

(1) In Policy Shift...

The shift stems from a realisation by Afghan and American officials that President Trump's South Asia strategy, which was rolled out in August 2017, has not yielded significant progress in undoing Taliban's gains.

Washington's willingness to hold direct parleys with the insurgents was reflective of the sense of urgency in the Trump administration to break the stalemate in Afghanistan, the newspaper said.

The move is perceived as part of a bigger push to inject new momentum into efforts, including last month's unprecedented truce, to bring the war to an end.

The US has also stepped up pressure on Pakistan to stop providing sanctuary to Taliban leaders and a rallying of Islamic nations against the insurgency's ideology. (Pajhwok)

(2) HPC Welcomes...

not making a fundamental difference in rolling back Taliban gains.

US officials said these talks will start without any preconditions and that the future of US and NATO forces will be discussed.

The UK's ambassador to Afghanistan also welcomed the move.

"Such an important and welcome move," UK ambassador to Afghanistan Nicolas Kay tweeted.

The apparent strategy shift, which was confirmed by several senior American and Afghan officials, is intended to bring the two positions closer and lead to broader, formal negotiations to end the long war.

According to the New York Times report, the government controls or influences 229 of Afghanistan's 407 districts, and the Taliban 59. The remaining 119 districts are contested, according to the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which was created by Congress to monitor progress in the country.

Taliban called for direct talks with US

On February 27, the Taliban called for direct talks with the US to find a "peaceful solution" to the conflict in Afghanistan, after months of escalating attacks.

In a statement posted online following the call for direct talks, the Taliban said it "calls on American officials to talk directly to the Political Office of Islamic Emirate regarding a peaceful solution to the Afghan quandary."

The Taliban, which views the Afghan government as illegitimate, has long said that the militant group would only negotiate with the US. The US has generally insisted that the Afghan government must be involved.

Trump ruled out direct talks

In January, Trump ruled out holding talks with the Taliban, following a spate of deadly bombings by the militants in Kabul and other major Afghan towns which killed and wounded hundreds of Afghan civilians and military personnel.

The attacks included an assault on the capital's luxury Intercontinental Hotel, an ambulance bomb in a crowded street and a raid on a military compound, that killed more than 130 people.

"I don't see any talking taking place," Trump said.

"I don't think we're prepared to talk right now. It's a whole different fight over there. They're killing people left and right. Innocent people are being killed left and right," he said.

Conflicting messages on talks

But the Trump administration sent out conflicting messages on talks with the Taliban. In September 2017, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis underscored that the point of expanding military involvement in Afghanistan was to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table.

"I want to reinforce to the Taliban that the only path to peace and political legitimacy for them is through a negotiated settlement," Mattis said. But several months later, following a spate of coordinated attacks by the Taliban in Kabul, which left over 100 people dead, Trump said the US had no interest in talking to the Taliban. "So there's no talking to the Taliban. We don't want to talk to the Taliban. We're going to finish what we have to finish," Trump said.

But last week during a surprise visit to Afghanistan, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo promised that the US would support Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's efforts to restart peace talks with the Taliban, following a successful simultaneous ceasefire the previous month.

"An element of the progress is the capacity that we now have to believe that there is now hope," Pompeo said.

"Many of the Taliban now see that they can't win on the ground militarily. That's ... deeply connected to President Trump's strategy," he added.

In recent weeks US officials have flown to Afghanistan and Pakistan where they reportedly tried to lay the groundwork for these talks and assure the Afghans that they are only meant to be a precursor to broader talks.

Unilateral Ceasefire

As part of his good-will gesture for peace, on June 7, Ghani announced a ceasefire with the Taliban after 2,000 religious scholar met in Kabul and issued a fatwa against the ongoing war in the country.

"With the ceasefire announcement, we emphasize the strength of the Afghan government and the will of the people for a peaceful resolution to the Afghan conflict," Ghani said in a video message posted to the Presidential Palace's Facebook page.

"This ceasefire is an opportunity for the Taliban to realize that their violent campaign is not winning them hearts and minds but further alienating the Afghan people from their cause," Ghani said.

Taliban Responded

The Taliban on June 9 issued a statement saying it had ordered its fighters not to clash with

Afghan security forces for the first three days of Eid.

