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Indian FM Jaishankar Discusses Afghan Situation with Qatari Special Envoy

Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar on Saturday held talks with Qatar's special envoy on Afghanistan, Mutlaq bin Majed Al-Qahtani, amid an upward spiral of violence in Afghanistan. "Pleased to receive Qatar Special Envoy Mutlaq bin Majed Al-Qahtani. Shared the Indian perspective on recent developments in Afghanistan. Also, the concerns of the region that I heard during recent interactions," Jaishankar said in a Twitter post on Saturday. "Rapid deterioration of the security situation is a serious matter. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan requires that the rights and interests of all sections of society are... **P2**



30 Al-Qaeda Fighters Killed in Airstrike in Helmand

Army forces in the southwest of the country say 30 Al-Qaeda fighters have been killed in an airstrike in the Marjah district of Helmand province. The 215th Maiwand Corps said in a press release that the airstrike was launched on Friday evening on a "terrorist" gathering in the Sistani area of Marjah district. According to the statement, the killed members of the al-Qaeda network were Pakistani citizens and members of the al-Qaeda network for the Indian subcontinent. The statement also said that two al-Qaeda-linked "Land Cruiser" vehicles were destroyed in the airstrikes. Also, local officials in Balkh province say the Taliban have fired several rockets at the headquarter of the 209th Shaheen Corps in Balkh province. Sayed Mustafa Sadat, Dehdadi district governor of Balkh province, told Hashte Subh daily that the Taliban fired 11 mortar shells near the 209th Shaheen Corps on Saturday morning. The mortars hit the village of Posht Bagh, the center of Dehdadi district, an area for... **P3**

UK, US Ask their Citizens to Leave Afghanistan



The U.S. Embassy urged all US citizens to leave Afghanistan immediately using available commercial flight options. Given the security conditions and reduced staffing, the Embassy's ability to assist U.S. citizens in Afghanistan is extremely limited even within Kabul, a statement read. The U.S. Embassy can provide a

repatriation loan for U.S. citizens who cannot afford at this time to purchase a commercial ticket to the United States, the statement added. The Travel Advisory for Afghanistan remains Level 4-Do Not Travel due to crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping, armed conflict, and COVID-19. Domestic flights and ground transportation

routes outside of Kabul are severely limited and subject to cancellation or closure. Also, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) advised against all travel to Afghanistan. It said that all British nationals in Afghanistan are advised to leave now by commercial means. "The level of consular assistance the British Embassy can

provide in Afghanistan is extremely limited, including in a crisis. Staff from the British Embassy will not be able to travel outside of Kabul due to the security situation. Travel by road throughout the country, but particularly outside the capital Kabul, is extremely dangerous," the statement said. On the other hand, the Taliban has allegedly removed Nishan Sahib, a Sikh religious flag, from a gurdwara in the Paktia province in eastern Afghanistan. Nishan Sahib was taken off from the roof of Gurdwara Thala Sahib in the Chamkani area of the Paktia province, according to images being tweeted on social media. However, Hindustan Times, an Indian daily, has not been able to independently verify whether Nishan Sahib was removed from the historical gurdwara, which was once visited by the founder Sikh religion Guru Nanak. Also, Afghanistan's ambassador to China told Reuters, that the Taliban cannot be trusted to keep their promise to China not to harbour Islamist militants seeking separatism in its Xinjiang region. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, and a surge in fighting as... **P2**

Chinese Envoy Calls for Efforts to Carry Forward Afghan Peace Process

A Chinese envoy on Friday called on the international community to carry forward the Afghan peace process by preventing all-out war, advancing peace and reconciliation, and fighting terrorism. Afghanistan is at a historic juncture of war and peace. With the hasty withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, Afghanistan has seen increased violence, rising civilian casualties and a deteriorating security situation, said Dai Bing, charge d'affaires of China's permanent mission to the United Nations. Two decades of war in Afghanistan has once again demonstrated that... **P3**



