

(1) Pakistan Says ...

to what would be the next course of action if some factions reject talks, Chaudhry said the Quadrilateral Group of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China has decided to give the reconciliation process a chance.

Hekmat Khalil Karzai who is another member of the four-nation group had also said in January that the nation should witness a change in two months.

The four-nation process begun after the visit of Pakistan's Chief of Army Chief (COAS) General Raheel Sharif to Kabul where he said that Islamabad would join Kabul in action against militant groups not willing to join the peace and reconciliation process.

The agreement to revive stalled peace talks with Taliban was reached during a meeting between President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the "Heart of Asia" conference in Islamabad.

For bringing Afghan militant groups to the negotiation table, Islamabad wants Kabul to act against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Chief Mullah Fazlullah who is responsible for some deadly attacks in Pakistan.

Islamabad claims that Mullah Fazlullah is hiding in Afghanistan. (KP)

(2) US Intel...

Kabul government faces persistent hurdles to political stability, including eroding political cohesion, assertions of authority by local power-brokers, financial shortfalls, and countrywide, sustained attacks by the Taliban.

Clapper said the Afghan government will confront larger and more divisive issues later in 2016, including the implementation of election reforms and long-delayed parliamentary elections.

The assessment comes as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's national unity government is expected to hold direct peace talks with the Taliban by the end of February to seek an end to a 15-year insurgency.

Senior diplomats from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States agreed last week in Islamabad on a "road map" to further the peace efforts and vowed to arrange the negotiations.

But the Taliban has not indicated whether it wants to join the peace process and has instead reiterated its demand for the complete withdrawal of U.S.-led foreign forces from Afghanistan before any peace talks.

Clapper told the Senate committee he thinks the Taliban position has consistently been not to negotiate. "The pre-condition they always describe is the removal of foreign forces (from Afghanistan) and I do not see them changing that position," he said.

Clapper's assessment also suggested that after initial infighting over a leadership succession, the Taliban has again become a united force under its new leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who took charge in July when it was disclosed that longtime Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, had been dead for more than two years.

He added, the Taliban's two-week seizure of the northern provincial capital Kunduz provided an important boost to Mansour's leadership. "We assess that fighting in 2016 will be more intense than 2015, continuing a decade-long trend of deteriorating security that will compound these challenges," he said.

"Kabul will be unable to effectively address its dire economic situation or begin to curb its dependence on foreign aid until it first contains the insurgency, which is steadily chipping away at Afghanistan's security," he said.

Afghanistan downplays remarks A presidential spokesman in Kabul, Sayed Zafar Hashemi, has downplayed Clapper's remarks about a possible political breakdown in Afghanistan.

Hashemi told VOA that "the national unity government is the representative of the absolute majority of the people of Afghanistan." But Afghan and independent foreign observers acknowledge political differences have prevented President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah from establishing an effective working relationship to promote good governance in the country where nepotism and corruption critics say are order of the day.

Despite public pledges, Ghani and Abdullah have made little progress towards reforming the national electoral process to discourage the repeat of the disputed 2014 presidential election.

They both claimed victory in the polls and the controversy plunged Afghanistan into months of political uncertainty until the United States

intervened and mediated a political deal between the two, allowing Ghani to take charge as the president and his election rival Abdullah to occupy a newly created post of chief executive. (VoA)

(3) Obama Administration

for programmes that reinforce Afghanistan's security and development by maintaining the gains of the last decade, supporting military training and assistance..." Kerry said in his proposal to the Congress.

He added the proposed assistance would help the Afghan government tackle corruption, counter the influence of extremists and terrorists, strengthen civil society and promote health, education, economic growth and good governance.

Earlier in the day, President Barack Obama sent his last annual budget to the Congress, reaffirming America's long term commitment to Afghanistan.

"The budget continues to support long-term national security and economic interests in Afghanistan and helps sustain political, economic, and security gains in the country as the US draws down its forces and assistance levels gradually decline," Obama said.

