

(1) WJ Rejects...

Lower House had the authority to reject the election law and approve the law on job descriptions and authorities of the election commissions, this was a positive move to bring about reforms on election law," said Mohammad Abduh, head of judicial commission of Wolesi Jirga.

But electoral watchdogs say the dream of bringing electoral reforms will not come true as two decrees have been rejected by the Lower House of Parliament so far.

Bringing amendments to the electoral laws is deemed the first step in bringing reforms in electoral bodies; however, it is not known yet what will be the fate of electoral reforms as well as the parliamentary and district councils' elections. (Tolonews)

(2) Gen. Raheel to ...

Afghan defense ministry officials have expressed hope that this time Pakistan abides by its promises regarding the Afghan peace dialogue.

Trips like this must help curb violence and ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, Dawlat Waziri, a defense ministry spokesman said on Saturday in reference to Sharif's trip to Kabul.

"We urge Pakistan to cooperate with us to put an end to the war in Afghanistan. Even a single bullet must not be fired in the country when trips such as this takes place," he said.

It is said that Sharif will also hold discussions with Afghan officials on intelligence sharing and joint cooperation between the two countries to target the militants along the borders.

Afghan officials have always blamed Pakistan for its involvement in the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan, allegations which Pakistan believe are baseless.

"The Afghan government should talk with the main side of the war including the Taliban. The important thing is that Afghanistan must talk with Pakistan, but from a strong position so that efforts for peace do not remain unsuccessful like in the past," second deputy of the Senate speaker, Mohammad Asif Sediqqi said.

Afghan officials believe that as the first step an end should be made to the undeclared war between Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to help Afghanistan identify its main opponents and sit with them at the peace table.

Reports say that a new committee has been formed with the participation of representatives from Pakistan, China, US and Afghanistan and they will meet in January.

Meanwhile, Sharif's trip takes place following months of tension between Kabul and Islamabad following a series of coordinated attacks against cities in the country. However, hopes for peace were renewed following President Ashraf Ghani's meeting with Pakistan leader Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the Heart of Asia Conference in Islamabad last month. (Tolonews)

(3) Air Raids...

forces after troops stepped up pressure on Saturday.

Meanwhile, a number of security force members have told TOLONews that Taliban fighters are using military equipment which they have allegedly seized from Afghan security forces.

"The enemy has planted mines on the frontline of the war, they have taken positions inside residential homes to target security check posts," said Shafiq Gulbahari, a police force member in Sangin.

"We cannot move forward from our posts, because Taliban can carry out an ambush," a police officer Shinkai Qarabaghi said. "Taliban fight with tanks and armored vehicles and destroy our security check posts. They have many tanks in Musa Qala and Nawzad districts," another officer said.

Meanwhile, TOLONews correspondent Abdul Wali Arian who is embedded with troops in the embattled Sangin dis-

trict reports from the frontline that fierce fighting is still going on in the area between Afghan troops and insurgents.

He says the Taliban are hiding out in residential areas which is making it difficult for security forces to target them.

According to him, the Taliban has also planted mines in a bid to hold off troops.

Fighting has meanwhile been ongoing for about three months in the volatile district.

Troops fighting the Taliban on the ground said on Saturday that the government must act quickly and send in reinforcements to help the current deployment.

"It is a dangerous war, insurgents are operating an academy near a village here and fire on the security forces on a daily basis. They also provide training to the people - we can easily hear their conversations on satellite phones and we have recorded them. If government doesn't act, soon they will capture the remaining posts. It is now two or three months that we are fighting them and we have never thought about retreating," one Afghan soldier in Sangin said.

"Sangin is the frontline. There are threats of mines and the enemy fires from inside residential areas and their hideouts and then target security check posts. The distance between security check posts has also helped the enemy to take a foothold," another soldier said.

Helmand, which borders Pakistan, is a strategic province for the Taliban as it is a key opium producing region. (Tolonews)

(4) IMF Gives ...

duties and tariffs, collecting tax from mobile users, imposing fees on flights from Europe crossing Afghanistan territory and the transfer of customs security officials from the Interior Ministry to the Finance Ministry were main reasons for the increased revenue.

