

(1) Unable to Make...

withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan and lifting of the ban on the movement of rebel leaders.

He added the US feared Afghanistan might again become a hotbed of foreign insurgents after the pullout of international troops. "But we assured them Afghanistan won't become a stronghold of foreign militants," Taliban's Qatar-based political office head Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai was accompanied by Mullah Abdul Salam Hanafi, Sohail Shaheen, Mullah Mohammad Fazil, Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwaja, Qari Din Mohammad and Mullah Shahabuddin Dilawar represented the militant group. (Pajhwok)

(2) Interest Rate...

This interest rate cut has been one of a number of efforts by Afghanistan to boost both the banking sector and the economy and to improve access to finance.

In another key move, the Central Bank last year granted its first Islamic banking license - to the Islamic Bank of Afghanistan (IBA), previously known as Bakhtar Bank.

As Reuters reported at the time, financial inclusion is a challenge in developing economies and can be due to many factors, such as religion in Afghanistan.

World Bank data showed that only 15 percent of adults in Afghanistan have a bank account, while 16 percent cited religious reasons for not having one. "We expect that introducing Islamic banking can help address this issue," said Abdullah Ludeen, a central bank official at the time, adding that such exclusion was tied to other factors such as financial literacy.

"There are good opportunities for Islamic banking in the country, it's an untapped market," he told Reuters. (Tolo news)

(3) Afghan Spy...

casualties on government forces and underlined the pressure they face as increasingly confident fighters step up violence, even as diplomatic efforts to end the conflict are underway.

In Monday's attack, the Taliban detonated a captured military Humvee packed with explosives. Some government officials said the casualty toll was higher than the one given by the NDS.

A senior defence source had told Reuters 126 members of the Afghan security forces were killed. Two senior security officials in the capital, Kabul, said at least 72 men being trained by the NDS were killed with 38 severely wounded.

The Taliban said their attack killed 190 people.

It was not immediately clear if Tuesday's air strike was supported by U.S. forces.

Afghan forces backed by U.S. air strikes have been targeting Taliban commanders, but questions have been raised over the future of U.S. involvement by reports that President Donald Trump wants to bring home almost half of the 14,000 U.S. troops. 'HEATED ARGUMENTS'

Officials in Maidan Wardak gave conflicting accounts of the violence that followed Monday's Taliban attack. Mohebulha Sharifzai, spokesman for the provincial governor said the NDS had killed six gunmen in an air strike in the provincial capital, but he was not sure if Taliban commander No-man was among them.

A second provincial official said the NDS, with support from foreign forces, conducted two raids.

"An air strike conducted by foreign forces killed three men and a boy, they were not gunmen but hunters," said Akhtar Mohammad Taheri, head of Maidan Wardak's provincial council.

Taheri told Reuters in the second raid, NDS forces hunting militants killed five civilians from the same family. An NDS spokesman was not available for comment and did not respond to requests for comment.

The surging violence came as Taliban leaders met U.S. officials in Qatar for talks to try to agree on a way to end the 17-year war.

Officials from the two sides have met at least four times in recent months but the militants have refused to talk to the U.S.-backed Kabul government.

The Taliban say they are fighting to oust foreign troops, topple the government and restore strict Islamic law.

The United States and its allies say they want to stop Afghanistan from becoming a haven for international militants plotting attacks in the West. Taliban officials privy to the talks, which entered an unscheduled third day on Wednesday, said U.S. negotiators, led by special envoy for peace Zalmay Khalilzad, were concerned about deteriorating security and feared that a U.S. withdrawal could lead to "terrorist groups" taking control in Afghanistan.

The two sides exchanged "heated arguments and counter-arguments", said a senior Taliban official who declined to be identified.

"Our delegation made it clear that they would never let Afghanistan to be used against any other country," the official said. (Reuters)

(4) China Recognizes...

In 2015, Pakistan facilitated the landmark first round of direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Islamabad, but the process broke down after Taliban announced the death of their longtime leader Mullah Omer, triggering a bitter power struggle within the militia. Chances for resumption of the stalled process dimmed further following the death of Omer's successor, Mullah Mansur, in a U.S. drone strike in 2016 on Pakistan, near the Afghan border.

Since then, several attempts to resume the stalled peace process have been made by a four-nation group made up of Pakistan, Afghanistan, the U.S., and China. (AA)

(5) IEC Unveils...

The IEC chairman noted that the election commission is evaluating the documents of the 17 possible presidential candidates for July elections and that soon it will reveal final lists of the candidates.

According to the IEC's final results, the following individuals have managed to secure seats in the parliament: Panjshir: Mohammad Zalmay Noori (8,456 votes) and Rahila Salim with (1,577 votes).

Sar-e-Pul: Mohammad Akbar Sultanzada (9,242 votes), Mohammad Hassan Sharifi Balkhahi (7,358 votes), Hamidullah Baik (6,260 votes), Sayed Hayatullah Alemi (5,746 votes) and Aziza Jalis with (6,015 votes).