It also includes resources to reinforce Afghanistan's security and development by supporting military training as well as health, education, justice, economic growth, governance, and other civilian assistance programmes necessary to promote stability and strengthen diplomatic ties, said the White House.

The State Department said the 2017 Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) of \$672.1 million request continued transitioning to a more self-sustaining diplomatic mission, focused on diplomatic engagement, public outreach, and empowering the Government of Afghanistan in its ongoing efforts toward self-sustainability.

Maintaining the development gains made over the last 13 years in health, education, and gender remained a priority, it said, pledging to partner with Afghanistan in its ongoing efforts to bolster economic growth, strengthen the rule of law and fight corruption.

Proposing \$1.027 billion for Afghanistan under OCO's Economic Support Fund, the State Department said this prioritised areas critical to sustaining gains of the last decade and objectives of the government while continuing to lay the foundation for sustained economic,

Civilian assistance programmes would focus increasingly on long-term development and the critical task of making Afghanistan more self-reliant and sustainable, it said. "Support from the United States will remain critical, as Afghanistan will continue to be tested by economic and governance challenges as well as threats to stability posed by violent extremism," the State Department said, proposing \$185 million for meeting the narcotics challenge.

"Funding will continue to promote Afghan ownership by increasing the percentage of Afghans employed by our justice, corrections and counter-narcotics programmes," it concluded. (Pajhwok)

(4) U.S Troops...

and it will lead to the defeat of terrorism," said Mol spokesman Sediq Sediqqi.

Hundreds of US troops will reportedly join ANA troops in Helmand at the end of this month but their exact number is not certain so far.

Meanwhile, the US Defense Intelligence Agency Director Vincent R. Stewart said in a recent speech on Worldwide Threat Assessment that the Afghan security forces are faced with a big challenge after shouldering the security responsibility countrywide.

He said: "In 2015, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces [ANDSF] took primary responsibility for security in Afghanistan for the first full year. The Afghan National Army conducted several independent multi-corps operations against the insurgency in diverse regions of the country."

"Security forces also successfully secured almost all provincial capitals and national lines of communication, to include major highways. A positive development in the evolution of the ANDSF is the use of special operations forces to effectively respond to terrorist threats and to deny safe havens to networks across the country, albeit with coalition support," he added.

Some analysts meanwhile said the early withdrawal of US troops from battlegrounds in Afghanistan left the Afghan security forces with an increasing challenge in their war against insurgent groups.

"I think the US should not have

withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan - without a serious assessment of the situation in the country. Now the US has realized its mistake [it has made in this regard]" said university lecturer Nasrullah Stanikzai.

MP Fawzia Kofi said the Afghan forces need the support of US troops. She said: "I think it will be better if US helps and assists Afghan forces instead of bringing its troops to the battlegrounds in Afghanistan."

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces took full responsibility for the country's security in January 2015. Since then, it is believed that they have faced growing challenges in tackling the increasing threat by terrorists. (Tolnews)

(5) Afghanistan ...

gunmen opened fire on them.

"Recent incidents show that reporters are still under threat and reporters are being targeted by groups involved in Afghanistan's war and there is no safety for them and the government also does not pay sufficient attention to the problem," said Hassan Khatib a journalist.

Sayed Hassib, a TOLO TV cameraman has filmed the ongoing war for a number of years, but recently fell victim to the Taliban himself. He was injured in last month's bombing in Kabul.

"Reporters overall are not safe, not only in provinces but even in the capital Kabul," said Hassib.

However the National Unity Government (NUG) acknowledges there is a problem.

"In general there are threats and we hope with the improvement of the situation and the blows imparted on the terrorist groups the security slowly slowly will change," the CEO's spokesman Mujiburrahman Rahimi said.

These comments come after a bleak month for the media - when eight media employees were killed by insurgents in just one month. (Tolnews)

(6) 19 Taliban....

