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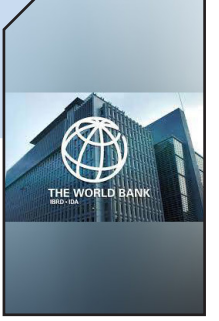
The Challenges of the Afghan Peace Talks

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Blast in Daikundi Kills 14 Civilians: Interior Ministry

At least 14 civilians, including women and children, were killed Tuesday by a roadside bomb in central Afghanistan, officials said, as violence continues despite peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government.

Seven women, five children and two men died when their vehicle detonated an explosive device in Daikundi province, interior ministry spokesman Tareq Arian said in a statement.

Three children were also wounded, he added, blaming the Taliban for the blast. Nasrullah Ghorii -- the spokesman for the governor of Daikundi -- told AFP the victims were traveling to a shrine when their minibus struck the bomb.

No group has claimed responsibility for the blast, but roadside bombs have been a weapon of choice for the Taliban. ... **P2**



Border terminals to open for pedestrian traffic: Pakistan

Pakistan has decided to open all border terminals with Afghanistan for pedestrian traffic, says a senior diplomat.

Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq tweeted that the terminals would remain open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

The ambassador wrote the border crossings with Afghanistan would be reverted to the pre COVID-19 schedule shortly.

"All border terminals with Afghanistan located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including Torkham, will be opened for pedestrian traffic."

The crossings would fully revert to the pre-coronavirus schedule shortly. Officials at the border crossings were being informed, he added.

Sadiq's tweet came as High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Dr Abdullah arrived in Islamabad on a three-day visit the invitation of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

On Monday, Abdullah kicked off his visit with a "constructive meeting" with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi at the Foreign Office.

MoPH: Afghanistan Has Successfully Gone Past 'First Wave' Of COVID-19



Acting Health Minister Ahmad Jawad Osmani said on Tuesday, Afghanistan had successfully crossed the first wave of Coronavirus infections and fresh cases had drastically reduced across the country.

Speaking at the opening of the "National Symposium to

Coordinate Resources and Consensus to Provide Patient Safety, Strengthening the Health System and Medical Education," Osmani said the minister was well prepared for a second wave of the virus and promised better services to potential patients.

He also added that over 85% of

Afghans have access to health services, even those living in rural areas.

This has improved in the past several years, the minister said, adding that citizens, on an average, are within a one-hour distance from medical centres.

Developing a new health policy is a

serious necessity

Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh said the development of a new Afghan health policy was a necessity without which "problems and challenges cannot be identified, and solutions cannot be found."

He stressed that Afghanistan's health system is facing many problems and concerns in terms of international standards compared to other countries, making it necessary to review the medical education system and the health sector accurately.

He added that political instability and the continuation of more than 40 years of war have been the main obstacles to the development and progress of Afghanistan in various sectors, including health.

However, Danesh added that in the past 19 years, despite significant progress in graduate education and health services, they have yet to meet the global standards and indicators.

He called for more coordination between the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Higher Education and the Afghan Medical Council to find solutions to the challenges in the field.

Iran Discusses Afghan Peace with Uzbek, German Officials

Iran's special envoy for Afghanistan Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian discussed bilateral relations and regional developments, in separate phone calls with his Uzbek and German counterparts on Monday.

The three officials reviewed the latest developments in Afghanistan, as well as the intra-Afghan peace talks, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said.

Taherian said Iran supported the Uzbek president's idea that the United Nations (UN) must pay more attention to Afghan issues and establish an appropriate mechanism for it.

However, The Trump administration has urged Iran to join the Afghan peace negotiations, says US Special ... **P2**



Time to Move Past 'Conspiracy Theories,' Take Practical Steps for Peace: Abdullah

Abdullah Abdullah said on Tuesday, that while there is a "peaceful future on the horizon" for Afghanistan, everyone needs to move beyond "conspiracy theories" that have held the region back and urged the stakeholders to take practical steps during the peace process.