In the statement sent to the media, the Taliban said its fighters would not launch attacks against Afghan security forces but that they would defend themselves if necessary.

The move by both sides was widely welcomed - even by NATO, European Union, and UN officials among others.

A successful three-day ceasefire transpired over Eid, but immediately after the truce was up on the Taliban's part, the insurgent group launched widespread attack across the country.

Pakistan's Afghan Policy
 Afghan officials have meanwhile continued to say that to end the war in the country, it is necessary to convince Pakistan to endorse peace and security in Afghanistan by ending its military and financial support to the Taliban leadership, something Pakistan has always denied. US officials have also repeatedly called on Pakistan to do more in terms of fighting the Taliban. In his first tweet of 2018, Trump said on January 1 that the United States has "foolishly" given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid over the last 15 years, "and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools."

"They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!" he added.

However, Pakistan continues to reject the claims and insist they are not harboring or funding the Taliban. (Pajhwok)

(3) Changes to...

observers believe the proposed system would not work in the present situation.

Yousuf Rasheed, director of the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), said the demand of political parties be considered. Undoubtedly, he added, the call was reasonable but implementing the demand would be time-consuming.

In the given circumstances, he said, declaring the voter registration process null and void would mean the political parties had no regard for the time and resources spent on the election process over the past five months.

According to him, there are other sensible ways to combat corruption, and political parties could review the list of voters instead of putting pressure on the Independent Election Commission (IEC).

"If parties have members of their communities, advocates and supporters, these lists of voters should be studied thoroughly and objectively to determine their accuracy," he commented. He argued it was too late to change the system as candidates and political parties had already been registered. Using the biometry system was also impossible and the parties could not insist on it, he said.

Political analyst Mohammad KabirRanjbar, referring to Article 83 of the constitution, said: "Such demands raise doubt about these leaders' support for elections, as a change in the electoral system isn't possible at this point in time."

According to Article 83, members of the lower house shall be elected by the people through free, general, secret and direct balloting.

Ranjbar was of the view the party leaders should have held the meeting a year ago to warn of boycotting the vote if the biometric system was not implemented. He claimed the demand was expressive of a foreign agenda.

He thought the parties could prevent the holding of elections by taking up arms. For its part, the government must stand firm and resist unconstitutional demands, which amounted to a crime.

On the other hand, the IEC said complaints and criticism were the right of political parties and citizens. The poll panel insisted it was determined to conduct the elections on time.

Meanwhile, Mirza Mohammad Haqparast, deputy spokesman for the IEC, said the process of voter registration was transparent. In order to increase transparency and prevent fraud, the requisite details have been fed into the voter information database.

About the political parties' proposals, he recalled, several months ago, members of the commission had held a detailed discussion with certain parties and the time was not ideal to revisit the issue.

On Sunday, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani said elections would be held according to the law. He opined the use of the biometric system would be impossible.

Ghani termed the participation of political parties in the upcoming ballot as decisive. However, he urged the parties to understand the current situation in Afghanistan. (Pajhwok)

(4) Afghan President...

the Taliban said it would not negotiate with the Kabul government after a first-ever ceasefire between the two sides coinciding with the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Fitr raised hopes of jump-starting long-stalled talks.

Ghani declared an end to the truce, but he also called on the Taliban to resume peace negotiations. The extremist group Islamic State (IS) was not included in the cessation of hostilities.

The unilateral government truce lasted from June 12-30. The Taliban adhered to its own June 15-17 cease-fire that prompted jubilant scenes of unarmed Taliban fighters congregating in government-held cities and posing for photos with residents and government officials.

Ghani said in his interview that the Taliban has lost any credibility it might have had among Afghans.

"Afghan clerics don't want an intensification of the conflict, they want peace - they want real peace. Therefore, if a small group of the Taliban think that they still have a shred of religious credibility, [they're wrong]. It has ended."

On July 11, a summit of religious scholars organized by the Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation called for a new cease-fire

in Afghanistan, a request dismissed out of hand by the Taliban.

"The cease-fire demonstrated that they want to be on the same side of their countrymen," Ghani added.

