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Heart of Asia

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Over 65,000 Vaccinated Against COVID19 in Afghanistan

Kabul: Over 65,000 people have been vaccinated against the coronavirus infection since the COVID19 inoculation drive began in Afghanistan, said the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) on Saturday.

Dastagir Nazari, MoPH spokesperson, said that currently ten categories of people in the community, including teachers, security personnel and defense forces, healthcare workers, media employees, people over the age of 50, immigrants, displaced people and people with chronic diseases can be vaccinated in the country. In the first phase, 20% of the country's population is to be vaccinated against the Sars-Cov-2 virus which causes the Covid-19 infection.

Afghanistan has so far received nearly one million doses of the vaccine from India and the COVAX facility, ... **P2**



US Lifts Sanctions on ICC Prosecutor Over Afghan War Crimes Probe

The United States on Friday lifted sanctions on the International Criminal Court's (ICC) senior members, including a prosecutor who had launched an investigation into alleged war crimes by US military personnel in Afghanistan.

Announcing the decision, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that assessment concluded that the measures adopted by the previous administration "were inappropriate and ineffective."

The Trump administration had imposed financial sanctions and a US visa ban on the ICC's Gambian-born chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda last year after she launched an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by American forces in Afghanistan, according to US media reports. ... **P3**

Politicians Gear up to Start Istanbul Summit on April 16



Sources have told Ariana News that the Istanbul summit on the Afghan peace process will run for 10 days from April 16.

US President Joe Biden put forward a new peace plan in early

March which laid out a number of suggestions including the convening of a multi-partner conference on accelerating the peace process.

The US proposed the conference

to bring together Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the US to discuss a unified approach to support peace in Afghanistan.

US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad

and representatives from the UN, Turkey, and Qatar are meanwhile expected to visit Kabul Saturday evening for final consultations with the Afghan leaders over the Istanbul conference.

Addressing a press conference on Saturday, Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib stated: "We are in contact with the Turkish side. They want to hold a successful summit."

Sources said the State Ministry for Peace Affairs is expected to hand over the Afghan politicians' stance on Biden's proposed peace plan for setting up an interim government in Afghanistan to the High Council for the National Reconciliation.

Mohib emphasized the need for a democratic way to transfer power. He stated that the government is ready for holding early presidential elections and that "President Ghani will not run in the elections."

"This government is elected by the people, the people have voted and if another government is formed via people's vote then it is okay but the government has no right to give people's decision to 40 ... **P3**

Iran, Afghanistan to Renovate Cross-Border Posts

Iranian and Afghan deputy foreign ministers agreed to accelerate renovation of cross-border posts.

The decision was made in a meeting which took place at Dogharoon-Islam Qala border, Northeast of Iran, by Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for International and Legal Affairs Mohsen Baharvand and Afghanistan's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Meerwais Nab.

The two sides visited process of border customs posts renovation and reviewed issues related to transit and traffic. ... **P2**



Immediate Change in Power Won't Bring Stability to Afghanistan: EU

The European Union (EU) has called on President Ashraf Ghani to make concerted efforts to advance the Afghan peace process and to make sure the people and the country's best interests are put first.

Arnout Pauwels, deputy head of the EU in Afghanistan, said in an interview with Ariana News that the EU is preparing for the Istanbul Summit.

"President on the other hand also has to take into account what is alive in the country, what are the political forces, the political streams. So, based on his sound political judgment he has to take the best step forward in the interest of his county and his people. So, the voice of the president is extremely important," said Pauwels.



He also remarked on the lack of women's participation in peace talks, and said that women participation and inclusive peace talks will bring peace and stability to the country.

Pauwels said that immediate change in power can't bring

stability to Afghanistan.

"We do not advocate any kind of quick change of power, it is not about power it is what you can bring to the country over a long term. So, a power grab by one side or the other will not lead to stability" added Pauwels. ... **P2**

Over 65,000...

which is a global initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Till Saturday, total positive cases in the country stand at 56,676. Total deaths reported is 2,497 and the total number of recoveries is 51,802, as per officials.

Iran, ...

In a relevant development last month, the two officials exchanged views about the importance of development of trade, efforts to organize refugees commute, fight trafficking of humans and narcotics, combat international terrorism and dispatch of humanitarian aid to alleviate sufferings of natural disasters.

Immediate...

Pauwels also condemned the spate of targeted killings and called on the Afghan government to bring the perpetrators to justice. "The targeted killing is totally against all values I think of humanity. It is extremely counter-productive move by their side. That should absolutely and totally stop immediately" said Paewels. This comes after sources told Ariana News that the Istanbul summit on the Afghan peace process will be held on April 16.

