

(1) Engagements with...

the overall objective of a durable political settlement in Afghanistan."

The Pakistani army spokesman made a further assertion. "The military-to-military engagement is likely to yield more positive results within the overall framework of stakeholders." Speaking in Washington a day prior, General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), told reporters in Washington he has maintained a "very robust relationship" with Pakistan's military chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. He emphasized that other U.S. officials also have been communicating to counterparts in Islamabad and "it is important to talk."

"We continue to work closely with Pakistan to help them fulfill the important role that they have indicated they want to play. Now is the time for them to step forward," the U.S. general said. President Donald Trump, under his new South Asia strategy announced last August, has suspended military assistance to Pakistan until it takes decisive action against terrorists involved in attacks in Afghanistan and other regional countries. That move strained mutual ties and halted diplomatic contacts until weeks ago when Washington restored the high-level contacts with Islamabad.

Taliban 'safe havens' U.S. and Afghan officials have long alleged that Taliban leaders and those of the Haqqani network are directing the Afghan insurgency from "safe havens" in Pakistan.

"We've made progress on paper, but we want action. I'm neither optimistic nor pessimistic," Afghan President Ashraf Ghani remarked earlier this week when asked for his assessment of the ongoing dialogue with Pakistan. (VoA)

(2) Wahidi's 2nd...

recruited contract-based officials and seven advisors against high salaries.

Wahidi created a temporary system for collecting 10 percent phone users' tax which caused losses to the government, he said.

The prosecutor said Wahidi installed the tax collection system in a place not accessible to observers and employed two of his relatives for controlling and watching the system.

However, Mohammad Ali Farhang, Wahidi's defense lawyer, said all allegations against his client were baseless.

He said the collection of tax on mobile users was responsibility of the Finance Ministry and ATRA. As such, he argued, the former minister had no role in the tax recovery.

"The Attorney General Office (AGO) is being misled by a specific group through exaggerated stories which are false and against the law," he maintained. Abdul Razaq Wahidi also rejected claims against him and said the 10pc tax after being collected directly moved to the Ministry of Finance and the temporary system was only meant for calculating and measuring the tax. Judge Mohammad Zaman Sangari said declared they could not reach a decision due to lack of some evidence and documents but the case could be continued in a future time after documents were produced in support of the claims. (Pajhwok)

(3) Iran-Afghanistan...

air corridor to India provides a parallel, more direct trade route. By contrast, China's twin economic corridors in the region run perpendicular: north-south through Pakistan to the Persian Gulf, and east-west through Iran to Istanbul.

Pakistan's Gwadar and Iran's Chabahar are thus effectively in the same geopolitical node, connecting very different Great Game trade strategies, reads an article published by CACI Analyst, a publication of The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center

China's foreign policy is really one of multiplicities framed as bilaterals. The rhetoric and policy practice will be strictly bilateral and one-to-one, playing to China's trade negotiating strength of numbers.

The country eschews any notion of plurilateralism on the pattern of the Washington Consensus. However, China's trade and industrial policies in external geographies are multifarious. Hence, it will plan firm, state, multi-state and regional industrial policy.

No matter the geopolitics, Afghanistan can only benefit from inward direct investment. Whichever way its energy and transport networks are built and rebuilt, all investment is a boon. Whatever the long-term outcome, in the short run, Afghanistan is very much on the radar of two expanding powers in India and China. (Agencies)

(4) Atmar, EU...

their rights and justice.

On the other hand, Atmar also met the UK ambassador to Afghanistan in his office, Qader Shah added. Atmar and Sir Nicholas conferred on the peace process and future plans.

The NSA appreciated UK's continued cooperation on training Afghan forces. Nicholas hailed peace efforts by the Afghan government as a positive step. (Pajhwok)

(5) 4-Party Talks...

calling the ongoing war in Afghanistan as unlawful.

About a year back, Pakistani ulema also called the conflict in Afghanistan as forbidden according to Islam.

The HPC secretary said the Afghan government welcomed efforts of ulema, civil society activists and tribal elders for peace.

He hoped the Taliban would accept the demand of Afghanistan ulema and the recent conference in Saudi Arabia and start intra-Afghan peace dialogue.