Ghani also reiterated his calls for Pakistan and other neighboring countries to work together to eliminate terrorism and create regional stability. Afghanistan and the United States accuse neighboring Pakistan of harboring the Afghan Taliban, a claim Islamabad rejects. Iran and Russia have confirmed they have contacts with the Taliban, but insist that they are aimed at ensuring the safety of its citizens in Afghanistan and encouraging the Taliban to join peace talks.

"Our stance is that if Taliban are independent, they should make decisions independently, but it's necessary that Pakistan help," Ghani said.

For years, Kabul and Washington have pressured Islamabad to bring the militants to the negotiating table.

The Taliban's rejection of Ghani's offer is a blow to hopes for lasting peace in the war-torn country where the United Nations said civilian casualties had reached a record high in the first half of 2018.

The insurgent group has demanded the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country as a precondition for talks and maintained that it wants to talk directly with the United States, which toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. The militants consider the Kabul government a "Western puppet."

The UN has blamed the Taliban for 40 percent of the civilian deaths in the country, while 52 percent of the attacks were attributed to Islamic State militants.

Afghanistan has been hit by a string of deadly suicide attacks since the end of the cease-fire, including a July 16 Taliban attack on a police checkpoint in the eastern Nangarhar Province that killed seven police officers. (RFE/RL)

(5) Afghan Police...

the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development late on Sunday that killed at least seven people.

Elsewhere, the Taliban attacked a police checkpoint in the Ghani Khel district of eastern Nangarhar province, killing seven police, the provincial governor's office said in a statement. (Reuters)

(6) Atmar, Nicholson...

The two sides also discussed the Oct 20 parliament and district council elections and creation of a peaceful environment for voters.

Atmar assured the Afghan government was committed to implementing decisions made during the recent NATO summit of heads of states in Brussels. (Pajhwok)

(7) 'Aqina Road...

, said more than 120 cargo trucks would enter the country through the port on a daily basis, adding \$750,000 to \$800,000 to the government's revenue.

On the other hand, Faryab governor Dr. Naqibullah Faiq said that closure of Aqina route not only affected traders and people but also led to increase in prices of essential items and petroleum.

He said if the current situation continued, it would affect Afghans in general and Turkmenistan might attempt to close Aqina port.

Faiq said they had shared demands of the protestors with the government and discussions were currently underway for finding a solution to the problem as soon as possible.

Massoud Ahmad Massoud, deputy head of Junbish-i-Milli Afghanistan, who also organized protests in Aqina port, said they would reopen the route whenever the government accepted their demands.

He said the government should pave the ground for the return of Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum and release Nizamuddin Qaisari without any conditions.

He warned they would not open the road even if killed until the government accepted their demands.

Dostum quietly left Kabul for Turkey last year in May after he was accused of rape and torture by a political rival Ahmad Ischi. Dostum has since been living in exile in Turkey.

Qaisari, Dostum's representative for uprising groups in Faryab, and his bodyguards were captured by the Afghan commando forces on July 2, from Maimana, the capital of northwestern Faryab province and later shifted him to Kabul for investigations.

But a number of people in Faryab have since been staging protests and demanding the release of Qaisari.

Three supporters of Qaisari were killed and five others injured after their protest turned violent. Some reports said Afghan forces had mistreated Qaisari's bodyguards. (Pajhwok)

(8) India to...

energy and water ministry that we would start the construction of the water supply network and government should start the construction of the dam. I am sure that the water network and construction of the dam will be completed at the same time. If so we will inaugurate them together," Yalani said.

Residents of Lalandar area, an area near Shahtoot dam, meanwhile welcomed the dam project but said government would first need to resolve the issue of land acquisition. They said government needs to purchase the land from them before starting construction work on the project.

"We are happy that Shahtoot dam will be built but we want our rights and government must pay us for our land," Ahmazai, a resident of the area said.

Another resident, Saleh Mohammad, said: "If around 700 families lose their land here, it is Ok, because five million people will benefit (from water) in Kabul. But government should pay us (for our land).

Once complete, officials said the dam will hold 146 million cubic meters of potable water for two million people in Kabul and irrigation water for over 400,000 acres of land.

