

(1) Top Pentagon...

a 17-year war, the longest in American history.

But he stressed that peace terms are for the Afghans to decide. Thus far the Taliban have refused to negotiate with the government of President Ashraf Ghani, calling it illegitimate. Washington is trying to break that impasse.

"The Afghans have to decide what Afghanistan looks like. It's not about the U.S., it's about Afghanistan," Shanahan told reporters travelling with him from Washington.

Later, Shanahan flew to a military base ringed by snow-capped hills where he met Afghan army commandos, who are regarded as the most capable element of the Afghan military. He told reporters the U.S.-trained commandos are increasingly on the offensive against the Taliban.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration's special envoy for Afghan peace talks, said Friday that although talks are in an early stage, he hopes a deal can be made by July. That is when Afghanistan is scheduled to hold a presidential election.

Shanahan, a former Boeing executive who had never been in Afghanistan until Monday, was scheduled to meet with Ghani and other top government officials.

Shanahan took over as acting secretary of defence on Jan. 1 after Jim Mattis submitted his resignation in December. Shanahan had been Mattis' No. 2. Shanahan's views on the Afghan war are not widely known. He said he would use this week's visit to inform his thinking and to report back to Trump. In testimony before Congress last week, Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. Central Command, offered a largely optimistic view of Afghanistan, saying the current manoeuvring between U.S. and Taliban negotiators is "our first real opportunity for peace and reconciliation since the war began."

Votel noted that the Taliban are still capable of inflicting significant casualties on Afghan government forces. Just last week the insurgents killed some two dozen Afghan troops in an attack on an army base in northern Kunduz province.

In addition to battling the Taliban, U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan are focused on an Islamic State affiliate known as ISIS-Khorasan, comprised of foreign fighters largely from Pakistan. "Left unchecked," Votel said in his report to Congress, ISIS-Khorasan "will continue to grow as a threat to our homeland."

In his remarks to reporters during his flight to Kabul, Shanahan said that although the Islamic State presence in Syria "has been decimated," local Syrian security forces are needed to ensure stability. He said IS still has a global presence.

"If something hasn't been completely eradicated, there is a risk of it returning," he said.

Trump has taken an ambivalent approach to Afghanistan, saying his instinct upon entering office in 2017 was to withdraw. Yet he chose instead to add about 3,500 troops in 2017-2018 to bolster the U.S. effort to train and advise Afghan forces. After Mattis resigned in December, Trump insisted that he had been unhappy with how Mattis handled Afghanistan. Since then, the administration has said it achieved a tentative "framework" for fuller peace negotiations with the Taliban.

"We do not know whether we will achieve an agreement," Trump said in his State of the Union address to Congress last week, "but we do know that after two decades of war, the hour has come to at least try for peace." (Monitoring Desk)

(2) No Plan on Troop...

"No, there is no program for leaving Afghanistan," Butler told TOLONews on Sunday. "We are committed to the Afghan security forces. I think you heard what President (Donald) Trump said is that we are committed right now to the Afghan security forces and like Ambassador (Zalmay) Khalilzad said nothing is decided until everything is decided. So, we are here. We are fighting every day in support of the Afghan security forces," he said.

"There is no program right now to decrease the troops... We are here. We have a shared interest together with the people of Afghanistan and we are committed to them," added Butler. Butler said Afghanistan and the United States have a "shared interest in combating terrorism". He added that the Afghan security forces have been fighting "heroically" and that he is very impressed about their commitment and how they continue to fight.

Reports about a possible withdrawal of a significant number of US forces from Afghanistan emerged last December. The US President said in his State of the Union speech that his administration is holding constructive talks with stakeholders in Afghanistan, including with the Taliban, and that it was now time to try for peace.

US has 14,000 forces in Afghanistan who are engaged in counterterrorism as well as train, advise and assisting mission for their Afghan counterparts. In a letter to Donald Trump last month, President Ashraf Ghani asked him to slow down the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and suggested cutting costs for the US where possible.

An Afghan Senator, Gulalai Akbari, said Afghanistan needs "foreign assistance" until peace and stability are ensured in the country as he talked about the US forces presence in Afghanistan. The High Peace Council's spokesman Sayed Ehsan Taheri, meanwhile, said any decision on troop withdrawal ahead before Afghan government-Taliban talks is not in favor of Afghanistan.

"We are awaiting for talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban," Taheri said. "Any decision on withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan ahead of these talks is not in favor of the country."

The issue of US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan has been one of the key preconditions by the Taliban to attend direct talks with the Afghan government. However, the US and the Taliban during their four rounds of talks have not succeeded to reach an agreement on a timeline for troop withdrawal. (Tolo news)

(3) Abdullah Blames...

peace talks, Abdullah said it would be impossible to insist on one's own demands and expect peace as well.