Alokozai, a senior official at the 705 border zone police, told reporters here that five Taliban were killed during a clash in Shindand district after a group of 50 militants stormed police check-posts in the area.

During the past one month, he said two Iranian nationals were rescued from insurgents and reunited with their families through government officials.

But residents of Herat City complained criminal activities were increasing in the city despite police claims of crackdowns on criminals.

Rafai Ahmadi, a resident of 9th police district, said: "We hear about police actions against criminals, but crimes are on the increase in Herat city."

Reza Sherzad, another resident, said criminals were released after one or two days in police custody and that was why police crackdown against criminals had no effect. He urged the judicial department to punish criminals so that the crime ratio could be declined. (Pajhwok)

(7) Japan to ...

director, Deputy Minister of Information and Culture Zardasht Shams said more than 14 artifacts would be returned to the museum.

They would ask for the return of the objects looted from the museum at the Tokyo Conference, Shams said. There is a big stupa and a warship centre of the Buddha era in the Hada Farm area on the southern outskirts of Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province.

Many historical objects were stolen during the civil war in Afghanistan, but the Ministry of Information and Culture has decided to renovate the museum. "A meeting will be held by the organisation in Tokyo in April when global assistance will be sought for the renovation of the museum," Shams said, adding hundreds of artifacts would be displayed.

"We will send a delegation to Nangarhar soon to identify the area of the museum and retake its land from grabbers," he promised.

The director of the heritage organisation, Takashi, called the Hada Museum a centre and temple for Buddhists, but many such sites were pillaged during the civil war in the country and many of its objects were stolen.

"We will start rehabilitation work on the museum soon and encourage international donors to assist us," Takashi said.

The governor's spokesman, Attaullah Khogyani, welcomed the decision of the deputy minister, saying the provincial government would provide assistance for the renovation work. (Pajhwok)

(8) Taliban Start...

of Waghaz district, Mohammad Hanif, told Pajhwok Afghan News

that the Taliban had launched digging mines in the town.

"There are mines in Ranakhel area and Taliban are extracting them and selling to Pakistani people." The resident said sometimes heavy explosions could be heard at the sites and the blasts had created fears among residents.

But the Taliban strongly rejected the claims. Their spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Pajhwok Afghan News the fighters were not involved in such activities nowhere in the country.

"These are fighting days, the Taliban have no time to extract minerals, this is a government propaganda," Mujahid said, adding no Pakistani engineer had been spotted in Ghazni.

A number of lawmakers have been claiming that Taliban and illegal armed groups are extracting minerals in a number of areas without being interrupted.

A day earlier, a report claimed Islamic State fighters have started smuggling timber from eastern Nangarhar province. (Pajhwok)

(9) Women Face ...

Baz Safi, an organiser of the workshop, said their aim was to eliminate violence against women in the society and improve their participation in civil society, education and politics.

"Women are part of our community, they need to be aware about their rights and work together with men in civil, political and educational processes," he said.

On the other hand, female participants of the workshop said the Afghanistan Constitution allowed women to fully participate in all processes, but regretted their constitutional rights were paid no attention.

Kamila Akbari, one of the participants, accused the government of what she said having adopted a discriminatory policy against women over the past 14 years.

She said women were denied the rights the Afghanistan Constitution had given to them.

"A less number of women working in government offices is a clear discrimination against them, only a few number of female workers are there in the public health, education and women departments of Khost province."

Kamila said the government should implement various projects for improving lives and economy of women in Khost.

Nadia Bawari, another participant of the workshop, said violence against women could be eliminated when men were educated about women's rights in Islam. (Pajhwok)

(10) Concerns Raised....

pylon in Baghlan. So how then will it be able to implement such big projects," said Massoud, a university lecturer and analyst in economic affairs. "If the economic projects are implemented, millions of dollars will flow into government and also Afghanistan will benefit from electricity and gas provided by the projects. The projects will create job opportunities for thousands of Afghans," he added. Spokesman for the Ministry of Energy and Water Abdul Basir Azimi meanwhile said insecurity will affect the implementation process of the projects.