"I believe it is now a chance to pass the old and repeated slogans and conspiracy theories that have kept us behind and create a new chapter... We need, more than ever, to see our region as a single region," the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation said while addressing an event at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS) on the second day of his trip to Pakistan. Abdullah said Pakistan played a key role in the start of the Afghan peace negotiations and it has to play an important role in helping to successfully bring the talks to their desired conclusion by



standing beside the people and the government of Afghanistan.

"Considering the current geopolitical context of the region, many new windows of opportunities have opened up. Therefore, more than ever, both countries need to pursue an enhanced level of interaction for a more peaceful and prosperous coexistence," Abdullah said about Afghan=Pak relations.

Abdullah said that his job in the Reconciliation Council is to help

build consensus and promote reconciliation to "justly, inclusively and honourably" end the war and seek a political settlement. He pointed that Afghanistan has changed over the years, for the better.

"Afghanistan today is not the country of 1990s or early 2001. It is a young, diverse, connected nation, eager to freely decide its own future form of government, corresponding to its unity and diversity." ... **P3**

Iran Discusses...

Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

The Pakistani leadership had been sending the right vibes for the success of the direct Kabul-Taliban talks on ending the conflict in Afghanistan, the ambassador told a Webinar in Washington.

Khalilzad was quoted as saying by Dawn: "We have offered to meet with Iranians on this issue. "They should join us at various forums to discuss the future of Afghanistan."

However, the US special representative alleged that Iran created problems for American efforts to stabilise the war-devastated country.

The US would respond if Iran-backed groups in Afghanistan acted against America and its coalition partners, Khalilzad warned.

"We are monitoring them very closely. There have been occasionally disturbing actions that have had a negative impact," the envoy claimed.

Blast in Daikundi...

"Deliberate attacks" targeting civilians killed or wounded more than 800 civilians in Afghanistan during the first half of 2020, according to a UN report released in July.

The violence comes as Taliban and Afghan government negotiators are meeting in Doha, where they are trying to find a way to end 19 years of war.

Despite calls for a ceasefire, the Taliban have refused to halt their violence, seeing it as key to leverage at the negotiating table.

The blast came as the head of the Afghan peace process, Abdullah Abdullah, kicked off the second day of a three-day visit to neighboring Pakistan. Speaking at an event in Islamabad, he proclaimed that the "ice has been broken" at peace talks, which started September 12.

Afghanistan has long accused Islamabad of providing vital support and safe havens to the Taliban.

Islamabad denies it supports the Taliban, but its influence with the militants is seen as pivotal to paving the way for any potential deal.

By Wang Yu, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan

All under Heaven are of One Family: Let's Jointly Build a Community of Shared Future for China and Afghanistan

Tomorrow is the 71st birthday of the People's Republic of China. In the past 71 years, China has undergone dramatic changes and worked a development miracle unseen in human history. In 1952, China's GDP was only RMB 67.9 billion, or 119 per capita. With decades of hard work, GDP in 2019 was close to RMB 100 trillion (USD 14.4 trillion), or close to RMB 71,000 (USD 10,300) per capita.

In the past 71 years, China has experienced profound integration and moved forward together with the rest of the world. It is now the largest trading partner of more than 120 countries and regions and accounts for about 11% of global imports. It has been the world's second largest import market for 11 consecutive years and a major supplier of global manufacturing. By January 2020, China had signed cooperation documents on jointly building the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with 138 countries and 30 international organizations. Following the steps of travelers and men of virtue at the age of ancient Silk Road, China is connected more closely with the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest 'black swan event' in 2020, still wreaking havoc around the world. In the past eight months and more, under the strong leadership of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government have united the people of all ethnic groups across the country in an effective fight against the pandemic.