Deputy HPC head Attaur Rahman Salim said that the Afghanistan Ulema's fatwa had been internationally accepted and the Taliban had no reason to continue the conflict.

Afghan Ulema Council head Qeyamuddin Kashaf said that Afghanistan was burning in flames of a war in which sacred places were also not safe.

"No one or place is safe in this war, whether they are worshippers, schools, funeral ceremonies, hospitals, patients, laborers, children and women," he said.

The conflict has turned Afghanistan into the center of mass killings, a place where blood was shed everywhere and people including children and women lost their lives on a daily basis, the cleric said. (Pajhwok)

(6) Work to...

but that once complete each unit

will hold 5,000 tons of fresh produce.

Officials stated the facilities are expected to be completed in the next two years but that the lack of security was a challenge. They also said the absence of companies experienced in building such facilities in the country was another problem.

"We could not find a company equal to the terms of the contract inside the country, but we hope a company is found and can build the cold storages in the coming two years," said Nasir Ahmad Durani, the Agriculture Minister.

Meanwhile, a number of stakeholders in the cold storage sector in the country criticized government for the delay and said these units can be built in under a year.

"The construction of those cold storage units is not a big deal and one that must take years; but the construction process must start because there is a huge need for such storage facilities," said Dost Mohammad, who works in the cold storage sector.

Some MPs meanwhile said the five-year delay in building these facilities was a disgrace and called on government to finish this project as soon as possible.

"We have a lot of plans, but not very much is implemented. The government draws up good plans but it is not capable of implementing them," said Mohammad Hussain Fahimi, an MP.

This comes amid a growing agriculture sector and the lack of cold storage facilities across the country is putting farmers and traders under enormous pressure.

Traders have said there is far too much spoilage of fruit and vegetables and that they are often forced to sell produce at cut rates due to the lack of such facilities. They also said this was pushing up the volume of imports as the country was forced to bring in vegetables and fruit from neighboring countries during winter. (Tolo news)

(7) Illegal Trade...

have been smuggled to Iran and sold at a high price in the past. The trend is ongoing right now and it is concerning. Government should put an end to it," said Ghulam Habib Hashimi, a member of Herat Provincial Council.

The Herat governor's office said relevant departments have been directed to bring an end to this illegal trade.

"Herat administration admits that birds are being smuggled to foreign countries through the ports. They, Herat officials, are continuing their efforts to stop the smuggling of these birds," said Jailani Farhad, a spokesman for Herat's governor.

The smuggling of wild birds from Afghanistan has been a major concern for officials, especially those from NEPA, for many years.

According to the Wildlife Conservation Society in Afghanistan, it is estimated that about 235 species of birds may breed in the country.

Other organizations have also noted that poaching has added to the pressure on the bird life in a number of provinces, including Herat.

There are no accurate statistics for birds in Herat province, but a few years ago officials told Relief Web that a dozen bird species were in danger.

Hunting bans have proved difficult to enforce and live trappers target smaller hawks up to

eagles, and even the common myna - which belongs to the starling family.

According to officials the mynas are smuggled to Iran in large numbers and, according to Relief Web, can fetch \$30 or \$40 each, where they have a commercial value - as a way of clearing farmland of pests cheaply and effectively.

However, the smuggling of Afghan birds of prey has also been an enormous problem in recent years.

According to officials, the principal market for Afghan birds of prey appears to be the Gulf states. (Tolo news)

Essential Items Prices Soar in Kabul

KABUL - The value of Afghani currency has dipped by one percent against the US dollar while the prices of some of essential items have increased by more than three percent during the outgoing week in the capital Kabul, market sources said Saturday.

Haji Nangyali Mohammadi, a grocery store owner in Kabul Mandavi, told Pajhwok Afghan News that the whole sale price of 24 kilograms of Pakistani rice increased from 2,000 Afghanis to 2,100 Afghanis, 50 kilograms of Kazakhstani flour from 1,190afis to 1,200afis, 49kg of Pakistani sugar from 1,570afis to 1,600afis and a tin of 16 liters Khurshid ghee from 1,020afis to 1,080afis.

He said decline in Afghani currency value has caused hike in the food items' prices.

