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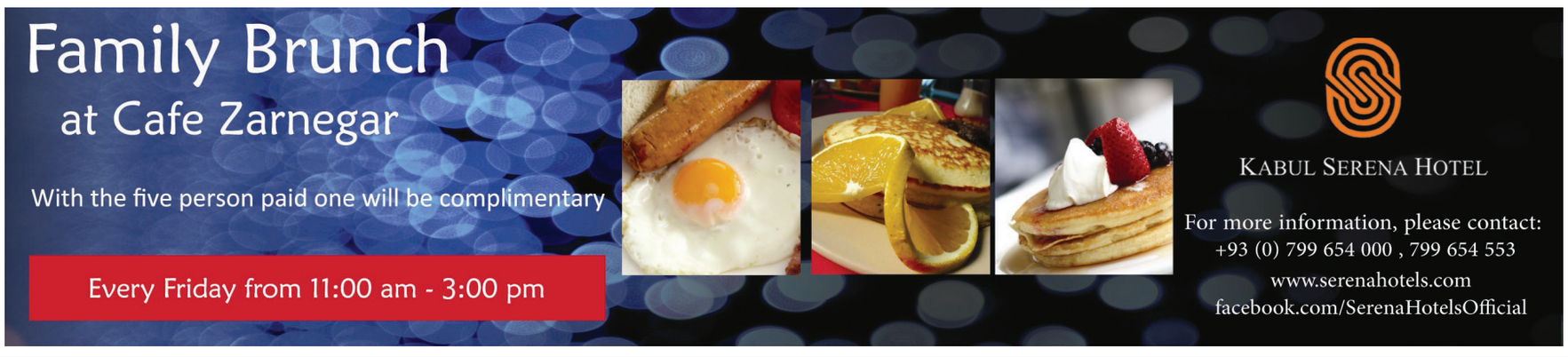


'Govt urged to seriously probe SIGAR report'

Corruption in security bodies irked lawmakers

SIGAR claimed that commanders selling fuel, food and even weapons of the Afghan forces to Taliban.

By Farhad Naibkhel

KBAUL: Members of the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House) of Parliament on Saturday expressed deepest concerns over the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) regarding corruption in security organs. They urged the government to seriously probe the report and take measures to address the issue.

Head of the SIGAR, John Sopko said Thursday evening at Duke University that corruption and mismanagement is the main factor behind failure of security forces in Afghanistan. Sopko claimed that commanders selling fuel, food and even weapons of the Afghan forces to Taliban. He said that also ghost soldier salary also goes to the commanders' pocket. Parliamentarians called existence of corruption in security organs "a big tragedy" for the country, asking the government and other related organs to seriously investigate the issue and take measure for solution. "Corruption exists in police and army crew," said member of the Lower House Aref Rahmani. "We are aware of corruption in contracts of food, uniform and weapons in security organs." Even some checkpoints dealing by the enemy due to corruption, he insisted. He said that the president's office, security high council and parliament should combat to root out corruption in security organs. Female MP Nahid Farid said that "broad corruption and insecurity changed to a wheel of interest for some figures." "Corruption will lead the system to collapse, if not contorted," she added. She added that Afghan government must seriously hold step to address the issue. Another legislator Sayed Ali Kazemi said that based on some report not only Afghans, but Western clusters were also involved in corruption. Kazemi added that high percentage of donation transferred back to abroad, so it is the time to the parliament follow the issue and clear all dimension of the issue.

So far no good

Editorial page 06

22 Daesh militants killed in Nangarhar

AT Monitoring Desk

KABUL: At least 22 militants loyal to the Islamic State (IS) aka Daesh terrorist group have been killed in an airstrike attacks in eastern Nangarhar province, provincial official said on Saturday.

Provincial governor spokesman, Attaullah Khogiani said that airstrikes targeted Daesh hideouts in Milo area of Nazian district on Friday evening, leaving 22 Daesh militants dead.

Two group commanders named Zabihullah alias Shino and Daz Gul were among those killed in the raids, he added.

It is worth mentioning that Nangarhar is among the relatively calm provinces in eastern Afghanistan but the anti-government armed militant groups have recently increased their insurgency activities in some parts of the province during the recent years. Both, Afghan and US forces regular carry out strikes against Daesh militants in the province. Security officials said that during the last year, Daesh group suffered significant casualties, forcing the terrorist group into a very bad situation.

According to statistics provided by security department, last year more than 1,900 Daesh fighters were killed and the group's activities were also limited to parts of Nangarhar province.

Scanners at Kabul's gates within 2 months: MoI

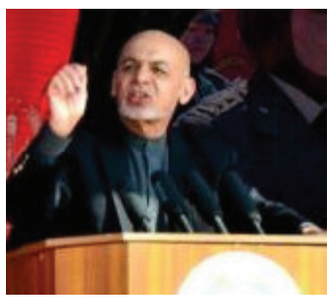
KABUL : Scanners to detect bombs such as vehicle-born explosive devices will be installed at the four major entrances to Kabul within next two months, an official said on Saturday. The scanners were provided to Afghanistan by China in December 2016, when Beijing delivered its first military aid to Kabul in January that year. The cargo contained among other things logistical equipment, parts of military vehicles, ammunition and weapons for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Ministry of Interior's deputy spokesman Najib Danish told Pajhowk Afghan News installation of the scanners would be completed within two months.

The devices would be installed on the eastern, western, southern and northern gates of Kabul, he said. He said the scanners could not be installed in winter because some persons had to be trained to manage the devices. **(Pajhwok)**

India, US face common security problems: Mattis

The United States Defense Secretary James Mattis in a meeting with India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, at the Pentagon on Friday said the two countries are faced with common threats, the Associated Press reported. The two sides discussed strengthening the relationship between India and U.S, the report said. "We're delighted to have you here. Democracies like ours need this sort of dialogue and we've had a strengthening of the relationship over the last several years. And no relationship stays the same. They either decline or they get better, they get stronger and our intent here today is to continue to strengthen the relationship and to make certain it gets stronger every year, between two democracies that have many common interests, many common security challenges," Mattis said. Meanwhile, India's National Security Advisor said the two countries are interested to work together. "We share the values, we share the democracy, we all have a very common objective and interest. Both of the regions, that I come from and also globally, that we are able to work together, share our ideas and thoughts and bring about some new innovative changes and improvements," he added. This was Doval's first meeting with Mattis. **(Tolo News)**

Ghani calls for sustained focus on girls' education



KABUL : President Ashraf Ghani on Saturday commended the even-handed development of northern Balkh province, attributing the achievement to Governor Atta Mohammad Noor's leadership. Ghani gave the governor full credit for his dedicated work to develop the province. 'Noor had always pleaded with Kabul for the progress of the province, not for personal favours, he said. At an event marking the start of the new academic year in the provincial capital, the president promised investment in education. He said 6.2 million textbooks would be distributed to schools across the country over the next fortnight. While stressing the need for sustained focus should on girls' education, he likened investment in females to investment in Afghanistan's future generations. **(Pajhwok)**

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US forces vow to Daesh in Afghanistan this year

U.S. forces in Afghanistan are upping the fight against an expanding Islamic State offshoot based near the Afghan-Pakistan border and are determined to defeat the extremist group in the country this year, U.S. military officials tell VOA.

"Our goal in 2017 is to defeat ISIS-K in Afghanistan," U.S. Navy Capt. Bill Salvin, the spokesperson and director of public affairs for Resolute Support headquarters in Kabul, told VOA's Afghan service. Islamic State's self-styled Khorasan Province branch (ISIS-K) has taken root in mountainous areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, increasing its recruiting efforts and terror attacks nationwide. Its name refers to a centuries-old description of Afghanistan and surrounding areas of Central Asia and Persia. NATO and the Afghan government say their security operations in recent months have reduced the extremists' strength in Afghanistan from several thousand to now under one thousand fighters, and their territorial control from more than 10 districts to fewer than five. Numbers falling

"In 2016, we believed that year began with about 3,000 or so ISIS-K members in about 12 districts in southern Nangarhar," Salvin said. "Right now, we believe there are about 600 ISIS-K members in two or three districts in southern Nangarhar."

But despite those battlefield losses, ISIS-K has "shown an ability to conduct attacks in Kabul and elsewhere in the country," General John Nicholson, the top U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

IS claimed responsibility for a March 8 attack on a military hospital in Kabul that killed at least 31 people.

Analysts caution that U.S. and Afghan officials may be overly optimistic when speaking of containing IS's spreading influence in Afghanistan.

"Ultimately, we should applaud U.S. efforts to cut down the presence of IS fighters in Afghanistan," said Michael Kugelman, a South Asia specialist at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. "But the broader problem is the ideologies of hate that keep IS strong. Taking aim at the ideological drivers of IS will be very difficult."

2-way approach to fighting IS

"The Afghanistan-Pakistan region is a magnet for militancy, and there's no reason why the hundreds of IS fighters that have been lost won't be replaced," he said. "There are deeper issues that need to be addressed — such as why IS managed to develop a presence in Afghanistan in the first place — and these are issues that can't be addressed by the U.S. military."

Roughly 8,400 U.S. troops are deployed in Afghanistan, carrying out operations against IS and training the Afghan army.

American and Afghan forces routinely conduct counterterrorism operations together. U.S. warplanes carried out hundreds of airstrikes against IS targets in Afghanistan during the first seven months of last year.

U.S. military spokesman Salvin said American forces pursue a two-way approach to combating IS.

"The first is the unilateral U.S. counterterrorism mission called Operation Freedom, and that is where we will conduct the operations against terrorist groups like ISIS-K on our own," he said. "The other way that we are attacking ISIS-K is in partnered operations with the Afghan special forces.

"They have had a great success in fighting ISIS-K, especially over the last month or so," Salvin said. Extremists try to control schools

IS fighters have made inroads in recent years into Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, bordering Pakistan, and are active in several neighboring districts.

Since 2015, IS has attacked several government installations and villages in several other districts of the province as well. In some areas, they closed public schools and replaced them with their own religious seminaries.

Afghanistan welcomed a recent call by General Nicholson for a few thousand more troops from the U.S. or other coalition partners to help in the battle against IS. "We stand confident that the new U.S. administration under President [Donald] Trump will remain strategically engaged and continue its support," Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani said in an appearance at the Atlantic Council in Washington this week. He described Nicholson's call as "an appropriate decision considering the prevailing security challenges still facing us."

Rabbani was one of dozens of foreign attendees at Wednesday's meeting of the Global Coalition to counter Islamic State. The 68-nation group met to accelerate international efforts to defeat IS worldwide. Afghans stronger now than in 2016

Rabbani met with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and discussed how Afghanistan and Pakistan can cooperate in curbing IS cross-border activities, U.S. officials said. Pakistan was not part of the conference.

According to media reports, many IS members in Afghanistan belong to the Orakzai tribe in Pakistan, whose militants maintain a presence on both sides of the Durand Line between the two countries. "There needs to be greater cooperation with respect to Afghanistan and Pakistan on these kinds of issues," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told VOA's Deewa service.

U.S. military spokesman Salvin predicts bolstered Afghan forces ultimately will win the fight against Islamic State. "We believe that they are stronger going into 2017 than they were when they finished 2016," Salvin said. "So while we do believe it will be a challenging year, we believe that the Afghan forces will be successful, and we will be here to be their partners." **(VOANEWS)**

Afghan carpet business harmed by nosediving Af-Pak ties

PESHAWAR/KABUL: Pakistan's crackdown against Afghan nationals illegally staying in the country is badly hitting the famed Afghan carpet business, as a large number of artisans have left Peshawar and other parts of the country.

Over the past many years, Peshawar had turned into major market for the famed Afghan carpet business as artisans escaping bouts of violence across Afghanistan sought shelter in Peshawar and its adjoining areas and where they also setup their looms.

Apparently, the situation has come full circle for these artisans as they are finding it difficult to live in the country, amid a crackdown against Afghans living in the country which was launched in the aftermath of the Army Public School massacre back in December 2014. Subsequent saber-rattling and deteriorating relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have only added to the woes of Afghan nationals living in Pakistan. The carpet business has come down by about 80 percent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, says Fazal Hayat a carpet trader who mostly deals in Afghan carpet in provincial capital. He said that there were about 5,000 carpet looms were in operation across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as per a survey they conducted with the help of the Afghan carpet makers sometime back. "There are hardly about a 1000 are left now," he said, adding that many among those left behind were also waiting to close their shops and only trying to sell their existing stocks and meeting previous contracts. "To a great extent, Afghan carpet business in Peshawar is over," he said. He said that decade long wave of terror which plagued Pakistan for more than a year literally stopped the international tourists from visiting the country, who purchased the bulk of carpets, which badly affected the business. Crackdown against Afghan is taking care of the rest as well and soon there will only the vestiges of a thriving business be left here, he said. Abdur Rehman, an artisan who works in a carpet-factory near Bakhshu Pul area on Charsadda Road area of the provincial capital said that about 30 Afghan artisans who were working along with him have left for Afghanistan due to the crackdown against refugees. He said that this factory was in operation for past 15 days and doing a thriving business so far; however, ongoing crackdown was badly affecting the business. "Pakistani government crackdown was against Afghan refugees was creating labor problems for establishment like their factories," he said, adding that currently they were finding it difficult with hiring artisans. He said a carpet measuring six feet weaved by four people takes at least three months to complete, while the pricing is determined by quality of material as well labor. "This has in turn also brought down the demand and the situation is likely to further deteriorate as the Afghan continue to leave Pakistan in large number.

He said that if the number of the artisans goes down, then these establishments would also not be able to meet the demand and contracts. He said that there were various verities of Afghan carpets like Turkoman, Kazak and Tajik.

Nasir Ismail a carpet artisan at another factory in Afghan Colony area of the city said that previously there were at least 30 people worked at the factory where he works. Majority of artisans have now gone back to Afghanistan in due to the crackdown and now there were only three to four artisans were left at this factory. "Work used to be very good in the some years back and now it has rock bottom," he said, adding that it has also decreased the demand as well. He said that in case the factory closes down then they would not have any other recourse other than shifting to some other business. Humra Qul, a resident of the Turkuman Camp located in the Nowshera district, where hundreds of Turkoman Afghan refugees live said that he came to Pakistan some 30 years back and had no idea how he could relocated to Afghanistan and start a life there.

He said that they were associated with carpet business and were contributing to the Pakistan's economy. "Our women were preparing carpet in homes and males were daily wagers and on this way we were earn of our bread," he said.

He said that going back to Afghanistan was very risky for them as last year an Afghan family migrated to Qanduz from Haripur area of Pakistan and 15 members of the family were killed by militants. "We want to stay here and want safe future for our children and do not walk back into the crosshair of the death," he said. **(Pajhwok)**

TDP's facing challenges

By Shamim Shahid

TANK, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Though from 80 to 85 percent Mehsud Tribesmen from South Waziristan Agency who have abandoned homes in 2009 military action Rah-i-Nijat have been de-notified as Temporary Displaced People (TDP's) but almost of them returned to settled areas of adjacent Tank and Dera Ismael Khan.

Both officials and tribal elders believe that lacking of proper accommodation is the main reason as almost of houses have been raised to the grounds and it is impossible for the families to reside in the demolished or damaged houses.

Now the government has directed political administration of South Waziristan to ensure repatriation or de-notify all Mehsud TDP's by April 30, 2017. With compliance of this decision, all Mehsud tribesmen who have abandoned homes in according to government policies for making successful Raah-i-Nijat, first ever formal military action against banned Tehrik Taliban Pakistan headed by Hakim Ullah Mehsud in his own South Waziristan, will reside with own expenses and arrangements.

Malik Mohammad Ayaz Khan Mehsud, a tribal elder of the area who attended a number of meetings/jirga's with administration regarding repatriation, was part of the delegation, which visited the area up to Beerghal in Tehsil Makeen couple of days back. Talking to this scribe inside political administration complex at Tank, said, "there is no any living infrastructure in the area and how it is possible to stay."

Malik Ayaz confirmed that almost houses rose to the grounds. There is no drinking water, health, education and even road facilities. He said that he didn't witnessed a single house safe or in its original shape on both sides of road while travelling around 20 kilometers.

Mr. Fakharal Ul Islam, Political Agent of South Waziristan has confirmed that due to lacking of proper privacy and accommodation, repatriation process f tribesmen to Mehsud dominated areas facing hardships. He said that from 35,000 to 40,000 houses have been demolished/destroyed completely whereas thousands of other's partially damaged. "Unless complete reconstruction of these houses, it is impossible for tribesmen to return," he remarked. He was sure of almost repatriation of Mehsud TDP's to their homes in coming a few months.

Answering to a question, he said that from 80 to 85 percent TDP's have been de-notified. He said that one or two members of each family left for construction of houses while the remaining, especially women and children return to Tank and Dera Ismael Khan. "Traditionally, purdah is compulsory in Mehsud dominated tribes," he remarked, adding "on such grounds, they couldn't stay." Similarly he said that chilly cold and rough weather was the second main hurdle before completion of repatriation process.

However, Political Agent South Waziristan has claimed that maximum other living infrastructures like health, education and drinking water ensured. He admitted shortage of staff in health institutions, which make unhappy the tribesmen. He said that arrangements are underway for addressing miseries of common tribesmen on security grounds, territorial responsibilities and others.

Meanwhile, Ahmadzai Wazir, another biggest tribe of South Waziristan in its traditional Jirga on Saturday demanded of the government to re-open Pak Afghan crossing at Angor Ada with immediate effect and also allow the tribesmen to keep light arms for their self-defense. In this respect, the Jirga give March 30 as deadline for acceptance of demands otherwise they threatened of going on strike and closing bazars and shopping centers.

Afghanistan scraps plans for new ultra-conservative girls' school uniform

Plans to force Afghan schoolgirls to wear a "severely restrictive" uniform have been scrapped after they were met with staunch opposition.

The proposals, from the country's Ministry of Education, would have made it compulsory for girls as young as five to wear long tunics and headscarves.

But the plans were thrown out after demonstrations against the uniforms were planned.

"They are telling us the length is to protect Islamic values," Bahar Sohali, who organised the protests, told American broadcaster National Public Radio (NPR).

She added: "Students have to be comfortable, they need to be able to exercise."

These 2 gray &blue Afghan school uniform,seemingly a 2.0 Version of Burka, #AFG Prez rejected the proposed uniform.

The new uniforms were to replace current school dresses that reach a few inches below the knee and are worn over leggings.

This code satisfied the country's conservative mandate for modesty, but were flexible enough for the girls to be able to do sports.

Under the new code, girls above the age of 12 would have been required to wear loose-fitting dresses that extended to the floor.

Headscarves were already a requirement, but the new rules would have been more strict. Having a fridge or strands of hair visible would have been prohibited after the change.

Zuhra Bahman, a Afghan writer in London who organised a petition against the new uniform, implored Muslims to sign it saying: "The new uniform misinterprets Islam and what it says about Muslim women's dress.

"If we allow restriction of Afghan women in these uniforms we will stifle many [like] Kubra Dagli [the Taekwondo champion] and Ibtihaj Muhammad [the Olympic fencer] from emerging."

She also urged Americans and Europeans to object to the change, given that the West provides financial backing to the school system in Afghanistan.

The countries with anti-women laws

Under pressure, the Afghan government retracted the proposals earlier this month.

