

(1) Afghanistan ...

Earnest said the president is certainly pleased with the performance of the US military and NATO partners.

"We've actually seen from the Afghans a willingness to fight for their country, a willingness to respond to losses and to recover from them and fight back," he said.

The US, he noted, would continue to have intensive conversations with its NATO partners about how they can contribute to the ongoing efforts inside of Afghanistan.

"I would say that over the last 15 years we've seen countries in NATO make substantial contributions to the situation in Afghanistan, and they're going to need to sustain those kinds of contributions moving forward," he said.

"And I'm confident that that will be an important part of the discussions over the course of this year leading up to the NATO summit that's planned for later this summer," Earnest said. (PTI)

(2) EU Optimistic ...

worked very well," he said.

The European diplomat said that the peace process will be time consuming.

"I think we will see negotiations with the Taliban at the table again within a reasonable amount of time. The key issue is that everybody should understand that one thing is to meet, something else is to have real negotiations on peace and unfortunately I believe that will take quite a while to achieve, but taking the first step again is very important and very positive and people should just allow the process to take the time it has to take."

He went on to say: "We know from many other countries that peace processes are lengthy processes and being realistic about what we can expect will be good, but having talks going on, even if they are not deep talks in the beginning, is a first very important step."

He believes that the Taliban by conducting with bombings and suicide attacks cannot achieve their goals.

"Suicide attacks don't change anything. If anything, it makes Afghan people come closer together. These attacks are purely done for messaging reasons and to mobilize money support for the Taliban by creating headlines. It has nothing to do with fight against the state. These attacks harm Afghan citizens all over the country," he said.

The third meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States is expected to take place within seven days in Islamabad, Pakistan. (Tolnews)

(3) Migrant Deaths...

Just looking at my notes from the last few briefings, two weeks ago, we reported 50 had died on this route, a week later 95, a few days after that almost 160, so it's doubling almost every time I come here and as of today 218. As point reference, there weren't this many deaths on the Aegean side of the Mediterranean last year until the middle of September," a spokesman for the IOM, Joel Millman, said.

The victims and survivors from Thursday's shipwreck are all Kurds and Iraqis according to the IOM, who reported that a survey from this week of migrants and refugees arriving in Greece revealed that 90 percent were from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. The IOM said that they were alarmed by the size of the boat that sank on Thursday, which was made of wood and had 65 migrant passengers though it was designed to carry only 30 people. Millman added that the severe overcrowding of the ships could mean smugglers believe that the Aegean Sea route will not remain open much longer.

"Clearly something has changed because these boats are less sea worthy and they seem to be leaving packed in greater numbers, so that speaks to perhaps a panic in the market that this is not going to last much longer," he said. More than 900,000 people fleeing Syria, Afghanistan and other war-torn or impoverished countries arrived in Greece from Turkey last year, often risking the short but dangerous sea crossing in overloaded boats. The inflow has continued una-

bated through the winter months despite the cold conditions and choppy sea, with about 2,000 people landing on Greece's islands a day, according to data by the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR.

The 218 deaths on the route linking Turkey to Greece in the first four weeks of January 2016 are almost four times those recorded last year through mid-August. During the whole of 2015, some 805 migrants and refugees perished in these waters. (Tolnews)

(4) Govt. Scorns...

Ghani's deputy spokesman, said the insurgents tried desperately to alter the country's geography. However, he insisted, the militants did not succeed in their nefarious designs.

He said most of the areas had been retaken from the insurgents after conclusive operations by the security forces. The fighters did not have the ability to stay in control of the areas they captured, he observed.

Hashemi said the 3rd quadrilateral meeting would take place in Islamabad in the coming week which when representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US would decide on a framework for peace talks. (Pajhwok)

(5) Watchdog...

parliament had risen for its winter recess.

Mehsud Tarashwal, spokesman for the Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council (APSC), asked the government to arrange a Loya Jirga to approve the power-sharing formula before the expiry of the deadline in September. He promised the APSC would play an active role in the future elections and would not allow the democratic exercise to happen before the necessary reforms were brought to the system.

Earlier, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) had announced the schedule for parliamentary and district council elections. The panel says it is ready to conduct the election on October 15, 2016.

It has promised mistakes of the 2014 presidential vote would not be repeated. The coming polls would be fully transparent, the commission chairman assured, claiming the panel had learnt a lot from past experiences.

But the Chief Executive Office said the schedule for parliamentary and district council elections would be announced by new commissioners and the current timetable was unacceptable.

