

(1) Forces' Retreat...

army's 215th Corps last week. "It was exhausting forces in desert areas where they have less influence on the security of the civilians," he said. "More importantly, when you look at the strategy the terrorist groups are adopting, they are moving, they're in small groups, they move from one place to another place." The decision to relocate forces corresponded with the views of NATO commanders, who say Afghan troops have been spread too thinly in static checkpoints, handing the initiative to the Taliban. Hundreds of U.S. troops have been deployed to Helmand since February to support local soldiers in advising roles, while U.S. warplanes have stepped up air strikes there this year.

Helmand, a mainly desert region bordering Pakistan, is of strategic and symbolic importance as a heartland of the Taliban.

More American and British troops died there than in any other province of Afghanistan since arriving after the fall of the Islamist government in late 2001.

The province also sits along major smuggling routes for drugs and weapons and is the region that accounts for the biggest share of opium cultivation, a key source of revenue to the Taliban.

The Islamist militants' gains in the province underline the danger they pose to Afghan security, now NATO has withdrawn most combat troops, leaving a smaller training and advisory mission.

The guerrilla movement is opposed to any foreign troops on Afghan soil, and wants to return to power in Kabul and reimpose its strict interpretation of Islamic law.

CONTROLLING MOVEMENT Government forces are now grouped closer to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah and nearby towns including Marjah and Gereshk, straddling the main Highway One that links the major cities of Kandahar in the south and Herat in the west.

To the north of the highway, they are also holding on in Sangin and in Kajaki, where they are protecting a vital dam and power station that supplies electricity to Kandahar.

Adding to the challenge of outwitting a nimble enemy, the Western-backed government in Kabul must overcome public distrust of the local armed forces.

"They are busy filling their own pockets rather than taking care of security," said Mohammad Akhondzada, one of hundreds of tribal elders and scholars who met in the provincial capital to express their concern about worsening security.

"The Taliban are now at the doorstep of Lashkar Gah and threatening the city."

The complex and shifting tribal politics of the province have defied central government control for decades. But the loss of the province would severely undermine the credibility of President Ashraf Ghani's government and leave the strategic city of Kandahar, birthplace of the Taliban, exposed.

Stanekzai acknowledged that the situation was "not rosy", but said that by positioning troops in strategic zones where they could block the flow of fighters in and out of the province, security forces could regain the initiative.

"We have to get the fighting out of the villages, we have to close the border, we have to reach the areas where the movement of fighters is taking place," he said.

As well as the Taliban, government forces in Helmand have been fighting foreign groups including Al Qaeda and Islamic State sympathizers, and Stanekzai said their presence underlined the need for continued international support.

But troops are weary after months of continuous fighting, their morale sapped by corruption, poor equipment and lack of supplies.

The 215th corps is undergoing re-training and refitting and dozens of senior officers, including the corps commander, have been replaced.

The corps recently retook the isolated southern district of Khanishin close to the border with Pakistan after persuading local people to abandon support for the Taliban, and Stanekzai said winning over the population would be vital.

But after months of steady reverses, patience with the administration in Kabul is wearing thin.

"People are fed up with injustice of government officials," said Hafizullah Khan, another elder at the Lashkar Gah meeting. "Therefore they're much closer to the Taliban and welcome them." (Reuters)

(2) Govt. Asked....

the selection committee could resume its work that came to a halt after the first legislative decree was rejected.

The IEC had earlier set an Oct 15 date for holding the long-delayed parliamentary and district council elections. Former IEC chairman Yousuf Nuristani had said the panel made all technical preparations to conduct the election process on October 15, 2016.

He promised mistakes of the 2014 presidential vote would not be repeated. The coming polls would be fully transparent, he had assured, claiming the panel had learnt a lot from past experience.

Senate Chariman Fazal Hadi Muslimyar, also a member of the selection committee, asked the government to promptly send the second legislative decree to the lower house. He said the selection committee was scheduled to hold its formal meeting today and details of the meeting would be shared with lawmakers tomorrow. (Pajhwok)

(3) Political Crisis...

elections in the country.