"President Ghani says the new school uniform which was announced by the Ministry of Education is not representative of the culture and tradition of the [Afghan] people

It added: "He has directed the Ministry of Education to work on a new design that is affordable together with a nationally representative group of teachers, parents and students." **(independent)**

The high cost of war in Afghanistan

"War represents a vice that mankind would like to get rid of but which it cannot do without. Man is like an alcoholic who knows that drink will destroy him but who always has a reason for drinking. So with war. And the best, most obvious, and most incontrovertible reason for war is of course 'peace.' The motive for which men are led to fight today is that war is necessary to destroy those who threaten our peace!" – Thomas Merton

I was intrigued by a column written by Sens. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and John McCain, R-Ariz., published March 13 in The Washington Post. In the column, the two senators urge the Trump administration to strengthen U.S. forces fighting in support of the government in Afghanistan's war against Taliban terrorists.

"On Sept. 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists murdered 3,000 innocent civilians on American soil while under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan," the senators wrote. "In response to that attack, U.S. and NATO forces deployed to Afghanistan to hunt down those responsible and ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a haven for terrorists. Since then, more than 2,000 Americans and 1,000 troops from our NATO allies have given their lives to that mission. "But after more than a decade and a half of war, Gen. John W. Nicholson, commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, told the Senate Armed Services Committee last month that the war in Afghanistan is in a stalemate. President Donald Trump and his administration must treat Afghanistan with the same urgency as the fight against the Islamic State or this stalemate risks sliding into strategic failure…"

By some estimates, the Afghanistan war has cost the United States more than $2 trillion (that's two thousand billion dollars), in addition to the more than 2,000 dead and many more wounded U.S. servicemen and women. One must ask, how much more treasure and how much more blood are needed to prevent the "strategic failure" the senators are ready to spend? Lindsey Graham and John McCain from their perch in the "world's most deliberative body" almost certainly have more insight into and more (indirect) responsibility for the near 17 years our country has been engaged in what has grown to be America's longest war.

Do you want to know how such a military and political morass that Afghanistan has become was allowed to happen and grow? Look no further than our prior lengthy and much bloodier war in Vietnam, where 58,000 American soldiers, Marines, and sailors died in a war we failed to win.

I've recently gone back to re-read then-Major and now retired Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster's "Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led To Vietnam." (McMaster now serves as President Trump's National Security Advisor.)

If you haven't read it, you should before endorsing the dubious Graham/McCain proposal to double down on the Afghanistan quagmire.

My military service did not coincide with the Johnson administration's decision to deploy more than half a million servicemen to Vietnam. Rather, I was there when President Nixon determined to pull them out. (I wrote about the Navy's role in this in my book, "From the Rivers to the Sea," published by the Naval Institute Press in 1992.)

I can tell you that getting out of a war you have not won is a lot harder than getting in. It requires a lot of betrayal, a lot of lies.

My long-held view concerning Afghanistan is that after punishing those responsible for planning and carrying out the 2001 attacks on America, we should not have followed the earlier defeat suffered by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan by showing the world how "nation building" could and should be made to work. That was foolhardy. Foolhardy, too, is to now pour good money after bad. It's time to cut our losses and come home. We have better work to do in far better places in the world.

R.L. Schreadley is a former Post and Courier executive editor. He is the author of a new book, "Intervention! The Americans in Haiti, 1915-1934," based on his Ph.D. dissertation at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. It is being published by Evening Post Books.

(POSTANDCOURIER)

Woman provides source of income for 25 families

JALALABAD : A woman from the Khewa district of eastern Nangarhar province has provided a source of income for 25 families with training on handicrafts. Nazia Latifi, 20, told Pajhwok Afghan News she would extend the business to other families as well, if supported. She has built a handicraft centre in her village, where 25 other women also work. "Besides meeting the needs of my own family through handicrafts, I have graduated from school. Now I have started studying political science at a private university," she said.

Latifi set up the center with the help of an organisation about three years ago. Only three women worked with her initially, but the number has now increased to 25. "In case of workload, we share raw materials with other families with experiences in this area and we give them pay in return for their work," she added. Latifi personally purchases raw materials from the market and offers her supplies as embroidered bodice, dresses, shawls and other items to local shopkeepers. "We prepare around 350 simple suits, 15 embroidered bras, 11 embroidered suits and many Punjabi suits every month. We sell around 35 to 40 suits a month," she said. She earns 100 to 1,000 afghanis from each suit sold and there are many shops in the market that sell such products. Stitching some suits may take a few hours but other need a month. This depends on designs and embroidery styles. The products are also exhibited and sold at such events, and also on orders from different customers. "The women working with me are widows or those whose husbands have disabilities or mental problems," Latifi explained. "A few days ago, I invited a woman whose husband has mental problems. Their economic situation is very bad. I brought her to my centre and she is working with us now." She said a number of women from other villages had also requested her for jobs but she has not enough resources and market for the handicrafts. "I can hire more women if the organisations concerned help me and find markets for our handicrafts in other provinces of the country," she concluded. **(Pajhwok)**

IS recruiting in Pakistan, Afghanistan: US

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson has warned that the militant Islamic State (IS) group wants to recruit young people from Pakistan, Afgha-nistan and Iraq and has stepped up its efforts in those places.

Speaking at the 10th Global Coalition ministerial meeting on IS in Washington , Tillerson also hinted at establishing a safe zone in the Middle East for sheltering Syrian refugees.

"The United States will increase pressure on ISIS and Al Qaeda and will work to establish interim zones of stability, through ceasefires, to allow refugees to return home," he said. Tillerson said that since the United States and its allies had broken their back in the Middle East, IS militants were moving to other regions to recruit fighters.

"Today, … Daesh (IS) is resorting to many terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and many other places in Europe in order to send a message that they are still standing and they want for those young people to go fight in its ranks," he said.

The 68-member global coalition against the IS is the largest in history and 23 of its partners have over 9,000 troops in Iraq and Syria to back the effort to defeat IS militants. Since Pakistan is not a member, it did not attend the ministerial conference.

Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, who represented his country at the meeting, urged the US to send more forces to help battle the Taliban and the Islamic State extremists.

Addressing a Washington think-tank, he blamed Pakistan for most of the troubles his country was facing and urged the coalition partners to use their influence to persuade Islamabad to stop alleged cross-border terrorist attacks.

Pakistan says it has already eliminated terrorist hideouts on its side of the border but blames Afghanistan for continuing to shelter TTP terrorists.

Rabbani welcomed a recent call by US General John Nicholson, the top US commander in Afghanistan, for a few thousand more troops to help Kabul defeat the militants.

The Trump administration has not yet said if it will respond positively to Gen Nicholson's appeal. Some 8,400 US troops are already deployed in Afghanistan, in the 16th year of the war and there are plans to increase that number to 15,000 to 20,000. "We stand confident that the new US administration … will remain strategically engaged" and will make "an appropriate decision considering the prevailing security challenges still facing us". He said Afghanistan had now stopped asking Pakistan to deliver Taliban to the peace table. Instead, "we want Pakistan to take action against the Taliban leadership. They should not support violence in Afghanistan."

(KASHMIRMONITOR)

Peace in Afghanistan is possible

Today the European Union will mark 60 years since the signature of the Rome Treaties. Since then the citizens of our Member States have enjoyed six decades of unprecedented peace, prosperity and security. The contrast to the first half of the 20th Century could not be greater. Two catastrophic wars in Europe between 1914 and 1945 left millions dead, and a continent devastated, divided and prostrate. European integration has been the most successful peace project in our history.

The European Union has been engaged in Afghanistan for decades and the European Union and its Member States are the largest donors in Afghanistan. Coming out of the very successful Brussels Conference on Afghanistan in October 2016 we will continue to be so until 2020.

Over the last 60 years Europe has proved that there is an alternative to war. This is also the case here in Afghanistan. Looking into the history of Europe there are many examples of old enemies coming together and agreeing on peace and reconciliation. The same can happen in Afghanistan and we must all work towards achieving peace here. It is our hopes that the European project can serve as inspiration for all Afghans. The EU will make peace the number one goal for our work in the coming years The world is going through a time of great uncertainty: the global balance of power is shifting and the foundations of a rules-based international order are too often being questioned. The European Union will be an increasingly vital power to preserve and strengthen the global order. The European Union is and will continue to be a strong, cooperative and reliable power. Our partners know what we stand for.

Whatever events may bring in the future, one thing is certain: the EU will continue to put promoting international peace and security, development cooperation, human rights and responding to humanitarian crises at the heart of its foreign and security policies. The EU will remain a strong and committed supporter of the Afghan people. Let's all make peace in Afghanistan our joint priority. Peace is possible. **(Pajhwok)**

Pakistan's opposition party demands for publicizing of Bin Laden presence report

AT Monitoring Desk

KABUL: An opposition party senator in Pakistan has stressed on the federal government to publicize the report to clarify confusions regarding the presence of the slain al-Qaeda head Osama bin Laden in the garrison town of Abbottabad.

Bin Laden was killed in a May, 2011 assault launched by the US Special Forces in Pakistan's Abbottabad.

"The puzzling event regarding the presence of Osama bin Laden in the high security zone of the country is yet to be resolved," said Farhatullah Babar, a senior member of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

"A thorough inquiry into visa issuance policies and procedures from 2001 onwards, when the global hunt for bin Laden started, is what is needed," Babar said in a statement.

He added that there is nothing new or wrong in a letter sent by the Prime Minister to the Foreign Office in 2010, allowing the issuance of visas to American diplomats, including the intelligence personnel.

"However its regurgitation at this time is politically motivated and aimed at diverting attention from the real issue," he alleged, arguing that national security interests would be advanced only by a credible investigation into visa policies and procedures.

"Investigations must also be made into how many Americans entered Pakistan through the Shamsi airbase in Balochistan with or without visas during the days of General Pervez Musharraf," the PPP spokesman stressed.

"Such investigations cannot be made through selective leaks or public statements in the media. A starting point can be the Abbottabad Commission probing the bin Laden fiasco," he added.

Babar furthered that publication of the Abbottabad Commission report would be a comfortable solution to the issuance of visas. "Any other course would not be valid and would be seen as a part of blame game and political witch-hunting."

The Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz has claimed that the interior minister had authorized former Pakistani ambassador to Washington, Hussain Haqqani in 2010 to directly issue diplomatic visas to Americans without clearance of the relevant channels. Aziz added that the document reveals the authorization granted from the office of then Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani.

Ambassador Haqqani said Friday that he had consulted with the civil and military security wings in the embassy before approving the visa applications. He furthered that any unauthorized visas had not issued by the Pakistani embassy in Washington during his time.

Similarly to clarify his position, former Prime Minister Gillani said in a press conference in his native hometown Multan on Friday that his government followed rules and procedure in issuance of visas, adding that the letter directs the ambassador to ensure timely issuance of visas not bypassing visa terms and conditions. He clarified that visas were supposed to be issued to those recommended by the US State Department.

Gillani added that letter to Hussain Haqqani was given through a proper procedure, not by hand which does not authorize visa issuance to the US Special Forces who launched the Abbottabad raid against bin Laden.

Moreover, he said that the issue of visa issuance to Americans during his tenure was a non-issue and had been brought to public by the Sharif family government to divert attention from others burning issues which matter.

"It is known to all that the US forces came into Pakistan for the operation to kill Osama bin Laden had not any visa at all," Gillani added.

He demanded an investigation to visa issuance to Americans should be conducted from 2002 to 2017.

He said publication of Abbottabad Commission's report could answer all the questions that are being raised today.

Pakistan's Former President Asif Ali Zardari told the Geo News on Wednesday that Hussain did not have the only authority to issue visas to Americans, nor did he ever say anything of the sort. He said that there are many people in the embassy other than the envoy who scramble visas. However, Hussain Haqqani in an article published Friday in Washington Post claimed that his connection with Obama administration enabled the United States to identify and kill Osama bin Laden. "My contacts with Obama administration led to closer cooperation between Pakistan and the United States in fighting terrorism and eventually enabled the United States to discover and eliminate bin Laden without depending on Pakistan's intelligence service or military which were suspected of sympathy towards Islamist militants," read Haqqani's article. Haqqani wrote further that the friends whom he developed relations during Obama election campaign were able to ask three years later as National Security Council officials for help in stationing US Special Operations and intelligence personnel on the ground in Pakistan. "I brought the request directly to Pakistan's civilian leadership, who approved it," he explained how he responded to the US officials' request. Following the US military operation against bin Laden, Haqqani was recalled in November 2011 and was forced to resign as ambassador after Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus gained the upper hand in the country's perennial power struggle.

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0202500200-+93793275595

Rabia-i-Balkhi Hospital
Pule Bagh-e- Umomi
070263672

Khairkhana Hospital
0799-321007
2401352

Indira Gandhi Children Hospital, Wazir Akbar Khan, Kabul 2301372

Ibn-e- Seena
Pul-e-Artan, Kabul
2100359

Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital
2301741, 2301743

Ali Abad
Shahrara, Kabul
2100439

Malalai Maternity Hospital
2201377/ 2301743

Banks

Da Afghanistan Bank
2100302, 2100303

Bakhtar Bank
0776777000

Azizi Bank
0799 700900

Pashtany Bank
2102908, 2103868

Air Services

Safi Airways
020 22 22 222

Ariana
020-2100270

Kam Air
0799974422

Hotels

Safi Landmark
020-2203131

SERENA
0799654000

New Rumi Restaurant
0776351347

Internet Services

UA Telecom
0796701701 / 0796702702

Exchange Rate

Purchase:

One US$ = 66.75Afs
One Pound Sterling= 80.87Afs
One Euro = 70.05Afs
1000 Pak Rs = 611Afs

Sale:

One US$ = 68.30 Afs
One Pound Sterling= 81.67Afs
One Euro= 72.50 Afs
1000 Pak Rs= 631

SUNDAY · MARCH 26, 2017
AFGHANISTAN TIMES

Trump admin asked to push for F-16 sale to India

Noting that the last F-16 for the US Air Force rolled off the production line in Fort Worth in 1999, the two Senators said India remains the only major F-16 prospect customer.

Two top Senators have urged the Trump administration to push for the sale of F-16 fighter jets to India to build its capability to counter security threats and balance China's growing military power in the Pacific.

Senators Mark Warner from Virginia and John Cornyn from Texa in a joint letter to US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, the Trump administration must make the fighter jet acquisition a priority during initial bilateral discussions with India.

India has launched an effort to expand its combat aircraft fleet and the competition has reportedly narrowed down to Lockheed's F-16 and Saab's Gripen.

Noting that the last F-16 for the US Air Force rolled off the production line in Fort Worth in 1999, the two Senators said India remains the only major F-16 prospect customer.

"A primary factor in India's decision will be compliance with Prime Minister Modi's 'Make in India' initiative, which will require establishing some level of local production capacity," Mr. Warner and Mr. Cornyn wrote.

"Given the strategic significance of India selecting a US aircraft as the mainstay for its future Air Force and the potential for a decision this year, we ask that the administration make the fighter acquisition a priority during initial bilateral discussions," they said.

Mr. Warner, who is a Democrat and Mr. Cornyn from the Republican Party are the co-chairs of the influential Senate India caucus, the only country specific caucus in the US Senate.

"We urge you to weigh in forcefully with the White House on the strategic significance of this deal, both to America's defence industrial base and to our growing security partnership with India," said the letter dated March 23.

Making a strong case for the sale of F-16s to India, the two Senators said this would represent a historic win for America that will deepen the U.S.-India strategic defence relationship and cement cooperation between our two countries for decades to come.

"It would increase interoperability with a key partner and dominant power in South Asia, build India's capability to counter threat from the north, and balance China's growing military capability in the Pacific," they said.

India, they said, increasingly serves as an integral partner in the United States' security architecture in the volatile South Asia region, helping to protect our joint interests and deter common threats, and has emerged as a critical trading partner, they noted.

As such "it is in our national interest to work with India to progress democratic principles through regional security partnership and burden sharing," they said.

"To this end, we support the co-production of our legacy F-16 aircraft in India to help sustain the United States' current fleet of aircraft and aid a critical Indian security need with a proven American product," Mr. Cornyn and Mr. Warner wrote. The competition for the fighter jets, they wrote, presents an opportunity to solidify and strengthen the significant gains made in the bilateral U.S.-India defence relationship over the two previous administrations, they said. **(THEHINDU)**

UN presses Sri Lanka to meet commitments on war crimes investigations, reforms

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka must make more progress toward meeting commitments to establishing a credible investigation into alleged war crimes during the country's civil war and enacting reforms, the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) said on Thursday.

The Geneva-based body handed Sri Lanka a two-year extension to implement fully the commitments that were made under a 2015 resolution after the United Nations top human rights official, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, expressed concern at the "slow progress" of reforms in Sri Lanka.

The United Nations and rights groups have accused the Sri Lankan military of killing thousands of civilians, mostly Tamils, during the final weeks of the war and have pressed for justice for the families of those who disappeared.

The United Nations launched a probe in 2014 into war crimes allegedly committed by both state forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels. The government of then-leader Mahinda Rajapaksa resisted the probe and denied U.N. officials entry to the island nation.

Many council members welcomed Sri Lanka's engagement, but called on President Maithripala Sirisena's government to present a clear plan aimed at meeting reconciliation, reform and justice commitments. In the eight years that have passed since the war ended, the government has failed to prosecute alleged war crimes such as torture, unlawful killings and enforced disappearances.

Families whose loved ones disappeared during the conflict have urged the United Nations to pressure the Sri Lankan government to speed up the war crimes probe.

More than 100,000 are believed estimated to have died and some 65,000 went missing during the 26-year conflict.

Sri Lanka's deputy foreign affairs minister, Harsha De Silva, told the U.N. rights body on Thursday that the government was striving to establish the rule of law and end impunity under "Sri-Lankan government-led processes". However, John Fisher, Geneva director of Human Rights Watch, said the president's opposition to the involvement of foreign judges, which had been agreed in the 2015 resolution, raised questions over the government's commitment to justice and undermined confidence in the government's efforts. "Sri Lanka needs to stop equivocating and move forward with a clear plan and timetable so that the promise of justice and accountability can finally become a reality," Fisher said in a statement. Tania Baldwin-Pask, head of international advocacy at Freedom from Torture said security reforms were needed to ensure torture and other abuses were not repeated. (Additional reporting by Stephanie Nebehay in Geneva; editing by Richard Lough) **(BUSINESSINSIDER)**

Doval's US visit reinforces counter-terrorism cooperation

WASHINGTON: The Trump administration is seeking to deepen its counter-terrorism cooperation with India and expand it further, sources here said after National Security Advisor Ajit K Doval's high profile meetings with top US officials.

Doval during his US visit this week met US Defense Secretary, Gen (rtd) James Mattis, Secretary of Homeland Security Gen (rtd) John Kelly, and National Security Advisor Lt Gen H R McMaster.

In all these meetings, the common threat was expansion and deepening of India-US co-operation in collectively addressing the challenge posed by terrorism in South Asia.

He also met Senator John McCain, Chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, and Senator Richard Burr, Chairman of the powerful Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

"Mattis specifically applauded India's efforts to promote stability in the South Asia region. Both leaders reaffirmed building upon the significant defence cooperation progress made in recent years," Pentagon Spokesperson Capt Jeff Davis said in a read out of the meeting, adding that the two leaders discussed their role in cooperating to uphold international laws and principles.

