

Taleban vow to fight on after Trump says talks are 'dead'

KABUL: The Taleban yesterday vowed to continue fighting against US forces in Afghanistan after President Donald Trump said talks with the insurgents were "dead", saying Washington would regret abandoning negotiations. The renewed war of words between the two sides raised the spectre of violence in Afghanistan as Trump and the Taleban pledged to take the fight to each other following the precipitous collapse in talks. "We had two ways to end occupation in Afghanistan, one was jihad and fighting, the other was talks and negotiations," Taleban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP. "If Trump wants to stop talks, we will take the first way and they will soon regret it."

The Taleban's statement came hours after Trump told reporters that the US was walking away from negotiations after nearly a year of talks that aimed to pave the way for an American withdrawal from Afghanistan following 18 years of war. "They are dead. As far as I am con-

cerned, they are dead," Trump said at the White House.

The announcement followed Trump's dramatic cancellation of a top-secret plan to fly Taleban leaders in for direct talks at the Camp David presidential facility outside Washington. Driving another nail into the coffin of what had appeared to be nearly finalized negotiations, Trump said a US military onslaught on the guerrillas was at its fiercest level in a decade. "Over the last four days, we have been hitting our Enemy harder than at any time in the last ten years!" he wrote in a tweet. On Sunday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that "we've killed over a thousand Taleban in just the last 10 days". Trump angrily denied that the whiplash effect of his sudden shifts on Afghanistan was causing turmoil.

'My own advice'

Until this weekend, there had been steadily mounting expectations of a deal that would see the US draw down troop

levels in Afghanistan. In return, the Taleban would offer security guarantees to keep extremist groups out. But then on Saturday, Trump revealed that he had cancelled an unprecedented meeting between the Taleban and himself at storied Camp David. He said this was in retaliation for the killing of a US soldier by the Taleban in a huge Kabul bomb blast last week.

The cancellation - announced on Twitter - was the first time most Americans learned that such a dramatic meeting was even planned. Many in Washington were shocked and some were angry that the Taleban had been about to visit the presidential retreat on the eve of the anniversary of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks. There was also widespread consternation at the characteristically unpredictable manner of Trump's negotiating style.

But Trump denied any discord among government members including Vice President Mike Pence. In a tweet, he

accused journalists of trying "to create the look of turmoil in the White House, of which there is none". Trump added that he had no second thoughts about his actions. "In terms of advisers, I took my own advice," he later told reporters.

'Murdering too many people'

A big part of Trump's 2016 election victory and subsequent first term in office has been his determination to keep the US out of what he sees as unnecessary wars in Syria and other mostly Muslim countries. Despite a fiercely pro-Israeli foreign policy and the presence of hawks like national security adviser John Bolton in his cabinet, he has so far resisted escalating the military standoff with longtime foe Iran. Trump fired Bolton yesterday.

Getting out of Afghanistan, where US troops have fought a largely fruitless battle against the Taleban over nearly two decades, was a top priority. It is widely thought that Trump has been pushing for a

withdrawal of US troops in time for his 2020 reelection bid. Trump repeated on Monday that he wanted "to get out by the earliest possible time". However, whether because of last week's killing of a US soldier, as he says, or due to wider misgivings, that goal now appears in tatters. "They did a mistake," Trump said of the Taleban's deadly bomb attack.

Several Republican lawmakers concurred with the president's decision on the talks. "I've never believed that a deal with the Taleban is either easy or imminent," Senator Marco Rubio said. Senator Mitt Romney said that "it wouldn't have been my choice to have the Taleban at Camp David" - an opinion echoed by Senator Ron Johnson, who said he was "glad" the talks were not held there. "I don't see where those negotiations go. At some point in time if you want peace you have to talk to them, I don't deny that," said Johnson. "But right now they're murdering too many people." — AFP



An undated handout image released yesterday shows an artist's impression of a Cryodrakon boreas, a newly discovered species of pterosaur. — AFP

Largest flying animal in history identified

PARIS: Scientists yesterday unveiled a new species pterosaur, the plane-sized reptiles that lorded over primeval skies above T-rex, triceratops and other dinosaurs of the late Cretaceous. With a wingspan of 10 m and weighing 250 kilos, Cryodrakon boreas rivals another pterosaur as the largest flying animal of all time, researchers reported in the *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology*. "This is a cool discovery," said David Hone, lead author of the study and a researcher at Queen Mary University in London.

"It is great that we can identify Cryodrakon as being distinct from Quetzalcoatlus," the other giant pterosaur for which it was initially mistaken, he said in a statement. C boreas was hiding in plain sight. Its remains were first discovered more than 30 years ago in Alberta, Canada,

yet elicited scant excitement because of the misclassification. But a closer look at the fossil remains of a juvenile and the intact giant neck bone of a full-grown specimen left no doubt that a new species had been discovered.

