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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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Chinese plan \$400m investment in Afghan power sector

The President of Afghanistan has asked the Afghanistan Investment Facilitation Unit to conduct necessary investigations in cooperation with the Central Bank of Afghanistan and the National Electricity Company (Breshna) for the investment of a group of Chinese investors.

The Presidential Palace had announced that a group of Chinese investors have traveled to Afghanistan to invest in coal-fired power generation.

China is now investing in Afghanistan's mining and oil sectors. In one case, the Afghan government outsourced the mining of one of the country's largest copper mines, Aynak Copper, to China. Most of Afghanistan's electricity is now imported from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Iran. These countries supply 80% of Afghanistan's electricity. Insurgents destroyed 13 Afghan power towers in two weeks last month, cutting off power to Kabul, Logar, Ghazni, Paktia, Maidan Wardak, Laghman, Nangarhar and Kapisa provinces.



Doha talks to resume soon, says Abdullah

The government delegation for Afghan peace process will soon leave for Doha to resume the intra-Afghan talks, said Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), on Sunday.

Abdullah met the chairman and members of the government's negotiating team at the Sepidar Palace on Saturday, as per the press release issued by HCNR. During the meeting, Abdullah stressed on the government's determination to seize the opportunity to end the war and achieve peace through dialogue and negotiation. He stressed on the need to create political solidarity between the country's leaders and political currents in order to support the peace process. A few days ago, government delegations and the Taliban met in Doha after a several-month hiatus.

At the time, the two sides announced that intra-Afghan peace talks would resume in Doha between delegations from both sides. To facilitate ... **P3**

Ghani failed to gain support of my team: Hekmatyar



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami, on Sunday announced that during a trilateral meeting with President Ashraf Ghani and former president Hamid Karzai, a number of important issues on the peace process were agreed upon; however, he added that President Ghani could not gain the support of his team. Hekmatyar said that inter-government disputes had left the Afghan government with no clear plan for peace. "The participation

of political leaders in the Istanbul meeting with a unified plan; the creation of a transitional government with a decision-making council consisting of representatives of the eight factions, including the Taliban; release of all Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami prisoners and a ceasefire, were some of the issues discussed during the meeting. Election in a jirga whose members are not appointed, but elected as a result of the election, and the establishment of the Supreme

State Council, were other points of focus," he said.

As per Hekmatyar, President Ghani agreed to announce these cases to all parties within eight days and gain their support; but that did not happen. "In order to gain a clear understanding of the Taliban's position and to make the right decision, it was agreed to form a delegation and hold an informal meeting with the Taliban so that we understand whether the Taliban has the will for peace or war? If they have

the will for peace, a high-ranking government delegation, including leaders, will attend the Istanbul meeting; but it has not happened yet," said Hekmatyar.

However, the Hezb-e-Islami leader said that if the Afghan government failed to build internal consensus on decision-making, political parties would make another decision on peace and war in Afghanistan. "If the government can put an end to its unhealthy internal disputes and rivalries and take a reasonable stand on peace and establish a single and competent decision-making body, and accept this council as the highest decision-making body for important national issues; I will support it," he said. He added, however, that if the new council, like the Ministry of Peace and the High Council for Reconciliation, were ineffective and futile, nothing would be achieved. Hekmatyar said that in order to overcome the current insecure and unstable phase, agreements and measures are needed to help the citizens of Afghanistan prevent the collapse of the system and the disintegration of administrative and security-military organizations and institutions, and to ensure the peaceful and lawful transfer of power.

248 civilians killed in Taliban attacks over past month: Mol

At least 248 civilians have been killed and 527 have been wounded in Taliban attacks over the past month, said Interior Ministry spokesperson Tariq Arian on Sunday. Arian said that the Taliban had always chosen civilian targets for their offensive attacks. He added that attacking civilians is a war crime, and the defense and security forces have always responded to such attacks.

