

(1) Afghan Taliban...

Pakistani and Iranian officials said they were trying to persuade the Taliban to meet Afghan officials. Another senior Taliban leader confirmed the Qatar meeting and said no other country would be involved. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) took part in the last round of talks in December.

"This time we want to hold talks with the American officials," said a Taliban leader based in Afghanistan, adding that they would discuss a U.S. withdrawal, prisoner exchange and the lifting of a ban on movement of their leaders.

The war in Afghanistan is America's longest overseas military intervention. It has cost Washington nearly a trillion dollars and killed tens of thousands of people.

The United States, which sent troops to Afghanistan in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington and at the peak of the deployment had more than 100,000 troops in the country, withdrew most of its forces in 2014, but still keeps around 14,000 troops there as part of a NATO-led mission aiding Afghan security forces and hunting militants.

Reports last month about U.S. President Donald Trump's plans to withdraw thousands of troops from Afghanistan triggered uncertainty in Kabul which depends on the United States and other foreign powers for military support and training.

The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan did not immediately respond to a request for comment. (Reuters)

(2) Kunduz: Protesting...

successful in the elections," she alleged.

As election officials in Kunduz refused to comment on the allegations, the governor's spokesman held discussions with protesting candidates and conveyed their demands to the relevant officials.

"But the commissions are independent in their work and it is up to them how to deal with the protesters' concerns," Esmatullah Muradi said. (Pajhwok)

(3) 'Presidential Poll...

Election oversight institutes say early start of the registration process of candidates and the delay in presidential election would prolong the time of campaigning and pave the ground for election tickets currently in power to hire their teams at top government posts in the capital and provinces so they are able to engineer elections in their favor, experts say.

Meanwhile, the Independent Commission of Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution also described the delay in the presidential elections as "a clear violation of the Constitution."

On January 1, a number of potential presidential elections including Mohammad Hanif Atmar, Ahmad Wali Massoud and Rahmatullah Nabil criticized the IEC for delaying the presidential vote from April 20 to July 20 and accused the government of pre-poll engineering.

They claimed the IEC delayed the election under pressure from the government the mandate of which would end on May 22.

The IEC has recently announced re-scheduling the presidential election from April 20 to July 20, but said the candidate registration would continue from Jan 3 to Jan 20.

According to the election law, the date of presidential election should be determined 180 days before the Election Day and the schedule for it be prepared 120 days ahead.

The article 71 of the election law says, "The Commission shall announce the election date at least (180) days before the Election Day. Conducting by elections shall be an exception to this provision. (2) The Commission shall publish the Electoral Calendar at least (120) days before the Election Day."

Shahla Farid, a political science lecturer in Kabul University, called the IEC decision to delay to the presidential ballot as 'a clear violation of the election law' and said the move needed to be reconsidered and the cost on the three-month delay

should be measured.

She said the government was responsible to provide resources and protection to candidates. "The government must provide security for candidates after their registration but their security needs guards and vehicles which cost a lot of money." Article 61 of the Constitution says: "The President shall be elected by receiving more than 50 percent of the votes cast by voters through free, general, secret and direct voting."

The presidential term shall expire on 1st of Jawza of the fifth year after elections. Elections for the new President shall be held within thirty to sixty days prior to the end of the presidential term.

Farid said the delay in elections would not only pave the ground for selling and buying votes but also for the misuse of political power and an opportunity for a pre scheduled election campaign.

She further said in a country where the law was violated, everything was disturbed such as economy, the people and democracy and such steps in the long term would bring the legitimacy of the system under question.

Election watchdogs

Yousuf Rashid, Executive Head of the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), said the delay in the presidential election was the authority of a specific committee mentioned in the election law.

The plan for the election delay should have been shared with the committee which could have decided in this regard, he said.

He said the commission was bound to announce an election schedule 120 days before the conduct of presidential voting. Early registration of candidates would give birth to some issues including early campaigning, attracting public votes, illegal expenditures and more chances for rigging.

Rashid said the early candidate registration had disturbed the overall political environment of the country.

He criticised the IEC for taking no measures so far for the safety and security of candidate.

Ministry of Interior (MoI)

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has said discussion on security of election candidates has been kicked off with authorities concerned.

Nasrat Rahimi, MoI deputy spokesman, said: "Initial discussion regarding the security and safety of election candidates has been started and would be shared with the people when finalized."

The Independent Election Commission (IEC)

The IEC maintains it needs more time to make preparations for the presidential poll, keeping in mind past experiences. The decision to delay the presidential polls was made in consultation with the institutions and donor countries concerned, the commission says.

IEC deputy spokesman Zabihullah Sadaat said security of candidates was discussed at a recent meeting with security officials and the commission demanded the security strategy to be shared with the presidential palace.

He did not provide more information in this regard, but added: "We will let the media know when the strategy of candidates' security is shared with us," he said.