Taliban Captures 2nd Provincial Capital in Two Days

The strategic city of Sheberghan, the capital of Jawzjan province in northern Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban after one week of clashes, sources confirmed. Sources said that security forces are stationed only at the provincial airport in Khwaja Dako district, which is the hometown of former vice president Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum and is located 17 kilometers from the city of Sheberghan. Sheberghan is the second provincial capital to fall to the Taliban in the last two days. Jawzjan lawmakers blamed the government for inattention to the security situation in Jawzjan and said it has remained indifferent to this matter. On Saturday morning, an aide to Dostum, Sayed Shamsuddin Sadat, said that at least 150 members of the public uprising forces loyal to



Junbish and led by Commander Ali Sarwar have newly arrived in Sheberghan to help other forces on the ground. Dostum's son Yar Mohammad Dostum is leading the public uprising forces in their fight against the Taliban in Jawzjan. Sadat said that some special

forces members have also arrived in Sheberghan. With the fall of Sheberghan, 15 media outlets, including TV stations and radio networks, have stopped operation in the province. The Defense Ministry said that Afghan forces operations to suppress... **P3**

UK, US Ask...

Taliban insurgents gain territory, raise concerns for China, which worries that more instability in the region will disrupt its Belt and Road plan for infrastructure and energy links to the west and embolden separatists to destabilize its far western Xinjiang region. While the meetings are likely to focus on the reconciliation process in Doha, where the Intra-Afghan dialogue has hit an impasse, New Delhi is also expected to point out that despite being regional powers, neither India nor Iran had been included yet in the meetings of the "Troika Plus" grouping of U.S.-Russia-China and Pakistan, due to be held in Doha on August 11. Both India and Iran have stressed on the "legitimacy" of the democratically-elected Ghani government in Afghanistan.

Indian FM...

promoted and protected," the minister said in a second post. The Taliban have established an office in the Qatari capital Doha that they have used for discussions with the US. The agreement between the US and the Taliban on a pullout of US troops was signed last year in Doha. Al-Qahtani who arrived in New Delhi on Friday met senior officials in the Indian foreign ministry including JP Singh, joint secretary in charge of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. India had also organized a discussion on Afghanistan at the UN Security Council on Friday in its capacity as the president of the Council for the month of August. The developments came amid reports that the Taliban had captured two provincial capitals – Zaranj in Nimroz province and Sheberghan, the provincial headquarters of Jawzjan – after sweeping through the rural areas of the country in a series of offensives since May. On Friday, Zaranj city in Nimroz fell to the Taliban "without a fight", according to its deputy governor, becoming the first provincial capital to be taken by the insurgents. There was more resistance in Sheberghan, several unnamed sources told AFP, but an aide to Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum confirmed to the news agency that the city had been taken. Clashes were continuing, according to media reports in Lashkargah, capital of Helmand province. The Taliban offensives have intensified after the US troop withdrawal on 1 July and come despite international warnings that a capture of power by force in Kabul would not mean international recognition or legitimacy for the group.

By: Ben Reynolds

China Eyes Afghanistan at a Pivotal Moment

With the United States and NATO poised to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan by September 11th, 2021, Afghanistan is reaching a pivotal moment. Regional observers are anxious to see whether the resurgent Taliban will finally take over the country, whether a renewed civil war will take hold, or if a far less likely peace can be won. While China has long had a much more limited role in the Afghan war, its rising stature in Central Asia means that it is more likely to play an important part in determining the future of Afghanistan. Here, China has numerous interests at stake: the fear of cross-border terrorism and support for Uighur resistance, the economic extraction of Afghanistan's natural resources, the country's central position amidst the broader Belt and Road network, and protecting the interests and stability of its regional allies like Pakistan. Balancing these interests will be difficult, and China is likely to adopt a pragmatic approach that acknowledges the Taliban's military ascendancy. The U.S. aims to withdraw most of its troops from Afghanistan twenty years to the day after the September 11th attacks, a grim end to a "forever war" that cost the U.S. over \$1 trillion, 2,300 dead, 20,660 wounded, and killed well over 100,000 Afghans. Judging by its declared objectives, the U.S. has lost the War in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is still reportedly embedded with the Afghan Taliban, the Taliban itself appears poised to retake much of the country, and a local ISIS affiliate has been added to the fray. Osama bin Laden escaped the country early in the war, only to be killed in neighboring Pakistan—an ostensible U.S. ally—many years later. Altogether, the war in Afghanistan joins a long list of U.S. imperial adventures, including Vietnam and Iraq, that succeeded mainly in killing thousands of the country's sons and daughters while enriching a few defense contractors. Militarily, the situation in Afghanistan points to a major victory for the Taliban upon the U.S. withdrawal. The Afghan National Army has seldom been able to stand on its own two feet, and the Afghan Republic's government

