Afghan government and

the Taliban have still not agreed on any aspect of the definition of "Islamic" to be used in shaping the government, rule of law, education, or any aspect of civil life—or that the religious interpretations of the other side could legitimately be described as Islamic.

- Fighting and targeted killings go on throughout the country, and the Taliban tends to win in the countryside. Plus, it is steadily increasing its control outside major population centers. As a CRS report in November 2020 noted, "By many measures, the Taliban are in a stronger military position now than at any point since 2001, though many once-public metrics related to the conduct of the war have been classified or are no longer produced."

- The United States has stopped reporting on Taliban gains in controlling territory and the population, but the most respected source of estimates—the Long War Journal—reports that the Taliban controls 75 of the 398 Districts in Afghanistan that it reports on and contests 187 more. The Taliban controls 4.6 million Afghans and contests control for 13 million more. The Afghan central government still holds all major cities and is credited with authority over 15.2 million people, but this figure is somewhat meaningless since the central government does not really fully control many districts that are under regional politicians and power brokers—and the Taliban still makes regular attacks in Kabul.

- The only reason the Taliban does not control far more territory and at least some population centers has been attributed to the level of past support the Afghan forces have received from U.S. airpower and U.S. allied support, especially to Afghan ground forces. U.S. and allied funding supports virtually the entire Afghan government's military, police, and local security forces.

- The Afghan forces are making slow progress in some areas, but it is all too clear from the quarterly reporting by the Lead Inspector General (LIG) of the Department of Defense and the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) that the Afghan forces are not ready to stand on their own. It is also clear that the Afghan government's security efforts have major flaws and that Afghan forces cannot survive without indefinite dependence on U.S. aid funds.

- More broadly, a deeply divided Afghan central government—dominated by leaders ... **P3**

By Hannan Hussain

## Can NATO Have it both Ways in Afghanistan?

New data released by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a top U.S. watchdog, shows that enemy initiated attacks in Afghanistan over the past quarter topped the same period in 2019. This marked increase in violence directly contradicts NATO's belief that its conditions-based troop presence in Afghanistan will compel the Taliban to go nonviolent, induce action against militant safe havens and ensure that the Western coalition can contemplate full withdrawal from a position of strength.

Instead, the Taliban are warning that any of the 10,000 NATO troops retained beyond the May 2021 withdrawal deadline would constitute a "continuation of occupation in Afghanistan," while senior NATO sources contend sufficient troop levels shall remain. By touting troop leverage and peace advances in equal measure, NATO risks reintroducing a new wave of Taliban offensives in Afghanistan

beyond a stated withdrawal deadline, complicating Biden's task of bridging the Taliban trust deficit. On diplomatic grounds, both NATO and the Afghan government have redoubled their interest in keeping coalition troops in Afghanistan.

"A combination of presence, plus diplomacy, bringing U.S. tools of power in a concentrated manner... would be extremely crucial to our success," said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at the Aspen Security Forum, urging NATO to embrace a conditions-based approach to the Taliban.

But from Kabul's viewpoint, such troop retention ambitions cannot materialize "without U.S. enablers," given that the basis for NATO engagement in Kabul is to train and assist the Afghan Security Forces instead of military and strategic forecasting. NATO's over reliance on Washington to signal any shift in Afghanistan operations makes autonomous dictation of withdrawal plans a mirage to the

Taliban.

Arguing in defense of May 2021 troop retention also defeats the purpose of a "political solution" to Washington's longest military engagement to date. Above all, the 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace deal – negotiated under the Trump administration and calling for a full withdrawal by May – stands to be flagrantly violated if the coalition's overdrive is not tempered.

Interestingly, without NATO pressing the Biden administration (and its forthcoming Kabul delegation) to engage the Taliban on collective withdrawal plans, the coalition fails to be seen as a "collective force" for anchoring peace in Afghanistan. In the process, it risks overstating its tactical leverage over skeptical Taliban insurgent factions.

For instance, NATO's revived image as a peace-building, troop-contributing giant is tied to synchronizing Afghan troop withdrawal with progress in Afghan-led Doha peace talks. That

progress is likely to be judged by the Biden administration's clearly communicated metrics on revised U.S. coalition force structure and a new exit strategy that challenges Trump's hasty withdrawal risks, while minimizing Taliban's striking potential.

Under no compelling scenario, including this month's hotly anticipated NATO defense meeting, does the future of coalition troops depend on a stakeholder other than the United States. In fact, U.S. forces in Afghanistan insist that their "ability to execute... has thus far not been adversely affected by the 'reduction of force levels' [to 2,500 troops]." NATO appears to be arguing to the contrary. The coalition treats troop retention as some potent yet unexplained leverage over the Taliban. Pentagon's own assessments are unsupportive of such wishful thinking, suspecting possible resistance from the insurgents.