"Secretary Mattis and NSA Doval further discussed collaboration on a wide range of regional security matters including maritime security and counter terrorism. The two pledged to continue the strong defence partnership between both nations," Davis said.

Doval and McMaster during their meeting at the White House on Thursday "committed" to work together as partners to "combat the full spectrum" of terrorist threats, affirming that both great democracies stand together in the fight against terrorism, a senior Trump Administration official said.

"All the meetings were very warm, very positive, very constructive. I think there is an open approach to India," Indian sources said as Doval concluded his meetings in Washington DC yesterday.

This was Doval's second trip to the US after Trump won the presidential elections in November.

In December, Doval had met NSA-designate Gen (rtd) Michael Flynn, who resigned a few weeks after he took over the job due to the controversy surrounding Russian diplomats during the transition and election campaign.

Flynn was quickly replaced by McMaster, who according to the officials, has a very positive view about India.

"The discussions (in all these meetings) covered India's economic plans, reforms, growth. They covered our core security concerns, regional concerns, defence and security aspect of the India-US engagement," the senior official said on condition of anonymity.

For instance, the meeting at the Pentagon covered India-US defence relationship, issues like maritime security. "Naturally the challenge, nature and manifestation of terrorism and co-operation with regard," the official said, adding that the sense from these meetings came out that the Trump Administration seeks to take forward the upward trajectory of this bilateral relationship. With Homeland security, issues of radicalisation, cooperation in border controls, issues of information sharing which can help fight terrorist sides popped up. **(TIMESOFINDIA)**

Bangladesh launches military operation at suspected militant den

Bangladeshi commandos on Saturday launched a military operation to flush out militants belonging to an Islamist group behind the country's worst terror attack from a building amid fears that several residents were trapped inside.

The operation was launched after a 48-hour siege by security forces failed to drive them out of a five-storey building in Sylhet, a northwestern city.

Officials and witnesses said army para-commandos led by a Major General launched the crackdown assisted by police's Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) unit, counter terrorism unit and elite anti-crime Rapid Action Battalion (RAB).

"GOC (general officer commanding) of our Sylhet-based 17 Infantry Division Major General Anwarul Momen is leading the 'Operation Twilight' there," a military spokesman told PTI.

TV channels were barred from live coverage of the operation.

A 'whole lot of them' there

Earlier reports had said at least two suspected militants, including a woman, were inside the building, but a police officer later feared a "whole lot of them" could be there.

Police said militants are believed to be the operatives of neo-Jamaatun Mujahideen Bangladesh (neo-JMB).

The neo-JMB, said to be inclined towards the Islamic State, was behind the July 1 terror attack on a Dhaka cafe in which 22 people, including 17 foreigners, were killed.

28 families trapped in building Officials said at least 28 families were trapped inside the building. Some 70 people could be evacuated ahead of the full scale military assault. The police used megaphones to ask militants to surrender before launching the operation.

Military put barricades on adjacent thoroughfares, including on a regional highway, as joint forces took position to storm the militant hideout. Authorities overnight cut off the gas and power lines to the building. **(THEHINDU)**

Nepal to enhance cooperation with China

Nepal and China have pledged to further develop their ties as Kathmandu expressed its willingness to join China's Belt and Road initiative. In a meeting with visiting Chinese Defence Minister and State Councillor Chang Wanquan on Thursday, Nepali Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" appreciated China's neighbourhood diplomacy featuring amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness.

Prachanda also thanked China for its assistance to Nepal's socio-economic development and defence, especially the Chinese aid for post-quake reconstruction.

"Nepal is committed to the one-China policy and it will always stand against anti-Chinese activities. Nepal is keen to be a partner of the Belt and Road initiative," the Prime Minister said.

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, known as the Belt and Road initiative, was proposed by China in 2013 with the aim of building a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along ancient trade routes.

For his part, Chang appreciated Nepal's strong support to China in regard to its "core interest" issues of Taiwan and Tibet.

Chang said leaders from both sides have reached consensus on deepening bilateral ties.

China is ready to join hands with Nepal to further promote their comprehensive partnership of cooperation to benefit the two peoples, he added. **(BUSINESS)**

Admin enforces writ, prevents Abdul Aziz from staging event

ISLAMABAD: The Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) administration on Friday enforced its writ by not allowing Maulana Abdul Aziz to hold a gathering at the Lal Masjid.

A heavy law enforcement presence was visible around Municipal Road in Sector G-6 – where the mosque is located – since 10am. All roads leading towards Lal Masjid from Melody Market, Aabpara and Shaheed-i-Millat Road were cordoned off and no one, not even pedestrians, were allowed to proceed towards the mosque.

As a result, the Friday congregation at Lal Masjid was very thinly attended – mostly by media persons and employees of the National Accountability Bureau, located across the road.

Maulana Aziz had given the call for a conference against blasphemy on social media to be held at Lal Masjid on Friday, but negotiations between his followers and the ICT administration broke down late on Thursday night.

Though no written reply was given, the ICT administration turned down the application for the event and verbally conveyed this to the Lal Masjid administration.

Heavy police presence outside Lal Masjid, Jamia Hafsa; cleric criticises govt, parliament in chaotic presser

"Permission could not be granted to hold a conference at Lal Masjid because Maulana Abdul Aziz is a 'proscribed person' and [the mosque] is government property – only the government has the right to decide [what] activities [are held] there," an official told Dawn.

Meanwhile, Lal Masjid announced that the conference would be held with the help of the faithful, who were extolled to gather at Lal Masjid "at any cost".

An ICT official told reporters that law enforcement personnel would be deployed around the Lal Masjid to prevent the arrival of outsiders, especially students from other seminaries of the twin cities.

Around 600 personnel, including members of the anti-terrorist squad and anti-riot police, commandoes and women police were deployed at various points, while traffic police helped divert traffic from blocked roads in G-6 and G-7 sectors.

A senior officer of the ICT administration told Dawn they had anticipated that Maulana Abdul Aziz would try to use the Friday prayers to attract a crowd, who would be touted as participants of the conference.

"Therefore, a decision was taken at a high level that no one should be allowed to proceed towards Lal Masjid for Friday prayers," he said.

While the situation there remained under control, tensions simmered at another state-run mosque down the road – the Masjid-i-Rehmania in Aabpara – where a large number of seminary students and clerics gathered ahead of Friday prayers.

Delivering the Friday sermon, mosque khateeb Qari Abdul Rehman Muawia made a fiery speech against the government and announced on the loudspeaker that no power could stop them from holding a gathering to condemn blasphemers.

However, when Islamabad Deputy Commissioner retired Capt Mushtaq Ahmed arrived at the mosque compound in his official vehicle, the cleric changed his tone, announcing" "Maulana [Abdul Aziz] has said that we will attend Friday prayers and go back".

Following this announcement, several people were seen heading back towards the Aabpara bus stand without attending the Friday congregation.

Around the same time – just before Friday prayers – Maulana Abdul Aziz was holding forth at the Jamia Hafsa in Sector G-7, which is also his residence. The cleric held a chaotic presser amid high pitched sloganeering by his followers, deploring the unIslamic state of affairs in the country. **(DAWN)**

PTI to block next polls without reforms: Imran

LAHORE: Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf chairman Imran Khan says he will use "street power" to block the next general elections if these are announced without electoral reforms.

The PTI is preparing a charter of demands based on the 40 findings given by the Judicial Commission constituted to assess rigging in the 2013 elections, he says, adding "the PTI will assert that at least 10 steps must be taken before the announcement of the next general elections."

The party's every plan has been held back till the judgement in the Panamagate scandal, he says.

'Panamagate an open-and-shut case' Speaking to senior journalists here on Friday, Mr Khan used a cricket analogy to make a point that nobody listens when you lose a match.

"A team has to take measures to get a neutral empire before the match."

In case of ignoring the party demands, he said, "we will use street power before the next general elections."

He said the PTI would ensure that the Election Commission of Pakistan is reconstituted as the present commission was constituted by the PML-N and PPP which were hand in glove. He said the PTI was also pressuring the ECP to introduce electronic voting machine that should also carry paper trail but all efforts had gone in vain.

He said the PTI would put up a charter of demands before the people who had been educated during the 126-day sit-in in Islamabad. World over, he said, the judicial commissions bring about reforms but the government here neither took a single step to reform the system nor did it hold any official accountable.

As for preparations for elections, the PTI chief said the parliamentary board would be constituted at federal and provincial levels after the announcement of Panama Papers case judgement. There would be no strict formula but a "mix and match" approach aiming at winning elections.

"Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is prepared, while decisions had already been taken on many seats in Punjab. In other cases, many choices are available," he said and added that many politicians from other parties wanted to join the PTI but are awaiting the Panama case judgement with their fingers crossed.

"The PTI will not mind seat adjustments, where needed," he said. Expecting that the Panamagate judgement could come next week, he said it was an "open and shut' case but unnecessarily dragged. He said none of the thousands of those named in this scandal ever denied or challenged the authenticity of the revelations.

Earlier, speaking to media persons at Lahore airport, the PTI chief said the dream of "Naya Pakistan" would come true after Panamagate judgement.

He said the state institutions were exposed during the court proceedings and this case would have not reached the Supreme Court, if institutions would have been working according to their mandate.

He said the Qatri letters were meant to cover up money laundering which was explained by Ishaq Dar in a detailed affidavit given before a magistrate.

He said the State Bank of Pakistan report said some $10 billion were being flying out of the country through money laundering. This money should have been used for the welfare of the masses in terms of developing infrastructure and offering jobs to the educated and skilled youth.

Since the Sharif family told the court that the Qatris were its business partner for the past 25 years, he said the latest award of Rs200 billion Port Qasim contract (without bidding) to Qataris explained conflict of interest. **(DAWN)**

News-in-Brief

US judge grants asylum to Singapore teen blogger

A Singaporean teenage blogger who was jailed twice for his online posts insulting his government was granted asylum to remain in the United States, an immigration judge in Chicago ruled. Amos Yee was jailed in 2015 for four weeks for hurting the religious feelings of Christians and posting an obscene image as part of his attacks on the island's late leader Lee Kuan Yew - whose son Lee Hsien Loong is now the prime minister. He was jailed again in 2016 for six weeks for insulting Muslims and Christians in a series of videos posted online, but critics claim the real reason was to silence him.

Judge Samuel Cole issued a 13-page decision on Friday, more than two weeks after Yee's closed-door hearing on the asylum application.

"Yee has met his burden of showing that he suffered past persecution on account of his political opinion and has a well-founded fear of future persecution in Singapore," Cole wrote.

Cole said testimony during Yee's hearing showed that while the Singapore government's stated reason for punishing him involved religion, "its real purpose was to stifle Yee's political speech". **(Al Jazeera)**

Nicolas Maduro seeks UN help to ease medicine shortages

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro has asked the United Nations for "help" boosting medicine supplies as he struggles to combat crippling shortages. "I've asked for support from the UN to help treat economic and social injuries that have hit our people caused by the economic war and the sharp fall in petroleum prices," Maduro said in a televised appearance on Friday.

He did not provide any details about the request except to say that the UN has the expertise to normalise the supply and distribution of pharmaceutical drugs in the country.

But just acknowledging that Venezuela needs outside help is a telling sign of how deep in crisis the country, sitting atop the world's largest petroleum reserve, has fallen.

The country is suffering from triple-digit inflation as well as severe shortages of fuel, food and medicines, from painkillers to chemotherapy drugs. As many as 85 of every 100 medicines are missing in the country, Venezuela's main pharmaceutical association has said. Shortages are so extreme that patients sometimes take medicines ill-suited for their conditions, doctors warn. **(Al Jazeera)**

Hosni Mubarak walks free after six-year detention

Six years after his ouster, Egypt's ex-President Hosni Mubarak has been released from detention after being cleared of inciting the killings of hundreds of protesters in 2011.

Mubarak, 88, on Friday left a military hospital in Cairo's southern suburb of Maadi where he had been held in custody and went to his home in the upscale Heliopolis district under heavy security.

His lawyer, Farid el-Deeb, told the Egyptian newspaper al-Masry al-Youm that he celebrated his release with breakfast his wife Suzanne and their two sons, Alaa and Gamal. Egypt: Six years since Arab Spring revolution

Mubarak was cleared for release earlier this month after the country's highest appeals court acquitted him of any involvement in the deaths of nearly 900 Egyptians during the 25 January - 11 February 2011 uprising. He had been sentenced to life in 2012 but an appeals court dismissed the charges two years later.

Timothy Kaldas, a non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, told Al Jazeera that it was unlikely "both now or any time in the foreseeable future that anyone will be prosecuted for the murders. "Mubarak being in or out of prison doesn't change the fact that the military the took control in Egypt in 1952 continues to rule Egypt today. **(CNN)**

Frustration as cabin electronics ban comes into force

The US and British ban on laptops and tablets in carry-on luggage on some flights from the Middle East and North Africa has come into force, immediately drawing complaints from passengers at several airports.

The ban requires that personal devices larger than a mobile phone - such as tablets, laptops and cameras - be placed in checked baggage for US and Britain-bound flights.

The US restrictions apply to flights originating from 10 airports in countries including Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The British restrictions do not include the UAE or Qatar but do affect Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. The affected airports had until Saturday to implement the new rules. The ban s have already led to discontent and complaints from passengers at Ataturk International Airport in Istanbul, which is one of those listed.

"This airport is so secured. The security level is so high compared to other airports in the rest of this part of the world. So why doing that from here?" Haggai Mazursky, a traveller, told Reuters news agency. Al Jazeera's Sinem Koseoglu, reporting from Istanbul, said the airlines were trying to limit passengers' frustrations while holding talks with the US to lift the ban.

"They [Turkish airlines] believe that if the comfort of passenger is affected, it will impact the industry as a whole and the company as well," she said.

"In efforts to make it easier for the passengers, they [Turkish Airlines] are offering free wifi during flights and will also launch a special mobile application in April."

US and British officials said the decision to implement the security measures was a result of intelligence showing an increased risk for "terrorist activity" involving commercial aviation.

However, many observers in the Middle East and North Africa said the ban amounted to discrimination, while others questioned the basis for the electronics ban, saying they were a ploy to undermine the aviation industry of the countries affected.

"If you say it like this, you are saying everybody can be a terrorist. It's not respectful. I think it's not good," said one passenger at Ataturk International Airport.

Geoffrey Thomas, the editor-in-chief of A irlineratings.com, said the UK joining the ban gave it some credibility that there might be an evolving threat, "but at the same time UK has not banned UAE and Qatar, which raises a lot of concern as to what this is all about".

Are you affected by the #ElectronicsBan on flights to the US, UK? How is it impacting your journey? Share your thoughts below?? pic.twitter.com/Gtm4QoNnGL

"Some suggest that the ban on UAE and Qatar has more to do with the Trump administration's desire to curb the power of Middle East carriers, because one of the crazy parts about this ban is that Emirates from Dubai to Athens, and on to the US, is not included in the measures.

"And then you have cities that actually have security challenges, such as Lagos and Islamabad, which are also not included in the ban. So, there are questions about this that leave a lot of experts perplexed," Thomas said.

Turkey's foreign ministry said on Thursday that talks were underway to try to persuade the US and Britain to exclude Turkish Airlines and Istanbul airport from the ban s. **(Al Jazeera)**

Republicans withdraw healthcare bill in blow to Trump

Republicans in the US House of Representatives, short of support from their own party, have withdrawn a healthcare bill drafted to repeal and replace "Obamacare".

House Speaker Paul Ryan said he recommended that it be withdrawn because he did not have the votes to pass it, and President Donald Trump agreed.

Just a day earlier, Trump had demanded a House vote and said if the measure lost, he would move on to other issues.

Trump told reporters in the Oval Office that "we were very close" and tried to blame Democrats for the failure to pass the legislation - even though his Republican Party controls both the House and the Senate. "We were just probably anywhere from 10 to 15 votes short," Trump said. "With no Democrat support we couldn't quite get there."

He also said he was surprised and disappointed by the opposition from the House Freedom Caucus, a group of conservative Republicans who led the resistance against the legislation.

Ryan told reporters that Obamacare will now stay in place for the foreseeable future.

Pulling the bill he had promoted was "a setback, no two ways about it," he said, calling it a "disappointing day".

Democrats, on the other hand, called it a "victory" for the American people.

Scrapping former president Barack Obama's healthcare law was one of Trump's major campaign promises. The failure to get the bill approved called into question his ability to get other key parts of his agenda, including tax cuts and a boost in infrastructure spending, through Congress.

Public policy professor Bill Schneider said that during the president's first 100 days, his impact is supposed to be at its peak. What has Trump done so far? "Here, the president was handed a huge setback, by his own party, which was also committed to repealing Obamacare," he told Al Jazeera.

"Trump is defeated and he learned something: you cannot deal with members of Congress as if they were building contractors...He said if you don't give me what I want, I'll walk out. Maybe that works with building contractors but it doesn't work with politicians, each of whom has his or her own constituency."

Conservatives had condemned the Republican-drafted bill because it would scrap Obamacare, but put another government plan in its place. They believe healthcare should be left to the free market. Democrats and moderate Republicans, meanwhile, feared the withdrawn bill would take insurance away from millions of people. "What happened on the floor is a victory for the American people," Nancy Pelosi, leader of the minority Democrats in the House, said. She said the message became "very clear" to Republicans that people across the country still support Obamacare.

A Quinnipiac University poll indicated only 17 percent of Americans support the Republican plan known as the American Health Care Act (AHCA).

Now that the effort to overhaul the nation's health care system has collapsed, Trump and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the administration will focus on gaining congressional approval for a sweeping tax overhaul plan.

"I would say that we will probably start going very, very strongly for the big tax cuts and tax reform. That will be next," Trump said. Mnuchin said a bill would soon be introduced to cut both individual and corporate taxes.

Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, widely known as Obamacare, in 2010, providing health coverage for 20 million low-income Americans previously uninsured. Many middle earners complained their premiums spiked as a result.

Millions of Americans would have lost coverage next year under the Republican plan, according to a review by the Congressional Budget Office. It would have rescinded a range of taxes created by Obamacare, ended Obamacare's income-based subsidies to help people buy insurance, and ended the expansion of the Medicaid programme for the poor, among other changes. **(Al Jazeera)**

UN to probe alleged crimes against Rohingya in Myanmar

The leading United Nations rights body has agreed to send a fact-finding mission to Myanmar to investigate alleged abuses by security forces against Rohingya Muslims.

Tens of thousands of people have fled Myanmar's Rakhine state since the military began a security operation last October in response to what it says was an attack by Rohingya armed men on border posts, in which nine police officers were killed.

A February UN report said the operation targeting the Rohingya involved mass rapes and killings, possibly amounting to crimes against humanity.

The independent, international mission should be dispatched "urgently" to establish the facts of the alleged atrocities, the UN Human Rights Council decided in Geneva on Friday, in a resolution adopted by consensus.

The investigation would be launched "with a view to ensuring full accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims," the resolution said. Rohingya plight: UNHRC to discuss human rights abuses in Myanmar

The investigators must provide an oral update in September and a full report by this time next year, said the resolution backed by the European Union. Some countries, including China, India and Cuba, dissociated themselves from the resolution.

