

(1) U.S. Detecting...

in a bid to break the stalemate and force the insurgents to the negotiating table.

Ghani, during a meeting with Mattis, described the new U.S. strategy as a game changer, allowing Kabul to extend its peace offer to the Taliban without doing so from a position of weakness.

"It has been a game changer because it has forced every actor to re-examine their assumptions," Ghani said.

Mattis said the goal was to take advantage of Taliban fracturing to peel off insurgents tired of fighting and create a process that could incorporate some Taliban leaders.

He said the positive signals had come from small numbers of insurgents.

"We've had some groups of Taliban - small groups - who have either started to come over or expressed an interest in talking," Mattis said.

"In other words, it may not be that the whole Taliban comes over in one fell swoop. That may be a bridge too far to expect. But there are elements of the Taliban clearly interested in talking to the Afghan government," he said.

The United States has in the past also expressed hope of peeling off elements of the Taliban and it was unclear how this new effort might be different.

Western diplomats and officials in Kabul say contacts involving intermediaries have been underway with the aim of agreeing on ground rules and potential areas of discussion for possible talks with at least some elements in the Taliban.

However, the insurgents, who seized a district center in western Afghanistan this week, have given no public sign of accepting Ghani's offer, instead issuing several statements suggesting they intended to keep fighting. (Reuters)

(2) Iran Invites...

Khawaja Asif and addressed a trade conference, Dawn News reported.

This move comes after Iran last month signed a lease agreement with India, which would give India operational control of the port.

Dawn news stated that Zarif said both Pakistan and India need to link through sea and land routes in order to boost development in eastern and south-eastern Iran and in south western Pakistan.

Zarif also said the Chabahar port project was not meant to "encircle Pakistan ... strangulate anybody" and twice said Iran would not allow anyone to hurt Pakistan from its territory much like Pakistan would not allow its soil to be used against Iran, Dawn News reported. (Tolo news)

(3) 2nd Deputy...

went to the third round.

Amin Khan Yar, Delawar Imaq, Niamatullah Ghafari and Akbari Stanikzai were candidates for the second deputy speaker and Mohammad Saljooqi, Nawab-Mangal and Helai Irshadran for secretary.

However, none of them succeeded in winning the required number of votes on Monday when the ballot went to the fourth round. The Wolesi Jirga voted in the election for the two slots today and the candidates, Amir Khan Yar and Niamatullah Ghafari, who received most of the vote, ran again for the deputy speaker slot.

In today's session, 202 lawmakers were present and each candidate required 102 votes to win. Amir Khan Yar was able to secure 125 votes and win the deputy speaker's post.

But Mohammad Saleh Saljooqi and Helailrshad, candidates for secretary of the house, received

83 and 47 votes respectively. Hamayun, first deputy speaker, said the election for the slot went to the fifth round, slated for tomorrow (Wednesday).

Last year, Hamayun served as first deputy speaker, Mohammad Nazir Ahmadzai as second deputy speaker, Abdul Qadir Zazai as secretary and Irfan as deputy secretary of the lower house.

The Meshrano Jirga, or upper house, elected its administrative board on March 7. The Senate re-elected Alam Ezediyar as first deputy chairman, Asif Seddiqi as second deputy chairman, Taib Atta as secretary and Faisal Same as deputy secretary. (Pajhwok)

(4) 16 Chain Drug...

presence of a pharmacist in every drug store, prevention of drug sales without doctor's prescription, prepaying 15 million afghanis by the owner of each chain drug store and access to quality medicines are key points of the license agreement," he said.

Preventing drug imports of multiple brands, price tagging on medicines, preventing sales of smuggled and fake drugs, better control on distribution of medicines and increasing the country's revenue were other important points of the license agreement, Firoz said.

He added applicants could present their proposals to NMHRA until Jun 12. Based on the license agreement, the applicant must create 500 chain drug stores across the country during the next five years.

"Assessment of pharmacies individually is a hard job for the private sector but we can better evaluate chain drug stores, the new plan covers at least 500 drug stores (30 percent new drug stores and 70 percent old ones) and the owner of each chain is responsible for any violations of the entire chain," he said.

Firoz said the entire chain of drug stores was to be managed by a single system and they would provide medicines from well-known international and domestic companies.

Currently more than 14,000 drug stores operate individually in the country, with some being substandard, he said, adding that currently drug stores covered 10,000 patients each but the chain pharmacies would cover 1,600 people each.

