

### (1) Troop Withdrawal...

our brave National Defense and Security Forces proved this wrong by making sacrifices and defended the country and the people with courage".

"If they withdraw from Afghanistan it will not have a security impact because in the last four and a half years Afghan forces have been in full control," Chakhansuri said.

Chakhansuri said most of the US forces - who will possibly be withdrawn from Afghanistan - are engaged in training and advise mission for Afghan forces and that Afghan forces are capable of defending the country.

Reports by US media indicate that Trump administration has ordered the US military to start withdrawing up to 7,000 troops from Afghanistan in the coming months.

In a report published on December 20, The New York Times quotes a US official who says that Mr. Trump made the decision to pull the troops - about half the number the United States has in Afghanistan now - at the same time he decided to pull American forces out of Syria.

On Thursday, the US Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that he would resign from his position at the end of February after disagreeing with President Trump over his approach to policy in the Middle East. The Wall Street Journal was the first to report the development.

The New York Times quotes another US official who says the reduction of forces in Afghanistan is in an effort to make Afghan forces more reliant on their own troops and not Western support.

According to The New York Times, Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a Pentagon spokeswoman, declined to comment on the plan to remove troops from Afghanistan.

The US troops in Afghanistan are divided between training and advising Afghan forces and a counterterrorism mission.

According to the report, those who are part of the 7,000-troop withdrawal will be a mixture of forces from both of those missions.

This comes amid increasing efforts by the Afghan government and its international allies, US on the top, to reach a political settlement for ending the war in Afghanistan.

In line with these efforts, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, met with Afghan government leaders, political leaders and activists in Kabul to discuss the Afghan peace.

In an interview with TOLONews on Thursday, Khalilzad said Taliban has accepted that they cannot win by warfare and that political settlement should be sought for ending the crisis in the country. (Tolo news)

### (2) Afghan Forces...

Lungescu said, NATO leads a coalition of 41 nations in our Resolute Support Mission. Our aim is to train, advise and assist the Afghan forces, as they create the conditions for peace.

At the NATO Summit in July, Allied leaders also agreed to extend funding for the Afghan security forces until 2024. Earlier this month, NATO Foreign Ministers expressed steadfast commitment to ensuring long-term security and stability in Afghanistan. The NATO Spokesperson said.

"Our engagement is important to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for international terrorists who could threaten us at home" She added. (Pajhwok)

### (3) Presidential Candidates...

Hassan, an election commissioner. An IEC spokesman, Abdul Aziz Ibrahim, said they will use all their efforts to hold the elections on time. Meanwhile, he did not reject the possibility of a delay in the elections.

"In October 20 elections, 35,000 voters repeatedly cast their votes. They were identified when biometric devices were connected to the main server," Ibrahim said.

Electoral monitoring organizations meanwhile said the election com-

mission needs serious reforms and according to them, government leaders are indifferent in this regard. "Their action shows that they deliberately want to lead the country to a crisis," said Yusuf Rasheed, CEO of Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan.

"The main problem is that the commission has been unable to make progress on the next steps. The list of voters and biometric system are not ready," said Naem Ayubzada, head of Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan.

The IEC deputy spokesman said they have learnt from mistakes and shortcomings in the parliamentary elections and will try to avoid those problems in the presidential elections. (Tolo news)

### (4) Saudi's Role in...

In a report on Thursday, Arab News quoted Mutasim Agha Jan, Taliban Quetta Shura member and former finance minister of the group during their rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, as saying that Taliban has a lot of respect to Saudi leadership and its government.

According to the report, Mutasim said the role played by Saudi Arabia is key to success for the talks.

His remarks come amid increasing efforts by the Afghan government and its international allies, US on the top, to find a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict.

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In an interview with TOLONews on Thursday, Khalilzad said Taliban has accepted that they cannot win militarily and that political settlement should be sought for ending the crisis in the country.

The Arab News report says that Mutasim described the talks in the UAE as an important phase, reasoning that the process now enjoys support from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the UAE.

He termed Pakistan's participation in the talks and its role as important. He said that the details of the discussion were unlikely to be made public and that things will be clearer going forward.

"Taliban wants to progress on the release of prisoners, recognition of their political office, removing names of senior leaders from the UN sanctions list, and halt to air strikes and nights raids. These will be important confidence-building measures ahead of the formal talks. The Taliban will show a positive response if the other side takes some confidence-building measures," he said as quoted by Arab News.

According to the report, Mutasim said the UAE talks were mainly focused on building trust and that key issues like a ceasefire and elections will be discussed at a later stage.

The former Taliban official said that both the US and other parties involved wanted the Afghan government to join the process later.