Like other winged reptiles living at the same time, about 77 million years ago, C boreas was carnivorous and probably fed on lizards, small mammals and even baby dinosaurs. Despite a likely capacity to cross large bodies of water, the location of fossil remains and the animal's features point to an inland habitat, Hone said. There are more than 100 known species of pterosaurs. Despite their large size and wide distribution - across North and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe - only fragmentary remains have been unearthed, making the new find especially important. — AFP

Shocking find: High-voltage eels revealed

TOKYO: Call it a shock discovery: DNA research has revealed two entirely new species of electric eel in the Amazon basin, including one capable of delivering a record-breaking jolt. The findings are evidence, researchers say, of the incredible diversity in the Amazon rainforest - much of it still unknown to science - and illustrate why it is so important to protect a habitat at risk from deforestation, logging and fires.

"In spite of all human impact on the Amazon rainforest in the last 50 years, we can still discover giant fishes like the two new species of electric eels," said lead researcher C. David de Santana, a zoologist working with the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The research "indicates that an enormous amount of species are waiting to be discovered in the Amazon rainforest, many of which may harbor cures for diseases or inspire technological innovations," he told AFP.

The electric eel, in fact a kind of fish rather

than an eel, inspired the design of the first electric battery. For centuries, it was believed that a single species existed throughout the region known as Greater Amazonia, encompassing parts of countries including Brazil, Suriname and Guyana. But as part of a project to better understand electric eels and map wildlife in remote parts of South America, de Santana and his team decided to test that conventional wisdom.

At first glance, they found little visible difference between creatures collected from different parts of the Amazon basin, suggesting the fish were indeed part of a single species. But further analysis, including of DNA from 107 samples they collected, upended centuries of assumptions and revealed three different species: the previously known *Electrophorus electricus*, along with *Electrophorus voltai* and *Electrophorus varii*. And their research also uncovered another stunning result: E voltai is capable of delivering a jolt of 860 volts - much more than the 650 volts previously recorded from electric eels - "making it the strongest bioelectricity generator known."

The findings, published yesterday in the *Nature Communications* journal, theorize that the three species evolved from a shared ancestor millions of years ago. The researchers found each of the three species



A picture released on Monday shows an electric eel (*Electrophorus voltai*). — AFP

has a clearly defined habitat, with E electricus living in the Guiana Shield region, E voltai in the Brazilian Shield, a highland further south, and E varii inhabiting slow-flowing lowland Amazon basin waters.

And they suggest that the particularly strong electric shock that E voltai can produce could be an adaptation to life in highland waters, where conductivity is less effective. Electric eels use their shock tactics for a variety of reasons, including hunting prey, self-defense, and navigation. They generate electricity from three specialized electric organs that can emit charges of varying strengths for different purposes. — AFP

Foot artists have finely tuned 'toe maps' in brains

WASHINGTON: Artists who paint with their feet because they were born without arms have individualized areas of the brain assigned to each of their toes, a trait not found in handed people, scientists have reported. Their paper, published in the *Journal Cell Reports* yesterday, raises intriguing questions about brain plasticity early in life: Are humans born with so-called toe-maps that most lose as a result of not using their feet for intricate tasks because they wear shoes? Or, are we born without this trait but develop it if the body is used in particularly

dexterous ways?

The researchers at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London, worked with Tom Yendell and Peter Longstaff, two of only three major foot artists in the United Kingdom. "We're trying to find the relationship between behavior and how that shapes representations in our brain," co-author Daan Wesselink told AFP, specifically the somatosensory cortex. Body parts are represented within this brain region in a way that roughly follows their position on the body, with the foot artists providing an illuminating boundary case of people who use their toes in ways that most others do not.

The team performed a series of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans on the two foot artists and on nine male volunteers who have arms. While the limbed volunteers were in the fMRI machine, the scientists touched each of their fingers and found individual spots of brain activity next to each

other - but when they touched the toes, they found no organized pattern. The artists, however, had individualized areas for each of the toes that corresponded to their position on the body - in other words, toe-maps, which are also present in non-human primates. "This was a fun experiment, but it has bigger implications," said Wesselink.

Scientists know there is a critical period of brain plasticity early in life when we are uniquely capable of learning, and it could be that the artists exploited this crucial window to rewire their gray matter. Or, "there could be some aspects related to brain changes that dramatically shift because they are born without upper limbs and hands," he added.

To try to resolve this question, the researchers plan to look at amputees and whether they too develop toe-maps. The team hopes to use the findings to investigate whether they can incorporate robotic prostheses onto adults' body maps. — AFP

Trump fires hawkish security...

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According to US media reports, the president's extraordinary bid - canceled at the last minute - to fly Taleban leaders into the presidential retreat at Camp David last weekend sparked a major row.

As so often in the Trump presidency, the abrupt reshuffle appeared to contain an element of chaos. Bolton was Trump's third national security advisor and joins a stack of senior officials who have come and gone during the Republican businessman's tumultuous first term in office. Trump, who has a habit of announcing major news on his personal Twitter account, revealed the sacking at around midday. He said that he'd informed Bolton of his decision Monday night.

