

International

Afghan peace talks to resume in Qatar as bloodshed continues

Talks tomorrow despite fear and chaos across Afghanistan

KABUL: A string of assassinations has sowed fear and chaos across Afghanistan as a fresh round of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban begin in Qatar tomorrow. Months of deliberations between the two sides have yielded little so far, but both parties made something of a breakthrough last year when they finally agreed at least on what to discuss in the next round.

Afghan government negotiators will push for a permanent ceasefire and to protect the existing system of governance, in place since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001 by a US-led invasion in the wake of the September 11 attacks. "The talks are going to be very complicated and time-consuming," Ghulam Farooq Majroh, a government negotiator said. "But we are hopeful to arrive at a result as soon as possible as people are tired of this bloody war."

The Taliban did not offer any comment. The first direct talks between the warring sides opened in September after months of delays, but quickly became bogged down by disputes on the basic framework of discussions and religious interpretations. A concerted diplomatic effort from Washington finally led to a consensus. The negotiations follow a landmark troop withdrawal deal signed in February by the Taliban and Washington, which saw the US pledge to pull out all foreign forces from Afghanistan by May 2021.

Violence increases

The talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have been marred by an increase in violence from the start, but a new trend is a wave of high-profile targeted killings of officials, activists, and journalists. The deputy governor for Kabul province, five journalists, and a prominent election activist have been among those assassinated in Kabul and other cities since November.

Officials blame the Taliban for the mayhem, although the jihadist Islamic State group has claimed some of the assaults. "The Taliban aim to divide the people and trigger criticism and frustration against the government's security institutions with these assassinations," Javid Faisal, an adviser to the National Security Council, said.

"But the killings are uniting people," Nishank Motwani, deputy director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit think tank, said the Taliban would not formally claim responsibility for the political assassinations, but nevertheless wanted to demonstrate "to its cadre that the Taliban are who they are and have not changed". The Taliban carried out more than 18,000 attacks across the country in 2020, Afghanistan's spy chief Ahmad Zia Siraj told lawmakers this week.

The first nine months of last year saw 2,177 civilians killed and 3,822 wounded, according to



In this file photo taken on September 9, 2020, a smoke plume rises following an explosion targeting the convoy of Afghanistan's vice president Amrullah Saleh in Kabul. — AFP

the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Ordinary Afghans long for better security but hold little hope for an immediate improvement despite the talks.

"We have no security at all in Kabul. For how long will we need to keep burying our loved ones?" said Jamshid Mohammad, a resident of Kabul. — AFP

Man held after entering Japan emperor's house

TOKYO: A 29-year-old man has been arrested after allegedly breaking into the Tokyo residence of Emperor Naruhito, where he reportedly spent two hours before being discovered, local media said yesterday.

The man, who has not been named, entered the usually heavily guarded Akasaka residential complex for imperial family members through the adjacent guesthouse on Saturday night, Fuji News Network (FNN) said. He was caught by the Imperial Guard near the residence of Princess Yuriko, the great-aunt of Emperor Naruhito, about two hours after he broke in, the broadcaster said, quoting police officials.

FNN said the man had gained

access via the entrance gate of the guesthouse, which was not guarded at the time. The break-in was also reported by TBS news, which said the suspect had told police: "I wanted to meet members of the imperial family."

There were no details on whether the man had encountered any royals, but local media said no one was injured in the incident. Local police declined to comment and the Imperial Household Agency did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Naruhito ascended the Chrysanthemum Throne in 2019, after his father abdicated. He and his wife Empress Masako delivered the traditional New Year's greeting on Friday by video message for the first time, after their usual appearance was cancelled to avoid crowds gathering as the country battles a third wave of coronavirus. The incident is not the first time intruders have breached palace security.