For several months now, the level of violence has risen as the Afghan peace talks have officially begun. In addition to the day-to-day fighting between Afghan security forces and the Taliban, which has also resulted in civilian casualties, ... **P2**



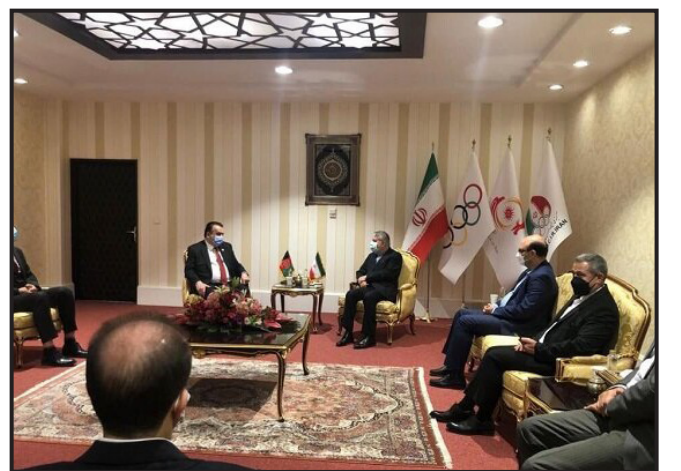
Iran voices readiness for sports cooperation with Afghanistan

President of Iran National Olympic Committee Seyed Reza Salehi Amiri voiced Iran's readiness for sports cooperation with Afghanistan.

"We are interested in having a joint sports cooperation with the friendly and brotherly country of Afghanistan," said Salehi Amiri in the meeting with his Afghan counterpart Hafizullah Wali Rahimi in Tehran on Sunday.

Iran National Olympic Committee is ready for any sports cooperation with Afghanistan, he added, saying that the two countries can cooperate in active development and continuity of sports relations, the exchange of coaches and training.

"Iranian sports institutions are ready to hold a sports olympiad



with the participation of some teams in Iran, and we are even ready to hold it in Kabul, and in this regard, a committee will be formed to hold this event," he noted which was welcomed by his Afghan counterpart. Hafizullah Wali Rahimi, for

his part, said, "We are very interested in sports cooperation with Iran. Afghanistan's sport has its own problems that we want to solve part of them through cooperation with Iran. This trip is a great achievement for Afghanistan."

248 civilians...

the level of targeted assassinations and the detonation of magnetic mines in Kabul and other provinces has increased in recent months.

However, security agencies have repeatedly reported the arrest of individuals accused of involvement in assassinations and bombings.

The Taliban, meanwhile, has denied the allegations, saying security forces were the main culprit. Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the group, said more than 200 civilians had been killed and wounded in attacks by security forces over the past month.

Human rights organizations have called on the warring parties to cease fire and uphold international humanitarian law in the conflict.

US faces ...

in a 2013 military coup that overthrew President Mohamed Morsi. El-Sisi was most recently re-elected in 2018, running virtually unopposed after his main challenger was arrested and several candidates dropped out citing intimidation.

Seth Binder, the advocacy officer at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), said the Biden administration's expression of gratitude "misread" the situation and sent the wrong message to Cairo.

"The Egyptians are doing this out of their own interest," he told Al Jazeera. "We don't need to bend over backwards to try to congratulate them on doing what's in their interests.

"We can still work with them on brokering a ceasefire, and at the same time pressure them and continue to centre human rights in the relationship."

By: Waleed Mir

Afghanistan's Wildcard Warlords

U.S. President Joe Biden's announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by September means the country has to brace for its future earlier than anticipated. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) are restructuring, while concerns are being raised about the future of Afghan women and how the country will maintain its economy and infrastructure without direct oversight. Even the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay see a ray of hope for their release. And yet, Afghanistan's warlords are in many ways preparing for bloodshed and the return to the kind of inter-faction competition that occurred between 1992 and 1996 after the Soviet withdrawal from the country.

It is hard to predict whether a peace settlement will be reached or a protracted conflict will play out, but in the case of mass violence, Afghanistan's near-term scenarios are limited. The international community is aware of the fragility of the Afghan state and the time needed to rebuild it, thus shifting its immediate focus to the ANDSF, which has fought alongside NATO over the past two decades and will be the country's first line of defense after the U.S. leaves.

Last October, the ANDSF numbered 305,021 personnel, its highest in recent years. But even after receiving a total of 1,383 Humvees, 55 Mobile Strike Force vehicles, 10 Black Hawk helicopters, and four fixed-wing A-29 light-attack planes from Washington, it is still operationally weak. Many have pointed to a lack of coordination and overall inability to use resources efficiently. The latest quarterly report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) shows a normal rate of attrition at 2 percent, but that too is expected to increase due to a drop in morale.