"The chairmen of the two election bodies cannot pave the way for electoral fraud even in remote parts of Nimroz, Kandahar, Badakhshan and Balkh provinces," he said.

On the selection committee, he said its formation was one of the president's authorities under the Constitution, but no one including the president could violate the laws and regulations.

"If the committee reflects on the desires and intention of the civil society and if it is free from government influence, then it is a good step for the electoral reform," he said. (Pajhwok)

(4) MoF Names...

press conference here that the government had invited bids for the New Kabul Bank to privatize it. He said after the assessment of documents of the interested companies, two firms, the Joint-Stock Company and the Muslim Commercial Bank of Pakistan could meet the conditions for purchasing the bank.

The conditions for purchasing the bank included having more than \$20 million in account, banking license, having a professional team and their proposals should be technical, he said, adding that former shareholders of the Kabul Bank were not eligible for the deal as per the conditions. The JSC showed more than \$167 million bank balance, saying if they won the bidding, the company would invest nearly \$1 billion in the bank, Kohistani said, adding the Muslim Commercial Bank also met the conditions.

The two companies could submit their technical and professional proposals to the Ministry of Finance in the next four months, he said. One of the two companies getting top marks would be declared as the winner after evaluation of their proposals, he said. (Pajhwok)

(5) Afghan Militants...

Meanwhile, Sediqi said the Afghan forces will continue to suppress the anti-government armed militants with improved capabilities, including the close-air support capability.

The Afghan Air Force has several A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircraft and MD-530 warrior helicopters from the United States which are expected to start operations soon.

Afghanistan also received 3 Mi-25 gunship helicopters from India late last year as part of India's support to bolster the capabilities of the Afghan Air Force amid deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. (KP)

(6) NATO an...

two leaders discussed the current situation in Afghanistan.

"The US and our military personnel in Afghanistan are going to continue to focus on their two missions: Counterterrorism and training Afghan security forces. NATO obviously plays an important role in supporting those missions, particularly the second one, and we have seen improved performance by the Afghan security forces on the battlefield," Earnest concluded. (Pajhwok)

(7) USAID...

and Livestock (MAIL), a statement for the agency said.

The loan funds would enable these institutions to expand their services to Nangarhar, Kunduz, and Bamiyan provinces, where their clients' production capacity would be expanded through access to Islamic finance for equipment purchases and for working capital, the statement added.

FMFB is a member of the Aga Khan Microfinance Network, which operates in 15 countries. This bank focuses on poverty alleviation and economic development through the provision of sustainable financial

services.

"The loan proceeds will be used to support FMFB's agriculture-related on-lending activities throughout the country, across the entire spectrum of the agricultural value chains," the statement said.

Afghan Rural Finance Company (ARFC) is also a non-bank financial institution and is leading provider of financial services to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that serve hundreds of Afghans in the agriculture sector.

The Agricultural Development Fund is an independently-managed government-owned institution that makes credit available to the agricultural sector. Its target clientele includes small commercial farmers as well as agribusinesses engaged in the distribution of agricultural inputs, producers of high-value crops, and processors and exporters of agricultural products.

Since 2010, with the cooperation of ADF, the ministry has extended loans worth more than 4.4 billion afghanis to 35,000 farmers and agriculturists in 33 provinces of the country, Zamir said. (Pajhwok)

(8) Use of Force ...

Taliban, said, "It means that Pakistan seriously wants Taliban to join peace talks otherwise Pakistan will be blamed for everything.

Rahimullah Yusufzai said he has no knowledge about a warning letter to Afghan Taliban by Pakistan forcing them to join the peace process, but definitely Pakistani government would put pressure on those Taliban leaders who happen to be on Pakistani side.

The experts on Afghan affairs said Taliban had put some conditions and if those conditions are not being talked about or addressed, they will not join peace talks.