The White House press office, however, seemed to have been unaware. It sent out a message announcing that Bolton would shortly be giving a press conference on terrorism

issues alongside Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Bolton himself disputed Trump's version of events, saying that the president had not fired him in person, as he claimed, late Monday. "I offered to resign last night and President Trump said, 'Let's talk about it tomorrow,'" Bolton tweeted. A Fox News television reporter said that he had received a text from Bolton in which he underlined: "Let's be clear, I resigned." Trump came into office promising to extricate the United States from military entanglements. Bolton was often seen as offering a hawkish counterbalance, which Trump would then take into consideration. "He has strong views on things but that's okay. I actually temper John, which is pretty amazing," Trump said in May.

Rob Malley, president of the International Crisis Group consultancy, said Bolton's departure could realign White House policy on Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela. Trump "has had two voices whispering in his ears: the one counseling diplomacy and warning against conflict, the other recommending belligerence," he said. "With Bolton gone, the second voice undeniably has lost its loudest proponent." Prominent Republican Senator Rand Paul agreed, tweeting: "The President has great instincts on foreign policy and ending our endless wars. He should be served by those who share those views." — AFP

Benny Gantz and his centrist Blue and White alliance. Rightwing nationalist votes will be key to Netanyahu's efforts to continue his reign as Israel's longest-serving prime minister. He is also facing a potential indictment for corruption pending a hearing scheduled for early October.

Israel occupied the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War in a move never recognized by the international community. Its settlements there are considered illegal under international law and major stumbling blocks to peace as they are built on land the Palestinian see as part of their future state. Israel says the Jordan Valley is vital to its security. — AFP

Iranian fan 'Blue Girl' dies after...

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The judiciary's Mizan Online website said a young woman had been arrested when she tried to enter a stadium and faced charges of offending "public chastity and insulting" law enforcement officers. Citing an informed judiciary official, it said no sentence had been issued since there had been no trial and the judge was away on leave.

The reported death sparked an outcry online, where many using the hashtag #blue_girl called on world football's governing body FIFA to ban Iran from competitions. Pictures said to be of her in hospital covered in heavy bandages have been shared widely on social media. Iranian football legend Ali Karimi urged his 4.5 million Instagram followers to boycott stadiums. "The women of our land are better than men," he wrote alongside an image of a woman with a football for a heart and flames over her head.

FIFA said it was "aware of that tragedy and deeply regret it". "FIFA... reiterate our calls on the Iranian authorities to ensure the freedom and safety of any women engaged in this legitimate fight to end the stadium ban," it added in a statement. Amnesty International called her death "shocking" and issued a similar call from London. "Khodayari would still be alive if it were not for this draconian ban and the subsequent trauma of her arrest, detention and prosecution for attempting to circumvent it," said Amnesty's Philip Luther. "Her death must not be in vain. It must spur change in Iran if further tragedies are to be avoided in the future."

Esteghlal expressed sorrow over her death. "The

tragic death of our beloved child, Ms Sahar Khodayari, has caused much sadness and regret for Esteghlal FC," the club said. "We offer condolences to you and your relatives, ask God for mercy and forgiveness and also patience and health for your family and all soccer fans." The judiciary's news website said Khodayari's body had been handed over to her family, who live in Qom, south of Tehran.

Italian club Roma spoke up in solidarity with Khodayari. "#ASRoma is yellow & red but today our heart bleeds blue for Sahar Khodayari. The beautiful game is meant to unite us, not divide us," it tweeted. "Now it's time for everyone in Iran to be allowed to enjoy football matches together. RIP #BlueGirl." Some called for FIFA to take a tougher line. "@FIFacom. Let's see if you have the guts just for once to stand against women's rights violation in Iran," wrote one person with the Twitter handle @IranLionness.

Iran has come under pressure from FIFA to allow women to attend qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup, and was reportedly given a deadline of Aug 31 to comply. The Iranian sports ministry said last month that women fans would be allowed into the stadium when Team Melli - as the national team are known - play their next home qualifier. "Women can go to the Azadi stadium on October 10" to watch the match against Cambodia, Jamshid Taghizadeh, the sports ministry's deputy for legal and provincial affairs, was quoted as saying at the time.

The ban on women in stadiums is not written into law or regulations, but is "ruthlessly enforced", said Human Rights Watch, calling it a "clear violation of the rules in FIFA". The authorities in Iran have allowed foreign women to go to matches in the country in the past. While a small number of Iranian women have attended select international matches on previous occasions, others have faced prosecution for entering stadiums at other times. — Agencies

Netanyahu vows to annex West...

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Netanyahu along with his rightwing and religious allies won a majority of seats in April polls, but he failed to form a coalition and opted for an unprecedented second election in five months. He is again facing a difficult challenge from ex-military chief