

(1) US Withdrawal...

President Ashraf Ghani's top aide announced on Saturday that the much-awaited face-to-face talks with the Taliban will start within the next two weeks and will be held in a European nation.

State Minister for Peace Affairs Abdul Salam Rahimi -- a close aide to Ghani -- said in a statement that a 15-member team including religious scholars, women and civil society members representing Kabul at these proposed talks has been finalized. Rahimi has also called for immediate reduction in violence across the country.

The talks would be held in Germany, the local Salam Afghanistan radio reported earlier this week. Germany jointly hosted with Qatar an intra-Afghan dialogue for peace in Doha attended by Afghan civil society representatives, the Taliban and Afghan officials in personal capacity. Berlin has not commented on recent developments.

"We pray to Allah on this holy day that peace prevails and the peace talks prove successful," Wali Totakhail, an elder in the eastern Ahmad Shah Maina neighborhood, told Anadolu Agency.

Intezar Khadem, a political commentator, said the country's constitution has held the Islamic principles supreme and the Taliban realize they cannot revive their so-called Emirate, which they had nearly two decades ago.

He said compromises on all sides could result in a ceasefire and launch of critical and eventual intra-Afghan peace talks. (AA)

(2) SIGAR Reports ...

(ANP) personnel enrolled and accounted for in APPS as of May 25, 2019.

This is roughly 10,000 ANA fewer and 25,000 ANP fewer than the numbers reported to SIGAR last quarter.80 This quarter's strength of 272,465 puts the ANDSF at 77.4%, and 79,535 personnel short, of its goal strength of 352,000.81, the report added. (Tolo news)

(3) Standard...

The president said Afghanistan exports would not improve until the production and packaging met international standards.

Ghani said during the past two years the Afghan government due to its continued efforts was able to find new international markets for domestic products. (Pajhwok)

(4) Efforts Underway...

"So far, we have not shared manifesto, we can give you the information once we publish our manifesto," said Qader Shah, spokesman to Atmar's team.

Amid the crisis in Atmar's team, eight of the 18 candidates have extended the suspension of their campaigns over allegations that the government leaders among them President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah were exploiting the government resources for the sake of their campaigns.

"One of the candidates categorically told them that avoid appointments in areas where the money comes from and such move will not be acceptable," said Shahab Hakimi, a presidential candidate.

Officials from the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission have also warned candidates before to avoid engaging in the manipulation of government resources for the sake of their election campaigns.

Sources said that differences between Atmar and Noor surfaced after Atmar during a televised interview said that the president should have the authority to dismiss or appoint the prime minister.

This comes as President Ashraf Ghani who leads the State Building campaign team on Thursday organized its second campaign in Kabul where he asked on the Afghan religious scholars to help mobilize the nation to vote and use their right for voting in the September. At the event, Ghani pledged to establish an Islamic university in the eastern province of Nangarhar if re-elected. (Tolo news)

(5) Intra-Afghan ...

He said Khalilzad's tweet that his trip to Kabul was most productive showed the two sides were on the same page. "The peace process is going well and fast, it is hoped the Afghans would hear some good news in days to come."

Political expert and former High Peace Council secretary Syed Khalid Sadat said the peace process remained obscure for internal players because they did not know what was being agreed upon between the US and Taliban.

He said there was progress in talks between the US and Taliban, but hurdles remained and should be removed. He said whatever agreed between the US and the Taliban should be explained to the Afghan nation.

Afghan journalist Sami Yousafzai, who had many times travelled to Doha to closely watch the US-Taliban talks, said the US and the Taliban had agreed upon some points.

He said the Taliban had been previously

demanding withdrawal of US forces before agreeing to a ceasefire and intra-Afghan talks. But the Taliban had now retreated from these points.

He said the Taliban would not carry out attacks in provinces from where US forces withdrew and would not insist on the name of Islamic Emirates.

Yousafzai said the real peace process which was intra-Afghan dialogue would begin after the agreement between the US and the Taliban, but the intra-Afghan talks would be hugely problematic. (Pajhwok)

(6) UN Renews ...

assures that this aid will not go waste," said Zuhra Bayan Shinwari, head of the Electoral Complaints Commission.

The UN Electoral Support Project (UN-ESP) provides direct support to Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) to conduct the next electoral cycles in Afghanistan from October 2017 to December 2019, including the long-due Parliamentary Elections (Wolesi Jirga) and District Council Elections.