If the security situation deteriorates, many of the country's former warlords may rush to protect their communities in an echo of the civil war era. Distrust in Kabul's ability to protect the population is widespread, and all the more so for Afghan minorities. Recently, Abdul Ghani Alipoor, a Hazara militia commander, took up arms in the central provinces after his community was said to have been repeatedly attacked by Kuchis, a nomad community, and the Taliban. However, in an odd yet familiar twist, he faced heat from President Ashraf Ghani in March, when militias under his command in Behsud, Maidan



Wardak, took down an Afghan helicopter.

Such incidents are neither rare, nor do they invite confidence about the allegiances of these strongmen. Both Ismail Khan and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, veterans of the resistance against Soviet Union, the civil war, and the post-9/11 fight against the Taliban, recently held rallies in which hundreds of armed men marched through Badakhshan on April 18 and Herat on April 13. Hekmatyar's party touted that his forces secured the Baharak district against the Taliban in the absence of protection from the government. Khan, too, at his rally, proclaimed that he wanted "real peace," urging the Taliban to come to a peace settlement, but also said that if there wasn't one, he would defend his people's "honor and dignity." Khan described the government as "incompetent" and then warned against any "reaction(s)" against his "mujahideen." A mujahid in Islamic theology is someone who performs jihad, in this case, referring to the lesser but violent form of jihad. The symbolism also invokes memories of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets in the 1980s, who were deemed imperialistic and atheistic. Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \$5 a month.

Framing a future resistance against the government or the Taliban as such is an ominous sign. It projects Ghani's government as not only corrupt

and incompetent, but also un-Islamic, further undermining its already weak legitimacy. This is important because the same calls to jihad, and allegations that the government is corrupt and a puppet of the West, are precisely what the Taliban claim as well.

But will an antagonistic approach work?

This will be determined by how Kabul engages the warlords. Ghani has previously mainstreamed warlords and currently has some of them allied with him and the government. Moving forward, he can also prevent a possible ethnicization of the ANDSF if the warlords fight alongside the army and are given positions in the government. However, while this approach might be effective against the Taliban, it can also add opportunities for such strongmen to fill their coffers. Kabul will also have to turn a blind eye to their history of human rights abuses. More pressingly, Ghani will certainly not forget the rampant side-switching carried out by the same outfits – all of which sided with the Taliban at least once – during the civil war.

Whatever happens, the history of warlordism within and outside of Afghanistan tells us that they are inherently volatile actors. Nonetheless, they will be playing a crucial role in the future if the government in Kabul has no better options.

By: Eileen Walsh

Will the Taliban reverse the right to education for Afghan women?

Foreign ministers and envoys from across the globe continue peace talks in Doha to establish a ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Concurrently, the Biden administration's withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan remains on track to finish by September 11, if not sooner. That means time is running out to influence a post-US withdrawal Afghanistan, especially with regard to the role of women. During their 1996-2001 rule, the Taliban prohibited most girls' education and limited women's movement. Those who did not comply faced beatings or execution. Former President George W. Bush's recent comments cut to the chase: "These girls are going to have real trouble with the Taliban... When they had the run of the place, they were brutal," he said.

The Taliban have promised to ensure the right of girls to

education, but the devil is in the details: Their statement qualified those rights would be "provided under Islamic law" but their interpretation of such law is draconian, even by Islamist standards. A recent Director of National Intelligence report stated that the Taliban is likely to maintain "its restrictive approach to women's rights, and would roll back much of the past two decades' progress" if the group retakes the country.

In 2017, Human Rights Watch reported that the Taliban's 2001 removal from power allowed millions of Afghan girls "who would not have received any education under the Taliban... [to] have had some schooling." Afghan women today work in medicine, media, the military, and as teachers, entrepreneurs and parliamentarians. As significant is the transformation of everyday

Afghans' views on education: an increase in urbanization and connection to the West has led many to view education not only as beneficial to society, but also in alignment with Islam. Indeed, 87 percent of Afghans now believe women should have the same educational opportunities as men.