The minister said the IMF had provided the \$75 million in bonus after Afghanistan achieved its revenue target in 2015.

He did not set target for revenue collection in 2016, but said strategies had been evolved to increase revenue in the coming year.

But Abdul Qayyum Arif, banking and finance department in charge at the Ministry of Economy, said the increase in annual revenue was not a big achievement, saying the income was not sustainable.

He said the increase in revenue did not take place through legal and permanent sources. He alleged the Finance Ministry was trying to deceive people by increasing the annual revenue using some "technical tricks" which might be temporary and could fail in future.

According to Arif, the government has been able to increase revenue through increased tariffs and duties, but the move would harm future investment and businesses in the country. He said the government should eliminate corruption from customs departments and cut tariffs so that foreign investment could inject money to businesses in Afghanistan. (Pajhwok)

(5) US, UN,...

India and Pakistan will benefit the people of the entire region," US State Department spokesman John Kirby said. The spokesman was responding to a question on Modi's surprise visit to Lahore, where he held talks with Sharif.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also welcomed the meeting between the two leaders, hoping that the bilateral dialogue will be maintained and strengthened going forward.

"The Secretary General has long been encouraging both leaders of the two countries to engage in dialogue. He obviously welcomes this visit and this step in the right direction and he hopes that the dialogue will be maintained and strengthened," a UN spokesperson told PTI when asked about the UN chief's response to Modi's visit to Pakistan, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in more than a decade.

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lu Kang said improvement in Indo-Pak ties is significant for regional peace, stability and development.

"The Chinese side has noticed the report and welcomes the latest development in the Pakistan-India relationship," Lu Kang said.

Lu said Pakistan and India are important countries in south Asia and the improvement of their relationship will be significant to regional peace, stability and development.

"As the common neighbour and friend of both Pakistan and India, China is happy to see and will support, as always, Pakistan and India to enhance mutual trust and achieve common development through continuous dialogue," he added.

Modi stayed for over two hours in Lahore on his way back home from Afghanistan on Friday during which he held talks with Sharif at his Raiwind house. (Monitoring Desk)

(6) Laghman ...

claims of Daesh presence in the province.

"I reject [reports of] presence of Daesh, not only in Qarghaee [district] but in the entire Laghman province. Daesh fighters do not have any activity here," he said.

Laghman residents have however said unless something is done, they will have to deal with increased insecurity in the next fighting season. (Tolonews)

(7) Afghan Taliban ...

Speculation over a limited partnership between Russia and the Taliban emerged after Zamir Kabulov, President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan and Russia's foreign ministry department chief, asserted Moscow had opened channels of communication with the insurgent group. It was an unusual step for Moscow since the Taliban itself has been listed as a terrorist group by the Russian government.

"We have communication channels opened for sharing information. Both the Taliban of Afghanistan and the Taliban of Pakistan have said that they don't recognise (IS leader Abu Bakr) Al-Baghdadi as a caliph, that they don't recognise Isil," said the Russian diplomat using the other acronym for the Iraqi Islamist group.

Russia's purported move has come at a time when the Taliban has begun to flex its muscles in Afghanistan, capturing key cities in an apparent show of strength against the IS. Though IS forces have begun to emerge in Afghanistan, the Taliban remains the dominant Islamist group in the country. As part of IS's growing campaign, the extremist group has launched a radio station named "Voice of the Caliphate" to recruit radicals including those in the Taliban. (Agencies)

(8) Obama Honors ...

Bagram Air Base. The Taliban posted a message on Twitter claiming responsibility for the attack.

"We never take for granted what all of you do for the American people," the president said Friday. "You help keep us free. You help keep us strong. And whatever service you're in, whatever branch, we are extraordinarily grateful for everything that you do every single day. And we hope you guys had a wonderful Christmas."

Obama and his family are in the midst of an annual two-week vacation in his home state. A Christmas visit to the base has become a yearly tradition as well.

Mixed in amid hiking and dining out, the president has been working out at the Marine Corps Base gym, which he joked about in his message to troops.