This announcement comes after the National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) recently warned that underground water reserves in Kabul will dry up within the next 10 years amid an increasing demand and the overuse of water in the capital city.

Thirty-two million cubic meters of water is used from Kabul's underground water reserves every year while the capacity of the city's water is 29 million cubic meters in a year, head of the authority, NajibAqaFahim, said recently.

There are currently over 200,000 wells in Kabul, he said, adding that the drop in ground water was "a crisis" for residents.

Shahabuddin, 18, a farmer in Kabul's Sarai Khawaja district, said the lack of water has affected his business.

"Our well is dry. There are almost 100 wells in our village but only 10 of them have water," Shahab said.

Meanwhile in the Asia Foundation's recent Survey of the Afghan People, it revealed that there are rising concerns over water shortages in Kabul province.

Each year, the survey asks Afghans about their biggest problems in their local areas, and in 2017, significantly more (26%) Afghans in Kabul province reported access to drinking water as the biggest problem compared to the previous year (19%). The survey also shows that over time, at the national level, access to drinking water is consistently one of the most cited problems Afghans report in their local area.

In addition, findings from the survey reveal that awareness about drinking water projects such as new wells or piped water systems drives optimism about the direction of the country. Among the respondents who report that they know about a drinking water project, 41.7 percent say that the country is moving in the right direction, compared to 29.9 percent of those who don't know about the project.

Importantly, those who see the country moving in the right direction are significantly less likely (35.0%) to report a desire to leave the country than those who do not (41.4%).

Since the NUG formed in 2014, President Ashraf Ghani has made water management and building dams a priority for economic growth and development.

In 2016, Ghani and Indian Prime Minister inaugurated the Indian-funded "Friendship Dam" in Heart Province, which is expected to irrigate over 80,000 hectares of land and provide electricity to thousands of homes in the western Afghan province of Herat.

The Asia Foundation meanwhile said recently that more needs to be done, including policy solutions that promote water use efficiency at the consumer level through recycling, wastewater management, water treatment, the harvesting of surface water, and the monitoring of groundwater extraction methods at the ministry level.

To fight the misuse of water, the government needs to step up efforts to promote public awareness by developing a national campaign in Kabul, but also in rural and urban areas throughout the country, the foundation said. (Tolo news)

(9) Dostum Supporters...

protestor, Amir.

"We will sit in a tent and we will go to the Presidential Palace and will close down the election commission," said Mohammad Aslam another protestor.

"Without the presence of the first vice president, elections will not be held," yet another protestor, Abdullah, said.

Meanwhile the shooting of a suicide bomber close to Monday's demonstration and the subsequent explosion dispersed the Kabul protestors.

Kabul police said that contrary to earlier reports the suicide bomber had not been killed but was instead wounded.

Police said he had planned to target the demonstration but was gunned down before reaching the location after security forces spotted him.

"Parts of his suicide vest detonated and the bomber was badly wounded and transferred to hospital," said police spokesman HashmatStanikzai.

This comes after Faryab residents started protest action over the arrest of Qaisari in the province almost two weeks ago.

Qaisari who is also a close aide to Dostum was taken into custody after reportedly threatening and insulting government officials. Faryab residents then took to the street in protest over the move - protests that then spread throughout the north and north-eastern provinces.

President Ashraf Ghani said on Sunday that the chances of Dostum returning to Afghanistan were high.

A day earlier, Turkish ambassador to Afghanistan Oguzhan Ertugrul said in Kabul that talks are ongoing regarding the return of Dostum.

These remarks also came in the wake of Second Vice President Mohammad Sarwar Danish's trip to Turkey where he held talks with Dostum.

Dostum left Afghanistan for Turkey last year after allegations of sexual assault were lodged against him by Ahmad Eschi, the former Jawzjan governor and ex-member of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan.

Dostum's close aides say that government has prevented him from returning to the country. However, following rising tension in Faryab over the Qaisari issue and continued demonstrations in the north, sources say government is now talking to Dostum and that there are indications he could return soon.

(Tolo news)

(10) Elders to Meet...

have talked to the education department, the governor's house and tribal elders on the issue. We are trying to find a solution to it," he said.

