

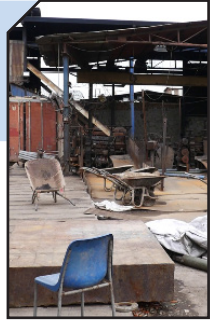


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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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**Chris Alexander: Pakistan's Secret 'Proxy War' Hurdle to Peace in Afghanistan**

Canada's former ambassador to Afghanistan Chris Alexander has said that Pakistan's "proxy war" was an impediment to restoring peace in the country. Alexander also said that Taliban and its allies had received ample support from Pakistan's army, particularly the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

"The problem is that over these last 20 years and before that, the Taliban may have not have been their own masters. There will be no peace in Afghanistan unless and until Pakistan stops its covert proxy war in Afghanistan. This link needs to be broken," Alexander said.

"Taliban as a fighting force are not welcome in Afghanistan. They are illegitimate, what they are doing is illegal, it is terrorism, they target civilians, it is tragic. But, we do need the Taliban to be sincere about the peace process, to lay down their arms and to turn over a new leaf," he said.



**Hero Rashid Spins Afghanistan to Test Win**

Afghan legspinner Rashid Khan has picked up his second 10-wicket haul in Test cricket to help his side beat Zimbabwe by six wickets for a series-leveilling win in Abu Dhabi.

Afghanistan chased down a target of 108 against the African nation in the final session of the second Test on Sunday to square the two-match series at 1-1.

The 22-year-old Rashid, Afghanistan's national hero who's become a global T20 star, picked up 7-137 in the second innings against Zimbabwe for a match-winning haul of 11-325.

Playing their sixth Test, the Afghans posted 4-545, their highest-ever total, before captain Asghar Afghan declared their first innings.

That was built on the first double hundred by an Afghanistan player when Hashmatullah Shahidi scored 200 not out. The skipper made 164.

The Asian side seemed headed ... **P3**

## Peace-Talk: Abdullah Emphasizes Need for United Stance on U.S. Plan



As the two major Moscow-Ankara peace meetings approach, Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), says that Afghanistan should be held accountable for the US plan and regional meetings to be held in the near futur and has a clear and

unified position. The leadership of HCNR has announced that the fifth meeting of the leadership committee of the council held yesterday , Sunday in the Sapidar Palace. Abdullah Abdullah called the fifth meeting of the leadership committee

of HCNR vital and stressed that Afghanistan should have a clear and unified position on the plan presented by the United States and the regional peace meetings to be held in the near future for the peace in Afghanistan. "We are not afraid to raise issues, but the legitimate position and

will of the people and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan must be clear," Abdullah said.

The meeting discussed the US government's plan and regional peace summits on the Afghan peace process, with members emphasizing the importance and necessity of peace, saying that any measures to ensure peace in Afghanistan should be taken.

The participants of the meeting noted that the peace in Afghanistan has a regional and global aspect. The sincere efforts and support of the region and the world can guarantee the success of this process.

According to the HCNR statement, members of the Leadership Committee continue to emphasize the need to accelerate the peace process, strengthen national, regional and global consensus for peace, establish a permanent ceasefire, and ending the violence.

Previously, the Presidential Palace had reacted to the US plan by implicitly rejecting it, saying that the election was a non-negotiable principle for the Afghan government.

**Pakistan's Special Envoy for Afghanistan arrives in Tehran**

Iran's Foreign Ministry Director-General for West-Asia Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi announced that Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq arrived in Tehran late on Saturday.

"Mohammad Sadiq has traveled to Tehran to hold talks with Iranian officials including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on developments in Afghanistan," Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi wrote on his official Twitter account.



## Interior Minister Says Afghan Forces Can Hold Their Own

Afghanistan's interior minister has said that Afghan security forces can hold their ground even if U.S. troops withdraw.

Masoud Andarabi's comments in an interview Saturday with The Associated Press were the first government reaction to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's warning issued in a sharply worded letter to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani last weekend.

In the letter pressing Ghani to step up efforts to make peace with the Taliban, Blinken said, "I am concerned the security situation will worsen and that the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains" after the American military withdraws.

Andarabi said Afghanistan's National Security Forces could hold territory, but would likely endure heavy losses trying to hold



remote checkpoints without U.S. air support.