From the Taliban's perspective, the political status-quo in Kabul hangs by a light thread. Following the delegation's meeting in Tehran this week, the insurgents are reportedly banking on an Islamic government to replace the exceedingly

unpopular Ashraf Ghani-ruling government – a noteworthy expression of defiance, considering that power-sharing talks are stalled, not defeated in Doha.

As a result, NATO's perceived continuity in Afghanistan's governance setup is an important consideration for its own survival. It did not establish Kabul as its marquee mission when key strategists deemed elements within the government as peace "spoilers." As international perceptions towards Kabul's political infighting change and Ghani's leadership is tested during the Doha stalemate, NATO struggles to present its troop retention posture as binding on the Taliban, even under the garb of a "conditions-based" compliance. Precisely for these nuanced militant motivations and power-sharing arrangements, Biden has refrained from ascertaining May troop levels, let alone threatening the Taliban with cosmetic leverage.

If the end goal of NATO's post-April troop ambitions was to honor Afghan peace and rein in the Taliban, it is pushing the insurgents to weigh confrontation instead: "We will have no choice [but] to continue our jihad and struggle."

# Afghanistan Saffron Harvest Yields Impressive 21 Tons this Year

The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock has said the harvest of "red gold" saffron this year topped the 21-ton mark.

According to the ministry, Herat, Balkh, Faryab, Kunduz, Farah and Daikundi are now the top saffron producing provinces in the country.

"In the 1399 solar year, about 7,900 hectares of saffron land was cultivated. Of this, 7,317 hectares of land in Herat province was planted with saffron, while all the other provinces combined used less than 500 hectares," Akbar Rustami, the ministry's spokesman said.

The ministry says that conditions in Herat are particularly favorable in terms of growing *Crocus sativus*, the flower that produces the saffron stigmas.

Being a sought after and expensive agricultural product, more and more farmers have started farming this plant in recent years, the ministry said.

The ministry also stated that agricultural experts are working to enhance the plant in order to improve its yield.

According to the spokesman of the Ministry of Agriculture, this solar year has seen the ministry focus on



distributing farming equipment to the saffron sector and also on establishing farms used as examples to promote the sector.

Rustami said the ministry intends to continue working to develop the saffron sector through 1400, the next solar year.

## Taliban Say Committed...

sincerely committed to finding a political solution to the ongoing conflict and therefore, took the initiative by opening a political office in the nation of Qatar towards this end.

It followed constantly emphasizing upon the need for a political solution in international conferences and conventions in conjunction with taking further practical steps, ultimately signing the Doha agreement in the presence of political representatives of a large number of countries including the United Nations, following which it significantly reduced the number of operations and launched intra-Afghan negotiations to fully comply with the Doha agreement.

4 - We believe that the United States and its allies have also concluded that the Afghan conflict can only be resolved through dialogue, hence it participated in positive negotiations with the Taliban in order to draft the Doha agreement.

5 - Now that a year has passed since the signing of the Doha agreement, we urge the American side to remain committed to the full implementation of this accord.

6 - We are fully confident that the Afghans themselves can achieve the establishment of an Islamic government and enduring peace and security through intra-Afghan dialogue.

7 - It is an irrefutable fact that majority of the general public supports the movement and, with the help of Allah (SwT), it is the outcome of this exact support that has carried our struggle to the threshold of success.

8 - The Taliban movement does not allow discriminatory treatment among people in our homeland. This country is the shared home of all Afghans and discriminatory behavior among members of this home is unacceptable.

9 - Just as the Taliban have clarified in many instances that they're committed to upholding and guaranteeing all rights of women afforded to them by Islamic law, we would like to once again assure the international community in this regard.

10 - We would also like to once more declare to everyone our commitment towards freedom of speech within the framework of Islamic principles and national interests.

11 - Just as the Taliban established a record in curtailing narcotics in the country prior to the invasion, it will again take all necessary steps in preventing narcotics resulting from international coordination and alternative income opportunity. On top of this, the Taliban consider it an obligation to provide treatment to drug addicts.

## Writing Off...

more interested in competing for power than the nation's future—cannot govern or make effective use of its funding, most of which comes from U.S. and outside aid. The political structure of the Afghan central government remains a corrupt and divided mess. The World Bank rates the Afghan government as one of the worst in the world as well as one of the most corrupt.

• SIGAR reported on November 6, 2020, that,

Corruption has substantially undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the very beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. We have previously reported that corruption cuts across all aspects of the reconstruction effort, jeopardizing progress made in security, rule of law, governance, and economic growth. We are concerned that a failure to effectively address the problem of systemic corruption as the coalition presence shrinks, while the Afghan government continues to rely on donor assistance to protect the fragile gains of the 19-year mission, would mean that U.S. reconstruction programs, at best, will continue to be subverted by systemic corruption and, at worst, will fail.

he rule of law is so weak that nearly half of Afghanistan's District governments do not even have a prosecutor.