This handout photo taken Saturday by the Imperial Household Agency shows Japan's Emperor Emeritus Akihito (left) and Empress Emerita Michiko posing for a photo during a family portrait session for the New Year at their residence in Tokyo. — AFP

In May 2020, a Japanese man was arrested after swimming across the Imperial Palace's moat to scale an outer wall and enter off-limits parts of the

grounds. And in years past, both Japanese and foreigners have been held after swimming across the moat, including a Brit who did so naked. — AFP

US Congress slaps Trump by overriding veto of defense bill

WASHINGTON: The US Congress on Friday dealt Donald Trump a humiliating blow in his last days in office with the Senate voting overwhelmingly to override his veto of a sweeping defense bill—the first time lawmakers have done so during his presidency.

By a lopsided vote of 81-13, well more than the two-thirds of the 100-member chamber required, the Republican-controlled Senate approved the \$740.5 billion National Defense Authorization Act to fund the military for fiscal 2021. The Democratic-led House of Representatives had voted 322 to 87 on Monday to override Trump's veto.

Both houses of Congress had easily passed the legislation in early December by strong majorities, but Trump, citing a litany of objections, vetoed it on December 23. "It's time for us to deliver this bill," Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said at the start of Friday's session.

"It's our chance to remind brave servicemembers and their families that we have their backs."

The vote completed a stunning rebuke in the waning weeks of Trump's presidency.

It came in an extraordinary New Year's Day session necessitated by his veto, possibly the final act of the outgoing Congress. New members will be sworn in on Sunday, just 17 days before Democrat

Joe Biden is inaugurated to succeed Trump.

Trump's complaints

Breaking with members of his party, Trump had criticized the defense bill on numerous grounds. He called it a "gift" to China and Russia and said it restricted his ability to lower troop numbers in Afghanistan, South Korea and elsewhere.

Trump had bristled at language to rename military installations that currently honor leaders of the breakaway Civil War-era Confederacy. He also insisted the bill should include a repeal of a federal law, known as Section 230, that provides liability protection to internet companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google, which he regularly accuses of anti-conservative bias.

There was no immediate reaction Friday from the president, but earlier, in a series of angry tweets, he denounced the "weak and tired Republican leadership" in Congress, which he said would "allow the bad Defense Bill to pass." That, he said, would represent "a disgraceful act of cowardice and total submission by weak people to Big Tech."

But members of the president's own Republican Party—which traditionally prides itself as strong on defense—underscored the importance of the bill.

"It's absolutely vital to our national security and our troops," said Republican Senator Jim Inhofe, chairman of the Armed Services Committee. "Our men and women who volunteer to wear the uniform shouldn't be denied what they need—ever." Democrats in both chambers had slammed Trump's veto. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called it "an act of recklessness."

without papers as children protection from deportation and permission to work.

Instituted by Obama in 2012, DACA covers some 700,000 people known as Dreamers. For many, America is the only country they have ever known. Trump in 2017 tried to dismantle the program on grounds that it is unconstitutional, triggering a lengthy court battle. DACA survived—but the Department of Homeland Security reinstated it only partially. Biden has vowed to restore the program when he takes office in January, though he needs the support of Congress to do so—and with control of the Senate up for grabs due to January 5 run-off elections in Georgia, that support is in question.

Even if he succeeds, DACA itself is only a "band-aid," said Hernandez, a beneficiary of the program. "DACA kind of puts this little umbrella over a little population of millions," she said.

And DACA is just the beginning. Biden faces a daunting task in rolling back Trump-era measures against immigration-reforms that "occurred at an unprecedented, even frenetic, pace," according to the Migration Policy Institute. Through more than 400 executive actions the Trump administration "methodically dismantled and reconstructed a system based on a worldview of immigration as a secu-



WASHINGTON, DC: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell departs as the Senate debate on overriding the veto of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. — AFP

Senator Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said Friday on the Senate floor that the bill was "essential" in bolstering the nation's cybersecurity against the type of widespread targeted attack that recently hit both the government and some private companies.

As to Trump's remark that Moscow and Beijing might approve of the bill, Reed said that any such suggestion was "completely baseless." On the Senate floor Friday, Inhofe and Reed repeatedly congratulated each other for their months-long collaboration on the sweeping bill—a rare instance of cross-aisle cooperation in the deeply divided Congress. — AFP

rity and economic threat to Americans," the think tank said.