Javed Faisal, deputy spokesman for the CE Office, said the date announced by the IEC had no justification because the government and people wanted the electoral regime to be reformed before new elections. (Pajhwok)

(6) We Don't Need ...

those connected with the situation in Afghanistan."

Lavrov himself was a little more specific, telling reporters that Ashgabat had described some "additional measures" that they were taking on the border, and that they didn't need Moscow's help.

"Help is offered when it is needed," Lavrov said. "Today we were informed about additional measures that Turkmenistan's leadership is taking to secure its border with modern technological means in the safe mode. If they need help in these efforts, of course, we will be interested. But I will repeat once again. Today our Turkmen friends told us in detail how they protect the border with Afghanistan. We proceed from this."

Turkmenistan, officially neutral and highly insular, is reluctant to take any foreign help. U.S. military officials reported a year ago that Ashgabat had asked them for (unspecified) help with respect to guarding the border. That was pretty out of character, and indeed when a U.S. diplomat visited Ashgabat in November Turkmenistan's government had apparently changed its mind and said it didn't need U.S. help any more. "We have discussed this with our partners here in Turkmenistan, representatives of the government as well as other international organizations," the official, Deputy Assistant Secretary State for South and Central Asia Daniel Rosenblum, said. "And the Turkmenistan government has said that it feels they can guarantee the Turkmen border and doesn't require any additional assistance from outside."

This may not only be connected with neutrality, argued Russian analyst Andrei Kazantsev. "This game is primarily an attempt to not frighten potential investors for gas projects," he told Kommersant. "Secondly, the Turkmen authorities are trying to play at multivectorality, distancing both from Russia and from China." (Agencies)

(7) President, CEO ...

appointed as mayor.

Shariati claimed having held different positions during the jihad period, including the post of Mahmud Raqi mayor from 2001 to 2006.

Provincial council head Husain Sanjani said there were five candidates, including the acting mayor and a former one, for the position. But a final decision was yet to be taken, he added.

Another source close to the government said the president had introduced Khwaja Zmaray for the position, but he was rejected by Dr. Abdullah.

However, CEO's spokesman Javed Faisal said all key appointments were finalised as a result of consultations between the government leaders. The president and the CEO jointly decided on filling key offices, he concluded. (Pajhwok)

(8) Taliban-Designated ...

caught red-handed while forcibly collecting Ushr from residents of the area.

A Kalashnikov assault rifle, rockets and bullets of different kinds were recovered from the detainees, who are currently under investigation. (Pajhwok)

(9) Former Interior ...

parliamentarians, politicians and civil society activists participated in the meeting.

A participant of the event, Mohammad Hassan Haqyar, told Pajhwok Afghan News 14 members of Taliban's Qatar office among 16 representatives of the group took part in the meeting.

Nearly 30 people, including parliamentarians, government officials, the president's cousin, Qayyum Kuchi, former interior minister Omar Daudzai, Anwarul Haq Ahady and civil society activists were also in attendance.

After remarks from Taliban representatives, the former deputy minister of labour and social affairs, Dr. Hassamuddin Hamrah, hailing from Panjsher province, asked the participants to offer fateha for Mullah Omer.

During his speech on the second day of the conference, according to Haqyar, Hamrah was impressed by the remarks from Taliban members and sought prayers for their supreme leader.

In a gesture of reciprocity, Daudzai made a strong pitch for peaceful coexistence, saying the Taliban had suffered a lot over the past few years, when they were tortured at the Guantanamo detention centre.

"I have worked as an ambassador, head of the president's office and interior minister. I apologise to the Taliban if they have been bothered by me," Haqyar quoted Daudzai as saying.

But a colleague of Daudzai, Mohammad Sangar Amirzada, said that the ex-minister's remarks had been quoted out of context. According to him, Daudzai said the people who committed cruelty should apologise.

If any injustice had been committed by the Taliban, they should tender an apology for that and he apologised for any wrongdoing that he might have been guilty of, Amirzada quoted Daudzai as saying.

Kuchi referred to Taliban's atrocities, accusing the insurgents of forcing them to leave their areas and houses, Haqyar recalled.

The president did not have an enmity with the Taliban, but wanted to reconcile with them and that was why he had initiated the peace process, Kuchi argued. "Ghani is not you foe; your enemy is (Prof.) Sayyaf." For their part, the Taliban defended their stance on the deadly attack on the Tolo News van, explaining they did not want to harm any other media outlets. (Pajhwok)

(10) Residents Call ...

demand that central government dispatch reinforcements in the area to counter large numbers of Taliban fighters and they must carry out air strikes to ensure the advance of soldiers, otherwise the operation will not yield

positive results," a resident of Baghlan, Sajjadullah, said.

