

Assad Blocks Access to Damascus for EU Envoys: Diplomats

BRUSSELS - Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has revoked special visas for European Union diplomats and officials traveling regularly between Beirut and Damascus, complicating efforts to distribute aid to civil war victims, three senior EU diplomats said.

Since conflict broke out in Syria in 2011, the EU has used the Lebanese capital, the nearest major

city, for its diplomatic base while closing most embassies in Damascus in protest over what they describe as Assad's brutal assault on the opposition.

But the special permission to use multiple-entry Syrian visas for access to Damascus was rescinded at the start of January with no explanation from the Syrian government, the EU diplomats said, meaning personnel have to apply

for time-consuming, single-entry visas every time they wish to travel.

The EU diplomats who spoke on condition of anonymity said they believed it was an attempt to try to force European governments and the bloc to re-open embassies in Damascus, as the Syrian army, backed by Russian and Iranian forces, regains control of most of the country. (Reuters)

Ships Catch Fire in Black Sea Killing at Least 14, Russia Says

MOSCOW - At least 14 sailors were killed and five others were missing Monday after commercial vessels caught fire in the Black Sea, Russian officials said.

Russia's Federal Agency for the Sea and River Transport said the fire erupted while fuel was being pumped between the two Tanzanian-flagged tankers, the Maestro and the Candy. Russian news agencies reported the flames spread

from one ship to the other, forcing the crews to jump overboard.

The news agencies quoted the federal maritime agency as saying the two vessels had 31 total crew members -- citizens of Turkey and India. The maritime agency said salvage teams have saved 12 crewmembers. It said crews recovered 11 bodies from the sea, adding that rescuers saw another three dead but failed to recover them. (Fox News)

(1) CEO Speaks...

"The fundamental obstacle has been the Taliban have refused at times, in most recently as well to sit together directly with the Afghan government to talk and discuss the issues including the concept of governance, including the issue of withdrawal of American troops or NATO, what they say is that we talk to the Americans about the troops withdrawal and we will try to be more inclusive when we rule again, I think that is the main obstacle. But by sitting around the table, one can find ways because they also have a stake in peace," said Abdullah.

He said that the Afghan government does not have any preconditions for talks.

"Taliban have certain ideas, a lot has changed in Afghanistan in the past 18 years. This is a misconception that these changes were imposed upon the people of Afghanistan; yes, the support from international community and the space it created, it helped these changes, but people will not go back on their rights," he said after being asked about government's redlines on education and women rights in the country.

He warned certain countries in the region against supporting terrorism and extremism and said that such an approach will harm those who provide sanctuaries to them. This comes a day after the Taliban confirmed that its delegation had held talks with US representatives in Doha, Qatar after the US side accepted the agenda tabled by the group for discussion.

"Following American acceptance of the agenda of ending invasion of Afghanistan and preventing Afghanistan from being used against other countries in the future, talks with American representatives took place today in Doha, the capital of Qatar. The session will also continue tomorrow," said Zabiullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban.

This comes shortly after US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad's visit to Islamabad where he met senior Pakistani civilian and military officials including Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi Qureshi, as well as Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua and Chief of Army Staff Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa.

His aim was to help cement concrete steps for the peace process in Afghanistan.

"We're heading in the right direction with more steps by Pakistan coming that will lead to concrete results," Khalilzad tweeted after meeting top Pakistani officials in Islamabad on Sunday.

Nevertheless, officials from the High Peace Council (HPC) have expressed hope that the current diplomatic efforts between the countries involved on the situation in Afghanistan will lead to direct peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, the Taliban, who claim to have control over large swathes

of land in Afghanistan, have ignored calls by the international community to engage in intra-Afghan dialogue.

"We are paving the way for a swift start of talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government delegation so that the year of 2019 marks the year of the beginning of talks," said HPC spokesman, Sayed Ehsan Tahiri.

In February last year, President Ashraf Ghani addressed the second Kabul Process meeting and proposed unconditional peace talks with the Taliban as part of his efforts to bring the group to the peace table.

However, he clarified later that an unconditional peace offer to the Taliban does not mean the end of the war in the country.