But the council stopped short of calling for a Commission of Inquiry - the world body's highest level investigation - into the violence, despite a call by Yanghee Lee, the UN's special rapporteur on rights in Myanmar.

Earlier this month, Lee told reporters that European leaders wanted to give Myanmar's new civilian government led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi more time before launching a top-level inquiry. **(Al Jazeera)**

UK report: Some Gulenists involved in Turkish coup

Some followers of Muslim leader and businessman Fethullah Gulen were involved in last summer's failed coup in Turkey, a UK Parliament report says, adding that there is no evidence to suggest the Gulen Movement as a whole was behind the plot.

The Foreign Affairs Committee's (FCO) report released on Saturday said the evidence of individual Gulenists' involvement in the attempt to overthrow the government was "mostly anecdotal or circumstantial, sometimes premised on information from confessions or informants".

The report also said that such evidence "is so far inconclusive in relation to the organisation as a whole and its leadership".

As well as the coup, the 82-page report also focuses on the UK's ties with Turkey; the threat from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); and the status of democracy in the country.

Since the July 15 coup attempt, Turkey has accused Pennsylvania-based Gulen of being behind the push to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

During the failed coup, about 300 people, the vast majority of them civilians, were killed across Turkey as rebel soldiers targeted the government by bombing state buildings.

"The FCO knows too little for itself about who was responsible for the coup attempt in Turkey, or about the 'Gulenists' ... whom the Turkish government exclusively blames for the coup," the report said.

"We found that the Turkish government's account of the Gulenists and the coup, which the FCO seems willing to accept broadly at face value, is not substantiated by hard, publicly available evidence, although as yet uncontradicted by the same standard."

The report cited a "lack of transparency", adding that it was unlikely Gulenists were the only elements involved in the coup.

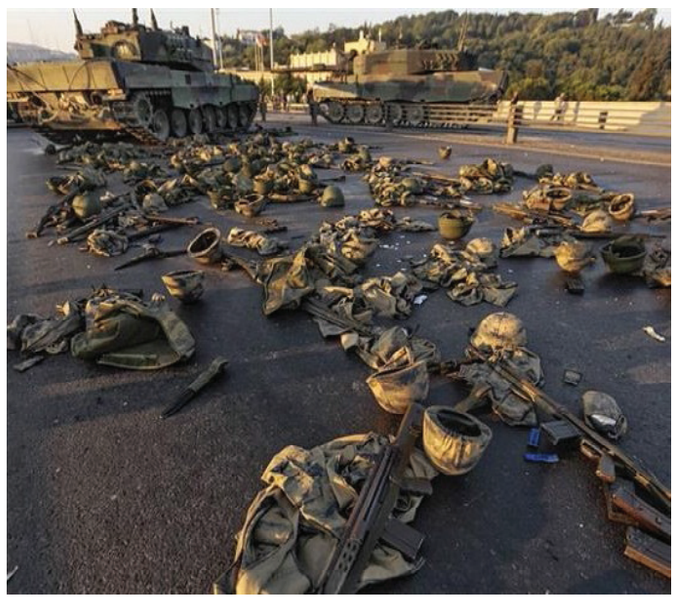
Turkey is seeking Gulen's extradition from the US, a request which has not been granted.

As well as accusing Gulen's network of staging the coup attempt, Turkey says it is behind a long-running campaign to overthrow the state through the infiltration of Turkish institutions, particularly the military, police and judiciary.

The FCO said that while Turkey faced a threat following the coup attempt against the backdrop of increased "terrorism", it disagreed with some tough measures by the Turkish government under a state of emergency.

"Turkey is an important strategic partner facing a volatile period," said Crispin Blunt, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

"It needs and deserves our support, but that support needs to include our critique where Turkish policy is not in its own, or our joint long-term interests: these are regional security and stability as well as strong and accountable institutions in Turkey." **(Al Jazeera)**



EU leaders mark 60th anniversary of Rome treaty

European Union leaders are renewing their vows on the 60th anniversary of the troubled bloc's founding treaties at a special summit in Rome designed to show unity despite Britain's looming divorce.

Meeting on Saturday in the same Renaissance-era palace where six founding countries signed the Treaty of Rome on March 25, 1957, the 27 leaders, minus Britain, will endorse a declaration of intent for the next decade.

The ceremonial gathering in Rome began with an audience with Pope Francis who gave messages of solidarity in the Vatican on Friday evening.

"You are called on to blaze the path of a new European humanism," Francis told the leaders.

"When a body loses its sense of direction and is no longer able to look ahead, it experiences a regression and, in the long run, risks dying," he said.

The White House congratulated the EU overnight on its 60th birthday, in a notable shift in tone for President Donald Trump's administration, whose deep scepticism about the bloc has alarmed Brussels. However, British Prime Minister Theresa May's absence from the summit, four days before she launches the two-year Brexit process, and an argument over the wording of the Rome declaration underscore the challenges the EU faces. High security

Security is tight with snipers on rooftops, drones in the skies and 3,000 police officers on the streets, as Italy takes no risks following an attack this week in London claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group.

Around 30,000 protesters are expected to take part in four separate marches - both pro- and anti-Europe - throughout the day in the Italian capital. Police plan to stop all traffic and declare a no-fly zone.

The Rome Declaration that the leaders will sign proclaims that "Europe is our common future", according to a copy obtained by the AFP news agency, after a series of crises that have shaken its foundations.

Mass migration, the eurozone debt crisis, attacks by armed groups and the rise of populist parties have left the bloc, formed from the ashes of World War II, searching for new answers.

Yet, the leaders are deeply divided over the way forward almost before they have started.

Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo only agreed to sign the declaration at the last minute, after bitterly opposing a reference to a "multi-speed" Europe favoured by powerhouse states France and Germany, AFP said. **(Al Jazeera)**

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AFGHANISTAN TIMES

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The constitution says

Article 111:

Article One Hundred Eleven: The Loya Jirga shall convene in the following situations: 1. To decide on issues related to independence, national sovereignty, territorial integrity as well as supreme national interests; 2. Amend provisions of this Constitution; 3. Impeach the President in accordance with the provisions of Article Sixty Nine of the Constitution.

Some stocktaking

By Afrasiab Khattak

The main feature of Pakistan's 70th National Day was the impressive and colourful military parade that remained the focus of media coverage on 23rd of March this year. The march past was supposed to represent the country's determination for defeating terrorism, which is a noble and desirable goal. So far so good. But for the last many years the country has been moving in circles on this front and despite the rhetorical claims regarding breaking the back of extremist terror we find it as entrenched and potent as it was years ago. Even after getting out of the mode of denial of the terror problem and making a public commitment to defeat it, Pakistan's performance has been less than impressive. National Action Plan (NAP) has for all practical purposes fizzled out. The biggest achievement of operation Zarb-e-Azb has been pushing most of the terrorists into Afghanistan and creating conducive conditions for Taliban to step up their war against the Afghan state and society. The new military leadership has deemed it fit to declare a new operation against terrorism called Radd al Fasad. How will it be different from the previous operations we don't know. Apart from some noble individual exceptions the parliamentarians as a whole seems to be resigned to their powerlessness and marginalisation. Hence there is no serious debate on this issue. So what is basically wrong with the country's strategy and tactics in the war against terror? Unfortunately we Pakistanis aren't used to stocktaking even on a national day best suited for such an exercise. The weakest link in Pakistani strategy against terrorism is the civil military divide, the tall claims of being on one page from both sides not withstanding. This serious duality of thought and action is spread over from governance to national security and foreign policy and is an open secret by now. Internally the said split reveals itself in the struggle for controlling the commanding heights of the state system in terms of making and executing policies.

The military's policy of fighting a war of attrition in neighboring countries through "non state actors" for achieving regional domination directly collides with the political government's policy of regional economic cooperation for turning the country into an economic tiger. The timing of recent border closure with Afghanistan was rather embarrassing for the government of PM Nawaz Sharif when the country was hosting a regional summit for promoting regional connectivity. We heard about the decision of the Prime Minister to open borders with Afghanistan as a good will gesture but apparently he or the foreign ministry didn't play any role in closing it. It is also quite obvious that CPEC could become a game changer only when Central Asian states will be able to link up with it through the shortest route that's Afghanistan. The most serious stumbling block on the path of achieving this objective is project Taliban of the Pakistani security establishment. Pakistani government leaders have been repeatedly saying that they don't want a Talibanised Afghanistan as that will turn our western neighboring country into a launching pad for Pakistani terrorists. That has already partially happened as TTP is launching terrorist attacks against Pakistan from the Taliban controlled areas. But despite that Pakistan based Taliban leadership is in the third year of their latest war in Afghanistan like so many previous ones. The present civilian government has its own limitations in fighting terror. It has been soft on a number of terror outfits on the basis of a misguided notion that such a policy can keep Punjab, its main political base, safe. Historical experience has proved it time and again that policy of appeasement towards extremism and terrorism is an unmitigated disaster. Even now the Punjab government is reluctant to go after some of the proscribed organisations. The time, energy and resources that the civilian and military factions of the ruling elites use to ward of each other's domination weakens the state and provides space to the activities of anti-state extremists. Intelligence agencies, both civilian and military are the eyes and ears of the state. Unless they pool together their professional capabilities to defeat the forces who are not only fighting against the state but also want to impose their so called ideology on the people of Pakistan, there can't be hope for winning the war. NACTA was to be strengthened and made effective for achieving the aforementioned goal. But again this project hasn't taken off. Unfortunately failure is not an option in this area and the country's leadership, both civilian and military will have to accept this challenge.

Pakistan is at a crucial stage of socio-economic development where adhocracy won't work anymore. The country has to make a strategic choice of focusing on geo-economic benefits. This would require a clear break from the policies rooted in the Cold War geo-strategy. It has to be a complete paradigm shift. It obviously can't happen overnight but clarity in thinking through the policy shift is indispensable. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif can provide leadership by convening extraordinary meetings of security related state institutions to bridge the gap between de facto and de jure. He also needs to take all political forces in confidence. Partisan biases should be set-aside in working on this project. Parliament is the forum for discussion on national policy in a parliamentary system of government. In camera sessions can be held to discuss sensitive issues. Here the present government also needs a break with its past practice of sidelining the Parliament. Remaining passive and pushing this issue under the carpet can be disastrous for everyone.

The writer is a retired Senator and an analyst of regional affairs.

EDITORIAL

So far no good

Afghanistan is going through an uncertain time where the security dilemma is getting serious with the passage of each day. The state is seems in trouble politically and militarily. There are huge differences among Afghan political elites in several issues, where one doesn't trust another. Poor leadership is also catastrophe. Most of the problems facing the Afghan security forces stem from poor leadership. The government still lagging behind in making leadership changes, but so far no good as security forces already abandoned Sangin district of Helmand province. Sources said that the security forces recoil the strategic district after they suffered high casualties in battle against the Taliban insurgents. Lack of military supply was the main element behind district fall. If it's not leadership failure than what it is? Afghanistan is at a crucial stage of its movement against war on terror where adhocracy won't work anymore. Since the Afghans, both civilian and military is the worst victim of the ongoing war, but some shocking news adds to the frustration of trouble Afghan masses.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has recently made shocking remarks on corruption among Afghan forces, terming combination of corruption and poor leadership in the security forces in Afghanistan as the root cause of their ineffectiveness. SIGAR revealed that commanders in the Afghan military steal the food and force their soldiers to buy it back. Some commanders steal fuel, and sell it to the Taliban. Ghost soldiers exist because names are either added—or never removed—from the Afghan payroll, and their salaries are pocketed by higher ranking commanders, SIGAR reported. This report is very much annoying. It's a bitter medicine for the Afghan government if it's true. The President Ashraf Ghani and the Chief Executive Officer, Abdullah Abdullah have to convene extraordinary meetings of security related state institutions to find out the grey areas and put full stop to this evil practice within security forces. We should not blame others for our failure. The Afghan security forces indeed are the true son of this soil. It has been for years that they are rendering huge sacrifices to maintain peace in our motherland. Undoubtedly, the war-hit Afghan masses have full confident on their security forces. Without their strong resistance, militant outfits with the support of regional players could have taken Kabul in a week. But security forces fighting insurgency with high moral, and defeated them in several fronts. It is a fact that Taliban and other militants have lost influence to fight security forces face-to-face. But the point is that all these sacrifices would be washed away if the government failed to recognize those commanders who are supporting militants in different ways. These elements could slowdown, and at some point could fail the country's strategy and tactics in the war against terror. It has been proved time and again that policy of appeasement toward extremism and terrorism is an unmitigated disaster. If SIGAR report termed correct, the government should take an immediate action against culprits. If unfound, SIGAR have to answer why such baseless allegation it has made.

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The coming ban on nuclear weapons

By: ZIA MIAN

On March 27, the United Nations will start negotiations on an international treaty to ban nuclear weapons. It will be a milestone marking the beginning of the end of an age of existential peril for humanity. This day was bound to come. From the beginning, even those who set the world on the path to nuclear weapons understood the mortal danger and moral challenge confronting humanity. In April 1945, US Secretary of War Henry Stimson explained to President Harry Truman that the atomic bomb would be "the most terrible weapon ever known in human history." Stimson warned that "the world in its present state of moral advancement compared with its technical development would be eventually at the mercy of such a weapon. In other words, modern civilization might be completely destroyed."

Soon afterwards, the newly created UN, established with the express purpose "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," took the threat posed by nuclear arms as its first priority. In January 1946, in its very first resolution, the UN called for a plan "for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons." The Soviet Union submitted such a plan that June. Now largely forgotten, the Gromyko Plan included a "Draft International Convention to Prohibit the Production and Employment of Weapons Based on the Use of Atomic Energy for the Purpose of Mass Destruction." At the time, only the United States had nuclear weapons, and it chose to maintain its monopoly. But it couldn't hold onto it for long. Where it led, others soon followed, forcing humanity to endure the decades of weapons development, arms races, proliferation, and nuclear crises that followed. Anti-nuclear movements took root, and, in a phrase made famous by the historian E.P. Thompson, began to protest to survive. They found allies in a growing number of countries. In November 1961, the UN General Assembly declared that "any state using nuclear and thermonuclear weapons is to be considered as violating the Charter of the United Nations, as acting contrary to the laws of humanity, and as committing a crime against mankind and civilization." As the number and destructive power of nuclear weapons grew, and as even developing countries began to acquire them, recognition of the danger gave rise to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which entered into force in 1970. "Considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war," the NPT begins, there is a "consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples."

To this end, the treaty committed all signatories to "undertake negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament." The US, the Soviet Union, and Britain signed the NPT. France and China, the only other nuclear weapon states at the time, held out for more than 20 years, until 1992. Israel, India, and Pakistan have never signed, while North Korea signed and then withdrew. Although all professed support for achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world, disarmament negotiations never began.

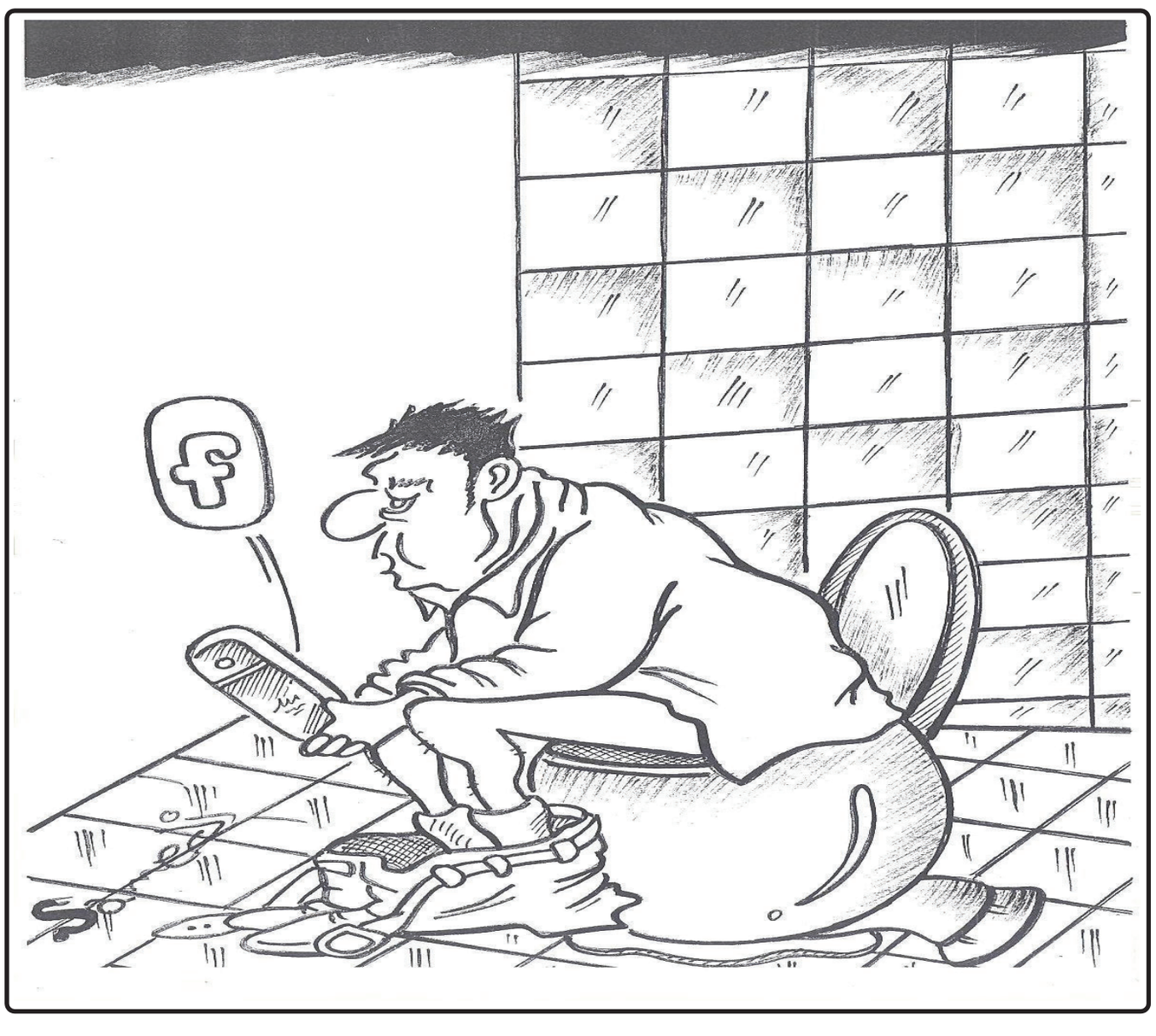
Countries without nuclear weapons – the overwhelming majority – took matter into their own hands. Through the UN General Assembly, they asked the International Court of Justice to rule on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons.

In July 1996, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion, with two key conclusions. First, "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law." And, second, "There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control."

But, in the 20 years since the highest court in the international system issued its judgment, the states affected by it have still failed to launch "negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament." Instead, they have set out on long-term programs to maintain, modernize, and in some cases augment their nuclear arsenals.