has struggled to establish basic legitimacy and overcome corruption in most areas. Meanwhile, Taliban offensives have grown increasingly sophisticated and bold. In a number of recent attacks, Afghan Army forces have abandoned their posts without a fight—a classic sign of an army suffering from severe morale problems. The Taliban presently controls over half of the country, with government control increasingly restricted to the major cities. The military reality here is familiar: forces that control the vast countryside can support and reinforce one another; forces trapped within isolated cities cannot. As such, analyses of the Afghan government's chances have grown dimmer in recent months, with one new assessment suggesting that it could collapse a mere six months after the U.S. withdrawal. Other analysts believe that a prolonged civil war could reemerge, particularly if other regional powers like India and Pakistan treat the country as a proxy battlefield and back competing factions within the Taliban, the government, and various local warlords. For much of the war, China has been happy to watch from the sidelines as the U.S. has been bogged down in Afghanistan. However, the past two decades have seen a massive expansion of Chinese influence and economic interests in Central Asia. Afghanistan is a lynchpin of any power's attempts to control the region—hence the twenty-year U.S. occupation. The country occupies a central geographic position and has potential for resource extraction, if it were not a major source of regional instability. China's Xinjiang province shares a border with Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, a remote region perfect for cross-border smuggling. China is thus likely to take a more active role in Afghanistan's future, at the very least in pursuit of its own "war on terror." China's most basic interest in Afghanistan will be a desire to limit the flow of fighters and material support to the separatist movement in Xinjiang. Afghanistan's extremely rugged geography and the presence of many competing Islamist groups will make this a challenge. Even in



the event of a total victory, it is unlikely that the Taliban will be able to exert real control over the entire country, not to mention the likelihood of struggles between competing Taliban factions like the Yaqoob and Haqqani networks. If China wants to make a pragmatic bargain with the Taliban—say, "we provide economic aid if you help us isolate the separatists"—with whom should it negotiate? The Yaqoob network is seen as more moderate and accommodating, while the Haqqanis are also closely tied to the intelligence services of Pakistan, China's close ally. What's more, can either network realistically promise to deliver what China seeks? The diplomatic complexities here are immense. These details also make it more difficult to read Chinese intentions from the outside. For instance, China pushed Pakistan to release Taliban deputy leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, a "moderate" who has received overtures from India. Does this mean that China will place its bets with the Yaqoob network, or that it is simply hedging an intra-Taliban struggle? It is difficult to say. Perhaps a reader could email the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Guoanbu for clarification. China also has to consider the regional strategic context and its own economic strategy. Afghanistan has been the site of a couple of stalled Chinese resource extraction projects, none of which is likely to make progress in the event of a civil war. The same can be said for any hypothetical infrastructure investment that could connect the

region and shore up China's energy security. Here, China's abiding interest is in an end to the fighting and a successful peace process, as seen by the repeated insistence that the U.S. slow its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Just as crucially, China must concern itself with the future of Pakistan. While Pakistan has long maintained ties with the Afghan Taliban, a total victory across the border could embolden Islamists in Pakistan itself who have already attacked China's substantial interests in the country. Balancing here will be very difficult. China has no interest in the destabilization of its closest ally in Central Asia. China's numerous concerns in Afghanistan point to a strategy of pragmatic accommodation with the Taliban, with broader goals including the cessation of fighting in the country and its integration into regional economic and diplomatic networks. China has little ability to do this alone—the broader fate of Afghanistan depends on regional powers like India and Pakistan deciding to support peace over a proxy war. Here, China may have to accept the limits of its own power. Having benefited from the U.S. example, China is unlikely to attempt its own military intervention in the graveyard of empires. The months that follow the U.S. withdrawal will offer key clues as to the future of China's role in Afghanistan. A new chapter in the country's history is emerging, one which will be written in Central Asia. *The views expressed in the opinion pieces are not endorsed or necessarily shared by Heart of Asia daily.*