"The Afghan security forces are fully capable of defending the capital and the cities and the territories that we are present in right now," he said. "We think that the Afghan security forces this year have proven to the Taliban that they will not be able to gain territory."

While the Taliban have not attacked

U.S. or NATO forces as a condition of the agreement, the Afghan National Security forces have faced some blistering assaults.

Andarabi also repeated his government's warning against a hasty U.S. retreat from the country, saying that the Taliban's ties to al-Qaida remain intact and that a swift pullout would worsen global counterterrorism efforts. ... **P3**

## Russia Seeks...

encouraged Arab countries to talk with Tehran, saying “promotion, trust and transparency in military construction” will strengthen the region’s security.

Lavrov’s efforts to push Arab countries to better relations with Iran may have a deeper meaning than a simple desire to contribute to regional security, taking into account a recent statement by US President Joe Biden who said he was willing to return to the Iran nuclear deal.

Steps in this direction demand Washington’s coordination with its Arab allies and being that the UAE is the only regional player having contacts with Iran, Russia can ask for the UAE’s help in softening other stakeholders’ stance. Lavrov also had an unplanned meeting with Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who has been trying to form a Cabinet since the deadly 2020 Beirut explosions.

So far, France was the main mediator between Lebanese sides without much success. The situation in the country has been deteriorating, and Hariri seems to be in need of any help he can find. Lavrov stressed many times that Moscow has good relations with all Lebanese sides, besides, Russia can also put in a good word for Hariri with Iran and the Arab countries, as their position counts in the issue of forming Lebanon’s government.

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt

# U.S. Has 1,000 More Troops in Afghanistan Than It Disclosed

Facing a high-stakes choice and running out of time to make it, the Biden administration is wrestling with whether to follow through with a full withdrawal in the next seven weeks of the 2,500 American troops still in Afghanistan — except, as it turns out, that number is actually around 3,500. The United States has about 1,000 more troops in Afghanistan than it has disclosed, according to U.S., European and Afghan officials. That adds another layer of complexity to the swirling debate at the White House over whether to stick with a deal, struck by the Trump administration and the Taliban, that calls for removing the remaining American forces by May 1.

A thousand troops may seem like a small number compared to the roughly 100,000 who were there at the height of the war. But the scope of the U.S. presence has become a contentious issue, not just in Afghanistan — where the Taliban want the Americans gone, but their foe, the Afghan government, relies on U.S. air support to bolster its beleaguered security forces — but in Washington. Members of Congress have repeatedly called for an increase in troops if the United States decides to stay past the withdrawal date outlined in the agreement, which was reached just over a year ago. The cloudy accounting around the troop numbers results from some Special Operations forces having been put “off the books,” according to a senior U.S. official, as well as the presence of some temporary and transitioning units. These troops, according to a second U.S. official, include Joint Special Operations Command units, some of them elite Army Rangers, who work under both the Pentagon and the CIA while deployed to Afghanistan. Having more troops in a country than the Defense Department officially acknowledges is common practice. From Syria to Yemen to Mali, the United States often details military troops to the CIA or other agencies, declares that information “classified” and refuses to publicly acknowledge their presence.

So last year, as former President Donald J.



Trump pushed for rapid troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, the Defense Department and other national security agencies used familiar methods to move numbers around, which made troop levels seem to be dropping faster than they really were. It was comparable to what happened in 2019, when Mr. Trump wanted to pull forces from Syria, U.S. officials said.

The Obama administration used similar sleights of hand under the bland, bureaucratic term “force management levels,” which resulted in more troops in war zones with little public oversight. “We’ve seen this movie before,” said Laurel E. Miller, a former top State Department official who worked on Afghanistan and Pakistan diplomacy for former President Barack Obama and for Mr. Trump. “To some extent, the fudging of the numbers reflects the arbitrariness of political fixation on declaring specific numbers.”

So, officially, the Pentagon insists that troop numbers are lower. “We are still at 2,500” in Afghanistan, Maj. Rob Lodewick, a Pentagon spokesman, said in an email to The New York Times on Friday.