"Security is the main factor in implementing projects but security agencies have vowed to ensure security of the projects. The projects involve different regional countries and it will benefit the whole region," he said.

The remarks and concerns come after the Interior Ministry said they have the capacity to ensure the security of big economic projects in the country. (Tolnews)

(11) Insurgents Gaining ...

Defence Force personnel killed and 261 seriously wounded.

Last week, the top US commander in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, gave a bleak assessment of the security situation in the country, warning 2016 could be "no better and possibly worse than 2015" if adjustments were not made.

"Afghanistan has not achieved an enduring level of security and stability that justifies a reduction of our support in 2016," General Campbell said. Defence Force head Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin has told a Senate estimates hearing the Australian Defence Force agrees with the concerns, and insurgents in Uruzgan are pushing Afghan forces back.

"Our assessment is in the rural areas of outlying districts such as southern Dihrawud, Charchina, Shahidi Hasas, Chora and Khas Uruzgan," he said "Insurgents have increased their freedom of movement and generally contain ANDSF (Afghan National Defence and Security Forces) units to their bases and their checkpoints."

Air Chief Marshall Binskin said 2015 was the first year the ANDSF took on the task of defending their country

themselves, but the withdrawal of coalition support had made the job difficult. (ABC)

(12) Enhanced Af...

internationally-accepted values, participants suggested, hailing the quadrilateral dialogue and the decision to hold another session on February 23. Leaders of both countries were urged to tackle misperceptions that could scuttle the dialogue as well as bilateral relations. The speakers called for respecting the basic rights of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

They hoped the Taliban would attend the session as interlocutors and that women's perspective would be taken into consideration at the forthcoming quadrilateral discussions.

The initiative was launched by the Centre of Research and Security Studies in partnership with Duran Research and Analysis (DRA).

The officials stressed indiscriminate action on both sides against non-state actors and promotion of cultural ties through an exchange of visits of writers, students and opinion-makers. (Pajhwok)

(13) New Kabul

government officials in Kabul. Before this, Sherzai had been serving as director of petroleum in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry for five years.

Speaking on the occasion, Sherzai said he would try to eliminate corruption in the transport department in direct cooperation with the Ministry of Transport. He did not go into details about corruption in the department.

"I would work day and night to increase the revenue and resolve available problems in the department," he said. Sherzai promised providing advanced transport system in Kabul and a special transport service for women as his primary goals.

The special transport service for women would be first launched in Kabul and then in provinces, he said, but added transport companies were currently facing problems, which he would try to resolve.

Sherzai said amending some procedures, the law on ground transportation and deploying electronic governance were other goals he had set for himself. (Pajhwok)

(14) 27 Militants...

In an unrelated incident, a health official was shot and injured after gunmen fired on his vehicle in Khost city, capital of eastern Khost province, earlier on Wednesday.

"Mohammad Hashim Sayyedi, head of Khost provincial health department, sustained injuries by the attack which took place near his office in the morning. But Sayyedi has not received life-threatening wounds," Mohammed Mubariz Zadran, the provincial governor spokesman, told Xinhua. (Xinhua)

(15) Two Dead,...

tional Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). "The initial information showed that two persons died and 27 others were wounded," Omar Mohammadi, spokesman for the NDMA, told Xinhua. Slippery roads and poor visibility due to the heavy snowing have been blamed for the accident, according to the investigation, he said, adding those killed included a child and a woman. No passenger of the second bus involved in the accident was hurt. (Xinhua)

(16) Jawzjan Woman...

Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) chief for Jawzjan, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab provinces linked the suicide family violence.

Maghfirat Samimi listed poverty, ignorance, disregard for women's rights and outright rejection of their demands as main reasons behind such incidents. She asked police to determine whether the women commit suicide or was killed. (Pajhwok)

(17) Takharis Cut...

Of Taluqan, said: "We are happy with the poultry business. We supply chickens to the market as well."