He said creation of NMHRA had helped bring about fundamental changes in controlling medicines in the country's drug markets. AlhajRahmuddin Haji Agha, head of high consultative board and Afghan entrepreneurs, said that currently 22 drug production companies were operational in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Nangarhar provinces and they manufactured 122 types of drugs.

However, he said that the government did not use the products of domestic companies. "The government is not creating such a culture to promote domestic products, I personally produce 10 types of medicines which have high quality," he said. Agha said the president had ordered consumption of 25 percent of domestic products by the government, but the order remained unenforced.

"We support this license agreement, it is the interest of our people," he concluded. (Pajhwok)

(5) Kabul's Anti...

by the corrupt, the poor will be hit the hardest ..."

Counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics measures would be ineffective where illicit arms and financial flows were not tackled, she argued. "Where bribery is the norm in business transactions, firms will be reluctant to invest in the country." The Transparency International

made certain recommendations that the national unity government should prioritise to curb corruption:

Enact a comprehensive anti-corruption law in line with international best practices and commitments under the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC); Investigate and prosecute major cases of corruption, money-laundering, drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime to end the culture of impunity; Pass whistleblower protection legislation;

Ensure that right-to-information requests are effectively processed;

Quickly establish a public central registry of beneficial ownership;

Strengthen the asset disclosure and verification regime;

Improve the transparency of public procurement processes and government contracting.

Nanayakkara said: "Corruption has not been openly discussed in public consultation processes on the SDG plan and it is unclear what the plan's targets and indicators concerning corruption will look like.

"Given that Afghanistan's sustainable development - and capacity to achieve its SDG commitments - is inextricably linked with the country's ability to tackle corruption, the plan should set out clear, measurable steps to address all aspects of corruption covered in the Goal 16 targets." (Pajhwok)

(6) Troops Gearing...

our vehicles and personnel.

"If a wounded person is in need of help, we simply push a button to inform other forces in the area and ask them to help out the injured," the

Saleem asserted the commando forces were fully prepared and better-positioned to vanquish the enemy in the coming solar year. (Pajhwok)

(7) 29 Taliban...

Nineteen militants were killed and five others wounded during the offensives, he said, adding Taliban's key leaders named RahmatMubarez, Amin and Nazir were among the dead.

In Helmand, six militants including a group commander, MaulviWafa, were killed and four others wounded in airstrikes in Marja district by US forces, said the statement.

Four other insurgents were killed and two wounded in a foreign forces' airstrike in the Shalwal area of Nad Ali district.

Meanwhile, the Taliban spokesman claimed in a tweet that casualties had inflicted on security forces in Helmand and Ghazni province. (Pajhwok)

(8) 5 Policemen...

forces check-post on Monday night in their village.

The Taliban captured the check-post in the overnight attack and took all the weapons and ammunition with them.

Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi claimed five policemen were killed and four others injured in the overnight attack. He added the Taliban capture 19 weapons and other light and heavy equipment. (Pajhwok)

(9) Zarif Stresses...

Minister Khawja Asif and called on Prime Minister ShahidKhaqanAbbasi. The two sides discussed bilateral ties as well as the situation in Afghanistan.

Iran endorsed Pakistan's stance on a negotiated solution to the Afghan conflict. Pakistan and Iran should use their influence to help Afghanistan restart dialogue with Afghanistan, he proposed.

Zarif hoped the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline would be completed and banking relations between the neighbours would resume and the Free Trade Agreement

would be signed. (Pajhwok)

(10) Rahgozar to...

relating to Balkh province are being resolved," said Abdullah.

In December last year, the Presidential Palace announced that Ghani had approved Noor's resignation as governor of Balkh.

Noor refused to step down however stating he would only do so once government met a list of his party's demands.

Noor also accused government leaders of being dictators.

Jamiat party members and government have been locked in talks on-and-off for the past two months without any resolution being found.

But, the presidential palace has reiterated that Noor's case will be tackled on the basis of the law. (Tolo news)

(11) Pine Nut...

Pakistan investors make billions of dollars by selling Afghan pine nuts under their own label.

This comes after businessmen in southern Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces last month called on government to help resolve challenges they have in exporting pine nuts.

According to them, more than 40,000 tons of pine nuts was harvested this solar year but much of this was smuggled to Pakistan.