By JOE EVANS

Taliban declares victory in 'forever war' with US

When the US began dropping bombs on Afghanistan in October 2001, a conflict was triggered that would stretch beyond two decades and claim the lives of 2,300 US troops and more than 43,000 civilians.

As the US and Northern Alliance Forces took the capital Kabul, the Taliban - which had ruled Afghanistan since 1996 - called for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict. Then US president George W. Bush responded: "There's nothing to negotiate."

But with American troops still in the war-torn country today, the tone of both the Islamists and Washington has shifted significantly.

'Elephant in the room' Joe Biden's administration has offered the Taliban an interim power-sharing agreement with the Afghan government, as the US faces an impending deadline set by Donald Trump for the withdrawal of the remaining American troops in the South Asian nation.

The latest bid to end America's "forever war" has been met with "swagger" from the Taliban, says The New York Times (NYT), which reports that the insurgent group's leaders are "promoting a bold message: we have already won the war".

Peace talks aimed at securing a peaceful post-occupation future are set to begin in Turkey next month, but the "elephant in the room" will be the "half-acknowledged truth that the Taliban have the upper hand and are thus showing little outward interest in compromise", the newspaper adds.

The insurgents clearly "have the advantage", agrees The Hill, having "slowly overrun Afghan military bases, steadily taken control of large swaths of countryside and encroached on cities".

The Taliban's deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqqani declaring in a recent speech that "no mujahid ever thought that one day we would face such an improved state, or that we will crush the arrogance of the rebellious emperors, and force them to admit their defeat at our hands".

To put that another way, says the NYT, "having outlasted the all-powerful Americans, the rest is child's play, in the Taliban's view. The game is essentially over."

"While the Taliban's current rhetoric is also propaganda, the grim sense of Taliban supremacy is dictating the response of a desperate Afghan government," the paper continues.

The insurgents' victory claim "contributes to the



abandonment of dozens of checkpoints and falling morale among the Afghan security forces", who according to a Western diplomatic source in Kabul, "are already hammered by a 'not sustainable' casualty rate of perhaps 3,000 a month".

Retired Afghan army general Mirza Aslam Beg predicts that the decisive moment in the decades-long war will come when the last US troops leave his country, a withdrawal currently scheduled for completion by 1 May.

Taliban resistance "will grow in intensity", with the Islamists "gradually consolidating their writ" in the 80% of Afghan territory in which they already have partial control, and "laying siege to towns and cities" currently held by President Ashraf Ghani's government, Beg writes in an article for Pakistani newspaper The Nation.

Yet despite that prospect, the US faces "the dilemma of the devil and deep sea" in deciding whether to go ahead with the scheduled withdrawal, beg argues. Afghanistan "remains weak and poorly governed", but the US will suffer "a bigger loss of face" if it decides to stay on "in a war it cannot win".

As the Biden administration wrestles with this dilemma, the Taliban are already "planning to restore their Islamic emirate", according to Jawed Kohistani,

an Afghan analyst and former security official in Kabul. "They think they have beaten the Americans, so they can beat the other Afghan forces as well, and get control over the country," Kohistani told the NYT.

Least bad option? The power-sharing deal is at the heart of Biden's plan to get US troops out of Afghanistan and reduce America's footprint in the Middle East. But "the very notion strains credulity", says the Brookings Institute's Michael E. O'Hanlon and Omar Sharifi.

"Apparently, people are to believe that the group that took Afghanistan back to the stone ages in the 1990s, that then harboured and protected the perpetrators of 9/11, and that remains deeply in bed with al-Qaeda, will voluntarily form a new interim government with some elements of President Ashraf Ghani's administration," the pair write.

However, while the plan may be built on flawed logic, it "sounds better than another ten or twenty years of forever war, in which government forces slowly but inexorably lose ground to extremists, while foreign forces try to stanch the bleeding", they concede.

Maintaining a military presence in the country "will invite the insurgent group to restart killing American personnel", adds Vox, which notes that "there's simply no overarching consensus on which is the ... **P3**

By Matthew Reisener

Is the U.S. Military Prepared to Leave Afghanistan?