"It is important to call the air force to fight alongside military personnel on the ground, this will add to their strength," another resident Abdul Khaliq said. Although Baghlan governor Abdul Sattar Murad has accepted that the operation against the insurgents in the area is moving slowly, he stresses that the security forces have achieved major gains.

"I want to assure my countrymen that our forces will review their military campaign when the weather is back to normal," he said.

The Afghan security forces launched their operation against the Taliban in Dand-e-Ghori area of Baghlan last Tuesday after the Taliban blew up a transmission line which transfers electricity from Tajikistan to Kabul. (Tolnews)

(11) US Defence...

Afghanistan for decades, Carter said: "I don't know about decades, but I'll tell you one very positive thing about a presence in that part of the world. Here we have a government that welcomes a presence by the United States." (Pajhwok)

(12) New Video ...

government, but we hear that ISI (Pakistan's military intelligence) is reconciling among them (Mullah Mansour faction plus government). This is a war of politics and the entire people know it. You will soon see the collapse of the entire Faryab province and people will join us.

Because Mullah Rasoul is our elder and their's (rival faction) is Akhter Mansour who works under ISI," Sayed Hashim Hashemi said.

"Akhter Mansour is the killer of Mullah Mohammad Omar. Mullah Rasoul is a Mujahid and the whole world knows this. But Akhter Mansour is the killer of Mullah Mohammad Omar. Akhter Mansour is a branch of Pakistan's ISI. Our elders have announced their disagreements against him. The people maintain rights on us in Islamic perspective and according to Sharia law and human rights," he says in the video.

Despite such contradictions, so far none of the groups have given the green light to negotiate with the government and both have continued their armed attacks against the government.

The new video is the second of its kind after Mansour's rival faction refused to pledge their allegiance to him at a gathering reportedly held in Farah province a few weeks ago.

Meanwhile, the Afghan security institutions have reiterated that the security forces will continue to fight any insurgent group including the Taliban. (Tolnews)

(13) Local Reporter ...

government-run Afghanistan National Radio and Television Network, the statement added.

He was also a cultural advisor for provincial governor Salim Khan Kandozai, according to the statement.

Governor Kandozai condemned the attack, the statement said, adding that local authorities have launched an investigation into the incident.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack.

Earlier in January, seven media workers of a private TV channel were killed and 24 others wounded after a Taliban suicide car bombing struck a minibus in Afghan capital Kabul. (Xinhua)

(14) Power Problems...

resolve the issue," he said.

Power supply has been cut off to both Kabul and Nangarhar. "I ask the government to pay urgent attention to the issue," said the provincial council secretary, Zabihullah Zmaray.

Up to 30 megawatts of electricity is transferred to Nangarhar and Laghman provinces, but at times, the power supply remains suspended for weeks due to technical problems. (Pajhwok)

(15) Taliban ...

might take. The attack in Baghlan cut off 250 megawatts of electricity supply to the capital. Important facilities in Kabul, including hospitals, are being provided thermal electricity.

Two days earlier, Baghlan Governor, Abdul Sattar Barez said initial work on repairing the pylon

had begun and reconnecting the power cables would possibly end in two days.

Earlier, local officials blamed the Taliban for destroying the pylon in Dand-i-Shahabuddin area, but the militants rejected the claim as misleading. The rebels insisted the tower had been hit by the local security forces.

On the other hand, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said insurgents would not target Breshna Shirkat workers tasked with repairing the pylon. (Pajhwok)

(16) 1,300 Criminal...

Unemployment, corruption, release of criminals from prisons and the presence of illegal armed persons are considered as the main reasons behind these crimes.

Meanwhile, Balkh residents voiced their deep concerns regarding these crimes.

"When you park your car and come back you see that it is stolen. You sleep at night and wake up tomorrow and hear that a house is robbed," Sher Mohammad, a resident of Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital city of Balkh province.

Noorullah, another resident of the city, also expressed his concerns over the increase of crime and urged the government to end the problem.

Faranges Sawgand, a member of the Balkh provincial council, alleged that in most cases criminals are not being punished and are being freed by paying bribes.

Sayed Muhammad Yazdanparast, a civil society activist, said that insurgency and crime have raised public concerns. (Tolnews)

(17) European ...

to those asylum seekers, including opposition from within her own conservative camp.

A poll conducted by the weekly magazine Focus published Friday showed that about 40 percent of Germans think Merkel should resign as a result of her handling of the refugee crisis.