Among the huge tasks that Biden will inherit will be management of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers, which now hold some 15,000 people caught without documentation. Here, too, he has made promising gestures: After complaints alleging improper treatment that led to the death of some migrants, including minors, Biden promised ICE staff will be held accountable for inhumane treatment.

And to lead the Department of Homeland Security, which runs these centers, Biden has nominated Alejandro Mayorkas, who came to the US as an immigrant from Cuba.

But despite these encouraging signs, wariness remains. Jorge Benitez, another Dreamer, said he still feels the fear he did under Obama, under whom the deportation of undocumented foreigners hit record levels.

Biden, he said, "was a part of that. He was an active player, very much. So yeah, we still have to be cautious." The sentiment is shared by William Martinez, who arrived from El Salvador with his family after their country was devastated by an earthquake in 2001. — AFP

News in brief

Boat with 20 aboard disappears

WASHINGTON: A boat carrying 20 people has disappeared between the Bahamas and Florida, the US Coast Guard announced Saturday, the day after suspending an unsuccessful three day search. The boat, which left the island of Bimini on Monday, was due to dock at Lake Worth in the southern US state, about 80 miles (130 kilometers) away. On Tuesday, the Coast Guard was alerted that the boat never arrived at port, according to a statement. — AFP

Zimbabwe reintroduces lockdown

HARARE: Zimbabwe's government on Saturday imposed a national lockdown with immediate effect, following a surge in COVID-19 cases, creating a major problem for most citizens who rely on the informal employment sector. Only essential services, such as hospitals, pharmacies and supermarkets will remain operational for the next 30 days, putting more pressure on already poverty-stricken families. The southern African nation is already struggling with a deepening economic crisis, hyperinflation and high unemployment. — AFP

Kingpin of Mumbai attacks arrested

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan authorities on Saturday arrested an alleged planner of the 2008 Mumbai attacks over a separate case of terrorism financing, officials said. Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, a leader of the banned militant organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) was arrested in the eastern city of Lahore where he was running a medical dispensary. Punjab's counterterrorism department said in a statement. He used the dispensary to collect funds for militant activities, it added, without providing details. LeT, including Lakhvi, is accused by India of plotting the four-day assault that left 166 people dead. — AFP

Two Kabila killers given pardon

KINSHASA: DR Congo President Felix Tshisekedi's office said Saturday that he has pardoned two men convicted over the assassination of former ruler Laurent-Désire Kabila, the father of his political rival Joseph Kabila. The announcement comes during a political crisis that has put Tshisekedi at loggerheads with Joseph Kabila, his immediate predecessor as president. Laurent-Désire Kabila was shot dead in his office by one of his bodyguards on January 16, 2001. The bodyguard was then shot dead. But two senior officials, the slain president's former aide de camp Colonel Eddy Kapend and former intelligence chief Georges Leta, were among those convicted of the conspiracy to kill the president. — AFP

Gibraltar in new lockdown

MADRID: Gibraltar on Saturday imposed a second lockdown to slow soaring rate of virus cases, just days after a landmark deal to ensure post-Brexit fluidity along its border with Spain. The measure, beginning at 10:00 pm (2100 GMT) Saturday, will remain in force for 14 days meaning Gibraltar's 34,000 residents can only leave home for essential shopping, to work, exercise or for medical reasons. Over the past month, the number of cases in this tiny British enclave at the southern tip of Spain has more than doubled, rising to 2,304, up from 1,035 cases on December 2, Chief Minister Fabian Picardo said. — AFP

Immigrants in US both hopeful and wary of Biden

WASHINGTON: Immigrants in the US await Joe Biden's presidency with a mix of hope and wariness—he spells relief after four years of tough restrictions under Donald Trump, but he served as vice president under Barack Obama, whom many referred to as "the deporter in chief."

On the surface, Biden is making the right noises. Gabriela Hernandez, a 22-year-old who came to the US from El Salvador at age five with her mother, says she is "not too big of a fan" of the next president—but she is "pretty optimistic that this administration is going to try to work with us."

For a start, Biden has promised a path to citizenship for the roughly 11 million people living in the US without authorization. He also supports immigrant protection programs that Trump tried to kill off, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which gave people brought to the US