Non-weapon states began to take action through a series of international conferences and UN resolutions. Finally, in October 2016, the UN General Assembly's First Committee, which is responsible for international peace and security, voted "to convene in 2017 a United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination." On December 23, the General Assembly ratified the decision, with 113 countries in favor, 35 opposed, and 13 abstentions.

(Newtimes)



War at the root of hunger

By: PASCAL CUTTA

The recent statement by the United Nations on the humanitarian crises affecting Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria is significant and timely. Substantial resources need to be allocated immediately in order to avert a further spiraling downwards. But, more than this, we need to address the root causes of this desperate situation - and time is short.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, along with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have been on the ground in these four countries for many years. We witness the massive suffering. Millions of people denied the very basics to survive. Millions of people forced to flee their homes. Millions of people threatened by starvation.

In Yemen, only 45% of health structures are functioning. Less than 30% of medicines and medical supplies that are needed are entering the country. In the city of Hodeida, the water system is on the verge of collapse, threatening nearly half a millions people. In South Sudan, it is estimated that one in three households is in urgent need of food.

In Nigeria, in the state of Borno, 300,000 children are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition over the next twelve months. The problems facing all these countries are wide-ranging and severe. Agricultural land contaminated with explosives. Livestock unable to survive. Water, electricity and other vital services damaged and destroyed. Health and humanitarian workers deliberately attacked targeted.

The list goes on. The cumulative impact is enormous. Famine, or the threat of famine, is just one of the by-products. But this situation has not just simply arisen overnight. The cause of severe starvation is not primarily climatic - though that has played a part. It is man-made. The key factor that links all these crises is the existence of long term and apparently, intractable, conflict. All four countries, and its peoples, have experienced years of violence and suffering. Protracted conflict lies at the root of this humanitarian crisis.

What we do

The ICRC is not standing idle. We are helping to address these issues in all manner of ways. For instance, in South Sudan we currently have six surgical teams working 24 hours a day, every day, trying to help people caught up in the violence: life-saving work. Following the recent upsurge in fighting in Yemen, the ICRC increased its medical assistance by 250% to respond to urgent needs in the treatment of war wounded.

The ICRC provides monthly support to five main hospitals and, on an ad hoc basis, to another 80 health facilities. In parts of Nigeria, we delivered food aid to more than 1.2 million people in 2016. We do what we can. The overall aim is to stop people from plunging further into poverty and vulnerability. And because of our impartial and neutral stance, the ICRC is able to access areas that others cannot. We deliver emergency aid and, at the same time, strive to keep essential services going over the long term. This invaluable work is carried out in conjunction with the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in these countries. For instance, in response to the current situation in Somalia, the ICRC, working alongside the Somali Red Crescent Society, expect to provide a combination of food, cash grants, and access to water and health care to 1.4 million people.

We will continue to work alongside our movement partners, in a coordinated and joined-up way to maximize the impact of our humanitarian work. The ICRC has already begun scaling up its work in these countries. In total, we will be spending at least 400m CHF (about 400m Euros), with the aim of responding to the needs of 4.7 million people. But it is a drop in the ocean. The needs are just so great.

What needs to be done?

Yes, financial support is certainly needed. This will provide immediate assistance in terms of food, water, shelter and health care. To support essential services such as health and water. But the international community must do more. States need to directly address the root causes of the crisis. Initiatives aimed at conflict prevention and resolution are essential. But we also need to address the here and now. We need to address how war is waged. As living witnesses to what is going on in these countries, we see how health facilities are deliberately attacked, how families

are forced to flee their homes, how essential goods and services are blocked. We see how humanitarian access is curtailed. We see 160 attacks against health structures in Yemen since 2015. We see how, perhaps, three million people in South Sudan have been forced to flee their homes since 2013. No amount of aid money can negate political obstructionism and a failure to abide by the norms of warfare. States have the power to make a difference, to influence behavior. And they can try harder to do this. States should not support those who fail to abide by the laws of war. There should be no support without compliance. Civilian areas should not be targeted. The basic services that preserve life – and prevent starvation – need to be protected. Blockades need to be lifted – in the name of humanity. There is one last important dimension to consider. If we do not deal with this crisis now, it will only get worse. The cost in human lives - and the financial cost - will only get higher the longer we leave it. It is beholden on those with power to act. They must help deal with the symptoms of conflict but they must also help deal with the root causes. And they must ensure that when war is waged, it is done so within the bounds of humanitarian law. If not, this desperate humanitarian situation will only continue. **(Newtimes)**

From the Golan, Iran is paving the way for a new war in Lebanon

By Huda al Husseini

'Harkat al Nujaba' or the 'Movement of the Nobles' is not temerarious enough to contend the Arabic language printed by the Iranians on placards carried by masked members to declare the formation of the Golan Liberation Brigade. The Golan name is misspelled missing the introducatory 'al' that precedes Golan as it should be written in the Arabic language. Nonetheless - exactly like 'nobles; – they "toed the line" and raised the banner. They also released propaganda videos showing members of the movement carrying banners that read: "Israel will be destroyed". The militia's official spokesperson, Hashim al Mussawi, said in a press conference on March 8 in Tehran that the new unit could assist the Syrian regime in taking the Golan Heights, a region occupied by Israel since 1967, a verdict he left entirely to Damascus to take, saying: "Should the Syrian government make the request, we are ready to participate in the liberation of occupied Golan with our allies. Unquestionably, the unit in concert with the regime, is likely to participate in a future offensive to capture territory from Syrian opposition on the part of the Golan still controlled by Syria prior any "full liberation" of the Golan. The formation of the Golan Liberation Brigade conspicuously demonstrates Tehran's priorities in south Syria, for agitprop purposes, locally and internationally limited to the so-called 'Resistance countries' that extend to Venezuela and Cuba.

Iran believes it is obliged to confront and to emphasize its commitment to fight Israel, mainly with the arrival of a new administration in Washington where observers feel certain that curbing Iran is a paramount issue for politicians and military officials alike.

Pivotal role in Aleppo

'Harkat al Nujaba' played a pivotal role in assisting the Quds forces – the elite arm of Iran's IRCG – and pro-Syrian regime forces to conquer Aleppo last year. The Iraqi militia functions as an extension of the Islamic Republic, having sworn full allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayotollah Ali Khamenei. The militia promotes 'velayat-e-faqih' and takes direct orders from Major General Qassem Soleimani, the chief of the IRGC's extraterritorial branch – the Quds Force. Last year, the Iraqi militia, which is also known as 'Harakt Hezbollah al Nujaba' proclaimed that it and Lebanese Hezbollah were the "twins of resistance." The militia leader, Akram al Kabi, is close to the top Iranian leadership, including the Supreme Leader and the co-founder of the 'Asaib al Haq' itself an offshoot of the Mahdi Army. In 2015, he bluntly stated that he would oust the Iraqi government if Khamenei seeks to do so. Last year, top Iranian officials close to Khamenei gave Kabi a highly publicized reception unprecedented in scope and scale for one of their Arab zealots. 'Harakat al Nujaba' publicized Kabi's meeting with Khamenei on the sidelines of a conference held in Tehran last December. Albeit the fact that 'Harakat al Nujba' derive its moral potency from the Iranian patronage, a wide chasm remains between its capabilities and ambitions to recapture the Golan. Since 1967, the Syrian regime fecklessly "vowed" to respond to Israel in due time, in addition to Iran's IRGC who is affiliated with militants groups founded by the Islamic Republic in countries under its clout. These combined forces are no match for the Israeli army.

Huda al Husseini

Iran's goal of establishing a foothold in the Golan Heights is not a secret any more. The Islamic Republic justified intervening in Syria to defend the Shiite shrines. However, the chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces said in remarks published last November that Iran may seek to set up naval bases in Yemen and Syria. Moreover, on several occasions, Israeli officials openly referred to Iran's increased leverage on Syria during the six years' old civil war, either through the IRCG or Shiite militants, chiefly Hezbollah. Previously, Avi Dichter, chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee stated that Iran had tried several times last year to move troops into the Syrian Golan Heights: "All movements are tracked." Nonetheless, media reports revealed that Israel had repelled several Iran-directed attempts to move forces to the Golan. Senior Iranian military commanders are known to operate in the Syrian Golan, and usually local press cast lights on such visits after its conclusion.

Killed in Israeli strike

General Mohammad Reza Naqdi, the commander of the Basij - a paramilitary force operate under the IRGC – toured al Quneitra sometime last year. However, Iranian media outlets published photos of the visit in July. The most renowned incident happened in January 2015, when an Israeli helicopter strike several targets in the area, including IRGC Brigadier General Mohamed Ali Allah Dadid accompanied by Hezbollah field commander, Mohamed Eissa, and Jihad Mughniyah, the son of Imad Mughniyah. The three were killed in the attack. Albeit the fact that 'Harakat al Nujba' derive its moral potency from the Iranian patronage, a wide chasm remains between its capabilities and ambitions to recapture the Golan. Since 1967, the Syrian regime fecklessly "vowed" to respond to Israel in due time, in addition to Iran's IRGC who is affiliated with militants groups founded by the Islamic Republic in countries under its clout. These combined forces are no match for the Israeli army. Iran is embracing a punctilious stance towards Israel, concealing behind its ideology of "Do not assault but infiltrate". Despite, Iran and Hezbollah's accusations of Israel bolstering the Syrian opposition embattling the regime, Israel not only successfully distanced itself from the Syrian war cataclysm effect, but was occupied in striking military and technology deals with China and India, and in ensuring that its frontiers are rather quiet from occasional skirmishes. Yet there is an understanding within Israeli security institutions that the status quo is unsustainable and that Israel must re-evaluate its strategy. These Iranian threats, by 'Harak al Nujba' and Hezbollah rather serve Israel in boosting its international relations, especially with the United States.

(Alarbya)

Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric leads to diminished college enrollment

By Eleanor J. Bader

Two-and-a-half years ago, when Margarita left her home in Venezuela to study in the US, she had high hopes. No one in her family had ever attended university, let alone studied abroad, and she relished the opportunity to perfect her English and complete a Bachelor's degree. Trump's election changed that and Margarita says that she now worries about whether it is in her best interest to remain in the country. Despite having a student visa, she says that she's always on edge. Nonetheless, she has decided to stay and finish her degree. "I want to make my dreams come true," she told Truthout. "I do not want to leave something half-way, that is incomplete." She expects to receive her undergraduate diploma in the spring of 2019.

Like most international students, Margarita is not eligible for financial aid and her family pays her tuition and living expenses out of pocket, in this case at $320 a credit. It's a huge investment, and as bias incidents and hateful rhetoric about immigrants ramp up, many would-be international students are asking themselves if it makes sense to continue seeking a home in a place where they may not be wanted. According to Rudy Fichtenbaum, president of the American Association of University Professors, "The atmosphere -- the increasing attacks on Jewish centers, cemeteries, Muslim mosques and the recent murder of two Sikhs in Kansas City -- means that many international students are deciding to stay away from the US and are instead attending colleges in Canada, Australia or Europe." Indeed, some Canadian colleges are experiencing a 70 percent bump in their number of international applicants. At the same time, the decline in international student applications to US programs has been precipitous: 40 percent of US colleges told Inside Higher Education in early March that there has been a sharp drop in both undergraduate and graduate applications from foreign students for fall 2017. The biggest dip has come from China, India and the Middle East.

The reasons? Fear about the ability to reenter the country after trips home and apprehension about community acceptance.

Dr. Reza Fakhari, vice president for workforce development and strategic community partnerships and continuing education at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY) -- my workplace -- explains the impact. "Some US graduate programs can collapse without international students," he begins. "Some, particularly in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, have a large percentage of students who come from other countries. The fear factor among these students is huge. The Trump administration's [leaders] ... do not want the country to be diverse. In fact, they actually want to reverse diversity.... It's at odds with reality not to see diversity as enrichment." But Trump, Bannon and the Republicans disagree and have made clear that they see multiculturalism as a threat to American hegemony and cultural continuity. A year ago, during the 2015-2016 academic year, 33 percent of the students at the Florida Institute of Technology came from outside the US; 32 percent of those enrolled at the New School for Social Research were international. Other colleges and universities with large international student populations include the Illinois Institute of Technology and the University of Tulsa (26 percent); Carnegie Mellon (22 percent); Brandeis and Northeastern (20 percent); UCLA (13 percent); Brown, Harvard, Rice and the University of Pennsylvania (12 percent); Princeton and Yale (11 percent); and Cornell, Duke, George Washington, Johns Hopkins and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (10 percent).

As CUNY's Dean Fakhari makes clear, STEM fields stand to be the biggest losers: 70 percent of electrical engineering, 63 percent of computer science, and half of all math, physics and statistics students entering master's level programs in the US come from abroad. And, he stresses, their presence benefits everyone since they contribute an estimated $30.5 billion to the economy and support 373,000 domestic jobs. Colleges recognize this and are trying to fight back, noting that the potential loss of these students -- and the money they bring with them -- will threaten their budgets and lessen intellectual collegiality. Although it's largely unprecedented, the presidents of more than 650 of the country's 4140 public and private colleges have signed onto a letter to John F. Kelley, Secretary of Homeland Security, that was sent on February 3. "International exchange is a core value and strength of American higher education," they wrote. "Moreover, our nation's welcoming stance to scholars and scientists has benefited the US through goodwill and a long history of scientific and technological advances that have been essential to the economic growth our country has experienced for decades." To date, Homeland Security has not responded to the appeal. International students are not the only constituency whose numbers are declining. Overall, college enrollment went from a peak of 20.6 million in 2011 to less than 19 million today -- a fact that predates Trump. Some have opted to enter the workforce or have enlisted in the military instead of continuing in school. In addition, undocumented students -- with and without Deferred Action on Childhood Arrival or DACA status -- are also noticeably staying away, not applying at all, or not returning to complete their courses of study. Although this population was never huge -- reaching a total of approximately 225,000 in 2015 -- many universities across the country are responding to the heightened anxieties expressed by both undocumented undergraduates and the much larger pool of 5.1 million US citizens who live in mixed-status households with someone at risk of deportation.

"The fear is in the airwaves," says Rev. Juan Carlos Ruiz, a pastor at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City and a founder of the New Sanctuary Movement. "Financial aid to low-income immigrants was never adequate, but the systemic oppression that has always existed has been compounded by Trump. Right now, we're working with five students whose parents have been detained. One has an eight-year-old brother with special needs. This student may now need to become the family breadwinner. I've also seen some people decide to pack up and leave rather than live in danger and fear. They feel humiliated that they worked and paid taxes and are now being treated so badly."

Pamela Johnson, interim vice president for enrollment management at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois, a Catholic college established more than a century ago to educate the Irish immigrants then working in the area's lead mines, says that about 10 percent of the school's 2,300 undergraduates are directly impacted by administration policies on immigration. "The DACA students, in particular, feel vulnerable," she says. "They've given all this personal information to the government. Some have told us that they plan to move so that the address on file is no longer where they live. The anxiety is really high." John DeCostanza, director of university ministry at Dominican, adds that as soon as the first executive order banning immigrants from Muslim-dominant countries was issued in January, pastoral counseling staff noticed a spike in the number of students calling for appointments. "Rumors of raids in Chicago were rampant, and in order to be good stewards and provide accurate and adequate care to our students, we've had to lean heavily on immigrant advocacy organizations working on the ground. They've provided us with the verification we need about ICE activity in and around Chicago," he says.

Good pastoral care, he continues, revolves around helping students grapple with the reality of the threat. It also involves learning their rights so that they can create the best possible plan to protect themselves and their loved ones. "The best source of protection is their own planning," DeCostanza continues. "They need to talk to their families and the people they're in community with about their options." This is a conversation that families often avoid, he added, especially when it involves discussing who will get custody of a US-born child if one or both parents are deported. Like most DACA recipients or students in mixed-status households, he says, those enrolled at Dominican feel a deep sense of responsibility toward their parents and siblings and are committed to helping younger family members in whatever ways are needed. "The psychological burden that comes with that responsibility cannot be overestimated," he adds. Not surprisingly, these responsibilities weigh heavily, and impact the number of applications coming from undocumented students and those living in mixed-status homes.

(Truthout)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Unemployment

Unemployment is the core reason behind drug addiction in the country. A number of youth across the country blamed government for ignoring them by not creating jobs for them. According to several youths, joblessness has forced young men into using drugs and migrating to foreign states. The government should pay serious heed to this issue and spare no efforts in a bid to generate jobs for them. The young generations are playing key role in building or damaging of a country.

The government should leave no stone unturned to create jobs for the youths as they are the future maker of this war-turn country. Putting a glance to every development countries, you would find that all credits for that progress directly goes to its youth's indefatigable efforts. We want the government to pay serious attention in providing jobs for youths.

Omar Khan, Kabul, Afghanistan

Letter to editor will be edited for policy, content and clarity. All letters must have the writer's name and address. You may send your letters to: afghanistantimes@gmail.com

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Child sexual abuse

By M Zaudian

The sexual abuse of children is universal. There is no country or culture anywhere that is free of this curse. All of the developed states have a suite of laws in place to outlaw it, and the penalties are severe in all cases.

It will never be eradicated, and the best that can be hoped for is a heightened sense of awareness and the development everywhere of a climate of disclosure — a climate wherein children are able to report what has happened to them. Pakistan is no different and like many other countries the incidence of child sexual abuse is on the rise.

A new report entitled 'Cruel numbers 2016' says that 4,139 children were sexually abused last year, 2,410 girls and 1,729 boys. The figures are derived from open sources and are without a shadow of doubt an under-reporting of the true numbers.

Most incidents were in rural areas; with Punjab having the greatest number which considering it is the most populous province is hardly surprising. The proliferation of CSA is in part driven by the internet where images of children being sexually abused number in the many millions and are not difficult to find if one knows where — and how — to look. Nor is it difficult to find shops that sell CD's of child sexual abuse and pornography is available everywhere in the country — in homes and workplaces as well, anywhere that has an internet connection.

The challenge for Pakistan is to bring its child protection services on a par with developed nations.

There is a slowly-growing cadre of trained social workers that have an expanding body of expertise relating to helping those that have been abused.

Unfortunately only Punjab has a fledgling child protection service that is linked to law enforcement and the courts, everywhere else lags far behind.

Beyond the institutional challenges there is the wider challenge of learning to accept what children say, and not doubling their pain by refusing to believe them or act on what they tell adults.

Numerous reports worldwide are consistent in saying that children invariably tell the truth when they report being sexually abused. It is for all of us to listen when they do — and then act.

(Tribune)

US sanctions firms for transferring technology to Iran, N-Korea, Syria

The United States has imposed sanctions on 30 foreign companies or individuals for transferring sensitive technology to Iran for its missile programme or for violating export controls on Iran, North Korea and Syria, the State Department said on Friday.

Eleven companies or individuals from China, North Korea or the United Arab Emirates were sanctioned for technology transfers that could boost Tehran's ballistic missile programme, the State Department said in a statement.

Nineteen entities or individuals were sanctioned for other violations under the Iran, North Korea and Syria Non-proliferation Act, it said.

They are believed to have transferred or acquired sensitive technology that could contribute to development of weapons of mass destruction.

"These determinations underscore that the United States continues to regularly impose sanctions under existing authorities, as warranted, against entities and individuals that engage in proliferation activity with Iran, North Korea, and Syria," the State Department statement said in a statement.