By: James Denselow

Biden the War Finisher

Weeks after President Biden accelerated the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, this month President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi announced their agreement to end the United States military's combat mission in Iraq by the end of the year. After more than 18 years, the role of US forces will shift to training and advising the Iraqi military to defend itself. "Our role in Iraq will be to be available, to continue to train, to assist, to help and to deal with ISIS as it arises, but we're not going to be, by the end of the year, in a combat mission" Biden told reporters as he and Kadhimi met. Mr Kadhimi responded: "Today our relationship is stronger than ever. Our cooperation is for the economy, the environment, health, education, culture and more." He has insisted

no foreign combat troops are needed in Iraq. A strategic pattern is emerging around Biden's foreign policy and the desire to seemingly tie up loose ends and long-term military adventures. Much of the Iraq shift is symbolic. There are currently only 2,500 US troops in Iraq down from a peak of 168,000 in 2007. Yet let us not forget that the US has ended combat operations in Iraq before, back in 2011 before the rise and rise of ISIS forced them to take a far more assertive stance in the country. In Afghanistan the Taliban's offensive and spiralling rates of violence gives a narrative of the US ending a forever war under fire, whereas in Iraq the US is ending combat operations but keeping a larger presence of troops for future eventualities. By having a high profile 'end' to the US missions

in Afghanistan and now Iraq allows the Biden administration several political wins. Firstly, he is the President who didn't 'surge' or sustain unpopular wars but moved quickly in his first term to end them. This gives him the license to use the military more assertively elsewhere, for example around the Asia pivot that President Obama pursued. There is no longer a strategic anchor or competitor for priority and focus in Washington. Secondly although the US will still have its largest global embassy in Baghdad, its presence in Iraq will surely cease to attract the hostile actions they have around other components of geopolitics. Rockets, mortars and large-scale protests have been fuelled by the infringements of sovereignty felt by Iraqis to a foreign army conducting combat missions

in their country, soon to me no more. These incidents often cost very little to organise but steadily haemorrhage the US public image as actors in the country. What is more as the Biden administration has taken a less belligerent policy approach to Iran, the idea that Iraq would become a violent arena for Washington-Tehran tensions is less of a reality than it was. Again, President Biden has proved able to both reposition US interests and clear the way for greater focus on more urgent priorities than sustaining wars started decades ago. One outstanding question will be whether this announcement gives more space for ISIS or ISIS-like groups to gain in ascendancy in parts of Iraq and whether the US has the license, permission and capabilities to conduct 'over the horizon' strikes against targets in the country from the start of next year. The more overt switch from

costly occupations and nation building exercises to maintaining a counter terrorism presence is by no means cost free as events in Pakistan in particular have shown in the past. Of course, the US repositioning itself in Iraq doesn't guarantee a predictable and positive near-term future for the Iraqi body politic. The Government in Baghdad has been struggling to keep a handle on Covid, ensuring that the public infrastructure is fit for purpose whilst keeping all parts of a fractured body-politic together ahead of election in October. Observers will be keeping a close eye both on levels of violence and crucially voter turnout for Parliamentary elections scheduled to be held on 10 October that will decide the 328 members of the Council of Representatives who will in turn elect the Iraqi President and Prime Minister.