Later, the Taliban rejected the Afghan government's offer of peace talks and the response was another blow to hopes that an unprecedented Eid ceasefire, announced by the Afghan government and the Taliban, could be a step towards more lasting peace.

This new development takes place amid a deteriorating security situation which has gripped the country since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001.

Afghan civilians and members of security forces have been dying in record numbers in the face of a resurgent Taliban in the country in the past few years.

The most recent of a string of deadly attacks saw a Taliban suicide bomber detonating a car loaded with explosives close to an NDS training base in Maidan Shahr, the capital of Maidan Wardak province, on Monday.

This camp was only a few kilometers east of Kabul. Dozens of Afghan security personnel were killed and wounded in the explosion.

The Trump administration meanwhile initiated direct contact with the Taliban in July last year, but a meeting last month in the United Arab Emirates was facilitated by the Pakistani government, after Trump requested Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan help with the reconciliation process.

Washington has in recent months ramped up pressure on Islamabad to play its role in overcoming the deadlock and moving towards intra-Afghan dialogue. (Tolo news)

(2) Attacks in Syria...

The attack "was another indication of the violence stretching the Afghan government's defenses, even as the United States may be preparing to withdraw some of its troops," The New York Times said in its dispatch from Kabul. "It was a sign, analysts said, of how violence is likely to grow deadlier even as the sides of the long war have indicated a willingness to seek a negotiated settlement." (AP)

(3) Protesting...

rejected the IECC decision as hasty and politically motivated.

Talking on behalf of others, Qureshi called for the removal of election commissioners and plac-

ing them on the exit control list. The protesters warned of continued demonstrations if their demands were not met. (Pajwhok)

(4) 'Some Taliban...

Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi was barred from any type of activities (after the UAE meeting), the Taliban sources said.

Some Taliban commanders also opposed the idea of sending Mullah Muttaqi to the UAE meeting.

The source added talks between the Taliban and the US went 'successful' in Doha meeting on Monday and the dialogue resumed today.

The Taliban said their agenda for the Qatar meeting carried two key points ---the US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan and assuring the US that no one from Afghanistan would threaten others in future.

Before Doha meeting, US special representative for Afghan reconciliation process, ZalmayKhalilzad was in Islamabad for four days.

It is said the US and Pakistan tried to arrange the new round talks in Pakistan, but the Taliban refused to do so.

The Taliban in a statement said they did not meet the US representative in Islamabad. (Pajwhok)

(5) Ex-Soldier...

The Guardian reported that another Afghanistan war veteran who contracted Q fever won a compensation claim against the MoD last year. Phillip Eaglesham, a former Royal Marine commando corporal, contracted the chronic condition two days before he was due to return home from a tour of duty in 2010.

Eaglesham's lawyers had argued that the MoD should have known that the infection was present in southern Afghanistan and that it could have prevented it causing serious illness.

Q fever is caused by a bacterium typically found in cattle, sheep, and goats. The animals transmit the bacteria in urine, feces, milk and other fluids.

These substances can dry inside a barnyard where contaminated dust can float in the air.

Humans get Q fever when they breathe in the contaminated air.

In rare cases, drinking unpasteurized milk can cause infection but the bacteria cannot be spread directly from one human to another. The exact frequency of Q fever isn't known because most cases aren't reported.

Complications of Q Fever are not that common but can occur if the infection affects a person's heart, liver, lungs, or brain.

According to the US's CDC, chronic Q fever occurs in less than five percent of infected patients.

The most common and serious complication of Q fever is a heart condition called bacterial endocarditis, which is the inflammation of the inside lining of the heart chambers and heart valves, which is called the endocardium.

This can cause damage to your heart valves and may be fatal if it isn't treated. (Agencies)

(6) Turkey Warns...

About the U.S. decision to pull out from Syria, Celik said: "Turkey

has the capacity to fight Daesh and to take over security in [Syria's] Manbij. Thus, it has the capacity to form a safe zone [in Syria]."

Last month, U.S. President Donald Trump abruptly announced plans to withdraw American forces from the war-weary country.

Trump made the decision during a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in which the two leaders agreed on the need for more effective coordination vis-à-vis Syria.