On the other hand, the Taliban do not acknowledge their involvement in closing schools. The group's spokesman, ZabihullahMujahid, said that they had certain problems with the government regarding schools.

"Our members would talk to the government about this issue at a safe and proper place," he said.

There are 307 educational institutes in Logar, where 150,000 students including 50,000 girls are enrolled. (Pajhwok)

(11) Helmand Date...

asked the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation to take immediate steps for Habibullah, a resident of Lashkargah city, said: "A date tree in our house did not yield fruit for several years until grafted this year."

Baryalai, another resident of Lashkargah, said: "We also have two date's trees in our home but they do not yield fruit."

Besides Helmand, date trees also grow in Nangarhar province and they yield enough. (Pajhwok)

(12) CABI Welcomes...

its place on the international market where its agricultural products - particularly with almonds, pistachios, raisins, apricots and pomegranates - have a global reputation for excellence."

In Afghanistan CABI has already implemented projects and programmes that are having a beneficial impact. The CABI-led Plantwise programme is fully operational and is supporting farmer to lose less of what they grow to pests and diseases with 162 plant clinics established, 333 plant doctors trained and 33 scientific fact sheets written since 2012. Other projects include Integrated Crop Management in High-Value Crops (2007-2008), Training of Marginalized Farmers in Kunduz (2010), Rice value chain development in Takhar (2016-17), Integrated Pest Management in Apple in Baglan (2009-10) - funded by Aga Khan Foundation and the World Bank-funded Kamal Bunt Disease Survey in Nangarhar, Border Quarantine Station survey (2015), Designing of Hitech Lab complex in Badambagh (2015-16) and Nationwide Insect Pest Disease Diseases Survey (2016-18).

Around 12 percent of Afghanistan's lands are arable and less than six percent is cultivated. Normally Afghanistan production of wheat is about 4.28 million tons whereas its needs 6.5 million tons for domestic consumption. The country meets its needs in rice, potatoes, pulses, nuts and depends on imports only for wheat, sugar, and edible fats and oils.

Mr Nasir Ahmad Durrani, Afghanistan's Minister for Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, said, "We as a Govt. are committed for the self-reliance of Afghanistan in production of its own food commodities. The Govt has built a number of successful partnerships regardless of internal security situation. Since last one decade, CABI support in building the capacity of agriculture department of Afghanistan has been incredible. We expect that a formal relationship with CABI will help us build further at policy and operational levels." (PR)

(13) Dollars Smuggling...

via the airports in Kabul and Balkh, Farah and Nimroz provinces.

He said around 100 taxi vehicles having cross border transportation licenses were involved in the smuggling of dollars.

Sediqui said currency's value had a direct link with domestic production of a country, adding that trade deficit remained a major factor pushing the depreciation of currency. He recalled the volume of Afghanistan's exports stood at \$500 million last year while imports over \$6.5 billion.

When asked about dissemination of dollars in the market to specific moneychangers, the Central Bank head rejected the notion and added no bidders could get more than three percent of the total amount of dollars the bank distributed to the market.

Wolesi Jirga speaker Abdul Rauf Ibrahim said the depreciation of afghani had a negative impact on common people's living and the authorities concerned particularly security forces should act and stop the smuggling of dollars out of the country. (Pajhwok)

(14) Commandos...

would be made functional as well.

"Some people spread conspiracies against commando force which is Afghanistan's national force and I am its commander, I never order killing or harassment of anyone," he said.

Wazir added commando forces kept distance from small issues, but if the leaders issued directives, the force would act to implement the orders.

For the past two years, commando forces have been fighting in Sar-i-Pul and Faryab provinces, rendering sacrifices, he said, adding Hazara, Pashtun and Tajik were among their ranks.

He hailed the performance of commando forces and added it was the only unit which had broken the back of the enemy. The enemy wanted to defame the forces but they would not be able to turn their dream into reality. (Pajhwok)

(15) Badakhshan...

including four foreigners, and eight security officials had been killed so far, he said. At least 28 fighters and 11 security forces have been wounded.

Some villages of the district had been retaken from the Taliban, the governor's spokesman said. Taliban have not yet commented on the clash. (Pajhwok)