In the summer of 2011, President Barack Obama delivered a speech to the American public announcing his plan to bring home ten thousand American troops stationed in Afghanistan, the first step of his plan to withdraw over thirty thousand troops from the war-torn country within a year. Obama used this speech to make a case against the nation-building campaigns initiated by his predecessor in both Afghanistan and Iraq, arguing that "it is time to focus on nation-building here at home," instead of doing so abroad down the barrel of a gun. Noting that America's strength abroad has historically "been anchored in opportunity for our citizens here at home," Obama articulated the need to "invest in America's greatest resource—our people," and "recapture the common purpose that we shared at the beginning of this time of war." Nearly a decade later, the promise of a sustained campaign of "nation-

building at home" remains largely unfulfilled. While President Obama deftly avoided committing America to nation-building projects in places like Syria and Yemen which might have tempted his predecessor, the United States is now in year twenty of its war in Afghanistan and remains mired in a nation-building process seemingly no closer to achieving success than it was when he departed office. The immense cost of the war in Afghanistan (roughly \$2 trillion in total as of 2019) has been diverted towards a conflict of diminishing strategic importance to the United States and away from several domestic challenges which may come to define American politics in the decades to come.

Despite these failings, the Biden administration is now faced with a golden opportunity to resurrect Obama's promise of committing to nation-building at home over doomed military interventions abroad. With America fast

approaching its promised May 1 departure date of the remaining U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan and the Biden administration pursuing an ambitious plan to repair and update America's crumbling infrastructure, one need not squint to see the outlines of a national agenda centered around the principles invoked by Obama one decade earlier. If President Joe Biden ultimately chooses to follow through with America's plans to depart from Afghanistan in 2021, then he is perfectly positioned to make a principled case for and sustained commitment to fulfilling the promise of nation-building at home.

The decision whether or not to withdraw from Afghanistan remains very much in flux, with Biden receiving pressure from both sides of the political aisle to defer the departure of U.S. combat troops and the executive himself saying the May 1 deadline may be logistically

difficult to meet. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and America's chief Afghanistan negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad continue to work valiantly towards a diplomatic end to the violence in Afghanistan that is more favorable to both the United States and the ruling government in Kabul. A recent report from the congressionally convened Afghanistan Study Group calls for a postponement of the withdrawal date "in order to give the peace process sufficient time to produce an acceptable result." All indications are that Biden, who proclaimed in 2010 that "we're going to be totally out of there—come hell or high water—by 2014," is considering extending the military's stay until November. History tells us the real withdrawal date could come much later.

Unfortunately, the logic behind remaining in Afghanistan is not supported by the facts on the ground, which reveal the extent to which America's nation-building experiment has failed. The Afghan military and police forces, supported for years by the United States and armed/funded to the tune of \$87

billion, are infected with deep institutional corruption. Afghan forces have proven ineffective against the comparatively rag-tag Taliban which has made significant territorial gains since the 2020 cease-fire went into effect and now controls roughly half the country, and the United Nations found that civilian casualties in Afghanistan actually increased following the start of peace negotiations in September 2020. Efforts to curb the production of opium, the Taliban's financial lifeblood, have been unsuccessful, as the UN estimates that Afghanistan accounts for "84 percent of global opium production over the past five years." A report by The Washington Post details how U.S. money, given to the Afghan government with little oversight, fueled a culture of state corruption, with one State Department official noting that America was "so desperate to have the alcoholics to the table, we kept pouring drinks, not knowing [or] considering we were killing them." Despite substantial assistance from the United States to rebuild the Afghan economy, the country's poverty rate has actually ... **P3**

SCA Inaugurates 82-million Afgs Water Supply Project in Takhar Province

A water supply project, worth 82-million Afghanis, for 14 villages in Pasaband of Rustaq district was inaugurated on Saturday by Abdullah Qarluq, Governor of Takhar province and Dr. Ahmad Khalid Fahim, Programme Director/Deputy Country Director, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. Work on the pipeline project, covering 85 square kilometers, began in 2018 and it will give access to safe drinking water to 3,645

families in remote villages. "The project has been implemented by SCA's Rural Development Programme and was completed in two years and six months. It uses solar power to transfer water from two 150-meter-deep wells to reservoirs built along the high hills of 14 villages where the beneficiaries can utilize the supply," said Engineer Hashmatullah Momand, head of the SCAs Rural Development Programme in Taloqan.



Saudi Deal with...

have since followed suit. The deals were the first since Israel's recognition by Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. Last year's agreements, brokered by former US President Donald Trump's administration, included a freeze by Israel on planned annexation of Palestinian land. Palestinian officials condemned the normalisation as "a stab in the back of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people". A two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict closely reflects the Arab Peace Initiative, which was proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002. The initiative called for normalised relations between Israel and other Arab states in exchange for a full withdrawal by Israel from lands it occupied in the 1967 war, including the occupied regions: Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The initiative was re-endorsed over the years by the Arab League but never implemented, as Israel continued its occupation and settlement expansion in the West Bank.

US Lifts...