In a phone call last week, Erdogan and Trump discussed the idea of establishing a terror-free safe zone in northern Syria near the Turkish border. (AA)

(7) Local Firm...

Meanwhile, a number of officials from Afghanistan Industries Association said, in addition to electricity, lack of raw materials is another big challenge faced by iron melting factories.

Currently, in addition to Maihan Factory, over 24 other iron melting factories are active in the country and their biggest source of raw material is from scrap iron. (Tolo news)

(8) Botsali, Deputy...

briefed Ambassador Botsali on the Kabul Process 3rd meeting and informed him the OIC mission would be part of consultations prior to the event. (Pajwhok)

(9) Rashid Kha...

World Cup Qualifier.

According to the statement, Rashid helped Afghanistan grab a berth in the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup in 2019.

The ICC ODI team of the year comprised of Sharma (India), Jonny Bairstow (England), Virat Kohli (India), Joe Root (England), Ross Taylor (New Zealand), Jos Buttler (England), Ben Stokes (England), Mustafizur Rahman (Bangladesh), Rashid Khan (Afghanistan), Kuldeep Yadav (India) and Jasprit Bumrah (India).

Kohli scored 1,322 runs at an average of 55.08 with five centuries in 13 Tests and 1,202 runs at an average of 133.55 with six hundreds in 14 ODIs. He ended 2018 as the top-ranked Test and ODI batsman in the MRF Tyres ICC Player Rankings. (Pajwhok)

(10) Nearly 2m Eligible...

factors of joblessness and ways of creating jobs, we also took measures to gradually reduce unemployment."

Zaki said dealing with joblessness was not the responsibility of the labor and social affairs ministry only but all people and national and international organizations should play part in this regard.

About the achievements of his ministry in reducing joblessness, he said the ministry implemented 59 different programs for creating work opportunities since the national work conference this year. (Pajwhok)

(11) Khwahan Residents...

said local officials were in contact with the Tajikistan consul general in the province on reopening the

bridge, but they were yet to receive a convincing response.

Shah Wali, a resident of Khwahan district, told Pajwhok that the price of a bag of 20-kilogram rice increased from 2,200 afghanis to 2,600 afghanis, a 500kg bag of flour from 1,200 afghanis to 2,000af, a tin of 18kg of ghee from 1,600af to 2,000af and 49kg of sugar from 2,500af to 3,500af.

He said local people were in trouble and the officials concerned should find a solution to the bridge blockade.

Besides the border bridge closure, all transport routes to the district have also been closed with the provincial capital due to heavy snowfall. (Pajwhok)

(12) Taliban Collect...

The militants have been forcing people, including the president's grower, to pay them harvests, he said. "Seventeen years ago when Ghani was appointed as minister of finance, since then his relatives are facing security problems."

One of the president's farmers, who was detained by the National Directorate of Security (NDS) personnel on the charges of providing crops to the Taliban, remained in custody, he added.

According to Ahmadzai, another grower of Ghani had been shot dead by the Taliban in Waghjan area of Mohammad Agha district. Ajmal, a resident of Surkhab area, said their area was under Taliban's control and the 10th part of every crop harvest went to the militants in the name of Usher. He confirmed the rebels collected yields from the president's land.

Abdul Wali Wakeel, deputy head of the provincial council, said the Taliban collected usher from many lands in Logar province and they used to punish those refusing to pay it.

"Poor and wealthy all are forced to pay part of their crops to the Taliban who forcibly take away yield from lands which belong to government officials," he informed.

Shamshad Larawy, the governor's spokesman, said there were allegations that the Taliban collected usher from people.

About the collection of yields from the president's land, he refused to give information. However, said they would arrest and punish those involved in forcibly taking usher from farmers, but it needed people's cooperation.

The Taliban also confirmed they collected usher from people in Logar province, including the head of the Kabul administration. (Pajwhok)

(13) 7 Taliban Militants...

destroyed a vehicle-borne IED, the officials said adding that "Taliban fighters continue to use VBIEDs and innocent civilians are wounded and killed as a result."

Both the Afghan and coalition forces have stepped up ground operations and airstrikes in the restive provinces of the country to suppress the anti-government armed elements. (KP)