Abdullah further added that peace requires sacrifice but not to sacrifice the wishes of people, emphasizing that Afghanistan belongs to all Afghans and everyone has the right to have dignified peaceful lives and achieve their demands in a peaceful way and through political campaigns, insisting that it would not be important that the wishes of certain groups are accepted by all Afghans as this will be tested and will be proved that the Afghan people want, whether they will choose an oppressive past, demand the current situation or want a better situation.

In the meantime, he warned that with domestic unity it would not be efficient to move towards peace.

In other parts of his speech, Abdullah said the government hails the efforts and bravery of the armed force and those who are fighting the Afghan people are enemies and there is no need to rethink whether they are friends or enemies, emphasizing that they can only become friends when they renounce violence and stop committing crime against the Afghan people. (KP)

(4) Documents Show...

The documents and evidence shared with Pajhwok show that Hamayon Muhtat, the PRD chief and a number of officers had distributed tens of thousands of empty demographic forms to facilitate fraud in the Wolesi Jirga and presidential elections. Distribution of empty demographic forms to candidates

On June 5, 2018, Hamayon Muhtat gave 10,000 demographic forms to Abdul Baqi Malakzada, a Wolesi Jirga candidate and current member of the lower house from Takhar province, but Malakzada did not hand the forms over to the regional PRD office. After not receiving the forms, the Takhar PRD office a statement had said that Malakzada distributed 9,000 demographic forms in a number of

districts of the province.

Violation of agreement between PRD and IEC

Based on a cooperation agreement signed between the PRD and the Independent Election Commission (IEC), the central PRD office should distribute ID cards without any regional, tribal, linguistic, religious or gender discrimination and without influence of candidates.

However, the PRD violated the agreement by distributing thousands of demographic forms to a number of candidates.

The article first of the agreement says: "Any type of ID card distributed in any form to a person as a voter is a responsibility of the PRD which will be accountable for that."

The PRD is yet to explain the distribution of fake ID cards to people which was exposed by the Grand National Alliance (GNA) and social media users.

On September 1, 2018, the GNA revealed thousands of fake ID cards to journalists during a conference and said the cards were forged in cooperation with the PRD for manipulation of the election outcome.

Members of the GNA had claimed that the number of fake ID cards were around 100,000 and had been distributed in 33 provinces of the country.

They had said most of the ID cards were registered with the PRD and IEC workers used them as valid cards in the voter registration process.

Docs about fake ID cards Documents obtained by Pajhwok show that some of these fake ID cards are without photos of the persons, lacked characteristics of the holder.

In some cards one photo was used, others were issued to underage people and Iranian and Pakistani nationals and in some cards photos of Indians and Iranian artists and those downloaded from social media were used.

Hiring inexperienced people in ID cards distribution process

A video clip of the exam scene of applicants for ID cards shows many applicants sitting together and a person asks questions in loud voice and the applicants collectively answer.

Meanwhile, a PRD official, who wished to go unnamed, told Pajhwok 'serious problems' plagued their department's employment process.

He confirmed exams taken from new employees in some provinces were not held transparently.

He claimed appointments were not based on the short list of candidates. Those failing the exam in more than 400 administrative units, including 1,053 distribution teams, had been hired across the country, he alleged. According to the source, the appointees were not literate enough to read and write. The uneducated employees include ghost workers from certain provinces.

Fund embezzlement An employee of the Population Registration Department, who declined to be named, told Pajhwok one billion afghanis had been allocated for the distribution of 10 million tazkiras to eligible citizens for voting in the elections. But the department spent only five million afghanis.

Assailing leaders of the Population Registration Department, the source explained poor management had resulted in forgery and irregularities in the card distribution process.

Not only the department's leadership but managers and employees were also involved in abuse and fraud by unlawfully selling tazkira forms to candidates they had links with.

Calling the distribution drive full of fraud, he said there were hundreds of thousands of fake cards having special tags for the election. They were registered in the database.

The source revealed ID cards had also been issued in names of Indian actresses (Katrina Kaif, Sunny Leone and Juhi Chawla). He disclosed many Iranian and Pakistani nationals had been able to obtain Afghan ID cards in border areas as a result of weak management of the Population Registration Department.

"In registration documents, profiles were not included initially. Only photographs were required. But a

delegation appointed by the Presidential Palace later forced the addition of profiles to the books," he informed.

Poor management and misuse of the temporary distribution campaign made Afghan citizenship unreliable and even worthless. The department concerned did not dare confirm it.

"All employees of the department witnessed the flawed distribution drive and a mismatch of thousands of demographic formats in different provinces, but no one raised a voice. Unfortunately, the project turned out to be a failure," he lamented.

Another official of the department, speaking on condition of anonymity, also hit out at the extra costs of the ID card distribution campaign. Of the five million ID cards distributed, about a million were issued to people under 18.

"The distribution drive was 30 percent successful and 70 percent unsuccessful. Each paper ID card might have been worth 333 afghanis," he reckoned.