"Some of the Taliban's demands are related to the US such as the issue of foreign troops, airstrikes, sanctions on the Taliban, and even the reopening of the office. So they await the US' response first," Mutasim said as quoted by Arab News. (Tolo news)

### (5) 'People to...

Saudi Arabia in Abu Dhabi this week.

While it is still not known whether the past 17 year's achievements in Afghanistan were discussed or not, a number of Afghan women said they were concerned about the fate of their rights in these talks.

The women said their rights in peace talks with Taliban should not be stepped on.

"If Taliban becomes part of the government, will women have rights or not? Will women be allowed to work and receive an education or not? Will a woman still be allowed to be a doctor, or for example me, as a singer, will I still be allowed to work as one?"

And will a woman be able to go to Shahr-e-Naw and buy things for her children?" Aryana Saeed, an Afghan singer asked.

Meanwhile, a number of Kabul women and girls said when Taliban collapsed the Kabul administration and took over power in 1996, they closed the doors of schools.

Shafiq, a resident of Kabul said when their school's doors were shut down by Taliban, she along with some other students, studied in underground rooms and then Taliban closed down those classrooms as well.

Now these women and girls, a number of whom are university students, said achievements must not be sacrificed for peace.

"My future was damaged and I am afraid that my girls also may lose their future. I want them to get an education and their future should not be like mine was," Shafiq said.

"If Taliban wants women to have equal rights with men, then girls should go to school and get an education," Kamila, a university student said.

Meanwhile, the Netherlands embassy in Kabul, also said Afghan women should be given a prominent role in the peace talks.

"It is up to the Afghan people to decide how they want to shape their own peace process. But the Afghan people are obviously not only men, but there are also women," an official from Netherlands embassy said. The peace talks between Khalilzad and Taliban, in addition to raising hopes over the end of war and violence, has created concern among the public.

A number of people are worried if a peace deal is reached with Taliban, the achievements of one-and-a-half decades may be sacrificed. (Tolo news)

### (6) Taliban Accepts...

In the Abu Dhabi talks, representatives from the United States, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and representatives of Taliban attended. Also, a negotiating team from the Afghan government went to Abu Dhabi to hold close talks with Taliban, but the Taliban representatives refused to meet the Afghan government negotiating team.

Khalilzad said, "I think they made a mistake in not meeting the Afghan government delegation. The countries who were present there, their reactions to this stance of Taliban was very negative, and questions were raised on whether the Taliban really wanted peace."

According to Khalilzad, the release of Taliban's prisoners including Anas Haqqani, son of the founder of Haqqani network Jalaluddin Haqqani, who is in an Afghan government prison, was also discussed in Abu Dhabi.

Khalilzad said after reaching a peace deal with Taliban, the presence of the US in Afghanistan would somehow change.

According to Khalilzad, Taliban representatives in Abu Dhabi said they would share the issue of a three-month ceasefire with their leaders. "We talked about a ceasefire. The Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates' suggestion was that negotiations should be held on all issues for three months and a ceasefire should be announced during the negotiations," Khalilzad said.

Now the question is, if a peace agreement is made with Taliban, would the current political system change to an Islamic Emirate?

Khalilzad said, "It is not an issue that has been proposed and there is no chance of that. I would be surprised if anyone thought such a system would come about."

Khalilzad also said Trump's administration had promised the Americans that the Afghan war would end, but if the war continues, Washington would stand with the Afghan people.

Khalilzad also praised Pakistan for its recent efforts in the Abu Dhabi peace talks.

In Abu Dhabi, for the first time a

comprehensive delegation from Taliban's leadership team and members of Haqqani network met with representatives from the US.

In their meeting with representatives from US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Abu Dhabi, the Taliban once again called for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. On Wednesday Khalilzad met with Pakistani leaders in Islamabad and then arrived in Kabul where he met with President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah and National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib.

In the meantime, a number of Afghan politicians and former Jihadi leaders on Thursday met with Khalilzad in former president Hamid Karzai's house in Kabul.

Sources told TOLONews that Khalilzad asked the politicians and leaders to create unity in the Afghan peace negotiating team.

The leaders who met Khalilzad included former president Hamid Karzai, chief executive of Jamiat-Islami party Atta Mohammad Noor, former vice president Mohammad Yunus Qanooni, chief of the High Peace Council Karim Khalili, second deputy of the Chief Executive Officer Mohammad Mohiq, former Hajj and religious affairs minister Nematullah Shahrani, former national security advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar, former urban development minister Sayed Masour Naderi, chairman of Mahaz-e-Milli party Sayed Hamid Gailani, former national security advisor Rangin Dadfar Spanta and former acting foreign minister Zahir Ahmad Moqbil.

