

### (1) CIA Director...

including President Ashraf Ghani and the country's intelligence chief, Masoom Stanekzai, according to sources familiar with the visit.

The US intelligence footprint in Afghanistan is intimately tied to the US military presence in the country and US bases there provide protection for that intelligence presence. Maintaining that presence, or expanding it, if the US military does begin to draw down, would require the CIA committing more resources to the country. It's also a national security priority to collect intelligence on terrorist groups operating in the area, including ISIS's regional offshoot, especially along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

A CIA spokesperson declined to comment, saying they do not discuss the director's schedule.

Earlier this year, there was a Taliban attack on the compound that is home to Afghanistan's intelligence agency. That attack left dozens of Afghan agency personnel dead.

Peace talks in trouble

President Donald Trump said that the bilateral peace talks between the US and the Taliban "are proceeding well" earlier this year. But in the last few months, those talks have led to divisions between the Trump administration and the Afghan government.

Tensions erupted when Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib unleashed on US special representative Zalmay Khalilzad, who is leading the US talks with the Taliban. He said Khalilzad has personal political ambitions in Afghanistan and was leaving the Afghan government in the dark on the talks that are taking place in the Qatari capital Doha.

"We get bits and pieces of information," Mohib told journalists in Washington. "We don't have the kind of transparency that we should have. There isn't proper access to information. The last people to find out are us." After the blow-up, the White House sought to clarify that the Afghan government is a vital player when it comes to securing an agreement with the Taliban.

"It is urgent that we convince the Taliban to sit down with the Afghan government and other Afghans and engage in a political process," explained a senior administration official. "Any settlement just simply won't be sustainable unless the Taliban agrees to sit down with other Afghans and work out a political settlement."

Khalilzad also spent a few days in Kabul earlier this month. He met with current Afghan government officials like Ghani and former officials like President Hamid Karzai.

It is possible that the US, the Taliban and Afghan officials sat down at the table together for the first time this month, according to sources familiar with the planning.

Hassel promised during a hearing on Capitol Hill earlier this year that "a very robust monitoring regime" would be necessary if there were to be a peace accord established with the Taliban in Afghanistan. She also emphasized the need to "maintain pressure" on terrorist groups in Afghanistan and act against them if needed.

Hassel is not expected to be directly involved in the talks with the Taliban herself, but she called Khalilzad's efforts "very intensive" when she spoke to the Senate Intelligence Committee in January.

Skeptics of engagement with Taliban

Yet there are still plenty of skeptics of the Trump administration's engagement with the Taliban. Some Afghan government officials aren't only worried that they are being left in the dark -- they also see the Taliban as equivalent to a terrorist group, and they do not want to be rushed into giving them legitimacy.

"You cannot get a cat to guard your milk. The Taliban and terrorism -- it's one DNA," Mohib said earlier this year. "We're protecting our values, our freedoms and we will not allow someone -- an individual's rushed agreement -- to put that in jeopardy."

In bulking up the intelligence presence, which Hassel discussed during her visit, the US would have a more robust backdrop should it start to withdraw US troops.

But the timeline for the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which Trump repeatedly promised during his presidential campaign, remains unclear. Despite expectations that a drawdown would have begun by now, US contractors for the Defense Department have continued to see their contracts renewed this year.

A defense official told CNN in December that Trump decided to withdraw about half of the 14,000 troops deployed to Afghanistan at the same time he ordered the military to pull out of Syria. But acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, during a trip to Afghanistan earlier this year, said that he had no orders to "step down our forces in Afghanistan."

Sources tell CNN, however, that the US is preparing to substantially draw down its diplomatic footprint in the country by 2020. (CNN)

### (2) Turkmenistan...

news agency.

This is the third meeting of this kind, held with the support of the regional program titled Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia of the German Society for International Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH).

In Central Asia, rivers are the main source of water resources used for agriculture and industry, the production of electricity, and the supply of drinking water to the population, and almost all of them are transboundary, as stated by the Neutral Turkmenistan newspaper.

The Interstate Commission for Water Coordination was established within the framework of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), which deals with determining water withdrawal limits in the basins of the largest rivers of the region, taking into account and protecting water resources, and controlling their rational use.

Turkmenistan borders Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Afghanistan and uses water resources coming in accordance with agreed quotas from four trans-boundary rivers, namely the Amu Darya, Tejen, Atrek and Murgab rivers. Turkmenistan is affected by the problem of the ecology of the Aral Sea, which is most noticeable in the country's northern Dashoguz Region, where problems have arisen with the provision of drinking water, the fight against salinization of cultivation lands, land desertification. (Trend)

### (3) Taliban Announce...

our believing fellow countrymen".

"Even as large parts of our homeland have been freed from the enemy yet the foreign occupying forces continue exercising military and political influence in our Islamic country," it said.