What U.S. forces remain in Afghanistan are

stationed at roughly a dozen bases and consist mostly of Special Operations troops advising Afghan units at the headquarters level, as well as flight and support crews for aircraft. In southern Afghanistan, U.S. jets fly overhead almost nightly. Since this time last year, U.S. troop numbers in Afghanistan have declined from 12,000 to the current number. That drop was staunchly opposed by Pentagon leaders, who have long said that at least 8,600 U.S. troops are needed, both to support the Afghan forces and to conduct counterterrorism missions.

But a review of the U.S.-Taliban deal by the Afghan Study Group, a congressionally mandated report that submitted its findings to lawmakers last month, concluded that maintaining around 4,500 troops in Afghanistan could be enough “to secure U.S. interests under current conditions and at an acceptable level of risk.”

In addition to the 3,500 Americans, there are roughly 7,000 NATO and allied troops still in Afghanistan who depend on U.S. forces for logistics and force protection. If the United States did, indeed, try to leave by May 1, it would be almost impossible logistically to withdraw both the American ... **P3**

By Manish Tewari

## Does India Have Strategic Interests in Afghanistan?

Hard questions with regard to our real interests in Afghanistan were never asked then and are not being asked even now.

Consider the following vignettes. A child born in the December of 1979 in Afghanistan would be today 41 years old. Across four decades that middle-aged person now has only known strife, violence and bloodshed as the only normal. It was on the 24th of December of that year, Soviet Tanks had rolled across the Amu Daraya to commence a brutal nine-year occupation of that antediluvian acreage situated on the crossroads of time.

It was the year 2016. For 15 long years Afghanistan had now been free of the malevolent influence of the Taliban. At a Track-2 event, I ran into a former chief of the Afghan National Army early one morning. I asked him, how is the situation in Afghanistan currently? He said we have democratic government, a free and a vibrant press — print, TV, radio and digital — encompassing over 1,800 media outlets, girls and

women in schools and colleges. Any Afghan can even tell the President that he is in the wrong. It was a learning to see that a former military man was calculating the achievements of the past decade-and-a-half in intangibles rather than gain or loss of territory qua the Taliban.

Cut to 2021 and Joe Biden is the third consecutive President wanting to end America’s longest war. Two decades ago, the Americans had gone into Afghanistan after 9/11 hunting for Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda after the Taliban leader Mullah Omar refused to turn them over to the US. While Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar were both dead, the Taliban and even the Al Qaeda are both alive and kicking. In fact, the United States, after holding leading elements of the Taliban leadership in primitively medieval incarceration in Guantanamo Bay for over 15 years or more, in a complete volte-face on February 29, 2020, cut a deal with the “same eminences” in Doha. One

of the essential elements of the deal being total withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan by 1st of May 2021.

In a recent letter to President Ashraf Ghani, the new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken virtually read out the riot act to the Afghan government to fall in line with the latest US approach to the Afghan quagmire. The letter has been made public by the Afghan news outlet Tolo News. Neither has it been denied by the US or the Afghan government, respectively.

The missive sketches out the following modes for an across-the-board settlement to the Afghan imbroglio pegged on the desirability of an enduring ceasefire by the Taliban. It, therefore, envisages ministerial-level parleys under the auspices of the United Nations between Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India and the United States of America to deliberate upon a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan, a senior-level meeting between the Taliban

and the Afghan government hosted by Turkey to take place shortly to finalize a peace agreement between the two.

It mentions a revised plan to operationalize a ninety-day reduction in violence programme predicated upon thwarting a spring offensive by the Taliban. The dispatch further calls upon President Ghani to consider US proposals for a roadmap targeted at a new and inclusive Afghan government.

The letter closes with a rather portentous caveat stating: “We are considering the full withdrawal of our forces by May 1st, as we consider other options. Even with the continuation of financial assistance from the United States to your forces after an American military withdrawal, I am concerned the security situation will worsen and that the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains.”