They said imposition of Islamic rule in Afghanistan, release of prisoners, scraping of black lists and agreement on principle on withdrawal of the coalition forces in a stipulated time are the main demands of Taliban.

They believed that any coercive measures that are adopted to force the Taliban to sit for talks would not deliver.

Commenting on some reports regarding Daesh threat to some Pakistan border areas with Afghanistan, the analysts also added that Daesh terrorist group is getting weak in Afghanistan and is not in a position to launch any kind of attack in Parachinar area of Pakistan but if it happens it would be repulsed by the security forces very effectively. (IRNA)

(9) Army ...

rights had been shared by the Office of Administrative Affairs with the Ministry of Finance, but no action had so far been taken in this regard.

"Retired officers are suffering from poverty, injustice, discrimination and double standards of the government," he said.

Finance Ministry spokesman Ajmal Abdur Rahimzai said 40 percent retirement benefits had already been added to pensioners' rights and another 10 percent would be added this solar year. (Pajhwok)

(10) Taliban Seek ...

explained.

He also referred to a shortage of female health workers in district healthcare centres, asking the Public Health Ministry to train at least five local women as midwives in each town.

Azizi said female health workers from other areas were not interested in working in remote districts. The issue needed to be addressed on priority, the governor believed.

Public Health Director Dr. Abdul Qayyum Pukhla confirmed the Taliban's demand. "The Taliban have demanded opening of health services in Shorabak, Registan, Mianshin, Ghorak and Shah Walikot districts." Health services at the district level were limited or non-existent, admitted Pukhla, who said that the Ministry of Public Health should positively respond to the demand. He said there were a total of 97 healthcare centers with 14 of them private in Kandahar province. Fifty of the centers are open in districts and the rest of others in Kandahar city, the capital of the province, he added.

Given Kandahar's huge population, current health services were insufficient as most of residents were without essential facilities, Pukhla acknowledged.

Public Health Minister Dr. Firozuddin Firoz said his ministry remained committed to extending health services to all people without any discrimination.

He verified 60 percent of Kandahar residents did not have access to health services, but pledged all-out efforts to augment medical coverage

despite a shortage of funds.

He promised 30 sub-clinics would be built in Kandahar province and the process of constructing a 350-bed hospital accelerated this year.

Residents of rural areas, meanwhile, welcomed Taliban's suggestion. They hoped the people, who had long been deprived of medical facilities, would be able to gain access to health services.

Mohammad Hashim, a resident of Shorabak, said there was no clinic in his area, whose residents had to travel across the border for their treatments.

Many patients lost their lives to simple ailments due to lack of healthcare services in the area, he regretted, urging the authorities to use the opportunity and open clinics in far-flung districts. (Pajhwok)

(11) As War...

reopening, but he had to get permission from the Taliban or else face their retaliation. They said they would allow it, if only boys attend - no girls - and if they are only taught a curriculum meeting the Taliban's hard-line version of Islam. Taliban mines from the time of the fighting still surround the school, and government forces are stationed just 40 yards (meters) from the school - a potential target for extremist attack. Between the damage and the danger, none of the school's 650 students can attend.

That's the fate for an increasing number of children in the battlezone regions of Afghanistan. In 2015, 615 schools in the country's 11 most volatile provinces had to close because of violence, according to the Education Ministry. That was on top of the around 600 schools that remained shut down from the year before in those areas.

Almost half the 2015's school closures were in the final months of the year as the Taliban did not take their customary winter break. Violence escalated across the warmer southern provinces, which were the hardest hit by closures, ministry's spokesman Mujib Mehrdad said. Last year, 105 of Helmand's 545 schools shut down, and in neighboring Kandahar, the figure was 150 of 545 schools.

The heaviest closures were in nearby Zabul, where more half the province's schools - 140 out of 242 schools - shut their doors.