As well as assurances that civilians would be protected, it called on Afghan government soldiers and police, who have been suffering thousands of casualties a month, to abandon their posts and join the insurgency.

"A key part of Al-Fath Operations is peeling away of countrymen serving in the military ranks of army, police and militias and being used by invaders for their own objectives," the statement said.

"On this basis we again call on troops working in enemy ranks to shun senseless hostility and futile resistance, to join the Mujahideen and gain guarantees of safeguarding life and wealth."

The announcement came days before the expected resumption of talks between U.S. special peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban officials in Doha.

Representatives from a variety of Afghan groups are also expected to be present but the talks will once again exclude the Afghan government, which the Taliban dismiss as a U.S.-appointed "puppet" regime.

U.S. President Donald Trump was reported last year to be planning to withdraw around half of the 14,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, adding pressure to secure a peace agreement with the Taliban to prevent the country collapsing.

The Taliban have made increasing gains as moves towards a possible peace deal have continued, with government forces in control of just over half the country, according to U.S. estimates cited by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a congressional watchdog.

There has been a reduction in high-profile attacks in cities such as the capital, Kabul, over recent months, but heavy fighting has carried on in the provinces. There were 3,804 civilians killed last year, the highest number recorded, according to United Nations figures.

Afghan security forces have suffered the brunt of losses, with more than 45,000 killed since 2014, but three U.S. service members were killed this week by a roadside bomb near Bagram air base, north of Kabul. (Reuters)

### (4) Women's Rights...

achievements of the past 18 years, including women's rights.

"It is a moment of pride that Faryab women raising their thoughtful demands. Women's rights are our red line in the peace process and we will never go back," Ghani reiterated. Ghani said women's role in Afghan society is not symbolic and that he is committed to improving their role in different sectors.

He called on women to raise their demands and share their thoughts "independently". "The participation of women at the national level is great and it is increasing at the local level. Presence of women in leadership posts is a need," he added.

This comes as government has been under criticism by rights activists for not giving the required role for women in the peace process. The proposed lists of the Reconciliation Leadership Council and the negotiating team show that each of the two bodies has two women members.

A US Senator Jeanne Shaheen has said in a tweet that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's refusal to commit to including Afghan women in US-led negotiations with the Taliban "is a moral and foreign policy failure for this administration".

She says that "Afghan women should be able to shape their country and the laws they live under".

"The Secretary's assertion that it is somehow up to Afghan women to let themselves into a negotiation controlled by the US and the Taliban is nonsensical and ignorant of the extreme abuses that Afghan women once suffered under Taliban rule," she said in a tweet on April 11. (Tolo news)

### (5) Minister Vows...

while according to him, it was at least \$900 million this year.

"We have focused our efforts on turning Afghanistan into an exporter country by supporting the country's industries and trade sector," said Ahmadi. "At least 550 flights carrying 6,500 tons of Afghan goods were exported through air corridors," he said.

He said the inauguration of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and the Chabahar Port for Afghan goods has helped increase in exports in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Economy, Mustafa Mastoor, said they have plans on hand to create a balance between population growth and economic development.

He said that NGOs provided jobs to at least 84,033 people, including 23,000 women, during the last year.

Mastoor said that every year over 650,000 people are added to country's population and that 2.7 percent economic growth rate is quite low to meet the challenge.

Deputy Minister of Finance Zahid Hamdard said government's revenue target collection was at least AFs270 million in the last year. According to him, all budgetary units are scheduled to report on their annual performance within the next two weeks.

"The target which is set by President (Ashraf) Ghani is around AFs270 billion, but the target which is set by the IMF is around AFs189 billion," he said.

Elham Omar Hotaki, head of National Procurement Authority (NPA), meanwhile, said the increase in government's budget expenses last year indicates that public procurement had great improvements.

"In fiscal year 1397, at last 763 projects were reviewed, of which 689 worth AFs127.6 billion were approved," he said. "Of total approved projects, AFs18 billion was saved last year. At least AFs50 billion was saved and 154 companies were blacklisted in the past four years," added Omar. (Tolo news)

### (6) AFCAC Launches...

bribe in return for delivery of services.

Zia said corruption and bribery had reached the peak in the country and their campaign was aimed at identifying corrupt officials and exposing them. He said they were in contact with all departments about their anti-corruption campaign.

He said they had initially launched their campaign in Kabul and Behsud, Dara-i-Noor and Sararud districts of eastern Nangarhar province. They would distribute "zero afghani note" in each street and house.

Zia said since 2001 Afghanistan had received billions of dollars in aid for rebuilding, but there was no system and the money was wasted.

AFCAC programs in-charge Ihsanullah Hikmat said if the money Afghanistan received during the past 18 years had been distributed to the Afghans, each person would have pocketed 30000 to 40000 dollars.