Fear of a return to the pre-2001 years is legitimate. Since the American withdrawal began, the Taliban has seized more territory and increased attacks. In areas already under Taliban control, girls have been forbidden to attend school for years, and risk everything to continue learning. As recent as May 8, 2021, terrorists bombed a girl's school in Kabul, killing at least 90 and wounding over 140. While the Taliban did not take responsibility for the attack, the event underscores how extremist groups target girls' education.

On April 27, 2021, ...

P3

Afghanistan's economy is not what is being officially projected: Study

The real economy of Afghanistan is markedly different from the one that is officially reported, according to a fresh USAID research. In 2019, the Afghan government reported imported goods valued at \$6.8 billion and exported goods worth \$863 million, of which the exports were 45 percent fresh or dried fruit, 21 percent medicinal herbs, and 10 percent minerals.

In reality, however, trade at the borders is more than twice the amount of freight reported by volume and possibly an even greater multiple of the reported value. For example, our estimates of talc exports at their peak in 2018—prior to the curtailment of production in 2020—are more than twice the amount reported in trade statistics, and almost five times the reported value.

High-resolution satellite imagery also reveals a coal industry with significant undeclared exports, as well as substantial amounts of chromites crossing into Pakistan without any of the trade recorded in official statistics.

The same vast discrepancies can be seen with reported imports. Our calculations, show fuel imports from Iran of 2.5 million metric tons, compared to the 1 million metric tons reported in Afghanistan's official trade statistics.

It is more difficult to calculate aggregate amounts or values of particular goods, but our analysis of the trade in transit goods—items that are transported duty-free through Afghanistan's neighbours on the agreement that they are consumed within Afghanistan—suggests a quantity and value of goods that far exceeds declared imports.

This research also points to a vibrant trade in a variety of commodities sourced from all over Asia and the Gulf, transported across Afghanistan by a network of traders and transporters, before being smuggled into Pakistan or other neighbouring countries by handcart, pack animal and truck.

This trade employs tens of thousands of people and generates hundreds of millions, possibly billions of dollars, but the income, profits and its contribution to the economy goes unreported. The implications of the level of underreporting at Afghanistan's borders are manifest.

For one, it points to an Afghan economy that is much less agricultural than official statistics suggest. For example, trade reports claim that minerals constitute only 10 per cent of the total value of Afghanistan's exports.

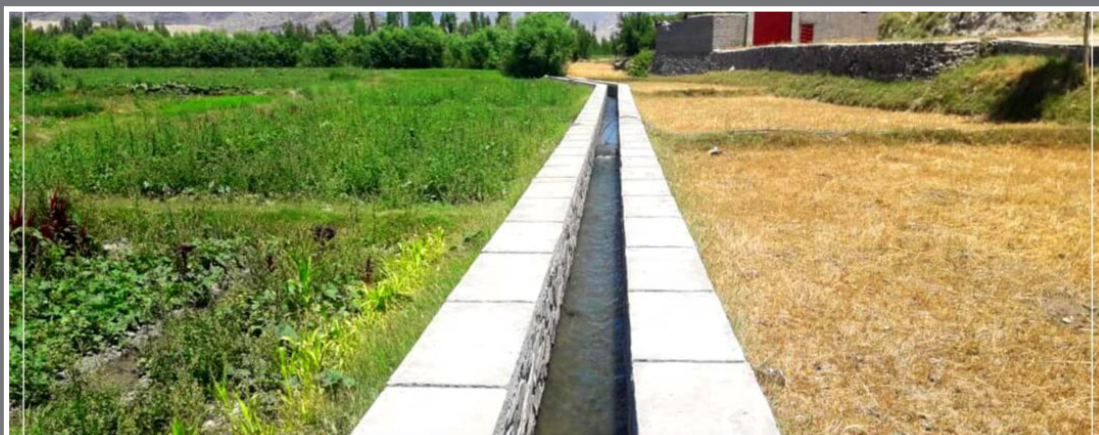
However, this is based on a ...

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14 developmental projects completed in Afghanistan's Laghman

Fourteen developmental projects have been completed and put into use in Afghanistan's Laghman province, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development said in a statement.

"The projects have recently been completed by the Citizens' Charter National Priority Program within Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development in different parts of Qarghayi district of Laghman," Xinhua news agency quoted the statement released on Saturday as saying. The projects included the building of 540 meters of water canal; building and reconstruction of 912 metres of supporting walls along a river; digging 11 deep water wells for providing potable



water to villagers; as well as the reconstruction of 105 metre of a district road, the Ministry said. But province has witnessed heavy clashes between security forces and Taliban militants in recent weeks.