• The Afghan economy has effectively imploded under the strain of war, Covid-19, misgovernment, and corruption. The World Bank reported in October 2020 that, The basic needs poverty rate was 55 percent at the time of the last household survey (2016/17) and is expected to have worsened after the COVID-19 pandemic that hugely impacted the living condition of households. The economy is expected to contract by up to five percent in 2020

with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 virus overshadowing improvements in weather conditions. Additional substantial downside risks remain, including political instability, deterioration of security conditions, premature reduction in aid flows, and further adverse regional economic or political developments. Poverty is expected to remain high, driven by weak labor demand and security-related constraints on service delivery.

• There are no current prospects for the development of an Afghan economy that can stand on its own. Aside from outside aid, Afghanistan's only major source of hard currency is narcotics—a stream of income dominated by the Taliban and regional power brokers rather than the central government.

• There is far less progress to preserve human rights than most reporting indicates. Civil and human rights progress has been real, but far too many of the data on civil progress in areas such as the rights of women, education, rule of law, and health are dubious at best or have badly dated estimates. The issues do not mean the United States should not play out the peace process or consider security and aid guarantees if the peace process should suddenly become far more successful. It certainly does not mean the Biden administration should not consider proposals from the Afghan central government if it can achieve any credible level of unity and show that it is capable of realistic peace negotiations. But the United States should make clear that it will fully and actively enforce a conditions-based approach to Afghan corruption and failures and that there will be no second chances if the Afghan government continues to be as much of a threat to success as the Taliban. The United States

should also make clear that it will immediately cut off aid the moment gross waste and corruption reappears and that it will actually leave if the Afghan political leadership cannot maintain greater levels of unity and effectiveness than it has to date.

The Biden administration's message should be unequivocal. The United States is willing to write off Afghanistan. It will stand behind competent and honest partners if they can negotiate and implement a successful peace. The United States now has no obligation to keep funding corruption and failure. It should be apparent that at this point only performance, not promises, count.

Writing off the Afghan government will probably mean some form of Taliban victory. This will create increased risks in terms of extremism and terrorism, but it is far from clear that these risks will not be higher than the risks of supporting a failed Afghan central government indefinitely into the future and failing to use the same resources in other countries to support partners that are more effective. There are many other states that face the threat of extremism, have more effective governments and ability to use such resources, and are closer to the United States and its major strategic partners, posing a more important potential engagement.

Moreover, leaving the problem to Afghanistan's neighbors, such as Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran, may push them into commitments that will place the burden of Afghanistan on them; forcing these states to deal with the burden of Afghanistan could actually serve the strategic objectives of the United States. Strategic triage is not a pleasant process, but the United States must use its limited resources where they are most effective.

## Int'l Conference...

inherent in building a peace and progress," he added. Hussain suggested increased people-to-people contact and said: "We need a collective effort to put the region together."

The two-day conference aims to inspire a conversation among various stakeholders to contribute to the discourse on challenges and opportunities

with their intellectual maturity to make the contribution for the establishment of global peace. All parties of these advocate basic principles of peace and mutual respect, and thus feel it obligatory to bring together all those who wish to contribute to the noble cause of peace and interdependence," a statement about the event said.

"Turkey, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics, which have maintained a strong friendship and strategic cooperation in the region a long time, are capable of putting their subjective ideas into action

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## Heart of Asia

Chief Editor: M. Hamid Hamdard

Reporters: Safiullah Nasary, Shafiq Amirzay,

Jawad Temori & Hameedullah Hamidi

Graphic & Design: Arman

Phone: +93-202502100 - +93-777989696

Website: www.heartofasia.af

Email: heartofasiadaily@gmail.com

Address: Behind Rahman Baba High School

- Opposite to 3<sup>rd</sup> District,

Kabul - Afghanistan

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# Int'l Conference in Istanbul Focuses on Peace, Cooperation

An international peace conference began in Istanbul Tuesday with speakers from several countries including Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to discuss some major conflicts of the current international order and peaceful solutions for them through cooperation between the participants.

The conference titled "Turkey, Pakistan and Central Asia: Partnership for Peace" is being co-hosted by Turkey's Center for Diplomatic Affairs and Political Studies (DIPAM) in partnership with Pakistan's Lahore Center for Peace Research (LCPR).

"We have to learn from each other to be partners in peace," said Tolga Sakman, chairperson of DIPAM.

Sakman called for cooperation at all levels among Turkey, Pakistan and Central Asian nations, including in cultural, economic, political and academic areas.

Referring to Jammu and Kashmir, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), he said shared principles of Turkey, Pakistan and friendly countries in Central Asia "are going to make great contributions in the new era" of the world order.

"Hopefully, this conference acts as a platform where different visions will be shared and worked upon," he added.