He said the unity government had taken some steps against corruption but not as required.

National Procurement Committee's contracts oversight department head Syed Ajmal said the committee was established in order to prevent corruption in projects. He said they had published details of 1830 contracts on their website in order to share them with people.

He said the national procurement committee would cooperate AFCAC in its campaign against corruption. (Pajhwok)

### (7) Taliban Have...

announced by the Quetta Shura, Taliban's leadership council, and that by making such an announcement, the group wants to give morale to its fighters after "facing many defeats".

The statement said the Afghan Defense and Security Forces will fight the Taliban and that the offensive announcement is mere propaganda.

This comes as the Taliban announced their spring offensive on Friday morning which is entitled Operation Al-Fatha - which means "victory" in Arabic.

The group said in a statement that the offensive will be conducted across Afghanistan with the aim of "eradicating occupation" and "cleansing our Muslim homeland from invasion and corruption".

"Our Jihadi obligation has not yet ended," the Taliban said.

President Ashraf Ghani on April 2 approved the security plan for the current solar year as conflicts are intensifying between security forces and Taliban in different parts of the country.

The National Security Council said in a statement that the plan, named Khalid Security Plan, is aimed at boosting security across the country particularly the security of urban areas and highways. (Tolo news)

### (8) Bala Murghab...

forces and that they "were forced to evacuate the district".

The Taliban entered key parts of the district a week ago, including the police headquarters, which is close to the Army camp, where hundreds of forces are stationed. But they were pushed back after airstrikes conducted by Afghan forces in support of coalition troops. Bala Murghab is surrounded by some other volatile districts such as Ab Kamari, Muqur, Jawand and Qadis.

Last time, Bala Murghab came under Taliban attack early in March and was under siege for more than two weeks, leaving more than two dozens of security forces dead and almost 28 of them gone missing.

This comes as the conflicts have intensified in different parts of the country with the arrival of the spring season - which is deemed as a usual fighting season for insurgents fighting the Afghan government forces.

According to the Ministry of Defense, at least 100 Taliban militants have been killed in the clashes. (Tolo news)

### (9) Afghanistan's...

They will be given a number through which they can follow their parcels," Aryubi said.

The Afghan Post Chairman Ahmad Wahid Wais said the new development helps the people to be benefited from many online services by his office, including tracking their deliveries.

"The central post office of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology and most of its post offices in Kabul have been connected to the fiber optic network and have been upgraded based on postal norms," he said.

Before this, the postboxes used to have physical locks and keys, but now they give each customer a special card and number through which they can have access to the boxes they are owned and also, they will be informed about the status of their posts through telephonic messages or email, officials explained. "Previously, post boxes were analog and they were locked and unlocked with a key. The customers were given a key and an ordinary card and the activities were not standard," said Mohammad Haroon, head of post Boxes Distribution Department.

The payments of the postal services will be done through banks afterward, he added.

"The customers now can transfer the fees of services to the Afghan Post's bank account and then email us the deposit receipt. Then we will give a special card to customers and they will be entitled a postbox," said Ahmadullah Hamid, General Manager of Post Box Network Department.

The second phase of development and modernization of the Afghan Post services will develop an application for Afghan Post that can be installed in smartphones and customers will monitor and track their posts from anywhere and also they will offer money transfer services, officials said.

Afghan Post provides universal postal services with over one century of background throughout the country. It provides postal collection and delivery services both domestically and universally through 463 post offices. (Tolo news)

### (10) Activists Collect...

and other provinces and, meanwhile, they have launched a social media campaign through which they motivate the people to donate the textbooks. They also visit homes in Kabul and other provinces to collect textbooks from the people.

The campaigners said that so far they have collected more than 10,000 textbooks.

The Ministry of Education published 49 million textbooks last year, according to information available on the Education Ministry's website. The textbooks will be distributed to students this year.

According to the ministry, up to 90 million textbooks are required for around nine million students in 18,000 schools across Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's new school year began on March 25 and reports indicate some public schools lack textbooks even in the capital city, Kabul.

"We started the campaign on March 8 and it will continue until April 20," said Fariha, an organizer of the campaign. "We hope that people help us to address lack of textbooks in schools."

"Based on our findings, at least 60 percent of students have no access to textbooks in eastern and southern provinces," said Lima Anwari, an activist and member of the campaign.

An investigation by TOLONews from last month shows that the textbooks are widely sold and purchased in Joi Sheer area in the center of Kabul, where many bookstores are located.