Exports From Iran to Afghanistan Decline by Over 85%

Head of Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce has said exports from Iran to Afghanistan have declined more than 85 percent due to the increasing tensions in the country, the portal of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCI) reported on Friday. "With the escalation of the conflict in Afghanistan, the number of trucks carrying Iranian goods to this country has decreased from 100 trucks every day to two or three trucks per day," Hossein Salimi said. According to Salimi, Iranian exports to Afghanistan over the past two weeks have been only 15 percent of the figure for the same period in the previous year. "When turmoil or conflict arises in a country, the first area that will suffer is that country's economy and trade," he said, adding: "Unfortunately, the situation is so bad that at the moment it is not easy to predict what awaits us. We still do not have an accurate estimate of the amount of damage inflicted on Iranian traders. We have to see how long this situation will last." Underlining the probable decline in the two countries' trade in case of the ongoing conflict, Salimi said: "If this situation continues for even another month, we will not reach 50 percent of our normal export volume to Afghanistan this year." According

to the official, Iran has targeted \$2.7 billion of exports to Afghanistan in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 21), but considering the current situation realizing this goal will not be possible. Road Transport Deputy of Sistan and Baluchestan province said that 'Milak' Border Terminal was shut down due to the insecurity in Afghanistan. Teymour Bagheri said, "In cooperation and collaboration with the executive organizations based at 'Milak Border Terminal' and in order to avoid any problems for economic activists, Iranian traders and businesspersons have been urged to refrain from exporting their transit cargo to Milak Border Terminal until further notice." In this regard, exit of Iranian and transit trucks towards Afghanistan will not be possible until further notice, he reiterated. Elsewhere in his remarks, he stipulated that Iranian trucks and commercial cargoes which are returning from Afghanistan to the Islamic Republic of Iran will be able to enter the country with the previous arrangements made in this respect. While emphasizing the protection of national interests, he said, "We hope that this will not be a long-term issue and we hope that our trade with Afghanistan will not be interrupted, so that economic activists of the country would be able to continue their



activity with peace of mind." It should be noted that Milak Border Terminal is located in the vicinity of Helmand city, neighborhood of Nimruz province of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Taliban closed a key border crossing with Pakistan on Friday, saying no one would be allowed through until Islamabad dropped or relaxed its visa requirements for Afghans. The Taliban, wresting control of Afghanistan in the wake of a withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops, last month captured the southeast Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing from Afghan forces. Pakistan initially closed its side of the crossing, landlocked Afghanistan's second busiest entry point and main commercial artery to the sea, before reopening it last week. But since the Taliban took control of Chaman-Spin Boldak, Pakistani

border officials there have begun enforcing visa requirements for Afghans which previously were not as strictly observed. In a statement on Friday, the Taliban statement called on Pakistan to scrap all visa requirements for Afghans. "(The crossing) will remain closed for all types of commuting, including transit and trade, for both sides, and pedestrians, until the Pakistani side leaves the gate open, morning to evening, for Afghans holding [Pakistani issued] migration cards or [Afghan] ID cards," the insurgent group's shadow governor for Kandahar province said in the statement. Pakistani border officials at Chaman told Reuters the Taliban had placed concrete barriers to block the road on their side of the Friendship Gate, the crossing point between the two countries.

Taliban Captures...

the Taliban are underway and that the situation in the country's provincial capitals will soon return to normal. On Friday, Taliban captured Zaranj city, the capital of Nimroz province in southwestern Afghanistan. Zaranj fell to the Taliban with no resistance by government forces. This comes as President Ghani met with former vice president Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum on Saturday and discussed the country's security situation, especially the situation in northern provinces, the Presidential Palace said. In this meeting, Dostum vowed his full support to Afghan forces and said the time has come to make effort for improving the country's security situation and for defending Afghanistan's values. Dostum's spokesman Ehsanullah Nairo said that Dostum presented his plan for the improvement of the security situation to the president, and it was accepted by President Ghani. "There will be significant improvements in military affairs," he said. "A major meeting will be held in the coming days and the most important suggestion by Marshal Dostum to President Ghani was the announcement of an emergency status."