ICC also pressed ahead with an investigation into alleged war crimes in the Palestinian territories by Israel. Blinken said the United States sees accountability for atrocities as a national security interest, and pointed to US support for other, often temporary, tribunals globally, according to the Associated Press report.

Politicians Gear...

people that they make a decision over the future of Afghanistan," Mohib said. "Today anyone wants to take part in the future government they have to prepare to run for elections," he stated. Meanwhile, a number of Afghan politicians said that government wants to mobilize all its support for the Istanbul summit. Abdul Sattar Murad, a member of the Jamiat-e-Islami Afghanistan Party, said: "The Afghan government has made a unified plan for both the US and the Istanbul summit during the last one week."

Is the U.S. ...

increased over the past decade. America has failed to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, and there is no reason to suspect that prolonging America's military engagement will change this. The Taliban, resilient due to the support it receives from a meaningful portion of the Afghan population, may be an untrustworthy negotiating partner, but the terror group is unlikely to become more reliable over the next six months or even the next six years. Diplomatic efforts to create a transitional government that includes the Taliban are noble and worth pursuing even after America's departure from the region, but not likely to succeed given Afghan President Ghani's strong opposition to the proposals. Remaining in Afghanistan would only put at risk the remaining 2,500 American servicemen and women stationed there who could become targets of Taliban attacks should America violate the ceasefire agreement by missing the May deadline. President Biden must make every effort to depart from Afghanistan by or near the May 1 deadline, as the only meaningful alternative to doing so is a continuation of the failed status quo. If Biden does follow through with America's withdrawal plans, his domestic agenda paints a clear picture of how the resources once committed to a failed nation-building effort could be better put to use. The Biden administration, taking the president's campaign pledge to "build back better" literally, has rolled out a \$2 trillion infrastructure

plan to address America's crumbling transportation infrastructure, revive American manufacturing, and prepare America to meet the coming climate change challenge. Given that problems with American infrastructure "cost billions of dollars in lost economic productivity," and that these costs will continue to compound as the infrastructure becomes even more outdated, this measure seeks to address an issue that has chronically plagued America for several decades, but which policymakers have thus far been unable to muster a response to. America faces several other systemic defects which have long served as ticking time bombs. Healthcare in America remains fatally flawed; over thirty million Americans are uninsured, America has twice the amenable mortality rate of many of its European peers despite spending several times more on healthcare per capita, and the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed nearly 550,000 Americans, laid bare the tragic risks associated with such a broken system. About 38 percent of American adults struggle with addiction to illicit substances, while U.S. demand for narcotics continues to drive its production and create instability throughout South and Central America. Nearly one in six children in America live in poverty as of 2018. The looming threat of climate change, which experts warn could cause a 10.52 percent loss of America's GDP per capita by the year 2100 (to say nothing of the immense ecological destruction and potential loss of life), will require a sustained national

effort that expands beyond the provisions of Biden's infrastructure plan which are designed to address it. Contrasting the long neglect of America's systemic problems with the time, energy, and resources dedicated to a failed nation-building project in Afghanistan paints a clear picture of the need for greater nation-building at home at the expense of such efforts abroad. While America's two decades in Afghanistan have failed to yield meaningful solutions to the war-torn nation's underlying problems, the Biden administration now has an opportunity to focus on complex, but ultimately solvable problems that threaten the American home front, many of which (poverty, infrastructure, counter-narcotics) we have struggled to address in Afghanistan. If Biden can successfully extricate America from Afghanistan in 2021 and avoid committing America to similarly ill-fated ventures in the future, then he can shift America's focus towards resolving many of the domestic problems that have long plagued the country. Biden cannot and should not turn his back on America's indispensable role in the world, and his first few months have given no indication that he has any desire to retreat into fortress America. But \$2 trillion spent on long-overdue infrastructure development does far more to advance America's interests than \$2 trillion spent trying and failing to remake Afghanistan in our own image. Obama understood this a decade ago, and now it is up to his former vice president to make that long-deferred dream a reality.

Taliban declares...

best course of action". The fear among Biden's advisors is that his "administration will own the consequences of what looks to be an increasing calamity in Afghanistan," says retired US Army Colonel Chris Kolenda, who commanded troops in Afghanistan and served as an advisor to Afghan civilian security forces. Yet simply maintaining "the

status quo locks in misery that the 38 million or so Afghans are living in", Kolenda told the news site. "That status quo is just not sustainable." All the same, the possibility of an Afghanistan run by the Taliban is "causing concern and fear in the minds of the secular world", Beg writes in The Nation. That prospect is regarded as an imminent reality by the

insurgent group, who believe "their advances will inexorably lead to the end of the Kabul government", says the NYT. "On the battlefield there is a sense that, 'We're stronger than ever,'" Ashley Jackson, a Taliban expert at the London-based Overseas Development Institute, told the paper. "Power-sharing and democracy, these are anathema to their political culture."