A number of pine nut merchants said they have been forced to sell their produce to Pakistan cheaply due to problems in the export sector.

Khost pine nut exporters said that every year, Pakistan benefits from the illegal export of pine nuts from Afghanistan. (Tolo news)

(12) UN Highlights...

Toby Lanzer, UN Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan said securing peace in Afghanistan is tied with the equality between men and women in the country.

"We asked them to eliminate barriers and pave the way for women's full participation in the life of Afghanistan. And through that painting, to call for urgent action, to achieve a change, a change where by men and women are more equal in Afghanistan. In the United Nations we believe that equality is a human right," said Lanzer.

Ali Reza Rahimi, Mina Nayeb and Mahdi Zahak were selected as the top three artists.

"This festival was held under the name of Parwaz. 50 young men and women (artists) on the 8th of March had painted the dreams, wishes and status of women. This is the biggest approach for changing the perceptions about women," said the president's advisor on United Nations affairs Fakhunda Zahra Naderi.

"Killing of women and prohibiting women and girls from going to school and universities in fact is prohibiting them of gaining knowledge. Unfortunately, the war has worsened the situation," said Kabul University Chancellor, HamidullahFarooqi. (Tolo news)

(13) Growing...

the president and the chief executive officer were engaged dealing with internal crisis and they had no time to address national issues.

Ghafari suggested security bosses should be summoned over the deteriorated security situation in some parts of the country and growing fatalities of security forces.

Newly elected Senate deputy chairman Mohammad Alam Ezediyar also expressed concern over growing deaths of security personnel in last two weeks and added the killing of over 22 security forces in Nimroz showed government's failure and stressed the need for strict measures to stop more losses of

security forces.

Chairman Fazal Hadi Muslimyar said the government had failed to implement its promise of suppressing the enemy in winter.

The Senate summoned Defense Minister Tariq Shah Behrami, Interior Minister Wais Ahmad Barnak and spymaster Masoom Stanikzai to appear before the lawmakers next week and brief them about their strategies for prevention of militant attacks. (Pajhwok)

US Relations, EU Future Challenge Merkel

BERLIN - A record 171 days after Germany's election, Angela Merkel is set to pledge for the fourth time to dedicate her efforts to Germans' well-being and "protect them from harm."

Merkel has 12 often-turbulent years as chancellor behind her. But fulfilling her oath of office may be even harder this time with U.S. President Donald Trump declaring that "trade wars are good" and threatening German automakers, a fractious European Union seeking to shape its future and a potentially wobbly German governing coalition.

Parliament is due to re-elect Merkel Wednesday, nearly six months after Europe's biggest economy voted and over a month after a coalition deal was concluded. The alliance of her conservative Union bloc with the center-left Social Democrats can't expect a honeymoon.

"A lot of work lies ahead of us," Merkel said Monday. She added that "we may be faced with new challenges: we had not, for instance, envisioned the latest developments on trade in the coalition agreement and we will have to answer them too. But I am confident that we will succeed."

Merkel, often named the world's most powerful woman and Europe's most powerful leader, said repeatedly during the post-election stalemate that global politics won't wait for Germany. In German-U.S. relations, military spending is already an irritant: Germany is one of many countries that fall short of a guideline for NATO allies to spend 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Now, escalating trade tensions are opening up a new difficulty.

Trump said over the weekend he had told the EU: "Open up the barriers and get rid of your tariffs, and if you don't do that, we're going to tax Mercedes-Benz, we're going to tax BMW" - two of Germany's most prominent exporters.

So far, Merkel has taken a diplomatic approach toward Trump and tried to engage him, but also distanced herself by suggesting last summer that Europe can no longer entirely rely on the U.S. Her initial response to the threat of trade tariffs has been to insist on talking through differences. (AP)

Turkmen President Invites Putin to Visit Ashgabat

ASHGABAT - Turkmen President GurbangulyBerdimuhamedov has invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to pay an official visit to Turkmenistan, the Turkmen government said in a message.

During a phone talk with Vladimir Putin, Berdimuhamedov expressed hope that on March 18, at the presidential election, the people of the Russian Federation will make the right choice.

The two presidents expressed satisfaction with the opportunity to discuss the priority issues of the Turkmen-Russian relations, which are being built on an equal footing and developing on the principles of mutual respect, long-term and strategic partnership, the message said. (Trend)