Holding the third conference in Turkey "shows the love and respect Pakistan has for this great country, Turkey," Nazir Hussain, the executive director of the LCPR, told the conference, which is being held amid strict COVID-19 measures. Hussain, who is a former Pakistan foreign service diplomat, said the aim of the conference is to "promote research and build peace between cultures, societies and nations."

"The region of Central Asia is very close to Pakistan as it is close to Turkey," he said, calling



it "greater Central Asia." "We, as Pakistan, are very much part of it and want to work together in search of peace and prosperity," he insisted. Referring to Afghanistan, he said the country has seen no peace for over 40 years. "It has resulted in collateral damage and Pakistan has suffered the loss of 70,000 civilians and over 10,000 military officials."

"The Pakistan-Turkey relationship is not new; Muslims from South Asia always supported the great Ottomans and so is the case with modern-day Turkey," he stated.

He recalled the visit by scholars from Central Asia to present-day Pakistan and the region.

"There is an inspiration from the region and we want to make an effort in this way for ... P3

## A look at the world

### Coronavirus Origin-tracing Mission in Wuhan is Independent: WHO

The World Health Organization (WHO) said Monday that the international expert team on the COVID-19 origin-tracing mission in Wuhan was "independent" and had no affiliation.

"Many times I hear that this is a WHO study or investigation. It's not. It's an independent study, a study which is composed of independent individuals from 10 institutions. And WHO's role here is coordination and that's what we should



take into consideration too," WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual press conference from Geneva. At Monday's press conference, Dr. Peter Ben Embarek, head of the international expert team in Wuhan, said that their report would be a "consensus document".

The expert team, composed of 17 international scientists and 17 Chinese counterparts, are working together to publish an interim joint report, in which they would "make recommendations for future studies," said Embarek.

He said that longer studies would be needed to "explore some of the hypotheses and advance our understanding about the origin of the virus".

Earlier last week, the international team concluded their month-long research in Wuhan and presented their initial findings at a press conference in China, ruling out the hypothesis that the virus escaped from a laboratory.

A WHO source said that the team is working on a summary report which is expected to be published this week, and that a full final report will come out in the coming weeks. (CCTVPlus)

### Turkey Hails Appointment of New WTO Chief



Turkey welcomed late Monday the appointment of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the new director-general of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

"We welcome the conclusion of the recent director-general selection process at the World Trade Organization with the appointment of the Nigerian candidate Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who received the strongest support in the process, as the new WTO Director General at the WTO General Council meeting held on February 15, 2021," the Turkish Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The statement emphasized that Okonjo-Iweala has "rich experience" in the fields of economy and diplomacy stemming from her previous positions including as finance minister and foreign minister of Nigeria as well as vice president of the World Bank. She will take up her duties on March 1 and her term, which is renewable, will expire on Aug. 31, 2025.

The ministry congratulated Okonjo-Iweala, adding it believes the new world trade body chief will demonstrate "outstanding success" also in her work at the WTO.

"We also find it important that the selection process was concluded within the framework of the principle of consensus that constitutes the basis of the WTO's rules of procedure. In this regard, we would like to thank all candidates who campaigned during the selection process for their contributions to the organization's vision and its pluralist and democratic structure," it said.

### Lavrov Accuses EU of Breaking Ties with Russia

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday that the EU has been consistently breaking off relations with Russia for many years.

Most of the bodies created for the development of Russian-EU relations were either closed or frozen in recent years, he said, speaking at a news conference in Saint Petersburg with his Finnish counterpart Pekka Haavisto. Currently, bilateral contacts are mostly focused on separate topics such as the Iranian nuclear problem or the Syrian conflict, Lavrov said.

However, Russia is ready to restore normal cooperation when the EU is ready for it, he added.



Commenting on the case of opposition leader Alexey Navalny and the detentions in Russia during unauthorized protests urging his release, Lavrov said the EU is concerned with human rights violations against Russians only in Russia while it ignores such violations against Russians in European countries, particularly in the Baltic states, where a non-citizen status for ethnic Russians exists.

"When Russian-speaking [TV] channels are being shut down and Russian-speaking journalists are prosecuted just because they are doing their job, when the shameful phenomenon of statelessness remains in the EU and the EU looks on without much desire to change anything, I believe that it's not Russia that is distancing itself from the EU, but the EU drifting away from the Russian Federation," he said.

Speaking on behalf of Finland and the EU, Haavisto noted that the EU did not bring up the issue of a possible break in bilateral relations.

He said EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell visited Russia recently, aiming to find common points.

However, the expulsion of three EU diplomats on the day of his visit was taken "heavily," he said.



Shigal  
English Academy

AMERICAN  
ENGLISH FILE



Western Street of  
Kabul University Close to  
Dehbori Park.



+93 (0) 789 98 9696



shigal.edu@gmail.com



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