The project follows previous UN projects in support of the Afghan electoral process, most notably the Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow (ELECT) projects, from 2006-2011 (ELECT I) and 2012-2015 (ELECT II), and the UNDP Project Initiation Plan July 2015 - October 2017. (Tolo news)

(7) NATO Chief ...

in Afghanistan for many many years -- for almost close to 20 years. And we went in together," Stoltenberg said.

This comes as US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad on Friday wrapped up his two-day visit to Islamabad where he met with Pakistani Prime Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa.

Khalilzad said he briefed Pakistani officials on the Afghan peace process and that they discussed Pakistan's role in support of the process and additional positive steps they can take.

"Peace will require reliable assurances from Afghanistan and Pakistan that neither side's territory is used to threaten the other," he said.

The US envoy said that such assurances on top of an intra-Afghan comprehensive peace agreement will allow increased regional economic integration, connectivity, and development.

"These are hopeful times and the two countries should be ready to seize emerging opportunities," Khalilzad concluded. On July 31, the US envoy wrapped up his "most productive" visit to Afghanistan where the US and Afghan governments agreed on next steps in the peace process. Khalilzad said he will travel to Doha for next round of talks with the Taliban after a stop in Islamabad.

"In Doha, if the Taliban do their part, we will do ours, and conclude the agreement we have been working on," Khalilzad said on July 31. (Tolo news)

(8) Peace Requires ...

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(9) Peace Process ...

Karzai who dominated the Afghan politics for thirteen years in the post-Taliban democracy said that holding the presidential elections at this period of time is not in the interests of the country and instead more work should be done to accelerate the peace process.

He also said that some other countries in the region such as Russia, China, Iran, and India must be involved in the peace process.

"In the first stage of arranging the list, Mr. Salam Rahimi came to me and brought me the 45-member delegation which had gone to Doha and said which one I would prefer and said that we have also shared this list with other elders. But they did not share the final list with us," he said.

Government's Negotiating Team While concerns continue to increase over the details of US-Taliban talks in Doha, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the government's peace negotiating team will start talks with the Taliban once the US and the Taliban reach an agreement.

"The delegation which has been structured by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, of course, it will have the authority when it comes to holding talks and our gains which mark our redlines will be considered in the talks," said MoFA spokesman Sibghatullah Ahmadi. (Pajhwok)

(10) Some Figures ...

said, without elaborating. The former warlord said ending the ongoing conflict in the country and ensuring stable peace would be his priority. "Peace cannot be ensured in presence of foreign forces and their puppet government here," he said.

He said if he won the election, he would he would accept envoys from countries where Afghanistan had its own representatives.

He would cancel the CEO post, remove the third vice-presidential post, prevent political bribery and scrape posts created in contradiction to the Constitution and cancel all decrees bypassing Islamic Sharia, the Constitution and the Parliament.

"Democracy is a deceiving slogan without clean election, it would create only anarchism and power-sharing style government," he said.

Hekmatyar said he would stand firm against those who threatened independence and sovereignty of Afghanistan.

"We believe there is no alternative to election, the war cannot end until all sides involved accept that the government should be chosen by the Afghans," he said. (Pajhwok)

(11) MPs Worried about ...

the parliament will be part of the negotiating team."

He also urged presidential candidates to maintain coordination among them about the peace process and try to protect Afghanistan's honor from being harmed.

"Only one person will make it to the presidency, not all candidates, but if the peace process succeeds, it will be a victory for all Afghans."

Meanwhile, lower house member from Kabul Fida Mohammad Ulfat told Pajhwok Afghan News that peace was every Afghan's demand and wish.

"Everything has been obscure so far. Wolesi Jirga members don't have correct information about the peace process. We demand peace which is in the interest of all Afghans." (Pajhwok)

(12) Wolesi Jirga ...

and a number of commissioners who said the Presidential Palace interfered in the final results of Wolesi Jirga candidates.

He said some candidates were given blank ballot papers by the IEC during the vote recount process in Kabul and later the votes of some of candidates were increased while of others decreased in a systematic plan.

An audio clip shared with the media and claimed to be the voice of the IECC head says: "I did not sign the result sheet, I stopped the credential giving process, I will never sign it, because the list published is not legal."

One of the IECC commissioners in another audio clip, says, "I had heard before, but today I saw it with my own eyes that a game is being played here, there is no such thing as election, all what is going on are political games."