Referring to the creation of more problems as a result of early candidate registration, the IEC spokesman said everything had been clearly stated in the election schedule of presidential poll and no one was allowed to violate the schedule.

He said every candidate would be dealt with in accordance with the law in case of any violation of the IEC rules. (Pajhwok)

(4) Iran-Pakistan...

China and Russia to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan and to seek the three countries' support in the peace process in Afghanistan.

In his trip to Tehran, Qureshi met his Iranian counterpart Mohammad-Javad Zarif and the two discussed the importance of stability, security and constructive convergence in the region, especially among Afghans and

the cooperation of the two countries in this regard.

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassem announced last week that Taliban would visit Iran last week and noted the main goal of the talks was to find approaches or facilitators to advance the talks between Afghan groups and the Afghan government. (IRNA)

(5) Trump, Modi Discuss...

While stating that he got along with PM Modi, the US President said PM Modi was "constantly telling me he built a library in Afghanistan."

"You know what that is? That's like five hours of what we spend," he said.

"And we're supposed to say, 'Oh, thank you for the library.' I don't know who's using it in Afghanistan," Trump said.

It was unclear to which project Trump was referring, but India has committed \$3 billion in assistance to Afghanistan since US-led forces toppled the Taliban regime after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Projects have included the reconstruction of an elite high school in Kabul and scholarships to India for 1,000 Afghan students each year. (Tolo news)

(6) Afghan Migrants...

in search of work to support struggling families.

Smugglers can charge \$300-\$500 per person, turning it into a multi-million industry.

An estimated 1.5 million to two million "undocumented" Afghans are in Iran, the United Nations' refugee agency said in September, citing government estimates.

Another one million are registered as refugees.

Many of the families of migrants are farmers who have been suffering through Afghanistan's worst drought in living memory, compounding the misery caused by 17 years of conflict and underscoring their reliance on the remittances.

"There were no jobs in Afghanistan so I had to go to Iran for work," said Mohammad Sarwar, 39, who worked as a labourer for four months before he was arrested by Iranian police and deported.

"If I can make some money here, I will never go back to Iran," he said at the IOM's busy transit centre in the western Afghan city of Herat, roughly 140 kilometres (90 miles) from the border.

Abdul Hakim, 28, had just found a job in Iran after a month of searching when he was detained and kicked out. He faces an uncertain future as he tries to find a way to support his wife and three young children.

"The situation is very bad in Afghanistan," said Hakim, who comes from the northwestern province of Badghis, which has been hit hard by the drought.

Some, like 75-year-old Naseruddin, who only gave one name, have returned to Afghanistan penniless.

"I was there for five months but the police caught me," he said.

"I have no money on me." Nearly half of the returnees -- 358,065 -- volunteered to come back to Afghanistan after watching their earnings shrivel up and jobs disappear.

Iran's rial lost around half its value against the dollar last year after US President Donald Trump pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal.

That move triggered a reimposition of tough sanctions on the Islamic republic, which have exacerbated the country's economic problems. (AFP)

(7) Afghanistan...

tons of dried fruits to London. Sameer Rasa, head of the Public Relations Office of the Senior Advisor to the President in Banking and Financial affairs, said the number of flights through the air corridors will increase from six per week to ten in the coming future.

He added that agreement was reached with Kam Air Airlines on one flight a week to export pine nuts to China. (Wadsam)

(8) U.S. Embassy...

been displaced because of the drought. This assistance is provided to displaced communities where they are located this winter on an emergency basis, with a view to-

ward early recovery of these communities this spring. So far, international assistance has reached 2.6 million Afghans in 22 drought-affected provinces, the majority of them in their home communities.

Altogether the United States has provided over \$228 million in humanitarian relief nationwide. This includes a recent delivery of temporary shelters and winter supplies for over 10,000 families in the two provinces, over 70,000 people total, and the distribution of those materials is now completed. (PR)

(9) Insecurity May...

"Now is the time to eliminate the insurgents. If the weather gets warm, there would be little chances of beating them," the official believed. Amaruuddin, a resident of Kunduz City, agreed the insurgency was expanding in the province with each passing day. "Since people have been in a state of fear, the government should address the issue."

Local officials and residents believed holding the presidential election in the summer would not be possible if the fighters re not suppressed right away.

With regard to public concerns about the security situation, police chief Brig. Gen. Abdul Baqi Nuristani acknowledged the existence of insecurity in the province. However, he opined the situation had not yet spun out of control.

Nuristani promised an operation against the insurgents would be launched soon in insecure areas of the province. (Pajhwok)

(10) Atmar Agrees...

his first and Mohammad Mohaqiq his second running mates in the upcoming presidential election.

However, Qanoni in the audio said they would not accept the vice-presidency of any candidate who opposed changing the CEO position to premiership.