Experts say that the coalition government decided to adopt tougher measures for the fear that it would lose support in the upcoming regional elections.

Earlier this week, the Cabinet approved measures that would make it easier to deport foreign criminals, a separate package that ministers drew up amid outrage over sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne blamed largely on foreigners. (Xinhua)

(18) S. Korea, Japan...

the seeds of peace" between the Northeast Asian neighbors.

The countries have struggled to settle disputes stemming from Japan's brutal colonial rule of Korea in the early 20th century and its wartime aggression of China, and school books have often been part of such arguments. (AP)

(19) Erdogan Eyes...

Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and the Balkans, analysts say.

"The visit is part of Turkey's longer term ambition to expand its presence in Latin America, both to increase Turkish influence globally and also to reach out to new potential trade partners," said Aaron Stein, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a US think tank.

With its opening to Latin America, Turkey appears to want to forge new alliances in new regions at a time of tricky ties with the United States, the European Union and Russia. (AFP)

(20) Almost 40 Dead ...

agency reported. "I am afraid the numbers will rise as divers continue the search," Mehmet Unal-Sahin, the mayor of Ayvacik, told the CNN Turk news channel by phone.

"Local people woke up to the sound of screaming migrants and we have been carrying out rescue work since dawn. We have an 80-kilometre-long coast just across from Lesbos, which is very hard to keep under control." At least five of those who died were children, Dogan reported, while rescued migrants were hospitalized with hypothermia symptoms. It said the migrants were of Syrian, Afghan and Myanmar origin. (Reuters)

(21) Raul Castro...

would mark "a new stage in the strengthening of relations between the two countries" following on from President Francois

Hollande's own state visit to Cuba last May, the first by a western head of state in more than half a century.

"This visit is important for Cuba's image," said Eduardo Perera, an expert in international relations at Havana University, specializing in Europe.

"It will undeniably make Cuba shine on the international stage." Havana hopes the visit will allow Cuba to "widen and diversify its relations with France in all possible areas -- politics, economics, trade, finance, investment, culture and cooperation," said Rogelio Sierra, Cuban deputy foreign minister.

Although Washington has yet to lift its half-century trade embargo on Cuba, US and European businesses are jockeying for a place in the market as the island's economy gradually opens up. Hollande urged an end to the blockade, which was imposed in 1962, on his Havana visit. (AFP)

(22) Kazakhstan Might...

government of Kazakhstan's Mangistau region, Svetlana Narshova.

She said the local budget allocated 340 million tenge (around US\$850,000) to build the first refugee center near the border with Uzbekistan.

A refugee center is necessary in emergency situations, she said, adding that no refugees were expected in the region in the near future, however. It is planned to use these funds to buy tents, kitchenware, warm clothes for around 1,000 people. (AKIpress)

AU Summit Opens with Call for Unity to Tackle Africa's Challenges

ADDIS ABABA - The 26th AU Heads of State Summit opened on Saturday in Addis Ababa, with a rallying call for unity, tolerance, respect for human rights and improved governance in order to tackle the continent's myriad challenges effectively.

Dozens of African leaders and a host of foreign dignitaries including the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon and Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, attended the opening ceremony of the summit.

The outgoing AU Chairperson, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe in his opening remarks stressed that unity is key to help overcome social, political and economic challenges blighting the African continent.

"We must speak with one voice as we chart a new chapter on our journey to become self-reliant and free from emerging threats like terrorism, dangerous epidemics and conflicts," Mugabe remarked.

The two-day summit will discuss a range of topics including human rights, women empowerment, financing of the continental body, terrorism, conflicts and reforms in the UN security council. Likewise, African leaders and senior policymakers will also discuss progress achieved in the implementation of development projects identified in the Agenda 2063. (Xinhua)

Singapore Lifts Ban on Transactions with Iran

TEHRAN - Singapore has scrapped its prohibition on transactions with Iran, the latest outcome of the entry into force of Tehran's nuclear agreement with world powers earlier this month. The Monetary Authority of Singapore said the decision to lift the ban on business with Iran took effect on January 28.

The ban was slapped on Iran in June 2012 after the Western governments toughened sanctions against the Islamic Republic over its nuclear program.

"The prohibition had applied to all financial institutions and individuals, as defined in section 27A(6) read with section 27A(7) of the MAS Act, from doing business with the Iranian government, its central bank, any financial institutions in Iran and a branch or subsidiary," Platts weekly said.

The ban had stopped financial institutions in Singapore from "directly or indirectly entering into, continue to participate in, arrange or facilitate the entering into or continued participation in, or any transaction or business relationships" with Iran. (PressTV)