The United Nations counted 25 students, teachers and other school staff killed in Taliban attacks or crossfire in 2015. In eastern Nangarhar province, the Islamic State group seized control of several districts near the border with Pakistan and terrorized women and girls, banning them from school and work, and in some case forcing them into marriage, according to residents who fled the area.

But extremists' ideological hatred of the schools and girls' education is not the only cause of school shutdowns. Human Rights Watch, the New York-based monitoring group, says the Afghan military continues to deploy weaponry in or around schools in battleground areas and uses them as fixed firing positions, even after President Ashraf Ghani banned the use of schools as military bases last year.

That puts children at "grave risk of attack by insurgents who then see schools as military targets," HRW's Afghanistan researcher Ahmad Shuja said.

During their time ruling Afghanistan in the 1990s until their overthrow in the 2011 U.S.-led invasion, the Taliban banned girls from school and mandated that boys learn the Quran by rote. Once they fell from power, schools and universities welcomed women back as teachers and students. With funding from the international community the number of children in school grew from 900,000 in 2001 to 8.3 million in 2011, according to figures from the U.N. assistance mission to Afghanistan. UNAMA says girls account for 39 percent of the total - up from near zero under the Taliban.

But in districts where the Taliban have regained control or have enough power to intimidate residents, they have returned to barring girls from the classroom and dictating curriculum for the boys.

In Helmand, where the Taliban control smuggling routes for drugs and other contraband, heavy fighting in recent months has put a number of schools like Loy Manda on the front line of the war, said the head of the provincial education department, Abdul Matin Jafar. In Gereshk district, he said, the education department building was attacked by insurgents, "was completely destroyed and now we have no office there to operate from."

Mohammad Mosa took his children out of their school in Nad Ali soon after the fighting started, and sent

them to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, not just for their safety but to ensure a well-rounded education. The Taliban had told parents in the district that they could re-open the school on condition they hire one of the militants to ensure that only Islamic subjects were taught, he said. (AP)

(12) \$120m Ice...

factories operate around the country and that they have created more than 20,000 jobs.

He said: "The ice cream industry has created 20,000 jobs in Afghanistan and over \$120 million USD has been invested in it. It is a sector that has reached self-sufficiently level."

Some factory owners meanwhile called for government's support and accused it of not paying their sector any attention.

"We are faced with some problems in a number of provinces that are near borders. We have invested in these provinces but our offices are closed there," said a factory owner, Dil Aqa Shekib. (ToloneWS)

(13) Complex for ...

with latest teaching facilities for engineering, agriculture, technical and vocational institute students, the complex accounted for nearly 13 million euros, he added.

Education Minister Asadullah Hanif Balkhi told reporters there were 290 technical and vocational centres around the country. Some of them lacked the required facilities.

Representative of the German Federal Ministry of Economic, Stefan Oswald, said Afghanistan should pay attention to promoting technical and vocational education.

Germany had improved its economy with that type of education, which could serve as a good template for Afghanistan's development, he added.

They had been supporting Afghanistan and would not leave it alone, he said, adding Germany had been trying to help prevent Afghan youths from migrating to other countries, he said. (Pajhwok)

(14) More Than ...

the canal had been silted as result of rains and floods over the past few years. The canal near Kokcha River would help irrigate 1,850 hectares of farmlands, the NSP director said. (Pajhwok)

(15) Top Taliban

a bid to curb the terrorist related activities of the militants.

The increase in operations comes amid growing concerns that the militants will step up attacks across the country as the weather gets warm. (KP)

(16) 19 IS ...

confirmed the operation that he was aimed to suppress militants.

"It is spring operation planned by local authorities and mainly aimed at preventing possible troubles in the district and to strengthen security on the Torkham-Jalalabad highway."

He said a portion of the Torkham-Jalalabad highway passed through an edge of Kot district and passengers feared insecurity in the area.