The companies included under the newly imposed sanctions are based in China, North Korea, and the United Arab Emirates.

The State Department said that 11 of the entities and people contribute to activity that "serves to escalate regional conflicts further and poses a significant threat to regional security."

Eleven entities and individuals were sanctioned for transfers of sensitive items to Iran's ballistic missile programme.

The government also implemented sanctions on 19 companies or people found to have "transferred to, or acquired from, Iran, North Korea, or Syria goods, services, or technology listed on multilateral export control lists, or on US national control lists, or other items that could make a material contribution to the development of weapons of mass destruction or missile proliferation."

Most of the companies listed engage in export activity.

(Dawn)

Israel didn't comply with Security Council call to stop settlements

Danon slams report by UN Mideast envoy Mladenov, says only impediment to peace is Palestinian violence, incitement

Israel took no steps to comply with a Security Council call to stop all settlement activity in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, and instead authorized "a high rate" of settlement expansions in violation of international law, the United Nations said Friday.

UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov told the council that the large number of settlement announcements and legislation action by Israel indicate "a clear intent to continue expanding the settlement enterprise in the occupied Palestinian territory."

He was delivering the first report to the council on implementation of the resolution it adopted in December condemning Israeli settlements as a "flagrant violation" of international law. The resolution was a striking rupture with past practice by President Barack Obama who had the US abstain rather than veto the measure as then president-elect Donald Trump demanded.

The resolution didn't impose sanctions on Israel, so the council isn't called on to take any action. But it does enshrine the world's disapproval of the settlements.

Mladenov, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, reiterated that the United Nations "considers all settlement activities to be illegal under international law and one of the main obstacles to peace."

He called "the January spike" in settlement announcements by Israel "deeply concerning." During that month, he said, two major announcements were made for a total of 5,500 housing units in Area C, the 60 percent of the West Bank exclusively controlled by Israel. "Overall, the last three months have seen a high rate of settlement-related activity, especially when compared to 2016, which saw tenders for only 42 (housing) units issued and some 3,000 units advanced over 12 months in Area C," Mladenov said. Palestinian leaders hope east Jerusalem will become the capital of a Palestinian state that will also encompass the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories Israel captured in 1967.

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon said Friday that "the only impediment to peace is Palestinian violence and incitement. This obsessive focus on Israel must end." In his report, Mladenov also said "many advancements in settlements in the past three months will further sever the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state and accelerate the fragmentation of the West Bank." He said these actions in Kfar Adumim, Shiloh, Kokhav Yakov and Shavei Shomron "are in breach of international law and they must stop."

"Settlement expansion undermines the very essence of the two-state solution," Mladenov said, and the resolution states that the international community will not recognize any changes to the 1967 lines other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations."

(Timesofisrael)

CENTRAL ASIA

Kyrgyzstan: Ruling party expels free-thinking MP

One of the youngest and most active members of Kyrgyzstan's parliament has been expelled from the pro-presidential Social-Democratic Party (SDPK). The SDPK's political council explained on March 24 that the views of Zhanar Akayev, 31, had drifted too far from its official platform. The speculation is that the decision was taken following Akayev's decision to participate in a march last weekend in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, in defense of media outlets being sued by the General Prosecutor's Office on behalf of President Almazbek Atamabayev. Akayev has said that he is not taking the expulsion to heart and that his colleagues were most likely "fulfilling an order" — implying the instruction was handed down by the president's office. "A person that tells the truth but who finds himself among liars and sycophants will always be considered an extremist," he said. In a previous life, Akayev worked for RFE/RL's Kyrgyz service, Radio Azattyk, which is one of the outlets facing the libel lawsuits. He has regularly spoken in defense of his old employer despite Atambayev's recurring criticism. **(AP)**

Prime Ministers of Russia, Uzbekistan to discuss economic cooperation

Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev on March 28 will discuss economic cooperation with Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov in Moscow, reports the press service of the Russian government today.

"Representative of the Russian government Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Abdulla Aripov will consider issues of economic cooperation, implementation of the projects in energy, transport, agricultural and humanitarian spheres," said the statement.

Azerbaijani oil prices for March 20 – 24

Average price of AZERI LT CIF, extracted at Azerbaijan's Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli block of fields, was $51.99 per barrel on March 20-24 or $0.55 per barrel less than the previous week. The highest price of AZERI LT was $53.06 per barrel, while the lowest price was $51.38 per barrel during the reporting period. Azerbaijan sells AZERI LT via the Turkish port of Ceyhan and Georgian ports of Batumi and Supsa. The oil is supplied to Ceyhan via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and to Georgia via the Baku-Supsa pipeline, as well as by rail. Average price of URALS (EX-NOVO), exported from Azerbaijan via the Novorossiysk port, was $47.08 per barrel on March 20-24 or $0.61 per barrel less than the previous week. The highest price for URALS was $47.95 per barrel and the lowest price was $46.47 per barrel on March 20-24. Azerbaijan sells the oil supplied via the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline through Russia's Novorossiysk port. Average price of Brent Dated was $50.1 per barrel on March 20-24 or $0.1 per barrel less than the previous week. The highest price for Brent was $50.86 per barrel and the lowest price was $49.59 during the reporting period. **(Trend)**

Tashkent -Dushanbe flights scheduled for April 4

The air communication between Tashkent and Dushanbe will start on April 4, reports RIA Novosti with reference to the national airline of Uzbekistan.

The flight from Tashkent to Dushanbe will be performed at 7:20 am on April 4.

The flight will be operated twice a week. Resumption of the direct flight between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which was frozen in 1992, has been canceled several times.

The first flight on the route Dushanbe – Tashkent was planned to be performed on February 10, however, it failed to be performed. Then Tajikistan's Somon Air explained that the relevant documents for flight have been sent to the Uzbek side too late.

The second flight failed on February 23.

Late documents were also blamed for the delay then.

(Akpress)

Japan issues order to troops over UN S-Sudan mission completion

Defense Minister Tomomi Inada on Friday issued an order to the Self-Defense Forces to withdraw from a U.N. peacekeeping mission in South Sudan by late May, which will end a more than five-year deployment of Japanese troops in the fledgling African country.

Noting that the activities of the Ground Self-Defense Force's civil engineering units have been "highly evaluated" by the United Nations and the South Sudan government, Inada told a meeting of ministry officials to make utmost efforts to ensure that all SDF members return home safely.

Japan began sending a civil engineering unit to South Sudan in January 2012 for the U.N. mission called UNMISS to help develop roads and infrastructure. South Sudan is the newest country in the world, having gained independence from Sudan in 2011.

But the participation in UNMISS has recently been controversial in Japan as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government has mandated the troops to serve new, and possibly riskier, roles under the country's security legislation that has eased restrictions imposed on SDF activities by Japan's pacifist Constitution.

The new roles include going to the aid of U.N. staff and other personnel under attack when there is an urgent request. The GSDF unit currently stationed in South Sudan became able to perform rescue missions in December, but it has not yet engaged in such tasks.

Concerns also linger over the security situation in South Sudan, which has been mired in conflict between government forces and rebels. But Abe, who announced the plan to withdraw GSDF troops on March 10, has said the condition in the country had nothing to do with the decision.

As part of the procedure, the government decided at a Cabinet meeting Friday to extend the participation of the GSDF unit in the U.N. mission for two more months through May 31, when they are expected to complete the infrastructure work that is now under way. The Defense Ministry said in a statement that the South Sudan government's efforts to bring stability to the country are "making progress" and that the deployment of the SDF civil engineering unit has become unprecedentedly long for a U.N. peacekeeping operation.

According to a ministry official, the 350-member unit will head home possibly from April, starting with those who have finished their work. Some members of a newly formed 60-member unit will be sent from Japan to South Sudan to assist the withdrawal.

While seeking to terminate the activities of the SDF unit, the ministry said it will continue to make contributions to U.N. efforts in South Sudan by extending the stay of SDF officers working in the mission's headquarters to Feb. 28, 2018. UNMISS is currently the only U.N. peacekeeping operation for which Japan is sending an SDF unit. The ministry's press secretary Hirofumi Takeda told reporters that Japan is eager to contribute further to international peacebuilding efforts, but added, "There is no concrete plan to send an SDF unit to other U.N. missions at the moment." SDF troops have taken part in a number of U.N. peacekeeping operations in the past, but their activities have focused on noncombat roles, such as infrastructure-building.

The Japanese government also upholds five principles for participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations to ensure that the troops' activities will not violate the Constitution, which include the existence of a cease-fire agreement among the parties in armed conflicts.

Abe's government has eased some of the constitutional constraints through the security legislation that came into force in March last year. But critics have said the new tasks the Japanese troops have been authorized to perform in South Sudan could lead them to become embroiled in overseas military actions for the first time since World War II, in what could be criticized as an act that goes against the Constitution.

(Mainichi)

Myanmar rejects UN probe of crimes against Rohingya, as it would 'inflame' the conflict

Myanmar on Saturday rejected the UN rights council's decision to investigate allegations that security officers have murdered, raped and tortured Rohingya Muslims, saying the probe would only "inflame" the conflict.

The Geneva-based body agreed on Friday to "urgently" dispatch a fact-finding mission to the Southeast Asian country, focusing on claims that police and soldiers have carried out violations against the Rohingya in Rakhine state.

The army crackdown, launched in October after militants killed nine policemen, has sent tens of thousands of Rohingya fleeing across the border to Bangladesh.

Escapees have given UN investigators gruesome accounts of security officers stabbing babies to death, burning people alive and committing widespread gang rape. The allegations have heaped enormous pressure on Myanmar's one-year-old civilian government, which has vigorously swatted back calls for an international investigation.

Myanmar's foreign affairs ministry on Saturday stopped short of saying it would block the UN-backed probe but said it "has dissociated itself from the resolution as a whole".

"The establishment of an international fact-finding mission would do more to inflame, rather than resolve the issues at this time," it added.

Myanmar is carrying out its own domestic inquiry into possible crimes in Rakhine.

But rights groups and the UN have dismissed the body, which is led by retired general turned Vice President Myint Swe, as toothless.

The recent crackdown is only the latest conflict to beleaguer the stateless Rohingya, who are denied citizenship and face brutal discrimination in the Buddhist-majority country.

More than 120,000 Rohingya have languished in grim displacement camps ever since bouts of religious violence between Muslims and Buddhists ripped through Rakhine state in 2012.

Most are not allowed to leave the squalid encampments, where they live in piecemeal shelters with little access to food, education and health care.

(SCMP)

Erdogan slams German Intelligence Chief's comment on Gulen's role in coup

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged German Federal Intelligence Agency (BND) chief Bruno Kahl not to "cross the line" after his stamenets about Turkey's weak evidence base proving Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen's involvement in the July 2016 coup attempt.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized the statements of German Federal Intelligence Agency (BND) chief Bruno Kahl about Turkey's weak evidence base proving Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen's involvement in the July 2016 coup attempt.

On March 18, Kahl said in an interview with German Der Spiegel magazine that Ankara failed to convince Berlin in Gulen's role in the July 2016 coup attempt.

"He says they don't see [Fethullah Terrorist Organization] FETÖ behind this incident. Look at them. What do you know about FETÖ being a terrorist group?… Who do you think you are? Don't cross the line," Erdogan said as quoted by Daily Sabah newspaper.

On July 15, 2016, a military coup attempt took place in Turkey. It was suppressed the following day.

Over 240 people were killed during the coup attempt and an estimated 2,000 were wounded. Thousands of people, including military officers, high-ranking civil servants and teachers have been detained or sacked in the country since the attempted overthrow of the Turkish government.

Ankara accused Gulen, who has been living in the United States since 1999, and his followers of orchestrating the coup attempt.

He has denied the allegations of involvement and condemned the attempted coup.

(Sputniknews)

Since China joined WTO, US has lost 60,000 factories: Trump

Speaking at a March 20 rally in Louisville, Ky., President Donald Trump said he wants to be like Henry Clay, a 19th century Kentucky politician who Trump said was "a fierce advocate for manufacturing."

From there, Trump launched into his usual critique of United States free trade policy over the last 20 years, laying out what he's going to do to address trade imbalances with Mexico and China, in particular.

"Since China joined — that's another beauty — the WTO in 2001, the U.S. has lost many more than 60,000 factories," he said.

We've heard Trump make this claim about the effects of China joining the World Trade Organization in a few different speeches since becoming president, so we wanted to put it on the Truth-O-Meter. We reached out to the White House for Trump's source but didn't hear back.

However, through our own research we found that the United States has, in fact, lost more than 60,000 factories since 2001, when China joined the WTO and became a bigger player in the world economy. And quite a few economists believe opening up trade with China has had a significant and negative effect on American manufacturing, though it's not a universal view. To count the number of factories, we used the U.S. Census' annual Statistics of U.S. Businesses series, which tallies the number of manufacturing establishments. An example of how the count works: Ford Motor Company has three U.S.-based transmission plants, two in Michigan and one in Ohio. That counts as three separate establishments.

In 2001, the year China joined the WTO, the Census counted 352,619 manufacturing establishments. In 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, it counted 292,543. That's a drop of 60,076 over those three years.

Another Census series, its Business Dynamics Statistics, tallied 348,513 manufacturing establishments in 2001 and 274,756 in 2014 — a drop of 73,757 manufacturing establishments.

It's not fair to assume that China's economic rise is entirely responsible for all of these lost factories, as someone might think when they hear Trump's statement, but it is certainly responsible for some. Around the same time China joined the WTO, the United States gave China permanent normal trade relations status. Both of these actions removed significant barriers to trade and investment with China, basically putting them on an even playing field with the United States' other trading partners. In the 16 years since, United States imports from China have quadrupled, in large part because production is so cheap there, making U.S.-based manufacturers less competitive.

We found three significant economic studies from the past few years that all conclude increased free trade with China has had a negative impact on American manufacturing and jobs.

A a 2014 report out of the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute found that the U.S. trade deficit with China has cost 2.4 million manufacturing jobs between 2001 and 2013. The report cites illegal Chinese policies that encourage exports and keep labor cheap, as well as a failure of the WTO agreement that endorsed China's membership to prevent these sorts of actions. Proponents of expanding U.S.-China trade also overestimated the potential market for U.S. exports in China.

Research conducted by a group of economists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Zurich and the University of California, San Diego, found comparable job losses due to import competition from China. They found that areas in the United States that had a large number of jobs in industries for which imports from China surged have suffered the most. A third analysis co-authored by Justin Pierce, a member of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve Board, and Peter Schott, a Yale economist, found a causal relationship between factory closures and China's permanent normal trade relations status. One reason for this connection is that in granting China this status, the United States agreed not to raise tariffs on Chinese imports, and that newfound stability incentivized American businesses to move operations to China.

While these analyses support Trump's general idea that trade with China has caused some factory closures in the United States, none of them say how many.

Robert Scott, director of trade and manufacturing policy research at the Economic Policy Institute and co-author of the first study, told PolitiFact that trade with China is a leading cause of a decline in manufacturing, but there's also growing trade deficits with other parts of Asia and Europe. A smaller factor in more recent years is the Great Recession and the slow recovery that followed.

Bradford DeLong, an economic historian at the University of California, Berkeley, is less convinced that opening up trade with China had such a negative effect on U.S. manufacturing. Rather, he told PolitiFact that he estimates about one-tenth of factory closures over the past decade or so have had to do with China, but that would have happened whether or not China joined the WTO. In the years leading up to 2001, U.S. imports from China were already surging. He added that improved trade with China also might have allowed some new manufacturing establishments to open because of new opportunities to export goods and services to China.

He said significantly increased manufacturing productivity in the United States, coupled with limited demand — there's only so many refrigerators a person wants to buy — play a bigger role in factory closures in the United States. "Manufacturing has become too productive to remain or ever again become a major source of employment on the shop floor," he said. Our ruling

Trump said, "Since China joined — that's another beauty — the WTO in 2001, the U.S. has lost many more than 60,000 factories." According to Census data, the United States has lost more than 60,000 factories since 2001. Economic experts told us that at least some of these losses can be attributed to increased trade with China, though there is not universal agreement on the extent of that impact.

(Politifact)

Turkish Central Bank takes step to boost lira's value

Bank raises interests paid to local lenders' US dollar reserves by 25 basis points

Turkey's Central Bank has taken a step to boost the value of Turkish lira by increasing the bank's U.S. dollar denominated reserves.

The bank raised interests paid to local lenders' U.S. dollar reserves by 25 basis points on Tuesday, the Central Bank said in a statement.

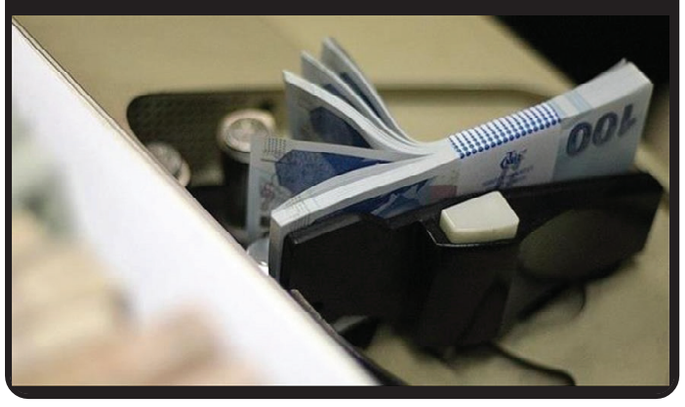
Interest rates paid to lenders as part of a local bank's required reserve ratio that are deposited in the Central Bank has been hiked to 1 percent from 0.75 percent, it said.

The required reserve ratio is a share of a local bank's balances that it is obliged to deposit in the Central Bank.

The ratio is determined by the Central Bank to affect money supply in local markets.

The move is aimed at encouraging lenders to keep their U.S. dollar deposits in the Central Bank and boost the value of the domestic currency Turkish lira, the statement added.

(AA)



Oil rises in late trade, still down on the week as glut weighs

Oil rose modestly on Friday in a spate of late-day activity, but fell on the week as concerns persisted over an excess of crude.

U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures CLc1 settled up 27 cents to $47.97 a barrel, but lost 0.5 percent on the week. About 390,000 WTI contracts had changed hands, lower than the average of about 520,000 over the last 200 days.

Brent crude LCOc1 ended up 24 cents to $50.80, and ended down 1.8 percent this week.

Oil has been on the back foot for more than two weeks now, after a string of U.S. inventory reports suggested that output cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries were not having the desired effect in reducing global oversupply.

On Thursday, a Saudi energy ministry official told Reuters that crude exports to the United States in March would fall by around 300,000 barrels per day (bpd) from February and hold at those levels for the next few months.

The official said the expected drop, in line with OPEC's agreement, could help draw down U.S. inventories that stood at a record 533 million barrels last week - stocks that have in part remained buoyant because of reduced seasonal refining runs.

"We still are at record high inventories here in the U.S.," said Andrew Lipow, president of Lipow Oil Associates in Houston. "We're seeing some short-covering given the recent declines in the price."

Saudi exports to other regions, notably Asia, remained elevated despite the OPEC-led deal that includes other producers like Russia to cut output by 1.8 million bpd during the first half of the year. Unless OPEC extends the curbs beyond June or makes bigger cuts, traders say oil prices are at risk of falling further.