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Tehran Rejects 'step-by-Step' Lifting of Sanctions

Iran's government wants the United States to lift all sanctions on its country and rejects any "step-by-step" easing of the restrictions, Iranian state broadcaster Press TV reported on Saturday.

The two countries said on Friday they would hold indirect talks in Vienna from next week as part of broader negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and global powers. The U.S. State Department said the focus would be on "the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order to return to compliance" with that agreement.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Saturday that Tehran was opposed to any gradual easing of sanctions. "No step-by-step plan is being considered," Khatibzadeh told Press TV. "The definitive

policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the lifting of all U.S. sanctions."

The aim of the talks in the Austrian capital is to reach an agreement within two months, according to a senior official with the European Union, the coordinator of the deal.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump pulled out of the nuclear pact in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran, prompting Tehran to breach some of the accord's nuclear restrictions.

Trump's successor Joe Biden wants to revive the agreement but Washington and Tehran have been at odds over who should take the first step.

Iran, China, Russia, France, Germany and Britain - all parties to the 2015 deal - held virtual talks on Friday to discuss the possible return of the United States to the accord.



A look at the world

Saudi Deal with Israel Will Be 'Extremely Helpful' for Region

A normalisation deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel would benefit the region, the kingdom's foreign minister has said, adding that a potential deal "depends to a large extent on the progress of the peace process".

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, during an interview on Thursday, added that "the normalisation of Israel's status within the region would bring tremendous benefits to the region as a whole".

"It would be extremely helpful economically, socially and from a security



perspective," he said in the interview with CNN, adding that it would be possible only if a Palestinian state within 1967 borders was delivered.

Saudi Arabia has previously made similar comments, saying it would only normalise ties with Israel within a plan that would deliver a sovereign state to Palestinians.

"What we need to make happen is a peace deal that delivers a Palestinian state with dignity and with a workable sovereignty that Palestinians can accept," Prince Faisal had said in December last year.

He added at the time that the normalisation of ties with Israel has long been part of Saudi Arabia's vision, saying that the kingdom envisaged a move in exchange for the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borderlines.

In September last year, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the so-called Abraham Accords to normalise ties with Israel. Sudan and Morocco ...

Pakistan 'Puzzled' over no Invite to US Climate Summit



Apparently irked over not being invited to an upcoming US-hosted meeting on the climate crisis, Pakistan's prime minister on Saturday said he could not understand the omission.

"I am puzzled at the cacophony over Pakistan not being invited to a climate change conference," Imran Khan said in a series of tweets, referring an April 22-23 virtual meeting.

He said Pakistan's environmental policies are driven "solely by our commitment to our future generations of a clean & green Pakistan to mitigate the impact of climate change."

"Hence our initiatives of Green Pak, 10 billion-tree tsunami, nature based solutions, cleaning up our rivers, etc.," he cited, referring to a massive tree planting drive to restore forests.

"Our policies are being recognised and lauded. We are ready to help any state wanting to learn from our experience," he added.

US President Joe Biden invited 40 world leaders to the summit "to galvanize efforts by the major economies to tackle the climate crisis," the White House announced last week, but its longtime ally Pakistan was not on the invite list.

Khan also said he has already laid out priorities for the UN Climate Change Conference 2021 if the international community is serious about countering the impact of climate change.

Ukraine Says Joint Military Drills with NATO to Begin in a Few Months

Ukraine's armed forces on Saturday said joint military drills with NATO troops would begin in a few months' time, a step that could stoke tensions with Moscow which has expressed its opposition to such a move.

NATO voiced concern on Thursday over what it said was a big Russian military build-up near eastern Ukraine after Russia warned that a serious escalation in the conflict in Ukraine's Donbass region could



"destroy" Ukraine.

The Kremlin on Friday said that any deployment of NATO troops to Ukraine would lead to further tensions near Russia's borders and force Moscow to take extra measures to ensure its own security.

Ukrainian troops have battled Russian-backed separatist forces in the eastern Donbass region in a conflict Kyiv estimates has killed 14,000 people since 2014.

The drills will involve more than 1,000 military personnel from at least 5 NATO member states and will be held in a few months, the Ukrainian armed forces said in a statement on Facebook on Saturday.

"In particular, defensive actions will be worked out, followed by an offensive in order to restore the state border and territorial integrity of a state that has been subjected to aggression by one of the hostile neighboring countries," the statement said.

It did not specify exactly when the drills would take place.



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