Samiullah Pacha, the lane driver, said several security incidents had happened near Kot district and in some areas in Momand Dara district on the road. "Sometimes militants appear on the road for attacks," he added. (Pajhwok)

(17) 6 Civilians...

armed insurgency, killing soldiers as well as civilians.

On Feb. 22, 13 people, including six policemen, were killed and 11 others injured after a Taliban suicide bomber targeted a police patrol in the same district.

More than 3,540 civilians were killed and over 7,450 injured as the violence spread in different places of Afghanistan last year, according to a report by the UN mission in the country in February. (Xinhua)

(18) Ghazni ...

the past two years.

"Some repair work should have been done during the two years. Most of the books from the department's library have gone missing or destroyed. The city too does look ugly due to the damaged building," the public representative said.

Similarly, writer Mohammad Arif Noori also accused the culture department officials of taking no interest in repairing the damaged building. "The information and culture director remains absent from his office, how he can work?"

He said Ghazni was a historic province and damaged government buildings should be rehabilitated. Syed Wihdat Abdali, an official of

the information and culture department, said the building could not be repaired despite the passing of two years.

He said his colleagues and officials of other government offices inside the building performed their duty under the destroyed structure.

"Books of the public library are placed on the ground. Some of the books had been written centuries ago and they have a historic importance, but the books are on the verge of extinction."

But Ghazni information and culture director Bismillah Sharifi told Pajhwok Afghan News that he had time and again shared the problem with the ministry concerned. (Pajhwok)

(19) European ...

children falling into the hands of traffickers and criminals."

"This is a priority for the Council of Europe and it must remain at the top of our thoughts," she added. (Xinhua)

(20) Moscow Blasts...

This indicates that Washington is "obsessed with military planning and construction directed against Russia," she said. The spokeswoman cited various examples of Washington's attempts to impede nuclear disarmament, such as delaying the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1996, and carrying out joint nuclear missions with non-nuclear NATO countries in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. (Xinhua)

(21) Kyrgyzstan...

baijan, the statement said. Nagorno-Karabakh is a mountainous enclave with a large ethnic Armenian population that lies inside the territory of Azerbaijan. This region has been the subject of a long-lasting dispute between the two neighboring countries as the first conflict broke out in 1988 when the region claimed independence from Azerbaijan to join Armenia. (Xinhua)

(22) Armenia, ...

20 armored vehicles in the past two days, while at least 16 Azerbaijani troops were killed during heavy fighting over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. (Xinhua)

(23) Syrian

being handed over to the Brazilian hosts of this summer's Olympics.

"It will be a symbolic, strong moment for the Olympic movement. The flame is here to unite people," HOC's chief stressed. (Xinhua)

(24) Over 172,000 ...

Turkey on March 4, two of which were Syrians who volunteered to be sent back.

Further death toll figures show that the central Mediterranean route linking North Africa with Italy has claimed the lives of 343 migrants this year while five people perished on the western Mediterranean and Western African routes. (Xinhua)

(25) 1st S-300 ...

systems to the Islamic Republic in "the nearest time."

Russia committed to delivering the systems to Iran under a USD 800-million deal in 2007. Moscow, however, refused to deliver the systems to Tehran in 2010 under the pretext that the agreement was covered by the fourth round of the United Nations Security Council sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program. The sanctions barred hi-tech weapons sales to Tehran. (PressTV)

(26) US Law...

told The Hindu newspaper in Washington that the administration was working with lawmakers to ensure the adoption of the US-India Defence Technology and Partnership Act. (Agencies)

(27) Turkmenistan ...

Program until 2030 and includes 5 strategic areas of cooperation: creation of information system and development monitoring of a high quality, which will allow further improvement of the national statistical system; environmental stability and energy efficiency; employment, diversification of economy and trade; governance and law. (AKIpress)

(28) WB Provides ...

Bank has been supporting land reform in Tajikistan for more than a decade, especially in rural areas through the provision of land certificates to households," said Patricia Veevers-Carter, World Bank Country Manager for Tajikistan. (Asia-Plus)