"OPEC's goal of drawing down inventories to normal levels is not going to be reached before their agreement expires on June 30," said U.S. investment bank Jefferies in a note to clients.

Many are now watching for whether OPEC, whose committee monitoring the cuts will meet over the weekend in Kuwait, will extend the deal.

In Russia, private oil producers are ditching their scepticism and lining up behind an extension of output cuts after previous oil price increases compensated for lost income.

In the United States, shale drilling has pushed up oil production C-OUT-T-EIA by more than 8 percent since mid-2016 to just above 9.1 million bpd, though producers have left a record number of wells unfinished in Permian, the largest oilfield in the country, a sign that output may not rise as swiftly as drilling activity would indicate.

The latest U.S. drilling rig count showed an increase of 14 rigs, the tenth straight weekly rise, according to Baker Hughes data.

(Reuters)

UAE assistance to Yemen reaches $2b

The total UAE foreign assistance provided to Yemen, between April 2015 and March 2017, within the framework of the UAE's efficient humanitarian and development role and its rebuilding projects to support the Yemeni people, amounted to AED7.3 billion (US$2 billion).

The assistance aims to reduce the suffering of the Yemenis and is in compliance with the UAE's humanitarian and development approach and its desire to establish development, security and stability in the country. The UAE's aid targeted about 10 million Yemeni people, including four million children. It provided polio and measles vaccines to 488,000 children, including 130,000 infants under the age of one, and 358,000 children between the ages of 1 and 5, in 11 Yemeni governorates.

UAE assistance included humanitarian, development and charity assistance, and urgent humanitarian assistance reaching AED1.97 billion ($536million), representing 26.9 percent of the total assistance to Yemen during the stated period. The UAE's aid targeted about 10 million Yemeni people, including four million children. It provided polio and measles vaccines to 488,000 children, including 130,000 infants under the age of one, and 358,000 children between the ages of 1 and 5, in 11 Yemeni governorates.

Its humanitarian assistance included food aid totalling 172,000 tonnes and more than 111 tonnes of medication and medical supplies, as well as the provision of ambulances and medical devices, while 235.8 tonnes of food were sent on a daily basis.

The UAE's development assistance to Yemen, during this period, reached AED5.3 billion ($1.45 billion), while its foreign development assistance, which was distributed to several sectors, reached AED985.58 million ($268.33 million) in support of the power generation sector.

(Ipsnews)

'Korea could suffer $20b loss from sour ties with China'

South Korea could suffer $20 billion in economic losses if its already-soured relations with China exacerbates, an industry report said Tuesday.

Korea is already suffering from China's apparent economic retaliation measures, such as banning Chinese travelers from visiting Korea and applying stricter customs procedures on Korean goods, as China has been asserting that the deployment of a US anti-missile system on the Korean Peninsula poses a threat to its territory.

If the bilateral relations between Seoul and Beijing maintains the status quo, Korea's revenues from Chinese travelers using duty-free shops and tourism spots in Korea will go down by $7.4 billion this year from 2016, and Korea's exports to China will suffer a $2.6 billion loss, according to the report by the Korea Development Bank's economic research institute.

If the relations further worsen with additional retaliation and the spread of anti-Korean sentiment, the revenues from duty-free shops and the tourism sector will plunge by $11.7 billion, and Korea's exports to China will see an $8.3 billion loss -- resulting in a $20 billion economic loss in total, the report said.

About 68 percent of duty-free sales comes from Chinese travelers and China is Korea's biggest export destination, taking up one-fourth of Korea's total exports.

By sector, Korea's cosmetics, duty-free shops and tourism businesses will be hit the hardest by Chinese retaliation against Korea, followed by autos, mobile phones, textiles, petrochemicals and shipping industries, the report said.

Korea's semiconductors, displays, shipbuilding and construction will be rarely affected by the worsened bilateral relationship with China, it said.

(Koreaherald)

Global banks handled laundered Russian cash worth hundreds of millions

Some of the world's biggest banks processed hundreds of millions of dollars reportedly from a vast Russian money-laundering scheme, data from leaked documents show.

The data show that major U.S. banks including Bank of America (BAC), JP Morgan (JPM), Wells Fargo (WFC) and Citi (C) all processed money from the scheme. Global banks HSBC (HSBC), Deutsche Bank (DB), Standard Chartered (SCBFF) and Barclays (BCS) also appear to have executed transactions.

The internal bank documents were obtained from anonymous sources by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta. OCCRP has shared data gleaned from the documents with CNNMoney and other media companies. The Guardian reported on Monday that $740 million was processed by British banks as part of the scheme. CNNMoney has not independently confirmed the authenticity of the documents.

The bank documents detail roughly 70,000 transactions made between 2011 and 2014.

According to OCCRP, the scheme allowed tens of billions of dollars to be moved out of Russia and into the accounts of thousands of companies scattered around the globe. The Guardian reported that 500 people are suspected of being involved in the scheme, including many wealthy and influential Russians. None of the banks contacted by CNNMoney denied that they had processed.

European political risks front-and-center as 'green shoots' continue to show

Data out of the Euro-Zone continues to impress, giving the impression that we may finally be seeing the 'green shoots' of a European economic recovery taking place. A series of PMI prints on Friday morning with a consistent theme of surprise beats further highlighted this potential as manufacturing, services and composite PMI's from both Germany and France came-in above expectations. Given that PMI's (Purchasing Mangers' Index) are looked at as a leading indicator – the fact that all of these prints came-in above the expectation highlights that optimism is continuing to grow within a key segment of the European economy.

But are we at a point where the ECB is ready to let QE end (in December, 2017), allowing the 'invisible hand' and 'animal spirits' take over price action in the Euro? That's the big question surrounding the European Central Bank at the moment, and this will likely persist until we get more signs of a confirmed recovery that could instill the confidence needed within the ECB to let market forces takeover. CPI numbers from Germany and the Euro-Zone as a whole are released on Thursday and Friday of next week, respectively, and each of these will speak to the prospect of continued economic recovery in the EU. But the immediate road ahead is not expected to be smooth as political risk will likely dominate European headlines in the coming weeks. Dutch elections went through with a minimum of drama; but as we walk into April there's another election lurking around-the-corner that could keep worries populating around the Euro-Zone, and that's the French Presidential election set to take place later in the month. A Marine Le Pen win would likely be bad for the Euro, as the candidate has previously discussed the possibility of doing-away with the single currency. **(Dailyfx)**

Here's who wore what at HT Most Stylish 2017

The sixth edition of the Hindustan Times Most Stylish Awards, held at the Taj Land's End hotel in Bandra (W), it was a stylish affair. They saw the best of fashion under one roof. From sheer gowns to glitter ensembles and slit dresses, Bollywood divas scored high on the style radar. While some choose glamorous gowns, a few went for loungy jackets - all are a testimony to the flourishing popularity of this style. Here is a sneak peek into who wore what.

Esha Gupta went for a Nikhil Thampi slit gown teamed with smoky-eye look.

Anushka Sharma went for an H&M ensemble. She added a strong case for statement rings with her style pick.

Deepika Padukone picked a black cold-shoulder flared top and flared pants from Milly. She finished the look with Outhouse earrings.

Parineeti Chopra went for an off-shoulder Avaro Figlio dress teamed with Isharya jewellery and burgundy suede pumps.

Alia Bhatt picked a Reem Acra ensemble teamed with sleek center-parted bun and subtle makeup. ***(Hindustan-Times)***

Keira Knightley once told her 'Love Actually' director that her next movie was "probably a disaster"

The Pirates of the Caribbean franchise has raked in billions of box-office proceeds, but according to Love Actually director, actor Keira Knightley wasn't always sold on the idea. Richard Curtis, the romantic comedy's writer-director, reflected on where his stars were in their careers when the film debuted in 2003, reported People magazine.

"When we shot the film, I remember Keira Knightley saying that her next project was 'some pirate thing — probably a disaster,' " he revealed. Of course, that project turned out to be the wildly popular Pirates of the Caribbean franchise that made her an international superstar. And Knightley wasn't the only Love Actually star to score a role in the blockbuster. As Curtis pointed out, "Bill Nighy was also later a be-tentacled Davy Jones" in 2006's Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest and 2007's Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End.

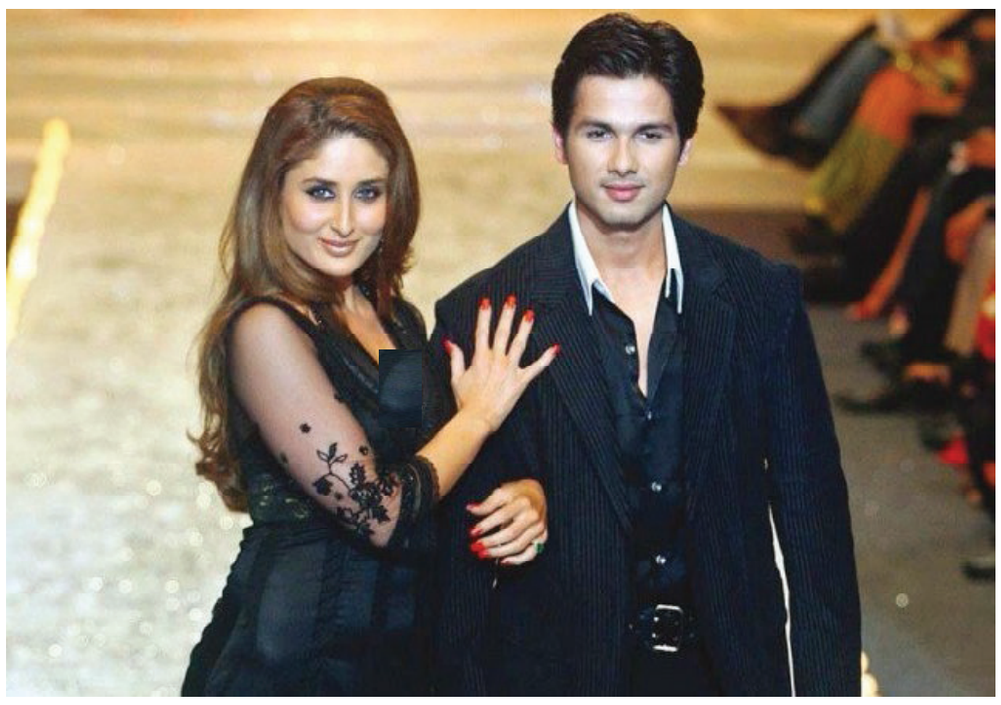
Curtis also mentioned that Andrew Lincoln, who famously professed his love to Knightley with cue cards in Love Actually, "had never come across, let alone killed, the Walking Dead." And Chiwetel Ejiofor, who went on to earn an Oscar nomination for 12 Years a Slave in 2014 "hadn't been a slave for five minutes, let alone 12 years," wrote Curtis.

The trip down memory lane comes in the wake of Friday's UK debut of a short follow-up to Love Actually, which promises to catch up with its main characters over a decade later. The reunion features most of the original cast. "I know the film is very much not everyone's cup of tea, but I've been surprised ever since it came out, and so grateful, that some people are really fond of it," Curtis wrote.

"So I hope that a lot of you will turn on to BBC1 on Red Nose Day to see the mini-sequel and maybe find it in your hearts to give a bit of cash to save and change a lot of lives, at home and abroad. What a strange and delightful outcome that would be for our little, old, slightly chaotic 'All I Want for Christmas' Christmas film."

(Dailymail)

My past with Kareena is world secret: Shahid Kapoor



Happily married to Mira, and loving his new real life role as a father, actor Shahid Kapoor chose to "get back" when asked about his "secret past" with Kareena Kapoor Khan.

Shahid was at the India Today Woman Summit and Awards when an audience member was keen to know about his "secret past." "I have a secret past?" Shahid asked, almost puzzled. "How do you know about it? Were you spying on me? I can't confess to my secret past," he added. On being prodded with Kareena's name, he said, "How is that a secret, madam? It's a world secret."

Later, when Shahid was asked to teach one of his dance steps to the audience, he invited the same lady who wanted him to talk about Kareena.

"The lady who said, Kareena Kapoor, I want her on the stage. See, this is karma, life gets back. What goes around comes around and it's not just Justin Timberlake who said that… it's true for life," he quipped.

Shahid and Kareena had one of the most talked about relationships in tinsel town in recent years, and their split courted equal media attention. Kareena went on to marry actor-producer Saif Ali Khan, and is now a mother to their first child – a son named Taimur. Shahid went for an arranged marriage with Delhi girl Mira, and they have daughter Misha. In the midst of the discussion here, when the host said she won't go into his past relationships, he said, "So kind of you. Shaadi ke baad yeh sab mat kiya karo (Don't do all this after marriage)." He spoke about love and arranged relationships. Asked if love is a prerequisite for a marriage, Shahid said, "Of course, it is, but in an arranged marriage, it's about companionship and friendship first, and love follows."

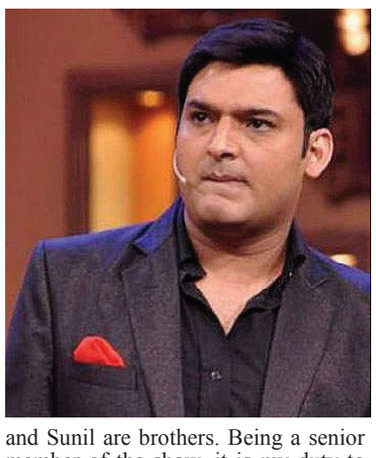
(Tribune)

People who wanted me to slash rates, now offer double price: Taapsee Pannu

When doing the quintessential heroine roles didn't work in her favour, Taapsee Pannu decided to turn the tables with heroic characters in content-driven films. She says those who were once her detractors have now stood in line to get her dates and her time for double the price. At the India Today Woman Summit and Awards here on Friday, Taapsee spoke fearlessly about the ways of the film industry towards women. She narrated, "I have been asked to slash my rates because the hero's last film didn't do well and the budget was limited, or the producer's last film didn't do well. So, I was told, 'Either you walk out or slash your price'. How I worked around it was when I started with Hindi films, I made sure I am going to do whatever it takes to be not-replaceable. How? Have a name for yourself, do the kind of films you want to and do it in a way that they have no other way but to notice. And when you go back, the same people will wait in a queue to get you at double the price probably." It's a reality that happened with Taapsee. "Without taking names, tables have turned and I have gone to the same people at double the price, and they stood in a line waiting for my dates, only because I decided to fight like a girl," added the actress, unwilling to "compromise" for anything to get what she wants. Her sentiment, she said, were in tune with the event presenter Vivel's campaign Ab Samjhauta Nahin, which inspires women to question the social fabric that tends to stereotype and at times impede their lifestyle choices. Taapsee says now she just smiles at the people who first turned her down. "I am warm and welcoming, and I have even invited them to my next film's premiere," she said, ahead of the release of her new film Naam Shabana.

(Santa Banta)

The Kapil Sharma Show calls off shoot due to non-availability of celebrities



Seems like nothing is working out in Kapil Sharma's favour these days. After a very public spat with his co-star and front-man Sunil Grover, who played one of the most loved character Guthi in The Kapil Sharma Show – it is now being reported that the comedian had to cancel shooting due to non-availability of celebrities. According to SpotboyE, the mid-air feud with Sunil has cost the famous comedian a whole lot. After Sunil boycotted the show, Chandan Prabhakar also left abruptly.

Did Kapil Sharma assault co-star Sunil Grover?

Now, rumour has it that Ali Asgar and Sugandha Mishra have also decided to stop shooting with Kapil. The episode with the Naam Shabana cast was a total fail since the main characters were nowhere to be seen. Recently, it was also reported that Kapil broke down during the show while he was shooting for the episode and confessed to Manoj Bajpai about his grave mistake. The next day, Sunil Pal and Raju Shrivastav, who were still a part of the famous comedy show, had to head home since Kapil had to call off the shooting due to non-availability of celebs. Don't act like God: Sunil Grover tells Kapil Sharma. However, Navjot Singh Sidhu, who has been a part of The Kapil Sharma Show franchise since its very inception, vowed to resolve the ongoing tiff between the two actors. "Kapil and Sunil are brothers. Being a senior member of the show, it is my duty to bring them together again," insisted Sidhu.

Phillauri: Anushka Sharma's film gets average opening, earns Rs 4.02 crore on first day

Anushka Sharma's second production Phillauri has collected Rs 4.02 crore nett on its opening day. The film stars Punjabi star Diljit Dosanjh and Life of Pi actor Suraj Sharma besides Anushka. It has been directed by Anshai Lal. Trade analyst Taran?Adarsh also tweeted the film's business figures. North India has contributed 52 per cent of the total Phillauri collections. "Phillauri is a high concept film with a big heart and we are happy with the start that it has had on day one. The film has good word of mouth and it will grow today. **(Santa Banta)**

West Indies v Pakistan: World Champions aim to hit back after 3-0 rout

est Indies will aim to make swift amends for their 3-0 drubbing at the hands of Pakistan when the teams meet in the first of four T20 internationals, live on Sky Sports this Sunday.

The World Champions were crushed last September in Dubai and Abu Dhabi - and went on to lose the one-day international series 3-0 too.

But Carlos Brathwaite's team has the opportunity to make an immediate statement on home soil against a Pakistan side riven by recent trouble.

Five players, including regular internationals Sharjeel Khan and Mohammad Irfan, have been prevented from touring as investigations continue into spot-fixing allegations during last month's Pakistan Super League.

Their absence presents an opportunity, either for players emerging from a period in the wilderness, like opening batsman Ahmed Shehzad and veteran all-rounder Mohammad Hafeez, or newcomers like Shadab Khan and Fakhar Zaman to stake their claims to regular international duty.

Sunday's match at the Kensington Oval is the first of four, with the remaining three at the Queen's Park Oval in Trinidad at the end of the week.

Those games precede a three-match ODI series Guyana, the next stage in West Indies' bid to claim an automatic qualifying spot for the 2019 Cricket World Cup in England.

Trounced 3-0 in their own backyard by England earlier this month, the two-time former World Cup winners continue to languish in ninth spot in the rankings on 84 points, five behind the Pakistanis, who will want to ensure they maintain that eighth spot and even improve to advance automatically to the World Cup.

Pakistan have already pipped the West Indies for the last available spot at June's Champions Trophy in England.

In what is believed will be his final series before bowing out of the international game, Misbah ul Haq will then lead Pakistan in three Tests at the conclusion of the ODI duel as the visitors seek to make history by winning a Test series in the Caribbean for the first time. West Indies: Carlos Brathwaite (captain), Evin Lewis, Chadwick Walton (wicketkeeper), Marlon Samuels, Lendl Simmons, Jason Mohammed, Kieron Pollard, Rovman Powell, Kesrick Williams, Sunil Narine, Samuel Badree. Pakistan: Sarfraz Ahmed (captain/wicketkeeper), Mohammad Hafeez, Ahmed Shehzad, Babar Azam, Shoaib Malik, Mohammad Nawaz, Imad Wasim, Sohail Tanvir, Rumman Raees, Hasan Ali, Wahab Riaz.

Watch live coverage of West Indies v Pakistan live on Sky Sports, starting with the first T20 from 5.25pm this Sunday on Sky Sports Mix. Grab a Sky Sports Month Pass for half price, and let us knock your sporting socks off with a blockbuster month of sport on NOW TV. All for just £16.99.