In its latest attempt to gain ground, the Taliban militants overran Dawlat Shah district in Laghman. In a statement last week, the provincial government claimed that more than 50 militants were killed

and some 60 others injured during clean-up operations. Taliban militants have intensified activities since the start of the US-led forces withdrawal from Afghanistan on May 1.

Will the Taliban...

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that "an Afghanistan that does not respect [women's] rights, that does not sustain the gains we've made, will be a pariah." Policy substance, however, does not match the opprobrium. Anchoring women's future to the Taliban's sense of shame is insufficient. Rather, diplomats convening to discuss Afghanistan's future in Doha, Istanbul, and perhaps other cities should tie girls' access to education not only to US and UN assistance to Afghanistan, but also to Pakistan, the Taliban's chief sponsor. They should demand the Taliban detail the status of such opportunities under their interpretation of Islamic law now. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad should necessitate that his Taliban counterparts clarify the issue given both how he has insisted the movement has changed and because the group has had two decades to develop its interpretations. Congress might now require that the White House submit semi-annual reports about the status of women in Afghanistan and their access to education.

The Taliban may not care what the world thinks of them but, on one issue, Blinken is right. Fifty percent of the Afghan population was born after the Taliban's 2001 fall from power. The Taliban may seek to repress Afghanistan with an iron fist, but even if the group has changed little since the pre-2001 period, the society they seek to dominate has changed greatly. Reasserting control over Kabul or Herat and crushing the aspirations of the youth and women will be met with far more civil resistance now than before. The question for Blinken is whether the US has any plan to forestall the worst-case scenario beyond reprimanding the Taliban from Washington. If the answer is no, then the legacy of the Biden administration regarding Afghanistan may be anything but success.

Doha talks...

the Doha talks, a meeting led by the United Nations, Turkey and Qatar was scheduled to take place in Istanbul, attended by representatives of the Afghan government, the Taliban and regional countries, as well as world powers, however, it still stands postponed.

Afghanistan's...

systematic underreporting of the amounts of coal and talc stone traded, which underplay the sector's importance to the overall economy, even more so when coal and talc stone make up 99 percent of Afghanistan's official mineral exports- almost all of it going to Pakistan. In fact, once the potential level of underreporting of coal and talc stone is factored in, minerals make up perhaps 23 percent of the value of Afghanistan's exports. This figure is likely to rise further were accurate assessments of other minerals, precious stones and metals, such as gold, chromites and lapis, included lazuli. Similarly, the amount of employment, income and rents generated by these non-agricultural activities, most notably the extraction, production, and processing of minerals, and Afghanistan's position as a major USAID.

GOV MANAGING LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONFLICT 4 conduits for trade, questions the assumption of Afghanistan's agricultural character. At its peak in 2018, the talc stone industry in Shirzad created an estimated 681,000 labour days of employment, and up to \$3.3 million in local wages, much of it to a rural population, who are most likely recorded as "farmers" in official statistics. In contrast to projected estimates in which minerals and transit trade are critical to longterm growth, this research shows that minerals and trade

make up a significant share of the existing economy, and are major sources of revenue for officials, insurgents and local powerbrokers.

The second implication of underreporting of goods at and within Afghanistan's borders is the loss of substantial revenue to the Afghan government. Our assessment of fuel imports from Iran indicates a shortfall of up to \$100 million per annum in duties and taxes due from the amount of fuel that enters Afghanistan undeclared.

The annual losses to the government on talc stone production were in the order of \$6.6 million before new contractual arrangements were put in place and local traders ceased operation. While, the multiplicity of goods entering Afghanistan from a wide range of countries, makes it impossible to offer an accurate assessment of the government losses on undeclared transit goods, it would not be unreasonable to estimate that it would be in the hundreds of millions of dollars given that these goods are typically more valuable than fuel, and the number of container trucks entering the country vastly exceeds the number of fuel tankers. Ultimately, the scale of the losses across all three value chains have significant implications for the financial sustainability of the Afghan state. This does not even begin to include similar losses in other value chains. This research shows that

where the administration in Kabul loses financially, corrupt officials and the Taliban gain. The latter two have a deep knowledge of the amount of goods that enter and exit Afghanistan due to their presence on the ground. Control over chokepoints provide a comparative advantage to the Taliban and corrupt officials, whether at the points of production in the case of talc stone, at strategic locations in transit such as checkpoints at critical junctures on the main highway for fuel and transit goods, at official and unofficial border crossings, or at the point of sale.