Kapisa: Mirdad Nijrabi (5,849 votes), Mir Haidar Afzali (5,370 votes), Iqbal Safi (5,355 votes) and Khadija Ilham Khalili with (1378 votes).

This comes about two weeks after the IEC announced the final election results for nine provinces including Jawzjan, Samangan, Uruzgan, Nimruz, Zabul, Parwan, Bamyan, Dalkundi and Laghman. (ATN)

(6) Etisalat Sets New...

investing in new digital platforms and global brand building initiatives. Etisalat's success as a brand was also reinforced by the synergy of operating companies across our footprint, creating brand loyalty and enhanced engagement with our customers," said Saleh Abdullah Al Abdooli, CEO, Etisalat Group.

David Heigh, CEO, Brand Finance said: "It is a real testament to the leadership of the UAE that Emirati brands are leading the charge for the Middle East, amongst the world's most valuable brands. As celebrations for the 'Year of Zayed' wrap up, we recognize the achievements, will and determination of the UAE's Founding Father, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan."

Operating in 15 countries across Asia, Middle East and Africa, Etisalat's success can also be attributed to its continued efforts in developing its customer loyalty programmes, sports sponsorship commitments and in driving the digital future to empower societies.

Etisalat pioneering 5G efforts in the region and delivering one of the fast-

est, smartest and best-connected places on earth during the global mega Expo 2020 Dubai has attributed to its success as a brand in the region. As the premier digital and telecommunications partner of Expo 2020 Dubai, Etisalat is prepared to deliver the event's visitors and delegates 5G connectivity that brings the Expo themes to life for the 25 million expected visitors.

Several factors have attributed to the success and growth of Etisalat's brand value mainly driven by an innovative customer service driven strategy, adapting well to a digital savvy marketplace, leading the 5G revolution and the successful launch of global brand building initiatives. Etisalat has also led digital innovation in the country with its overall strategy focused on 'Driving the Digital Future to empower societies' by working on several digital initiatives in digital infrastructure, entertainment and smart cities.

Etisalat has reached out and engaged with its consumers across markets with global branding initiatives by sponsoring global football teams and clubs aligning with the brand's priorities of being at the forefront of major sporting events. Etisalat also launched the new positioning campaign 'Together Matters' to highlight togetherness among its subscribers in today's world of connectivity.

As part of its digitization efforts for consumers, Etisalat provided an efficient personalised retail experience by amplifying the roll out of smart stores in UAE and transforming a brick and mortar retail environment to a digital experience for customers. Brand Finance, is the world's leading independent branded business valuation and strategy consultancy, and is the organization behind the Global 500 Brands and Telecom 300 league table of the world's biggest brands ranked by their brand value, assesses the dollar value of the reputation, image and intellectual property of the brand. (PR)

(7) Egyptian Envoy...

of Understanding being finalized for signing between the two countries, which provides bilateral cooperation in all cultural areas including in archeology, the statement concluded. (Pajhwok)

(8) Man's Heroic...

service and police and then woke the family up.

The newspaper distributor later caught two children of the family -- Mukaddese, 7, and Umit, 5, -- after the father dropped them from the window of the burning house.

Speaking to Anadolu Agency, Ozyurt described how the incident occurred. "I noticed that the fire would engulf the building. They [family] throw the children down one by one and I caught and took them to their neighbors living on the opposite side of the building," he said.

Firefighters then rescued Muhammed Norazi and his wife Merziye from the fire.

The father said that they could not evacuate the house as the stairs inside burst into flames.

"I threw my children out to Mr. Remzi. He saved their lives. There was nobody [around] at that time. God has sent him to us.

"We will never forget his favor," Norazi said, adding, "My children are alive thanks to him."

The fire was extinguished after a one-hour effort.

The family was also taken to a nearby hospital for a health check-up. (AA)

(9) Pakistan's...

worth \$163.164 million in the same month of the previous year.

The imports also witnessed a decrease of 36.55 percent which fell to \$10.238 million in December 2018 against imports worth \$16.138 million in the same month of 2017.

On a month-on-month basis, exports from Afghanistan increased by 2.5 percent to \$74.193 million against exports worth of \$72.389 million recorded during November 2018.

Similarly, imports went down to \$10.238 million in December 2018 from \$13.172 million in November

showing a negative growth of 22.27 percent.

This comes after the Afghan Ministry of Industry and Commerce said in December the trade and transit volume between Afghanistan and Pakistan had decreased by 20 percent overall in 2018.

A spokesman for the ministry, Musafir Qoqandi, said statistics from the first nine months of last year showed that Afghanistan and Pakistan's trade and transit totaled about \$1 billion in 2018 against \$1.5 billion in 2017.

According to the ministry, Afghanistan's exports to Pakistan totaled at least \$280 million in 2018 while imports from Pakistan were \$800 million.

"Our trade volume has decreased with Pakistan against previous years. But our exports have increased. We want good trade relations with all the nations, but we will be focused on our trade balance," Qoqandi told TOLONews at the time.

Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) meanwhile said that Afghanistan's economic dependency on Pakistan had decreased following the establishment of new alternative trade and transit routes with a number of countries.

However, in December, Pakistan's Embassy in Kabul issued a statement that there had been an increase in trade and transit volume between Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2018.

"Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to maintain up-ward trajectory of trade during last two years and has crossed \$2 billion mark in year 2017-2018," the embassy said in a statement on December 21. (Tolo news)

(10) Afghanistan...

security-centric conceptions in their relations.

Addressing the forum, Abdullah said the processes, practices and mechanisms that upheld values of justice, truth, repentance, empathy, victim identification, empowerment and democracy could not be done away with simply because of a change in the nature of the international political system.

"We need to develop the conceptual frameworks in international relations to protect national peace and reconciliation programmes from the harmful effects of what follows from a multipolar global system in terms of state interaction."

"States must guard against perpetrators of heinous crimes manipulating interstate rivalries to seek legitimacy and power at the expense of victims, thereby setting the scene for further conflict, repression and erosion of the values upon which sustainable peace could be built." (Pajhwok)

(11) US Service...

a medical facility in Germany after being wounded by small arms fire on January 13 during an operation in Badghis province.

Meddock, 26, of Amarillo, Texas, was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington.

The US has approximately 14,000 troops in Afghanistan with the majority of them serving in non-combat roles as part of the NATO-led train, advise and assist mission.

A smaller number of US Special Operations Forces participate in counterterrorism missions. (Tolo news)

(12) Pakistan Rejects...

over the operations of a part of Shahid Beheshti Port, Chabahar in Iran last month. On 24th December 2018, India, Iran and Afghanistan jointly inaugurated the office of the Indian SPV - India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ), at Chabahar. The physical take-over of the terminal area, cargo handling equipment and Office building was completed by 29th December 2018.

Commercial operations began at IPGCFZ with the arrival of a vessel. A Cyprus registered bulk carrier had arrived at Chabahar with 72458 MT of corn cargo. The vessel MV MACH-ERAS berthed at the terminal at 0130 hrs on 30th December 2018.

Central Asia countries have also lauded Chabahar. Uzbek ambassador to India Farhod Arziev has lauded

the project saying a railway project in Afghanistan can connect Uzbekistan with Chabahar.

New Delhi is Afghanistan's largest donor in the region. (Pajhwok)

(13) 2018: Above...

were Taliban militants."

On the other hand, people urged the government and the Taliban to pay special attention to civilian lives and properties during their military operations and fighting.

Mohammad Musa Mustafa, a resident of Zahoo locality of Gardez, the provincial capital, said the government should take care while conducting ground and air operations and urged the Taliban not to use people's homes for attacks on security forces.

Ghulam Mohammad, a resident of Mamozo locality of Zurmat district, who lost his two brothers and three nephews to nighttime operations, demanded an end to the ongoing conflict.

"My three nephews and two brothers have been martyred, each day people are killed, for how long the bloodshed will continue, the people need peace and an end to the war."

Mohammad Rahman Qadari, Paktika provincial council member, said civilian casualties had lately increased due to lack of coordination and intelligence information among security organs. Qadari urged the warning parties to pay attention to people's lives and properties.

According to him, security organs' coordination remained only on paper and they showed coordination only in front of the governor and the president. He said security forces did not share information with each other due to personal grudges.

Abdul Wali Sahi, the deputy governor, said saving civilians' lives and properties was security forces' top priority and in most cases security forces attempted to avoid casualties to people in their operations.

However, Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, rejected the fighters had inflicted casualties on civilians. Mujahid said they noticed no security incident during the past one year, in which a large number of civilians had suffered casualties from their side.

"But when our fighters stay at night at someone's home, security forces raid the home, so it is a raid on civilian homes."

Casualties in the southeastern zone decreased by 50 percent in 2018 compared to 2017 casualties, when about 850 people were killed and wounded. (Pajhwok)

(14) Kunduz Officials...

mercy on Kunduz people," he said. Taj Baig, another resident, said four people were kidnapped from Kunduz City during the last three months.

He said armed robberies, kidnappings, murders and other crimes had reached the peak in Kunduz City. "If the government did not control the situation as soon as possible, we will stage protests," he warned.

A number of other participants of the meeting expressed similar views, with Kunduz provincial council head Yousuf Ayubi, calling provincial military and civil officials as incompetent. He said Kunduz security needed special attention.

"Insecurity, murders, kidnappings and other criminal cases have significantly increased, we will close the city gate's and those of security organs if security forces do not take serious measures," he said.

Kunduz acting governor, Hashmatullah Rahimi acknowledged they were unable to ensure security. "We are trying to improve the security situation, but unfortunately most of our troops particularly police are fighting on the frontline and that is the reason behind the security vacuum in the city," he said.

Provincial deputy police chief, Safiullah Mahzon, also said they were not successful in improving security but they were working hard to have good security in future.

"We agree that we could not improve security as needed, we were unable to solve problems in Kunduz but we have taken strong measures for future security," he added. (Pajhwok)