He said CEO Dr. Abdullah Abdullah had encouraged Salahuddin Rabbani to join Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah had reached a deal with Ghani based on which Salahuddin would be Ghani's vice-president and Abdullah would continue as the CEO.

Qanoni and Hanif Atmar have not yet commented about the audio tape which has sparked reactions from people in the social media.

Mahbobullah Khan, on his Facebook wall, said: "Our politicians think only about taking the government and changing it, but they do not care about the public, this story has been ongoing for the past four decades."

Abdul Jabbar Andar, another Facebook user, said Hanif Atmar had been a failure since the beginning as he did not properly understand the Afghan society.

"Atmar thinks he would take the power by making deals with corrupt electoral tickets, but it is impossible, anyone who ignored the hopes of the majority for illegitimate demands of a minority would not succeed," he said.

Mahbob Shah Mahbob, another social media user, said, "The Constitution is more important to us than any other document, we are against those who seek power by making deals over the constitution."

However, another Facebook user, Babrak Omar supported Hanif Atmar and said the audio clip was fake because similar audio clips had appeared in the last presidential election.

He said Atmar had not confirmed the audio content and it was not Atmar's or anyone else authority to change the Constitution, but it needed a Loya Jirga or grand council. (Pajhwok)

(11) Turkey Emerges...

including al-Qaeda, while the United States and NATO would end their military missions and withdraw within 18 months.

Some analysts had muted hopes for the Turkey peace talks. Latif Arasch, a Kabul-based political analyst, thinks neither the Taliban nor Washington will participate in the Turkey talks, but that the summit could still mend ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

For Bismillah Randschbar, an expert on Central Asia at the Afghan Center

for Strategic Studies, the end of the conflict could still be a long ways off. "We can only hope for peace when there are synchronized efforts in a certain direction, when these efforts do not cancel each other out," he told DW. (Monitoring Desk)

(12) Salang Highway...

northern parts of the tunnel.

Dozens of trucks have been stranded in the Pash-i-Sorkh locality of the Jabalus Saraj district of Parwan province and in the Malkhan area of Baghlan province.

In the winter, travelling the highway is dangerous for passengers due to heavy snow and cold weather. (Pajhwok)

(13) Over 1,700...

and over 6,600 others are waiting for treatment.

"If the patients who have been treated face any problems after six months or one year, their problems should be identified and they should be retreated," Salim Baharmand, head of the health section at ARCS said.

On Monday the ARCS sent 40 children with cardiac disease to a hospital in Kabul as well as outside the country for treatment.

Somaya who is seven months old was among the children sent for treatment. Her family said when she was born, they discovered something was wrong with her.

"Even before my daughter was born, doctors told me that my wife lacked blood cells and should eat better food and fruit. When my daughter was born, after three days we noticed she had a cardiac disease (hole in the heart) and we began efforts to treat her," Faiz Mohammad, father of Somaya said.

Nasir Ahmad, 2, is one of the children who was treated with the last group. Ahmad's father said now he is healthy and can eat food and play like other children.

"He had a fever, his weight was very low and his skin color was not normal. When we went to ARCS, we were on a waiting list. They called us after a year. Now seven months have been passed since my boy's treatment and he is in good health," Gul Wazir, Ahmad's father said.

ARCS officials said they will inaugurate a hospital next year in Kabul, which will have modern equipment and better opportunities to treat cardiac disease inside the country. (Tolo news)

(14) Operations Against...

heels of raids on Taliban hideouts. The locality security forces were supported by NATO troops two days back in Alamar and Andkhoy districts, where dozens of rebels were killed and wounded. Khalid called the security operations important, saying the militants had suffered heavy casualties over the past few days. "Our fight is aimed at bringing peace to the country," Khalid said. "Our pressure will continue as long as the enemy continues to show obstinacy."

According to Khalid, the Afghan Army is in a better position in terms of equipment, training and operations against militants.

Bek, the IDLG head, said they wanted to study the general security situation in the province. Around 50 rebels suffered casualties in the latest clearing operations. He sought credit for IDLG for the better security environment.

Governor Naqibullah Faiq said Faryab had witnessed widespread insecurity before the arrival of reinforcements and NATO forces, who had defeated the militants.

He said military operations and pressure on militants would provide an opportunity for peace negotiations with Taliban. Talks continued throughout the province between the Taliban and influential tribal elders, he added, calling the outcome satisfactory. Shansab's case referred to court, says AGO. (Pajhwok)

(15) Baghlan Highway...

people had been brought to the civil hospital in Pul-i-Khumri, the provincial capital.

"Three civilians and six policemen who were injured in the incident have been delivered at the hospital and their condition is stable," he said. Baghlan security officials refused to comment about the incident as per orders of the Ministry of Interior.

The Taliban also have so far said nothing about the attack, which comes a week after nine police were killed in a Taliban attack on a security post in Pul-i-Khumri. (Pajhwok)