What Kabul doesn't see Kabul doesn't receive. The main highways serve as the primary artery on which the Taliban and corrupt officials predate (see Figure 1). The amount of money involved is startling. For example, the Taliban can earn up to \$83.4 million per annum from their tax on the movement of fuel and transit goods entering from Iran alone, siphoning off a further \$26.7 million at Muqur in Ghazni on transit goods joining the main highway from Spin Boldak. The strategic positioning of their checkpoints in the southwest mean that there are few vehicles that evade payment and with the amount of traffic plying these roads, it is likely that the tax on fuel and transit goods is one of the Taliban's primary source of finance, significantly larger than the \$40 million at which opiates are valued.

Israel: End...

Hamas in Gaza, Bennett said during the hostilities he was abandoning efforts to form a coalition with the centre and left. But a ceasefire is holding, a recent wave of street violence in Israel between Palestinian citizens and Jews has ebbed, and a Lapid-Bennett partnership could be back on course.

Israeli political commentators, however, are taking nothing for granted. "The anti-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu government of change is still not an accomplished fact," political columnist Yossi Verter wrote in the left-wing Haaretz newspaper on Sunday. "It's premature to pop open the

champagne, and also too early to wear sackcloth," he said, questioning whether Yamina's lawmakers could withstand pressure from the right against a deal with Lapid. If Lapid, 57, fails to announce a government by Wednesday, a fifth Israeli election since April 2019 - a prospect Bennett has said he wants to avoid - is likely.

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Russia reports over 9,600 daily COVID-19 cases, a new high since March 19

Russia confirmed 9,694 COVID-19 cases over the past day, a new high since March 19, the anti-coronavirus crisis center told reporters on Sunday. In relative terms, the growth rate reached 0.19%.

Since the start of the pandemic, a total of 5,063,442 people have been infected, according to the crisis center.

The lowest growth rates were registered in the Jewish Autonomous Region (0.02%), the Tuva Republic (0.03%) and the Republic of Adygea (0.05%). Moscow confirmed 3,719 COVID-19 cases over the past day. Some 829 COVID-19 cases were recorded in St. Petersburg, 748 in the Moscow Region, 179 in the Rostov Region, 145 in the Voronezh Region and 143 in the Nizhny Novgorod Region. Currently, 264,410 people are undergoing treatment in Russia.

Some 7,386 COVID-19 patients recovered in Russia over the past day, bringing the total

number of recoveries to 4,677,870. The share of recovered patients remained at 92.4% of all those infected, according to the crisis center. Over the past day, some 602 patients were discharged in the Moscow Region, 498 in St. Petersburg, 232 in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), 195 in the Saratov Region and 152 in the Rostov Region.

Russia confirmed 355 COVID-19 deaths over the past day versus 401 a day earlier and the total death toll hit 121,162. The average mortality rate remained at 2.39%, according to the crisis center. Some 59 COVID-19 deaths were registered over the past day in Moscow, 39 in St. Petersburg, 15 in the Voronezh Region, the Nizhny Novgorod and Samara Regions, and 12 in the Krasnodar Region. Moscow's COVID-19 cases surged by 3,719 over the past day, a record high since May 14, while the total caseload has reached 1,177,356 since the start of the pandemic, the anti-coronavirus crisis center announced on Sunday.



In relative terms, Moscow's coronavirus cases grew 0.32%. A day earlier, some 3,241 cases were registered. In the last 24 hours, the Russian capital recorded 59 COVID-19 deaths, bringing the total death toll to 20,060.

As many as 2,547 people were discharged from hospitals over the past day. Since the start of the pandemic, some 1,060,588 COVID-19 patients have recovered. Currently, 96,708 people are receiving treatment in the capital.

A look at the world

Israel: End of the Benjamin Netanyahu era may be near

Israel was gripped by political drama on Sunday over the possible imminent end of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's record run as country's leader.