Since India is now going to sit at the high table to decide the future of Afghanistan it must seriously consider what “real” strategic interests it has in Afghanistan. Writing a decade earlier on the same question veteran journalist

Shekhar Gupta opined, “It will still be a country of great strategic importance. But for whom, is the question. It will be of no strategic importance to us. None of our supplies or trade comes to Afghanistan. None of our bad guys hide there. No Afghan has ever been involved in a terror attack on India. In fact, almost never has a terror attack on us been even planned in the more precise Af-Pak region. They have all been planned and executed between Muzaffarabad, Muridke, Karachi and Multan. Almost never has an Afghan, Pakhtun, Baluch, Tajik, any ethnicity, been involved in a terror attack in India.

It’s always been the Punjabis. Ask anybody in the Indian army who has served in Kashmir and he will tell you that the intruders he fought were exactly of the same ethnic stock as the bulk of the Pakistani army he may have to fight in a real war: The Punjabi Muslims. Leave Afghanistan to the Pakistanis. If the Pakistani army thinks it can fix, subdue and control Afghanistan, after the British, Soviets and Americans have failed to do precisely this at the ... **P3**

## Afghan Industry in Peril as Investment Money Leaves

The Afghanistan Chambers Federation has expressed concern about the flow of investment capital out of the country and says that many Afghan investors have shifted their financial focus to Turkey, the UAE, and Uzbekistan in the past year.

Afghan investors, besides facing a lack of security and a lack of basic infrastructure, are now concerned with the possibility of chaos as uncertainty reigns amid potential peace talks, Sakhi Ahmad Paiman deputy director of the chamber said.

"Most of the Afghan capital has shifted to Turkey, UAE, and Uzbekistan, as investors assess the situation as

untenable," he said.

Karwan Folad, a steel company that was established in Kabul four years ago with more than 100 staff and over \$20 million in investment money, has been bankrupt since the beginning of the current solar year (1399).

"We have suffered many problems up until now. There is no electricity-raw materials are expensive and that is why less than two people are now working here," said Azizullah, an employee in the company.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Commerce and Industries says it is optimistic that investment will increase.

"We hope the investments increase



along with progress in the peace talks in the country. We are in close contact with some investors to encourage them to invest in Afghanistan," Fawad Ahmad, a spokesperson for the ministry said.

Over the last two years, amid the presidential election disputes, the COVID-19 economic impact, and the recent political chaos, investment has dried up in the country, owners of various companies said.

### Hero Rashid...

for quick revenge for losing inside two days in the opening Test when they dismissed Zimbabwe for 287 in the first innings and reduced them to 7-142 in the second after enforcing the follow-on.

But Zimbabwe captain Sean Williams, who remained unbeaten on 151, and Donald Tiripano showed fight to add 187 for the eighth wicket and help Zimbabwe avoid an innings defeat.

Rashid, who had taken 11 wickets against Bangladesh in 2019, broke the resistance with his sixth wicket of the innings and he denied Tiripano a maiden Test hundred when he trapped him lbw for 95 shortly before the lunch break.

Rashid also then removed number 11 batsman Victor Nyauchi, before he had scored, as Zimbabwe were dismissed for 365 in their second innings.

### Palestine Slams...

to move their embassies to Jerusalem pending a final agreement between Israel and Palestine on the issue of the holy city.

Among EU states, only Hungary has diplomatic offices in Jerusalem.

With the exception of the US and Guatemala, countries worldwide have declined to shift embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

### Interior Minister...

He said that Afghan National Security Forces backed by U.S. assistance have so far put a squeeze on terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, including the local Islamic State affiliate.

A hasty "uncalculated withdrawal could certainly give an opportunity for those terrorists ... to threaten the world," he said from inside the compound, protected by concrete blast walls, barbed wire and a phalanx of security guards. The warning comes as Washington is reviewing a deal the Trump administration struck with the Taliban over a year ago that calls for the withdrawal of the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops by May 1.

### U.S. Has 1,000...

and the allied forces in time, experts have said, though U.S. officials insist it remains an option.

Despite the shrinking timeline, Mr. Biden has yet to decide whether U.S. troops will stay beyond the proposed date — and if so, how many — or leave, ending America's longest war after more than 19 years.

Mr. Biden's own inclination, when he was Mr. Obama's vice president, was toward a reduced U.S. presence. But as president, he must weigh whether following such instincts would run too high a risk of the Taliban defeating government forces and taking over Afghanistan's key cities.