According to sources, Khalilzad assured the Afghan politicians and leaders that he has not discussed the establishment of an interim government with Taliban. (Tolo news)

### (7) At Odds with...

treat them with respect, he argued. "We must do everything possible to advance an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values, and we are strengthened in this effort by the solidarity of our alliances," Mattis wrote.

Mattis has warned against troop pullout from Afghanistan. The Pentagon released the resignation letter soon after Trump tweeted that Mattis would be leaving.

"General Jim Mattis will be retiring, with distinction, at the end of February, after having served my administration as secretary of defense for the past two years," Trump wrote. (Pajhwok)

### (8) Kabul, Sharjah...

Ziyad Mahmood Khairalla and Mohamed Rashid Ali Demas, SCCI board members, and Mohamed Ahmed Amin, acting director-general of SCCI, attended the meeting.

Al Owais underlined SCCI's keenness on providing facilities for Afghan businesspeople looking to conduct economic activities in Sharjah.

He asked the Afghan business community to participate in exhibitions organised and hosted by Expo Centre Sharjah throughout the year in order to learn more about the market in Sharjah and companies operating in the emirate.

He urged the Afghan delegation to open a trade office in Sharjah to help the local business community identify investment opportunities in Afghanistan. (Pajhwok)

### (9) ANA's Women...

second consecutive year, ANA's women officers have undergone training at the academy. In 2017, 19 women army officers from Afghanistan took part in a three-week programme. (Pajhwok)

### (10) Taliban to Kabul...

Afghanistan's future with the US. On Friday, a statement on Taliban's website explained why they had declined a meeting with the Afghan government delegation in the UAE capital two days back.

The main agenda item, the insurgents said, pertained to the US pullout from Afghanistan. A possible threat to the US-led Western world

from Afghanistan was another American concern that the Taliban addressed.

In return, the US should set free Taliban prisoners, remove names of militant leaders from the blacklist and recognise their political office to build confidence and take forward the nascent dialogue, the statement added.

The Taliban explained they did not meet the Afghan delegation, because Kabul was not empowered to address the issues discussed at the UAE meeting.

The statement said Kabul, it was still interested in reaching an understanding with the Taliban, should immediately walk out of BSA and tell US troops to leave the country. (Pajhwok)

### (11) Riyadh Vows...

hoped the ambassador, who called the meetings productive. They would help promote intra-Afghan dialogue towards ending the conflict, he said

"Despite obstruction attempts of those who fuel terrorism and conflicts in our region, we will start to see very positive results by the beginning of next year.

"KSA and the UAE share the international community's desire for peace in Afghanistan, and will continue their efforts towards promoting dialogue and reconciliation. The peace talks held in the UAE will help bring us closer to that goal," he tweeted.

"We will continue to work with our allies; USA and UAE and others to produce positive results for the brotherly Afghani people in order to find an end to the conflict and establish much needed peace and security in Afghanistan," he said. (Pajhwok)

### (12) Students Win...

I pray to God that lasting peace is restored in Afghanistan so that we can have a better education and have a better life in the country," said second position holder, Haroon Farman. Background

As a global brand, UCMAS is the largest worldwide skill development program promoting the universal concept of a mental arithmetic system for children between the ages of 6 and 13. Operational in 52 countries, UCMAS has trained more than a million students worldwide and about 25,000 students across 27 centers in the United Arab Emirates since its inception in 2003.

The UCMAS approach promotes holistic brain development and establishes core skills that greatly enhance the learning experience of the child with the aim of bringing out the best in every child. UCMAS is one of the programs promoted by Abacus Quest Point (AQP), a company registered in the UAE and part of ARK Global Venture, a holding company registered in the United Kingdom. Other programs promoted by AQP include DinoArt, Robotics and Veg-aamath.

Origins of the Program

Universal Concept of Mental Arithmetic System is a skills development program that aims to bring out the best in every child. The program originated in Malaysia and is now taught in more than 40 countries. UCMAS focuses on producing tangible results, enhancing creativity, concentration and confidence.

UCMAS was introduced in the UAE in 2003 by Mrs Soundari Raj. It started as a small start-up venture and is now being taught in over 27 different centers across the UAE and Oman.

The Abacus (Mental Arithmetic) The human brain is made of two hemispheres, the right and left. The left brain, which is associated with logic and analytical processing, is well-developed in most children through the regular school curriculum. However, the right brain, which is the seat of intelligence associated largely to increased learning ability, concentration, perceptual capabilities and imaging skills, is not so well-developed. UCMAS is a program which aims to develop and exploit the capabilities of the right brain to the fullest extent possible, through mental arithmetic. (Tolo news)