30 Al-Qaeda...

retired army officers, and around Division 18, Sadat said. He added that no casualties were reported from the rocket attacks. According to him, a number of Dehdadi residents have left their homes. At the same time, the Taliban launched attacks on the Pul-e Imam Bakri checkpoint in Dehdadi district of Balkh province, said Mustafa Sadat. Two children were injured as a result of the mortar fire. Army sources have not yet commented on the matter. Also, as per the Ministry of

Interior, ten Taliban insurgents were killed and wounded in a counterattack by security and defense forces in the capital of Sar-e-Pul province. Last night, the Taliban group carried out terrorist operations in the "Toghani" area of the capital of Sar-e-Pul province, which was met with a strong response from the security forces. Following the clashes, four terrorists, including a Taliban leader named Matiullah Omari, were killed and six other members of the group were wounded. The security and defense forces of

the country were not harmed in this incident. And, in a video conference with the provincial police chiefs, Gen. Abdul Sattar Mirzakwal, the acting Minister of Interior, listened to the report of the current security situation from the mentioned commanders and gave them the necessary instructions to suppress the terrorists and enforce the law. The acting interior minister also stressed in the video conference that counter-terrorism operations must be increased and that police forces must be armed and completed in a timely manner.

Chinese Envoy...

there is no military solution. Any external power interference in Afghanistan is doomed to fail, he told the Security Council. The international community should help avoid the expansion of fighting and prevent all-out war in Afghanistan, he said. It is the greatest aspiration of the Afghan people to see the cessation of hostilities and to enjoy peace. It is also the common expectation of regional countries and the international community. China condemns violent attacks against civilians and civilian facilities, and calls on all parties in Afghanistan to exercise restraint, stop military confrontation and reach a comprehensive cease-fire at an early date, said Dai. Foreign troops should consult fully with the Afghan government on

post-withdrawal arrangements to ensure a smooth transition in Afghanistan. They should be more transparent with regional countries and avoid leaving behind all the problems. The United States has recently expressed its intention to assist Afghanistan in maintaining stability. China hopes that the United States can earnestly fulfill its commitment and step up efforts, he said. Dai said efforts are needed to advance the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. A political solution is the only way out for Afghanistan. No government should be established in Afghanistan by force. China welcomes the recent resumption of dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, and their agreement to continue

high-level talks and to accelerate the negotiation process, he said. "We hope that negotiating parties can show flexibility, seek common ground while managing differences, and chart out a roadmap and timetable for reconciliation as soon as possible. We look forward to the rebirth of Afghanistan and the establishment of a broad and inclusive political structure in pursuit of a moderate and steady Muslim policy, with a commitment to friendly relations with all neighboring countries," said Dai. China is willing to host intra-Afghan negotiations in due course to support and facilitate the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan, he added. He also stressed the importance of preventing terrorist forces from gaining strength.

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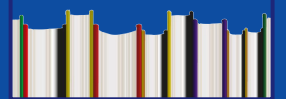
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Lebanon Asks UN to Pressure Israel to Stop Sovereignty Violations

Lebanon on Friday called on the UN to pressure Israel to stop violating its sovereignty. In a statement, caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab urged the UN to ask Israel to respect the UN Security Council Resolution 1701, and halt its violations of Lebanese sovereignty at a time when military tensions on the country's border with Israel have been escalating. Diab stressed "the need to stop the repeated Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty." The resolution, adopted in August 2006, calls for a cessation of all hostilities between Lebanon and Israel. It came after confrontation between the two sides in July the same year. Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri described the escalation as "very dangerous and an unprecedented threat to Resolution 1701."

"Using the (country's) south as a platform for regional conflicts with uncalculated results and repercussions is a step into the unknown that puts all of Lebanon in the crosshairs of the wars of others on its land," he said in reference to Iranian-Israeli tensions. On Wednesday, Israeli army spokesman Avichay Adraee said on Facebook that warplanes raided the areas from where rockets were allegedly launched from Lebanon, besides targeting some infrastructure used for "terrorist" purposes. He warned that "the raids will continue and may escalate in the face of terrorist attempts to target Israel," blaming Lebanon for what is happening inside its territory. Meanwhile, the Lebanese army announced that Israel bombed several areas in southern



Lebanon, which led to a fire in the town of Rachaya Al Foukhar. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon had called for a cease-fire and maximum restraint to avoid

further escalation on the border between Lebanon and Israel. Hezbollah, however, has now claimed responsibility of firing rockets toward northern Israel.