Many senior military commanders still argue that a full withdrawal could also lead to Al Qaeda and other groups hostile to the United States regaining a prominent presence in the country. But troop levels are just one of many issues the Biden administration faces as it tries to make peace in Afghanistan.

Afghan leaders were already angry about being left out of the Trump administration's negotiations with the Taliban. They were also unhappy with the deal that resulted; in the past year, the Taliban have largely kept to their promise not to attack Americans, but they have stepped up violence against fellow Afghans. Last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken sent a blunt letter to Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, first reported by the Afghan outlet

TOLO News, that proposed several steps to revive the stalled peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The letter, which asked the Afghan leader to "understand the urgency of my tone," was received by Mr. Ghani as a personal slight, suggesting that he was one of the main obstacles to the process, said an Afghan official with direct knowledge of the matter.

Mr. Blinken's letter also signaled continued high-level support for Zalmay Khalilzad, the longtime lead U.S. diplomat involved in the peace process, who is a divisive figure in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. Many in Mr. Ghani's circle have resented the pressure that the Afghan-born Mr. Khalilzad put on the government over contentious issues, including the release of roughly 5,000 Taliban prisoners, during the lead-up to the talks in Doha, Qatar, which began in September.

Trying to inject new energy into the talks between negotiators in Qatar, Mr. Blinken proposed in his letter that the Taliban and Afghan leadership meet next month in Turkey, where they would likely discuss a cease-fire and power-sharing proposal outlined by American officials. Neither side has agreed to the deal, nor is it clear who would be attending the meeting in Turkey from either side.

Mr. Blinken also pushed for a U.N.-hosted meeting of foreign ministers from Russia, China,

India, Pakistan, Iran and the United States to discuss Afghanistan in the near future. And Moscow will host a conference on the peace process in the coming weeks that the Afghan government has agreed to attend.

In addition, Mr. Khalilzad, who is in Doha, continues to meet with the Taliban in an effort to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and he is exploring other ways the Taliban can engage Afghans and the international community in pursuit of a political solution, according to U.S. officials.

On Friday, a massive car bombing in the western Afghan city of Herat decimated a neighborhood and killed at least seven people, leaving more than 50 wounded. The attack was carried out by the Taliban, Afghan officials said, and it was condemned by Mr. Ghani. No group claimed responsibility. Earlier in the week, the Taliban captured a district center in the northern province of Faryab, routing Afghan special operations forces and forcing the surrender of the district's police chief.

The Americans did not come to the Afghans' aid, according to the Afghan official, despite repeated requests for airstrikes.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff reported from Kabul, and Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt from Washington. Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kabul and Asadullah Timory from Herat, Afghanistan.

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### Does India Have...

peak of each one's superpower Dom, why not let the Pakistanis try their hand at it? If they pour another ten divisions and half of the ISI into that hapless country now, isn't it that much of a relief for us on our western borders?"

This assessment is as relevant today as it was a decade ago. Hard questions with regard to our "real interests" in Afghanistan were never asked then and are not being asked

even now. Would a foothold in Afghanistan help us in the event of a two-front war with China and Pakistan? Highly unlikely till the time we are not willing to put boots on the ground in Afghanistan. Is it desirable to put boots on the ground even if the Afghans were to request Indian military presence after the Americans leave? Highly undesirable. The last time India had seriously considered such a request was in early 2003 to deploy US

forces in Iraq. Prime Minister Vajpayee had rightly refused to do so. Does a presence in Afghanistan open up new vistas for India in Central Asia? Not really, after Iran dropped India from the Chabahar to Zahedan just before it inked a USD 400 billion 25-year strategic partnership with China.

While it is heady to be invited to the high table, as the saying goes, there is no free lunch in life. India needs to be careful.