(Cricket News)

Star Sixes: Steven Gerrard and England to face Spain in six-a-side tournament at The O2

England have been drawn against Spain in the inaugural Star Sixes tournament - live on Sky Sports - in London this July.

Steven Gerrard will lead England in the six-a-side competition for former international players, and they will face Spain, Mexico and Scotland in the group stages. The ex-Liverpool captain will come up against former team-mate Luis Garcia, who will compete for Spain alongside Carles Puyol, Gaizka Mendieta and Michel Salgado.

Germany's Michael Ballack and France's Robert Pires were in the Sky Sports studio to make the draw on Friday afternoon, and the duo will face one another in Group C, with the two nations also drawn against Portugal and Denmark. Meanwhile, Group B sees Brazil, Italy, Nigeria and China face off for a place in the knock-out stages. The tournament will take place at The O2 from July 13-16 - but here's all you need to know...

What is Star Sixes?

Presented by Pitch International (London), in partnership with Football Champions Tour, a leading sports management agency, Star Sixes will reunite the world's greatest players in their national team colours to renew old rivalries over four days of intense competition. Top seeds England, captained by Gerrard; Brazil, featuring Roberto Carlos; and Germany, also starring Jens Lehmann, avoided each other in the initial group phase of the 12-team tournament.

The top two countries in each of the three four-team groups, plus the two best third-placed teams, will progress to the quarter-finals.

Star names on show

Players confirmed so far include England's Michael Owen, Rio Ferdinand, Emile Heskey and David James, France's Marcel Desailly, Eric Abidal, William Gallas, Ludovic Giuly, Olivier Dacourt and Sebastien Frey. Ex-Chelsea and Barcelona defender Juliano Belletti will be on duty for Brazil, while former Premier League duo Deco and Jay-Jay Okocha will skipper Portugal and Nigeria respectively.

Deco will skipper Portugal in the summer tournament

Deco will skipper Portugal in the summer tournament

Confirmed Scotland players include Dominic Matteo, Barry Ferguson, Don Hutchison, Paul Dickov, Christian Dailly, Simon Donnelly and Rab Douglas, while Martin Jorgensen and Stig Tofting will line-up for Denmark. Every Star Sixes player will be a fully-capped former international, and with each country selecting a 10-man squad, many, many more star names will be announced in the coming weeks.

When is Star Sixes?

Group stage matches will be played during three 'sessions' on Thursday, July 13, Friday, July 14 and Saturday, July 15 (afternoon session). All 12 countries will play one 20-minute match in each of these sessions.

The evening session on July 15 will feature four quarter-finals, before Star Sixes reaches a pulsating conclusion the following day.

With the silverware at stake, the Sunday 16 July session will include two semi-finals, a third-place decider and the Star Sixes final.

(Sky Sport)

Linares vs Crolla II: Hosea Burton hopes to stay on course for Frank Buglioni rematch

Hosea Burton returns to the scene of his first professional defeat on Saturday and already has set his sights on a rematch with Frank Buglioni.

'The Hammer' is back at the Manchester Arena on Saturday night, as he faces Tamas Kozma on the Jorge Linares-Anthony Crolla bill, live on Sky Sports 1.

Burton (18-1-KO9), the cousin of Tyson Fury, lost the British light-heavyweight title to Buglioni last December after a stunning final-round stoppage and has revenge firmly etched on his mind.

"I would love that fight as soon as possible," he said.

"I still feel as if I am the best in Britain even though he has got my belt but he is only keeping it for a little while until we meet again."

I still feel as if I am the best in Britain even though he has got my belt but he is only keeping it for a little while until we meet again."

Hosea Burton

Buglioni was due to make the first defence of his newly acquired British title on the David Haye-Tony Bellew undercard, but suffered a cut in sparring on the same day that he officially joined Matchroom Sports.

Burton though believes the rematch will happen this year, and hopes to put his career back on track this weekend.

"I am dying to get back into the ring," he said.

"I never left on the best of notes in getting beat but it was such a good fight that people want to see me more now and I can't wait to get back in again."

(BBC Sport)

The Rock bids for golf world record

The Rock has fallen agonisingly short of breaking the world record for the longest ever golf drive, he has claimed. The WWE legend found some spare time during the filming of Ballers, his NFL-themed drama, so attempted some record breaking on the golf course. "The world record longest drive is 515 yards set in 1974," The Rock posted on Instagram about Mike Austin's accomplishment at US Senior National Open Qualifier. Upgrade to Sky Sports now and get 12 months for just £18 per month!

"My drive here measured an estimated 490 yards by the scientists holding the rulers. I failed math when I was a kid, but I think that's kinda close." **(BBC Sport)**

Belfast Giants fan Blake McCaughey named Elite League player of the week

A nine-year-old boy, who is set for open heart surgery in London in May, has been named Elite League player of the week.

Blake McCaughey was credited with Belfast Giants' third goal in their 5-3 home defeat by Sheffield Steelers last Friday after an extra goal was awarded, timed at 59.59.

After being given the Giants' man of the match award, Blake then led the team around the ice for their end-of-game skate where he received a standing ovation.

His name was added to the official game sheet for the Elite League encounter and a player profile was also uploaded to the website.

Blake, who suffers from a rare genetic disorder which means he consumes food and drink through a feed, is a huge Giants fan and a popular figure at the SSE Arena.

The Elite League said: "On behalf of everyone at the Elite League, we'd like to wish Blake all the best and look forward to seeing him back on the ice again soon!"

(Sky Sport)

Surrey Storm, Loughborough Lightning look to maintain unbeaten records

Surrey Storm and Loughborough Lightning will be aiming to maintain their perfect starts in the Vitality Netball Superleague season this weekend.

Both teams are in action on Saturday with Storm at home against winless Celtic Dragons, while their challengers Loughborough travel to Hertfordshire to take on the Mavericks. This Friday, Team Bath entertain Team Northumbria with Wasps in action against Manchester Thunder. Wasps have won four of their opening five games this season, with Thunder experiencing a mixed start to the season, winning three of their first five. The attacking talent of Natalie Haythornthwaite is looking forward to taking on her old Thunder team, telling the official Vitality Superleague website: "They're a great group of girls, I'm still in touch with them off the court but as soon as the whistle goes it's game on and the only thing that matters is getting the win.

(BBC Sport)

Elena Vesnina stunned by Ajla Tomljanovic at Miami Open

Indian Wells champion Elena Vesnina crashed out of the Miami Open on Friday, losing 3-6 6-4 7-5 to world No 594 Ajla Tomljanovic.

Vesnina, the world no 13, beat Svetlana Kunetsova to claim the title in the Californian desert last week and looked to be on course for a place in the third round until qualifier Tomljanovic rallied in their match which was held over from Thursday after a thunderstorm. The Croatian wild card had levelled the match before edging 5-3 ahead in a tight third set before the weather intervened. Vesnina twice double-faulted to hand Tomljanovic her first match points but the 23-year-old saw her chances go begging. More service problems for Vesnina in the 12th game led to a third match point, although the weather struck yet again, but when they returned after a brief shower Tomljanovic clinched one of the biggest wins of her career and a third round showdown with unseeded Czech Lucie Safarova. Two other seeds fell earlier in the day, 25th seed Roberta Vinci went down in straight sets to 20-year-old world No 111 American Taylor Townsend and 24th seed Timea Babos was beaten by France's Pauline Parmentier. Babos took the first set on a tie-break in her match against Parmentier but went on to win just two more games as the Frenchwoman wrapped up a 6-7 6-2 6-0 victory.

Much to the delight of the home crowd, Chicago-born Townsend coasted to one of the biggest victories of her career with a 6-3 6-2 success that sets up a meeting with Kutnetsova after the seventh seed proved too strong for Mandy Minella, coming through 6-2 6-2. It's the first time Townsend will have played the former US and French Open champion and she is relishing the opportunity. "I really like watching her play, she has won two Slams and is a great player who is playing some of her best tennis now. I am playing well. I've got four matches under my belt and I don't have anything to lose," Townsend said. Another American advanced with Madison Keys booking her third round spot as she continues her return from injury as she beat Switzerland's Viktorija Golubic 6-1 6-2.

Third seed Simona Halep also had a tough test but eventually prevailed to see off fast-rising Japanese teenager Naomi Osaka in three sets 6-4 2-6 6-3, while current French Open champion and sixth seed Garbine Muguruza recovered from a set down to beat Christina McHale 0-6 7-6 6-4. **(Sky Sport)**

Bob Baffert hails Arrogate ahead of the Dubai World Cup

The Khalid Abdullah-owned four-year-old has not even been racing for a full year, yet has already won the Travers Stakes, the Breeders' Cup Classic and the inaugural Pegasus World Cup.

Baffert, who has trained such American greats as Triple Crown hero American Pharoah and previous winners of this race Captain Steve and Silver Charm, believes he has never had a horse with such a raking stride as Arrogate. The decision to go to Dubai was a relatively late one, but Baffert admits it had been in the back of his mind all along.

He said: "I had to really wait for the horse to sort of tip us off, and it was sort of a gutsy decision to bring him here. "I thought if I run him here and he's doing well then I can freshen him up for the fall racing, so he will definitely get a deserved vacation after this. "It was probably about three weeks ago (that we decided to run). I was sort of aiming for it if he was showing me something, then he worked a really strong seven-eighths - he looked fantastic - so I thought we'll take him over there and maybe I'll scare someone off and there'll only be eight or 10 horses. "I think the minute I said, 'Yes', everybody joined in.

"He's got an incredible stride - it's probably as long as I've ever seen, but he's quick. He can quicken and he's just a long-striding horse and can get to another horse really quick. "In the US$12million race (Pegasus), it was down the back side, Mike Smith actually moved a little early because California Chrome had him pinned in and then he saw Victor (Espinoza on California Chrome) was really wanting to go, but Chrome was taking two strides to his one.

"When he (Smith) asked him he said he just caught those speed horses easily and went by them. Then he came down the straight - he just has this ridiculous set of lungs, he doesn't get tired.

"When you have a horse of that calibre, you love seeing him but at the same time you are in charge of this valuable specimen. We know what he can do so I just don't get caught up in all the stuff, we just stayed focused with him and train him. "Once you have a great one like that, you just want to maintain him and keep him happy." He added: "I'm fine with the draw (nine), I always leave it up to Mike. I didn't want to be 14 or on the inside. He'll play the break, see how he jumps out of there and how much horse he has under him.

(Sky Sport)

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MoD rejects fall of Sangin to Taliban

Officials in Ministry of Defense rejected sangin district control fall into Taliban hands, earlier local officials had confirmed that sangin district came under Taliban control and Afghan security forces did tactical retreat from sangin district of Helmand province. Ministry of Defense Spokesman Dawlat Waziri said, "We totally reject the news, district control is not in the hands of the enemies, neither has fallen into Taliban hands nor it will and we will not let this happens, the Afghan security forces have full control of the district." Meanwhile experts declared that International players are playing complicated games in handing over the districts.

Political expert Zalmay Wardak said, "The main game changers are the International countries Afghan government can't do nothing, losing controls of districts are the main games of the International countries showing their power off." "Afghan government provided necessary supplies for the following district two days ago, this is the new style of handing over the supplies for the enemies." Political expert Ahmad Saiedi said.

Meanwhile Kabul resident Ahmad said, "Falling sangin district control to Taliban with all the equipment and supplies is the biggest damage for the government, the main story is behind the curtain." Losing district control in Helmand comes after Taliban brought Khujabahawodin district of Takhar province for some hours in the long run they were defeated back. **(KP)**

KABUL: Former President Hamid Karzai on Saturday met Mari Skare, Royal Norwegian Ambassador to Kabul at his office. Both sides discussed Afghanistan's current situation and strengthening of relationships between Kabul and Oslo.

I will quit my job, not the province: Balkh governor

MAZAR-I-SHARIF : Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of northern Balkh province, on Saturday reiterated his intention to resign in the near future, saying the president had asked him to delay his decision.

Addressing the opening ceremony here for the new academic year, also attended by President Ashraf Ghani, Noor said he would stand down as governor but would not leave the province. The governor promised staying in the province to monitor the performance of his successor, pledging not to let him do anything wrong. Without giving an exact date, Noor said he would resign in the near future. However, President Ghani asked the governor not talk about his resignation as Balkh people would not be happy with such a decision. "We would discuss it later in a relaxed environment," the president commented. Ghani gave the governor full credit for his dedicated work to develop the province. 'Noor had always pleaded with Kabul for the progress of the province, not for personal favours, he said. **(Pajhwok)**

8 militants, policeman killed in Logar

AT Monitoring Desk

KABUL: Eight militants and a policeman have been killed during separate incidents of violence in Logar province, an official said on Saturday. While confirmed the news, the provincial governor spokesman, Salim Saleh said that the incident took place after two armed militants stormed a police checkpoint in Kandahari Pul area of the Mohammad Agha district late Friday night. "The attackers, riding a motorbike, killed the checkpost commander, Mohammad Halim," Saleh told Pajhwok Afghan News, adding that the assailants managed to escape. Police are looking for the attackers. In the meantime, Afghan security forces carried out air and ground operation against Taliban insurgents in Charkh district of the same province. During the operation a compound came under attack in Maulana Sahib area. The compound was targeted when a gathering of Taliban fighters was in progress. Saleh added, "eight militants were killed and three others wounded in the overnight raid. A car and two motorcycles belonging to the Taliban insurgents were also destroyed in the incident." Syed Gulab Shah, a resident of the locality, confirmed to local media that security forces bombed a house last night. He said the house has destroyed and all insurgents living there have been killed in the incident. Charkh is an insecure district of Logar, located 26 kilometers south of Pul-I-Alam, the provincial capital. Same days back, 14 people including civilians were killed during a clash in the Baraki-Barak district of Logar.

14 Paktia girls' schools stay shut as new year starts

GARDEZ : The new academic year was officially started in southeastern Paktia province on Saturday, at a time when 14 girls' schools have been closed in the province.

The new academic year was launched at an official ceremony in the provincial capital, Gardez. Education director Kuchi Zazi on the occasion said there would be no shortage of text books in the new academic year.

He said all textbooks would arrive from Kabul to Paktia next week. The education director said 14 girls schools had been closed in Zurmat district, the largest town of Paktia.

"We have problem only in Zurmat district. The closed schools include primary and middle. We have launched serious efforts to reopen the schools in cooperation with local elders."

Zazi said schools in the remaining 12 districts of the province were open. The Ministry of Education has set Paktia the target of enrolling 20,000 new students, half of them girls, during the new academic year.

Provincial officials said they were optimistic the target would be achieved and even surpassed.

Governor Zalmai Weesa also addressed the gathering. He mentioned low quality of education, lack of school buildings and other materials and hoped the ministry would resolve the problems.

The governor expressed concern over the closure of schools in Zurmat district and said efforts were underway to reopen them.

"Like other sectors, we have problems in the education sector as well. Most of our schools have no buildings. We also lack resources for schools and it was due to numerous problems that most of the schools in Zurmat district are closed."

A member of the provincial council, Mohammad Rahman Qaderi, said the current situation of education in Paktia was of great concern. "Education is basic need, but we have been denied equal treatment in this crucial sector as well. The current situation is not acceptable to us. Paktia needs a lot of work and we demand it seriously that education be given importance and attention." Nearly 190,000 students, including 50,000 girls, are taught by 4000 teachers in 362 schools across Paktia. About 200 schools are without buildings in the province.

Taliban commander among 6 rebels held in Herat

HERAT CITY : Six Taliban, including the group commander, has been arrested in western Herat province, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) said on Saturday. The suspected militants had been arrested in Qafsalan locality of Enjil district, a statement from the Spy-Network said. Taliban commander Safiullah and his colleagues Mushfeq, Wahidullah, Ghulam Mohammad, Baharuddin and Sayed Eesa were among the detainees. The arrested individuals were involved in roadside explosions, murders and other criminal activities. During initial investigations detainees have confessed to their involvement in several terror and criminal activities including the murder of two policemen and one afghan soldier. Taliban have not commented about the arrest of their fighters.

82 insurgents killed in raids

AT News Report

KABUL: At least 82 militants were killed and 42 others were wounded in different operations within past 24 hours, military sources said Saturday.

In a press release issued here, Ministry of Defense, (MoD) said that Afghan National Army (ANA) with the cooperation of the Afghan National Police (ANP) and National Directorate of Security (NDS) conducted joint operations against insurgents in different areas of Kapisa, Logar, Paktia, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Faryab, Farah, Herat, Kunduz and Helmand provinces.

Statement said that in these operations 82 insurgents were killed and 42 others were injured. This joined operation of the Defense Security Forces was supporting by the artillery and air forces, added statement. ANA discovered and confiscated weapons and ammunition in the operations as well.

The First Microfinance Bank (Afghanistan) and European Technology Company, Afghanistan join hands to provide renewable energy solutions

Mr. Frank van der Poll, CEO FMFB-A and Engr. Farzad Alawi, General Manager European Technology Company on the occasion of signing ceremony of 'Tanveer Solar Loan' partnership held at FMFB-A, Head Office in Kabul.

Kabul, 26 March, 2017 - The First MicroFinance Bank (Afghanistan), a leading microfinance and commercial bank, today announced that it has added 'Tanveer Solar Loan' to its suite of innovative financing options. FMFB-A on Monday signed an agreement with European Technology Company – a provider of IFC-approved manufacturers of Solar power equipment. The agreement was signed in Kabul by Chief Executive Officer, FMFB-A, Frank van der Poll and General Manager, European Technology Company, Engr. Farzad Alawi.

Over 20 million Afghans remain unconnected to the electricity grid, and those who are, continue to face frequent disruptions. FMFB-A will finance a variety of solar packages which consist of affordable plug and play devices for lighting, mobile phone charging and powering fans and TVs. These loans will primarily service underserved small-sized homes and businesses and address the growing need for affordable solar financing.

"Demand for solar energy is growing and exploring alternative energy sources is an important priority for the country," said CEO FMFB-A, Frank van der Poll. "FMFB-A and ETC will work together to address electricity issues of the masses living in far-flung areas and also help them in activities that support their livelihood," he added.

FMFB-A is a member of the 'Global Alliance for Banking on Values' and its values-driven agenda is focused on providing affordable financial services that promote entrepreneurship, agriculture, green-financing, and incremental housing in Afghanistan.

For more information regarding FMFB-A's solar solutions, please call **0790010104-5** to speak with a Phone Banker or email at marketing@fmfb.com.af

About The First MicroFinance Bank (Afghanistan)

Founded in 2004, The First MicroFinance Bank, Afghanistan (www.fmfb.com.af) is part of the Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance (AKAM), which has programmes in over 10 countries throughout the developing world. FMFB-A's vision is to be recognized as the leading microfinance services provider contributing to poverty alleviation and economic development through the provision of sustainable financial services primarily targeting micro/small businesses and households. The bank provides credit and deposit products to a wide range of clients including micro, small and medium enterprises along with commercial banking and international remittance services. The bank is also a member of the Global Alliance for Banking on Values (GABV) - an independent network of banks using finance to deliver sustainable economic, social and environmental development. Our values-based banking agenda focuses on providing affordable financial services that promote entrepreneurship, agriculture, incremental housing and clean energy in Afghanistan.