"The only problem I've got when I'm here is having to work out with Marines in the gym," the president quipped. "Because I generally feel like your Commander-in-Chief is in pretty good shape, and then I get next to some guy curling 100 pounds and it makes me feel small," he continued.

"But that's okay. It gives me

some inspiration. I'm going to work harder so I can keep up with you next year, all right?" (Agencies)

(9) US Pursuing...

The US and its allies invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 as part of Washington's so-called war on terror. The offensive removed the Taliban regime from power, but after more than 14 years, the foreign troops have still not been able to establish security in the country.

Weber said, "As the record of US policy over the past fifteen years has clearly shown, American military involvement has not ended strife and conflict in the region as American leaders pledged and promised. It has in fact made the problems of the region far worse with harmful consequences for Europe and the world."

"Today, as in 2001, US policy in the region is reactive and not clearly thought through. The fact that high-ranking American lawmakers and officials now, fourteen years after the 2001 invasion want to send more US troops to the country, shows clearly that the premises of US policy have for years been short-sighted and wrong-headed," the stated.

"The US has been trying to act as a kind of world policeman, the role for which it has neither the means nor the will to carry out. The only sensible policy for the US should be the one of non-intervention in the conflicts and problems of Afghanistan and in the Middle East," the analyst noted.

In October, President Barack Obama announced plans to keep 9,800 US troops in Afghanistan through 2016 and 5,500 in 2017, reneging on his promise to end the war there and bring home most American forces from the Asian country before he leaves office.

According to US officials, Washington would also maintain a large counterterrorism capability of terror drones and Special Operations forces to fight militants in Afghanistan. (Agencies)

(10) Strong...

Pakistan. Pakistan's Urdu TV channel Geo said that the city of Peshawar in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province was the worst-hit area from where all the 37 casualties were reported. The hospital authorities said that most people sustained injuries in the head and limbs after being hit by the bricks of collapsing houses.

The provincial authorities have imposed a state of emergency in all the three major hospitals in Peshawar and also in neighboring Nowshera district to facilitate the injured.

The quake also caused land sliding at Karakoram Highway in north Gilgit Baltistan area, blocking it from various places. Ghulam Rasool, a Pakistani official, said that the earthquake's duration was 59 seconds in parts of the country, adding that several mild to moderate aftershocks have hit the country in the next few hours.

He said that Pakistan lies on the earthquake fault line due to which the local office is closely monitoring the seismic activity and has its bases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which enable them to give a more accurate report.

The disaster management authority of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province said that they are contacting their sub-offices in various districts to check possible damages caused by the quake.

The National Disaster Management Authority's spokesperson said that they are checking with the disaster management authorities of all the provinces to assess losses and damages.

A 7.5-magnitude earthquake with a depth of 210 km hit the Hindu Kush mountain range in northern Afghanistan late October, with strong tremors also felt in Pakistan and India.

The death toll from that quake reached 350, with thousands of people wounded. (Xinhua)

(11) India Arrests...

earlier also on their way to Afghanistan by the intelligence

agencies.

It further states that missing complaints were lodged at different police stations in Telangana state by the respective families after the students left home on Thursday. Telangana police had informed Maharashtra ATS after it came to fore that the men were heading to Nagpur to take a flight for Srinagar. Superintendent of police, ATS, Sunil Kolhe said that the operation was meticulously planned with the Telangana counterparts. "Maharashtra police handed over the men to Telangana special cell officers after nabbing them. Telangana police would conduct further interrogations," said Kolhe.

The three men have been identified as Abdul Wasim, Umar Hasan Farooqui and Majh Hasan Farooque, and they would be produced before Hyderabad court later on Saturday. The police is likely to seek their remand for custodial interrogations to unearth the links. (PK)

(12) 7 Killed in ...

limited presence.

An unknown number of militants were wounded in the gunfight in the province bordering Pakistan, the source added.

The Taliban has intensified attacks over the past months as the militant group tries to take territory and consolidate its positions ahead of winter in the conflict-torn country. (Xinhua)

(13) Afghan Army

as roadside bombs and landmines planted by the militants also cause casualties on civilians, the statement added.