TOLONews reporter interviewed some parents who bought textbooks for their children. They said that they purchased the textbooks as their children did not receive the textbooks from their schools. They said that free purchase of the textbooks should be banned. However, Nooria Nazhat, a spokesperson for Ministry of Education, said the books in the bookstores have been printed by private schools and that the soft of the textbooks have been provided to the schools by the ministry. (Tolo news)

### (11) Venezuela: ICRC...

while working within the principles of the Red Cross Movement. This is the first visit to Venezuela by an ICRC President in 24 years.

"During my visit I talked to many Venezuelans and I saw how they're facing daily challenges due to the deterioration of fragile basic services, including access to health care," Mr Maurer said. "Hospitals are having difficulties ensuring they have water, electricity, medicine and enough health staff on site. Our cooperation with and support to the public institutions will be crucial to reverse this trend."

During his visit Mr Maurer traveled to Táchira, on the border with Colombia, and to Bolívar, on the border with Brazil. He talked with community members, migrants, people affected by armed violence, medical person-

nel and patients at three hospitals.

In addition to its efforts in the health field and assistance to migrants, the ICRC has also visited some 2,500 detainees since the beginning of 2019 and helped hundreds of them get in touch with their families through family contact services.

"Through my visit I wish to confirm and express ICRC's readiness to scale up our activities in support of the Venezuelan people. I am satisfied with the willingness of the authorities to work with us to address the humanitarian needs we have identified in a consensual way," said Mr Maurer.

Of particular concern for the ICRC is the high levels of armed violence affecting vulnerable people and hampering their access to basic services. The organization is supporting affected communities with first aid.

Many people are leaving the country in search of a better life. Since the beginning of the year, the ICRC with the Venezuelan Red Cross has helped more than 6,000 migrants reconnect with their families through phone calls.

"I came to Venezuela to listen to people, understand their needs and make sure our response is relevant to them," Mr Maurer said. "More will be done in the coming weeks and months. It's not only about this snapshot in time or the assistance we can deliver. It's about helping Venezuelans move forward with their lives in a sustainable way."

The ICRC has been present in Venezuela since 1966, working in support of the Venezuelan people by providing neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian assistance. (ICRC)

### (12) Alien Life...

on Earth evolved from creatures that endured even greater UV radiation exposure than nearly a handful of the closest exoplanets, i.e. planets outside our solar system.

By modelling the surface UV environments of our four closest potentially habitable exoplanetary neighbors, the authors found that these exoplanets' radiation exposure was significantly lower than what Earth received 3.9 billion years ago.

They concluded that ultraviolet radiation should not be considered a limiting factor in the search for planets that can host life. "Our closest neighboring worlds remain intriguing targets for the search for life beyond our solar system," the researchers wrote in their paper.

The four planets studied were:

Proxima-b (4.24 light years from Earth in the constellation of Centaurus)

TRAPPIST-1e (39.6 light years away in the Aquarius constellation)

Ross-128b (10.89 light years away in the Virgo constellation)

LHS-1140b (40 light years away in the Cetus constellation)

The closest planet, Proxima-b, receives 250 times more x-ray radiation and potentially hazardous UV radiation exposure than Earth does today. However, life on Earth survived far worse exposure, the authors argue, so why not on our neighboring exoplanets? In addition, not all wavelengths of UV radiation are equally damaging and the planets' ozone levels, not just their radiation levels, are important to factor in to any long-term habitability studies. (RT)

### (13) US Lets 3 NATO...

the S-400s reach Turkish soil. Others warned that having the F-35 and the S-400 within one military would compromise critical advantages of the fifth-generation fighter jet.

Military analysts who talked to RT said much of the fuss is about Ankara not bowing to Washington and NATO and pursuing its own interests.

The US "is losing the lead and Russia is taking it," Igor Korotchenko, editor-in-chief of the National Defense magazine and member of the Defense Ministry's public board, said. The prospect of a NATO member buying from Russia "damages US reputation ... and inflicts losses on the American military industry."

The S-400 is a danger to NATO aircraft because "it can spot and engage F-35 and F-22," he explained.

But it is not uncommon for NATO member states to use high-tech Russian-made weaponry, including the S-400's predecessor. Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovakia - all US' NATO allies - have the S-300 in their arsenals. (RT)

### (14) Assange Arrest...

years, but was returned behind bars this March for refusing to testify against WikiLeaks.

"They're saying that it's only five years, but five years in a US prison is unlike five years in any other country's prison, with few exceptions. It's a notoriously cruel, barbarous and vindictive system," Wight said.

The personal characterization of Julian Assange by Judge Michael Snow was "highly improper," Mads Andenas, former UN special rapporteur on arbitrary detention, told RT.

"The world is following this case" and Snow's words "made people doubt the fairness of the judicial process," he said.

Prime Minister Theresa May announcing Assange's arrest to the cheers of Parliament was also "not the right thing to do in a case where it's very important for the UK to leave the impression that it's a judicial process that's deal with absolutely fairly," the legal expert added. (RT)