According to him, everyone is critical of the election commission but the fact is the main culprit is the Population Registration Department with regard to the distribution of the ID cards that paved the way for fraud and rigging. Criticism from Observers

Election observers, criticising activities of the Population Registration Department and Independent Election Commission (IEC), say lack of coordination had raised serious questions about transparency in the October 20-21 vote.

Mohammad Naeem Ayubzada, executive director of the Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan (TEFA), slammed the large-scale distribution of fake ID cards,

He said: "Unfortunately, we all witnessed that widespread fraud and rigging in the card distribution drive." He linked distribution of fake cards to the delay in Wolesi Jirga election results.

Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) chief Yousuf Rashid also criticized the Population Registration Department (PRD) and the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and said he wished there was coordination in the ID cards distribution and the voter registration process.

He said if there had coordination among the certain institutions, today there would not have been questions raised such about election rigging.

Independent Election Commission (IEC) Meanwhile, Zabihullah Sadat, IEC deputy spokesman, said they had also received information about distribution of fake national ID cards, but IEC officials needed tools to recognize such ID cards.

He added that tens of thousands of voters had been removed from the voter lists for missing their date of birth, required age (18 years) and incorrect information or fake information in their national ID cards.

The IEC has entered all voters' ID cards data to the database system but due to lack of electronic information bank at the PRD, the ID cards information could not be matched.

Population Registration Department Roena Shahabi, PRD spokesman, said the topic was outdated and did not need to be discussed whether the PRD chief or other staff had distributed demographic forms.

She said their department never distributed demographic forms but some individuals with malicious designs had been attempting to derail the national process.

She said the October 20 and 21 Wolesi Jirga elections were not possible if the ID cards distribution process was not successful.

She rejected as baseless propaganda that Pakistanis had been issued Afghan ID cards and if there was any evidence in this regard it should be directly shared with the judicial organs.

When asked how many ID cards were distributed to eligible people during the voter registration process ahead of the Wolesi Jirga elections and how much the process cost, she said such questions should be asked from the PRD leadership.

However, PRD officials did not provide information about these questions. (Pajhwok)

(5) Peace Efforts...

The Chief Executive' Office, however, said that the government leaders are ready to step down for the sake of ensuring lasting peace in the country, adding that so far they have not seen any sign of peace from the Taliban.

It comes as the government has repeatedly said that the upcoming presidential elections will not be compromised in the peace process and that it will be held on the scheduled time. (ATN)

(6) Donors Urged...

in Sarwan Kala and Garmaab localities of Sangain district late on Saturday night.

Alokozai said his relatives were among those killed.

CPAG once again called on the government to control civilian deaths by introducing all those commanders and individuals involved in their killings to the judicial organs. (Pajhwok)

(7) Trees Still Cut...

Mountain is called "National Park" and we hope the government will deploy some Afghan Local Policemen (ALP) and plant some fruit trees."

Paktia agriculture department head Mohammaddin Momand also confirmed the issue and said still nearly 30 percent of the province's forests was lost to illegal logging but efforts were underway with the help of local councils and tribal agreements to fully protect the forests. (Pajhwok)

(8) Middlesex Sign...

"He will join up with the Middlesex squad in early July to prepare for the tournament ahead."

Law said Rahman, who played for Hampshire in the competition last year, would add a unique style to the bowling attack.

"It is with great pleasure to say that Mujeeb has agreed to play for Middlesex in the Blast," said Law.

"His unique style of spin has proven to be difficult to play against and his record is outstanding in this format."

"I'm sure the staff and players at Middlesex are looking forward to working with him this season," added the 50-year-old Australian, who stepped down from his role as West Indies coach last year. (AFP)

(9) NATO Ministers...

initiative, which requires allies to have 30 land battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels ready for use within 30 days.

SACEUR and SACT will provide updates on these subjects, including work to adapt the NATO command structure. In the evening, the ministers will discuss burden sharing.

Allies submit annual national plans on defence spending which will be reviewed by Ministers. In Davos, the Secretary General announced that based on the national plans coming in from Allies, European Allies and Canada will add \$100 billion by the end of next year.

On February 15, ministers will review NATO operations in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq and at sea. They will end with a session with the European Union and Finland and Sweden for talks on European defence initiatives and NATO-EU cooperation. (Pajhwok)

(10) Taliban militants...

Air Force carried out airstrikes using MD-530 helicopters against the militant in Hazrat Sultan area located in the provincial capital of Kunduz which left two militants dead and three others wounded.

The anti-government armed militant groups including Taliban have not commented regarding the operations so far. (KP)

(11) Two Moldovan...

Dodon, who has fostered close ties between Chisinau and Moscow, said the two pilots were freed on February 9 following several months of negotiations.

Their release was achieved "only because of the help provided by the leadership of the Russian Federation, which had responded to my personal request," the Moldovan president said. (RFE/RL)