He said most people had reservations about frozen imported chicken meat and many believed the frozen meat might be haram. Majidi said the residents of Takhar were poor people and could not afford to buy meat of other animals. He hoped their business would help the poor eat the chicken meat. Abdul Hashim, a resident of Salah village and a poultry farm owner, said he had been running the poultry business for the past two years. He said farm owners brought chickens from Pakistan and Nangarhar province. (Pajhwok)

(18) Civilian Killed, ...

who wished anonymity, told Pajhwok Afghan News the attackers managed to flee after the incident.

Bullets hit the NDS personnel in their

hands and legs, but they were in stable condition, a police source said. Police have launched a search for the attackers, the source added.

Separately, one civilian was killed and another wounded as the motor-bike they were riding hit a roadside bomb in Qasar district on Tuesday evening. The town's Administrative chief, Rahmatullah Qaisari, said the injured civilian was in critical condition. Meanwhile, the Taliban claimed killing one soldier and injuring another in an attack on a convoy of the security personnel in the Ghormach district of Faryab. (Pajhwok)

(19) S.Korea to...

tions from testing any ballistic missile technology and conducting a nuclear test. Calling recent provocations as an intolerable act and a challenge to peace and stability to the Korean peninsula and the world, Hong said Pyongyang has never shown intention to give up its nuclear and missile programs as seen in the DPRK's recent declaration to continue nuclear and missile tests. (Xinhua)

(20) Turkish Military ...

2015, twin suicide bombings hit the capital city Ankara, claiming a total of 103 lives. Both were blamed on the Islamic State (IS) militant group. (Xinhua)

(21) IMF Chief

while requesting Ukraine to implement a series of economic reforms, including those in judicial and energy sectors. Since the bailout program started, Kiev has received a total of 6.7 billion dollars in two disbursements from the global lender, but the third tranche was delayed. (Xinhua)

(22) NATO, EU ...

structured framework for exchanging information and sharing best practices. This is a concrete example of NATO and the EU working together to counter hybrid threats.

"Intensified cooperation under this arrangement will allow us in a tangible way to better prevent cyber-attacks, but also our ability to predict, detect and respond to them," said Ambassador Sorin Ducaru, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges. (Xinhua)

(23) Syrian Rebels ...

against Western-backed rebels backed by Russian air strikes.

Trying to prevent a collapse of diplomatic efforts to end the war, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is pushing for a ceasefire and more humanitarian aid access ahead of a meeting of the International Syria Support Group in Munich. Moscow said Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov agreed on Wednesday on the need for a ceasefire in Syria and the provision of humanitarian aid to blockaded areas. (Reuters)

(24) Indian Energy...

however it won't be at the expense of the Carmichael project and associated infrastructure. "The reality is that both latest generation thermal coal generators and increasingly efficient solar parks will be required to meet India's rapidly increasing energy demand in the long term," Adani said in a statement.

Local media is reporting a solar power station may be built in the small central Queensland state town of Moranbah, which isn't surprising as the state is emerging as a hot spot for large-scale solar plants after a hybrid wind and solar plant recently approved in the state's north. (Xinhua)

(25) Financial ...

moves by the European Central Bank, and there are even talks that the U.S. Federal Reserve System might have to reverse its rate hikes. While the markets may have been overly jittery, there are signs that the market is "losing confidence in the ability of central banks to perpetuate the 'levitation' of risky assets," said Rabobank, a Dutch multinational banking and financial services company. It was revealed that even some members of the Bank of Japan had been concerned over the self-defeating effect of the negative interest rates move and the prospect that it may trigger rate cuts elsewhere. (Xinhua)

(26) Erdogan Chastises ...

Ankara sees the Syrian Kurdish PYD as terrorists, citing their links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has carried out a violent, three-decade insurgency for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey's southeast.

"Are you our side or the side of the terrorist PYD and PKK organization?" Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara to provincial officials. (Reuters)