The clips and text messages showed differences among commissioners over taking bribe from candidates, Presidential Palace's interference and other issues.

DFA said they would continue their struggle until a neutral and independent organization investigated their documents and fraud in the Wolesi Jirga elections.

Pajhwok Afghan News tried to contact the IEC for comment about the allegations, but no one responded.

This comes as the IEC had announced the final results of Wolesi Jirga election from all provinces of the country and the new lawmakers have sworn in and are doing their duty in the lower house. (Pajhwok)

(13) 5 Rebels ...

02 unit conducted raids the Mirgi locality of Rodat district.

One Taliban member was killed and two suspects arrested during the raid, said a statement from the NDS.

The Taliban have not yet commented about these incidents. (Pajhwok)

(14) US Pulls Out...

a direct security threat to the United States and our allies."

The U.S. has long complained that the treaty was no longer fair and actually doesn't stop the arms race as intended as Russia was openly violating it, while China, which is a non-signatory, is free to develop weapons that would otherwise be prohibited.

The Trump administration said, for example, Russia has produced and fielded multiple battalions of the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile throughout Russia, which is a violation of the treaty. Some of the missiles have "the ability to strike critical European targets."

"This violation, which has been underway for many years, is a critical threat to American and Allied security now. That is why this action has become unavoidable," a senior official said.

Another White House official pointed out that Russia has been deceptive about its military buildup, particularly denying the development of a ground-launched cruise missile in 2014 that is now fielded and poses a security risk to Europe.

"Throughout the process, they lied about the existence of the missiles at both the expert level and, finally when confronted with the evidence, came clean for this in the past several months," the official said.

European powers came out to criticize Russia for not complying with the INF treaty amid the U.S. announcement of withdrawing from the agreement.

"We regret the fact that Russia has not done what was necessary to save the INF treaty," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said.

"Now we call all the more on Russia and the U.S. to preserve the New START treaty as a cornerstone of worldwide arms control," he added. "Nuclear powers such as China must also face up to their responsibility on arms control -- they have more weight in the world than at the time of the Cold War." (Fox News)

(15) Saudi Arabia...

Twitter along with thousands of Saudi women to celebrate what many described as a new era.

"A generation growing up completely free and equal to their brothers," she said, referring to the freedom to travel.

The kingdom's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has eased social restrictions, such as lifting a driving ban for women last year, as part of a push to open up the conservative Muslim kingdom and transform the economy.

Last year's murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the hands of Saudi agents caused a global outcry, however, and the Gulf Arab state has been widely criticized for the arrest and alleged torture of nearly a dozen women activists.

Several high-profile cases of young women seeking asylum abroad on claims of gender-based repression have added further pressure on Riyadh over the male guardianship system.

Guardianship's status between law and custom makes it a thorny issue for Prince Mohammed, who indicated last year he favored ending the system but stopped short of endorsing its annulment.

Other parts of the system remain intact. Women still need permission from a male relative to marry or live on their own.

A hashtag calling for marriage without a guardian's consent was among the top trending along with a hashtag thanking the crown prince and another touting the new travel rules. (Reuters)

(16) India Marks...

The hyperloop will be executed in two phases. Phase 1 will consist of a 11.8km (7.4 miles) section from Gahunje to Usse, estimated to be completed in 2.5 years at a cost of roughly 5,000 crore (\$724 million).

"The stretch for phase I has been selected as a test track because the technical challenges that can be experienced along the expressway can be found on this patch," an unnamed official told the Times of India.

If this initial phase proves a success, the remaining section between the Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai and Wakad in Pune will be completed in an estimated six to eight years.

If all goes well, India could become the world's pioneering hyperloop nation. (RT)

(17) Bombs Hit...

driver Chokechai Prasongsan, 48.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. "I would like to condemn those causing the situation which destroys peace and damages the country's image," Thailand's prime minister Prayuth said on Twitter. In a message to the public, Prayuth said: "A group of ill-intended people have recently incited violence while the government is propelling the country forward". (Reuters)

(18) UK PM Johnson...

and Radnorshire with a majority of 1,425 votes. "Boris Johnson's shrinking majority makes it clear that he has no mandate to crash us out of the EU," said Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson, whose party now has 13 seats in parliament.

A narrow majority of voters in the area had supported leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum and Swinson said the result showed her party could win in Brexit-supporting areas.