The Afghan security forces have beefed up offensives against Taliban militants recently. (Xinhua)

(14) Nigerian...

must realize that the most important thing for those children is that they must not be denied education; schools must be rebuilt," said the Nigerian president.

Buhari had earlier given military chiefs a December deadline to end the insurgency of Boko Haram. (Xinhua)

(15) Burundi Holds...

deployment of AU troops into Burundi. We serve citizens and that is why we are here," said Burundian First Vice-President Gaston Sindimwo.

Sindimwo warned politicians who are behind insecurity in Burundi saying, "We will not tolerate them and we will continue to fight against criminals."

In the capital Bujumbura, citizens gathered at the Independence Square in the city center and proceeded to Bujumbura Port. (Xinhua)

(16) Russia-Turkey...

Tensions between Ankara and Moscow have been escalating since Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet near the Syrian border. On November 24, Turkey shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M bomber with two pilots aboard, claiming the fighter jet had violated the Turkish airspace. One of the pilots lost his life following the attack while the other was rescued in a Syrian army operation. (PressTV)

(17) Yemen...

government Popular Resistance militia said.

Loyalist forces advanced in Ghayl area in the same province, around 20 kilometres northeast of Majzar, Mohamed al-Behaih added. (AFP)

(18) Philippine...

Secretary Herminio Coloma Jr., quoting military spokesman Colonel Restituto Padilla, said the BIFF lightning raids and harassment were still expected following losses incurred in earlier military operations conducted during the last few weeks.

He said the BIFF, the splinter group of the MILF, intended to show that they are not yet a spent force following recent debacles.

"The AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) however has kept these activities localized with

its ongoing military operations to hunt down BIFF elements who have perpetrated the recent criminal acts," the official stressed. (Xinhua)

More than 100 Homes Lost in Australia's Christmas Day Bushfires

MELBOURNE - More than 100 homes burned down in a leading Australian tourist area in bushfires on Christmas Day and the situation remained dangerous on Saturday, as officials predicted more blazes to come later in the hot southern summer. While around 500 firefighters and 13 firefighting aircraft battled the flames along parts of Victoria state's picturesque Great Ocean Road, teams moved in to assess damage from fires that had lit up the night sky along the coast on Christmas.

A spokesman for the state's emergency services said 98 homes had been confirmed burned in the community of Wye River and another 18 in nearby Separation Creek, for a total of 116 in the two townships, located about 120 kilometers (75 miles) southwest of Melbourne.

Top emergency officials warned that dry conditions posed a threat of more fires for the Great Ocean Road area and the rest of Victoria. "This fire doesn't go away," Craig Lapsley, the state's emergency services commissioner, told a news conference. (Reuters)

Most Greeks Pessimistic about National Economy in 2016: Poll

ATHENS - A poll has shown that most Greek citizens were pessimistic and anxious about their country's economic situation in the 2016 as the new year is arriving in a few days.

According to an opinion survey published on the Greek newspaper Real News recently, up to 81.4 percent of the respondents said they were pessimistic about the country's course in the next year.

In addition, 63 percent of the participants of the survey, which was conducted by polling firm MRB, expected the Greek economic situation to get worse, while 51 percent of them predicted a year of decline for their own households.

As to the Greek debt crisis that has blighted the country and the eurozone for several years, 42.8 percent and 32.4 percent of those surveyed expressed anxiety and anger respectively, said the poll.

In contrast, only about 30 percent of the respondents showed positive sentiments, like hope, confidence, pride and certainty, in the survey. (Xinhua)

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan Hold Ministerial Consultations in Dushanbe

BISHKEK - Dushanbe hosted Uzbek-Tajik political consultations on December 24-25, the press service of the Foreign Ministry of Uzbekistan reports.

Delegations of two countries headed by deputy foreign ministers discussed the state and prospects of cooperation development and exchanged views on the important regional and international issues.

Issues of strengthening cooperation in trade and economic, transport and communication, cultural and humanitarian and other fields, expansion of existing legal framework were touched upon the meeting. The sides expressed mutual interest in implementation of the current potential for diversification of the range of goods and services in bilateral trade.

Participants exchanged views on the issues of further cooperation expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States, including interaction between two countries within these organizations. (AKIpress)