According to Haji Mir Husain Sadaqat, owner of Sadaqat Money Exchange Services in Kabul, one US dollar accounted for 73.15afis and 1,000 Pakistani rupees 562afis against last week's 72.55afis and 576afis.

The prices of other essential items remain steady.

Noor Ahmad Khairkhwah, a tea seller in Kabul Mandavi, said a kilogram of Indonesian green tea cost 280afis and the same amount of African black tea 300afis -- same prices as last week's.

Ahmad Wali Panjsheri, who owns a grocery store in Dahn-i-Bagh area of Kabul, sold a 50-kg sack of Kazakhstani flour for 1,300afis, a 49-kg bag of sugar for 1,700afis, 24-kg of Pakistani rice 2,400afis a 16-litre tin of ghee for 1,150afis, one-kg of Indonesian green tea for 300afis and the same amount of black African tea for 350afis -- higher than wholesale rates.

The oil price also remains steady. Abdul Hadi, a worker at Wazirabad fuel station in Kabul, said that one liter of petrol cost 55afis and the same quantity of diesel 47afis this week.

Ahmad Javid, a liquefied gas seller in Taimani area of Kabul, said the price of one kilogram of the commodity was stood at 62afis. (Pajhwok)

US Officials and Taliban Leaders Reportedly in 'Talks'

KABUL - Reports of the United States and Taliban political leaders having held secret talks has been met by mixed reaction in the country.

America's NBC News reported that according to the Taliban, talks have been held in Afghanistan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

One negotiator said Taliban delegations had been joined by "never more than five" Americans for a series of meetings in

hotel suites in Doha, Qatar.

NBC quoted three Taliban commanders who said four of the group's political leaders met with US officials on a number of occasions and that talks are ongoing.

The US State Department has not confirmed having held talks with Taliban leaders, but has said Washington is eager to end the war.

"The United States is exploring all avenues to advance a peace process in close consultation with the Afghan government," a spokesman for the state department told NBC News.

Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC) meanwhile said government has called on all foreign countries to use what influence they might have on the Taliban to get them to the negotiations table.

The HPC said however no talks will have a positive outcome unless they are Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

"If the negotiations are not done between the Afghans and if other people do the negotiations on behalf of the Afghans, such negotiations will not result in peace," HPC head secretariat Mohammad Akram Khpulwak said.

NBC meanwhile reported that the secretive talks have been held in hotels and that amid concerns about their own safety, the Taliban delegates have taken steps to not be identified by the intelligence services of Russia, China and Arab countries.

The news channel also reported that the Taliban leaders arrived at the meetings separately and did not even enter the meeting rooms together. (Tolo news)

Mnuchin Calls on China, EU to Make Tariff Concessions

BUENOS AIRES - US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said on Saturday he will be pushing China and the EU to agree to a more "balanced" relationship on trade when he meets with finance ministers at the Group of 20 convention in Buenos Aires.

Mnuchin arrived in the Argentine capital at the end of a week in which US President Donald Trump has ramped up his inflammatory remarks and threats with regard global trade.

Trump described China, the EU and Russia as trade "foes" and threatened to hammer the entire \$500 billion in goods the US imports from China with punitive tariffs.

"It is definitely a realistic possibility so I wouldn't minimize the possibility. We've been very clear with our objectives," Mnuchin told reporters ahead of the start of the two-day G20 summit amongst finance ministers and central bankers from the world's 20 leading economies.

"We share a desire to have a more balanced relationship and the balanced relationship is by us selling more goods (to China)."

The US trade in goods deficit with China stood at almost \$376 billion in 2017.

"Although the objective is to cut the trade deficit, the desire to do that is for them to open up their markets so we can compete fairly and increase our exports," he said.

"I think it's a tremendous opportunity for us and a tremendous opportunity for China.

"China has a large, growing population that will consume more products and that likes American products." He pointed to energy, agriculture and technology as areas in which the US could boost its Chinese presence. But Mnuchin said joint ventures were a major stumbling block between the two countries, particularly when it comes to technology, stating that other than in certain "security" related cases, "companies are free to do business in the US without setting up joint ventures." (AFP)