# Syrian War Killed Nearly 400,000 So Far

The overall death toll for Syria's civil war has reached 388,652 since it began a decade ago this month, a war monitor said Sunday. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the figures include almost 117,388 civilians, among them more than 22,000 children. Attacks by the Syrian regime and allied militia forces accounted for the majority of civilian deaths, said the Britain-based monitor, which relies on sources inside Syria for its reports. The Observatory's previous tally was issued in December and stood at more than 387,000. Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said 2020 saw the lowest annual death toll since the war began, with just over 10,000 deaths. Battles slowed this year as a cease-fire held in northwestern Syria and attention turned to

containing the coronavirus pandemic. The Observatory also documented at least 16,000 deaths in regime prisons and detention centers since the conflict erupted in 2011 after the brutal repression of anti-regime protests. It said, however, that the real number was likely higher because its tally does not include 88,000 people believed to have died of torture in regime prisons. Today, the Damascus regime controls more than 60% of Syria after a string of Russia-backed victories against the opposition conducted since 2015. Among the regions still beyond its reach are the last opposition stronghold of Idlib in the northwest, Turkish-held areas along the northern border and northeastern parts of the country held



by U.S.-backed YPG terrorists, the Syrian wing of the PKK terrorist group. The war has forced more than half the country's

pre-war population to flee their homes. Some 200,000 people have gone missing, according to the war monitor.

### A look at the world

#### Russia Seeks Arab Support in Reviving Iran Nuclear Deal

From March 8 - 12, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov toured the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar to discuss regional and international issues. The tour began with the UAE, where Lavrov met the Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan; the country's Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and National Security Advisor Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan. UAE authorities made exceptions for the Russian delegation where it was received in the Abu Dhabi emirate, although it is mostly closed for visits due to the coronavirus pandemic.



The delegation was also freed from an obligatory 10-day quarantine. However, Lavrov and the delegation had to take PCR tests before meeting the crown prince. At a news conference, following the meeting, Russian and UAE ministers praised bilateral relation developments, confirmed "the overlapping or similar approaches" to the crises in the Middle East and promised to continue "close coordination" in Syria, Libya and Yemen. The UAE foreign minister surprised journalists by saying US sanctions were the main obstacle for restoring dialogue with Syria. He also spoke in favor of Syria's return to the Arab League and its reconciliation with regional Arab countries, which was considered a compliment to Russia, that has consistently urged the lifting of sanctions on Syria and for its return "to the Arab family." On Israel, Lavrov once again welcomed its normalization with Arab states, including with the UAE. However, he stressed that "a fair settlement of the Palestinian problem must not be relegated to the background." Lavrov then turned to Iran and ... **P2**

#### Nigeria: 19 Killed in Boko Haram Terror Attack



Nineteen people were killed in the attack by the Boko Haram terror organization in the northeastern state of Borno in Nigeria, according to media reports on Saturday. Terrorists attacked a military convoy in Gudumbali in the Lake Chad region, killing 15 soldiers and four Joint Task Force members. Army spokesman Mohammed Yerima said in a statement that several soldiers were also injured in the attack. On Thursday, Nigeria's National Security Adviser Babagana Monguno announced that his country would not negotiate with the terror group and the government does not see negotiations as a means to deal with the worsening security conditions in the country. Boko Haram launched a bloody insurgency in 2009 in northeastern Nigeria but later spread its atrocities to neighboring Niger, Chad and Cameroon, prompting a military response. More than 30,000 people have been killed and nearly 3 million displaced in a decade of Boko Haram's terror activities in Nigeria, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Violence has affected 26 million people in the Lake Chad region and displaced 2.6 million others, according to the UN Refugee Agency. **P3**

#### Palestine Slams Czech Diplomatic Office in Jerusalem

Palestine on Saturday slammed the Czech Republic for opening on March 11 a diplomatic office in Jerusalem -- affiliated to its embassy in Tel Aviv. It called the controversial step a clear violation of international law. While stopping short of shifting the Czech Embassy to Jerusalem, the move received clear approval from Israel, with Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi attending the opening along with Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis.



The Palestinian Foreign Ministry in a statement condemned the move by Prague, and said it was a "blatant attack" on Palestinian people, their rights and a "flagrant violation of international law." It was noted that the decision was a revolt against Europe's stance on the legal and political status of Jerusalem, which was an integral part of Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. The statement emphasized that the Czech move would have dramatic consequences on work carried out for the resumption of peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine. The ministry also held the Czech government responsible for the consequences of the decision not only in the Middle East peace process but in relations with Palestine, Arab and Islamic countries. It also urged EU states and their foreign ministers, as well as EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, to intervene and make Prague reverse the decision. EU member states have refused ... **P3**



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