Wales, and the Brecon area, is a region where sheep outnumber people and where the prospect of steep EU tariffs being slapped on Welsh lamb exports in a no-deal Brexit have prompted widespread concern among farmers.

The Brecon vote was called after Conservative lawmaker Chris Davies was ousted by a petition of constituents after being convicted of falsifying expenses. Liberal Democrat candidate Jane Dodds won with 13,826 votes.

Davies, who ran again for the Conservatives, came second with 12,401 votes. The Brexit Party came third with 3,331 votes, while the Labour Party came fourth on 1,680 votes, a bad result for the main opposition party with its vote share down 12 percent from 2017. (Reuters)

(19) South Korea...

occupation, but President Moon's comments were the starkest yet. "We won't be defeated by Japan again,"

Moon told his cabinet, pointedly invoking South Korea's difficult history with Japan, which colonized the Korean peninsula before World War Two.

He described Japan as a "selfish nuisance" for a decision that threatens to disrupt global supply chains, and aired suspicions over its motive for hobbling a rival economy.

Top officials followed Moon in blaming Japan, South Korea's security partner in a region where both are the biggest allies of the United States.

Kim Hyun-chong, Moon's deputy national security adviser, criticized Tokyo as an obstacle to the South's effort to build peace with North Korea, calling Japan's step a "public affront".

South Korea will review whether to maintain a military information sharing pact with its neighbor, Kim added.

South Korea's countermeasures will see it drop Japan from its own list of favored trading partners and hasten filing of a complaint to the World Trade Organization over Japan's export controls, Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said.

Its foreign ministry summoned the Japanese ambassador to be told by a vice foreign minister that Japan was no longer considered a friendly nation. (Reuters)

(20) 'The Great...

Paul-Olivier Dehaye, a mathematician and data expert, told RT's Rick Sanchez. Dehaye was consulted as an expert source on a new documentary film, "The Great Hack," which takes a closer look at Facebook's data policies in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

"For a while, for maybe 10, 15, 20 years, we've decided that power was ok in corporate hands, but we start to realize that there are other interests at hand, democratic interests, control over the discourse," Dehaye continued. "These are real questions now -- who should have that power?"

Dehaye noted that much of Facebook's policies are driven by a profit motive, which he says follows a simple equation: "the more people and the more data that they get, the more money they make" selling ad space, but he is not convinced that the platform is acting with meaningful consent from its users. (RT)

(21) NATO Says...

to the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) that kept nuclear weapons out of Europe and avoided short-notice attacks.

The U.S.-led alliance says Russia has breached the terms of the 1987 treaty, which bans land-based, medium-range missiles in Europe, and has developed the nuclear-capable Novator 9M729, which is also known as the SSC-8.

Russia denies any such violations.

"NATO will respond in a measured and responsible way to the significant risks posed by the Russian 9M729 missile ... We have agreed a balanced, coordinated and defensive package of measures," they said. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told a news conference there would be "no rash moves" by the alliance and "would not mirror what Russia does." "We don't want a new arms race," Stoltenberg said.

Washington is only considering conventional, not nuclear weapons, in any possible response, NATO diplomats say. Stoltenberg listed military exercises, surveillance and air and missile defenses as ways to deter Moscow.

NATO is also considering more flights over Europe by U.S. warplanes capable of carrying nuclear warheads, more military training and the repositioning of U.S. sea-based missiles, alliance diplomats say.

Within the next few weeks, the United States is expected to test a ground-launched cruise missile. In November, the Pentagon will aim to test an intermediate-range ballistic missile. (Reuters)

(22) Trump Says...

on the city's government to drop the use of the word to describe the protests.

On Wednesday, 44 people were charged with rioting for their role in one recent protest that turned violent when thousands of activists clashed with police near Beijing's main representative office in the city. Rioting is defined under Hong Kong law as an unlawful assembly of three or more people where any person commits a breach of the peace. A conviction can carry a 10-year prison sentence.

Trump said earlier this month he believed Xi had acted responsibly with the Hong Kong protests and that "China could stop them if they wanted".

Thousands of civil servants are planning to rally on Friday night in support of the protesters and to urge authorities to rebuild confidence in the government, with more demonstrations planned for the weekend.

What started out as protests against the extradition bill have evolved into a broader backlash against the Hong Kong government and its political master in Beijing. (Reuters)