After four inconclusive parliamentary elections in two years, a 28-day mandate for opposition leader Yair Lapid to form a new government runs out on Wednesday, and media reports said he was close to putting together a coalition that would end Netanyahu's 12-year stretch as prime minister. Lapid's chances of success rest largely with far-right politician Naftali Bennett, a kingmaker whose Yamina party has six key seats in parliament.

Bennett, 49, was widely expected to announce, possibly as early as Sunday, whether he would



team up with Lapid, who leads Yesh Atid party. But first, Bennett would have to rally his own party's legislators behind joining what Netanyahu's opponents have described as a government of "change" comprising factions from left, centre and right.

Still short of a parliamentary majority after a March 23 election that ended in impasse, such a diverse grouping could be fragile, and would require outside backing by Arab members of parliament (Palestinian citizens of Israel) whose political views differ sharply from Yamina's.

Bennett has maintained public silence in recent days, with Likud party chief Netanyahu fuelling speculation his own tenure was about to end in a tweet and video on Friday. "Real Alert," he wrote, warning a dangerous "left-wing" administration was in cards.

Yamina announced late on Saturday that Bennett would meet and update its legislators on Sunday, after reports emerged he had agreed to a deal in which he would serve first as prime minister before handing over to the centrist Lapid.

A former defence minister, Bennett has reversed course before over removing Netanyahu, 71, a right-wing leader in power consecutively since 2009, and now on trial on corruption charges that he denies.

With an agreement with Lapid widely reported to have been finalised just before fighting erupted on May 10 between Israel and ... **P3**

Armenian acting PM accuses Azerbaijan of seeking to influence election results in Armenia



Nikol Pashinyan thinks that Baku doesn't want his party win the parliamentary polls. Azerbaijan is seeking to provoke tensions on the border in a bid to influence the outcome of the early parliamentary elections in Armenia, Armenian acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on Sunday.

"Azerbaijan's latest provocations [on the border] are obviously meant to influence electoral processes in Armenia," he said.

"Taking these provocative steps, Azerbaijan wants to see a certain election outcome," he said, adding that Baku doesn't want his party win the parliamentary polls.

Amid the political crisis that broke out in Armenia in November 2020, the government and parliamentary parties agreed to organize early parliamentary elections on June 20.

Armenia's defense ministry said on May 12 that Azerbaijani armed forces had tried to carry out "certain works" in a border area in Syunik Province in a bid to "adjust the border. Pashinyan described the situation as an infringement of Armenia's territory. He said Azerbaijani troops had crossed Armenia's state border and moved 3.5 kilometers deep into its territory. The sides have had several rounds of talks to settle the situation. **P2**

US faces 'difficult questions' on Egypt ties after Gaza ceasefire

Advocates question Joe Biden's promise to take a rights-based approach to foreign policy amid Egypt-led mediation.

US President Joe Biden is facing renewed scrutiny over the United States' relationship with Egypt - and his promise to stand up to rights abuses committed by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government - in the wake of 11 days of deadly violence in the Gaza Strip. Washington this month relied heavily on Egyptian mediators, who shuttled between Tel Aviv and Gaza to reach and maintain a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian faction Hamas, which governs the besieged Palestinian territory.

In so doing, the Biden administration has been



confronted with lingering questions over its promise to take a "human rights centred" approach to Egypt, which has long served as an interlocutor in the Israel-Palestine conflict as one of the few countries that engage with both Israel and Hamas.

The US president had previously said there would be "no more blank checks" for el-Sisi whom his predecessor Donald Trump reportedly called his "favorite dictator", but some rights advocates say Biden has already fallen short of that commitment.

"Once again, we see that nothing has changed," said Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), a Washington, DC-based think-tank. "He said no more about human rights than [former Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo and the Trump administration before him."

In two calls between Biden and el-Sisi this month - the first since Biden took office in January - the US president "thanked Egypt for its successful diplomacy", according to a readout from the White House. "President Biden underscored the importance of a constructive dialogue on human rights in Egypt," the statement added.

On Wednesday's visit to Cairo, Blinken also affirmed the US's "strategic partnership" with Egypt.

He told reporters he had a "lengthy discussion and exchange on human rights" with the Egyptian leader, who came to power ... **P2**



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