A look at the world

UK Condemns 10-Year Sentence for Dual National in Iran

The United Kingdom on Friday hit out at reports that a British-Iranian labour rights activist had been given a sentence of 10 years in Tehran for participating in an outlawed group. A Foreign Office spokesperson said in a statement London "strongly" condemns the sentence handed out to Mehran Raouf, a former teacher from north London. "We continue to do all we can to support Mehran and his family, and continue to raise his case at the most senior levels," they added. The response follows a Wednesday announcement on Twitter by Iranian lawyer Mostafa Nili that both



Raouf and German-Iranian woman Nahid Taghavi had been sentenced to 10 years for membership of an illegal group and eight months for anti-government propaganda. The sentencing of both Iranian dual nationals comes against a backdrop of deteriorating relations between Britain, its Western allies and Iran. On Friday, the G7 group of economically advanced nations accused Iran of orchestrating a drone strike on an Israel-linked tanker that claimed the lives of a former British soldier and a Romanian national. The United States, Britain and Israel had already pointed the finger at Iran over the attack on the MV Mercer Street off the coast of Oman. The families of dual nationals, including British-Iranian woman Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe, have accused Tehran of using their loved ones as pawns in a wider geopolitical standoff with the West. Earlier this year, Amnesty International called for Raouf's unconditional release, saying he had been arbitrarily detained in Tehran's notorious Evin prison. The human rights monitor said he was a "prisoner of conscience", who had been helping to translate English-language news articles and discussing workers' rights in Iran, where trade unions are banned.

45 Houthi Rebels Killed in Airstrikes, Clashes in Yemen's Marib



At least 45 Houthi rebels were killed in multiple airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition and in ground clashes with the Yemeni government army in Yemen's central province of Marib in the last 24 hours, two military sources said on Saturday. "In the western district of Sirwah, the airstrikes targeted a rebel makeshift operational room, killing at least 12," one of the sources in Marib told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. "In the adjacent district of Rahabah, to the south of Sirwah, the airstrikes destroyed several pick-up vehicles carrying rebel combatants on the southwestern Rahabah, killing more than 20," he added. The other military source, also in Marib, said the army repelled a fierce attack launched by the Houthi rebels from three directions on the army's positions in the mountains of Al-Bayadh and Al-Abzakh in Rahabah district. "Thirteen rebels were killed on the ground, while dozens fled," he told Xinhua. Both strategic mountains and most of Rahabah district were recaptured by the army last week. Meanwhile, the Houthi-run al-Masirah TV reported 11 Saudi-led coalition airstrikes on the Houthi positions in Sirwah and Rahabah, without providing more details. The Houthi rebels began in February a major offensive on Marib in an attempt to seize control of the oil-rich province, the government's last northern stronghold. The United Nations has warned that the offensive on Marib, which hosts nearly 1 million internally displaced people, could lead to a major humanitarian catastrophe. Yemen's civil war flared up in late 2014 when the Iran-backed Houthi group seized control of much of the country's north and forced the internationally recognized government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi out of the capital Sanaa

Chinese Language Teaching Takes Root in Uganda

Chinese language teaching in Ugandan secondary schools has taken root despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, officials said here on Saturday. Grace Baguma, director of the country's National Curriculum Development Center, said that Chinese language courses have been offered in over 30 secondary schools in Uganda after Chinese was integrated into the ordinary level curriculum. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted the school calendar and despite the limited learning materials for



teaching, teachers here have persisted in teaching the Chinese language, Baguma said, noting that more materials would be made available. Baguma made the remarks at the opening of the second online seminar for Ugandan secondary school teachers of the Chinese language. Barnabas Nawangwe, vice chancellor of Makerere University, said at the seminar that the university is ready to promote Chinese language learning for students who have advanced to the university level from secondary school. Charles Kahigiriza, head teacher of Ndejje Secondary School, one of the schools teaching the Chinese language, suggested that a China Day can be organized in the school calendar to attract more students to learn about the Chinese language and culture. Learning the Chinese language is critical, said Kahigiriza, noting that it opens up opportunities for students, for instance jobs after graduation, as well as further study opportunities in China, among others.



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