China was one of the first countries in the world to put the pandemic under control. When people's safety and health were under a sudden attack and serious threat of the novel coronavirus, the Chinese government put the people and their lives first and took resolute measures. In a bit more than one month, the spread of the epidemic was initially contained. In 2 months or so, the number of new indigenous cases every day was brought down to a single

digit. And then within about 3 months, the number of confirmed cases in Hubei Province, where the first outbreak was reported, was brought down to zero, with economic and social order restored. Nowadays, there has been no new local case in China for more than a month. China was among countries first to provide support and assistance for other countries, especially the worst-hit ones. We have launched the most extensive emergency humanitarian operations with the most limited time frame. We dispatched 34 teams of medical experts to 32 countries, arranged 283 batches of assistance to 150 countries and 4 international organizations and provided and exported pandemic response supplies to more than 200 countries and regions, involving a total of 151.5 billion masks, 1.4 billion protective suits, 230 million goggles, 209,000 ventilators, 470 million test kits and 80.14 million infrared thermometers. These have strongly supported developing countries, including Afghanistan, in their pandemic control efforts.

China was also the first major economy to grow since the outbreak of COVID-19, with multiple economic indicators turning positive. In the second quarter, GDP grew by 3.2%. Various institutions have forecasted that the Chinese economy is on track to grow at a medium-to-high rate of 5-6% in the third quarter, with positive growth for the year as a whole.

Under the leadership of the government, Afghanistan has made remarkable progress in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and is now actively returning to work towards resumed socio-economic development. The recent opening of intra-Afghan negotiations marked the start of a crucial phase of the peace and reconciliation process. It was a milestone event influencing the course of Afghan history.

On 12th September, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended the first Video Opening Ceremony of Intra-Afghan

Negotiations. The Chinese side stressed that all parties to the peace talks should put the interests of the nation first, follow the fundamental direction of a political settlement, adhere to the Afghan-led principle and stick to a broad and inclusive framework goal. China hopes that The future arrangements for Afghanistan will resolutely fight against terrorism, pursue a foreign policy of peace and friendship and steer Afghanistan onto the path to peace, stability and development. China will, as always, continue to be a supporter, mediator and facilitator for its peace and reconciliation process.

This year also marks the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Afghanistan. Our bilateral relations have withstood the test of the pandemic and the ever-changing international situation and remained steadfast in many aspects.

First, the tradition of mutual understanding, trust, support and assistance has remained steadfast. Since 2001, China has provided billions of RMB in assistance gratis for Afghanistan and built a number of infrastructure facilities benefiting Afghan people, including the Republic Hospital in Kabul and the National Vocational and Technical Institute. Afghanistan adheres to the One-China principle and firmly supports China on issues concerning sovereignty, integrity and security.

Second, the general trend of consolidation and deepening of our friendship has remained steadfast. It is a miracle in the history of international relations that our two countries, linked by mountains and rivers, have had exchanges for over 2,000 years without any conflict. President Xi and President Ghani have been meeting each other annually since 2014. This year, due to the pandemic, the two leaders have maintained contact through letters, which sustained the positive momentum of high-level exchanges. In recent years, China has consistently ranked among the most popular in

By Wolfgang Minatti

The Challenges of the Afghan Peace Talks

In February 2020, after more than a year of negotiations, US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad signed an agreement with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. By signing the agreement, the Taliban committed to preventing terrorist organisations from launching attacks against the US from Afghanistan. At the same time, the US agreed to gradually withdraw its forces – and that of NATO – by March 2021. Moreover, the Taliban agreed to engage in intra-Afghan peace talks to discuss the implementation of a 'permanent and comprehensive ceasefire' with the Afghan government.

The start of intra-Afghan talks was delayed for almost six months as they hinged on a mutual prisoner release between the Afghan government and the Taliban. On 12 September 2020, the last six prisoners were finally released from Kabul and talks began in Doha. However, a compromise between the two opposing parties will be hard to achieve, not least as several challenges remain.

Opposing Visions

First, while both sides have emphasised their earnestness in the negotiations, the two parties' visions for the country's future differ profoundly. Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation and leader of the Afghan government's delegation in Doha,

emphasised that democratic values and specifically human and women's rights were to be preserved, but the Taliban may have other ideas. During their time in government between 1996 and 2001, they implemented an ultra-radical Islamic theocracy. Although the movement has come a long way since and toned down on several of its policies, they remain committed to what they call a 'true Islamic system'. The Taliban emphasised that this Islamic system should be 'inclusive', but the group has yet to outline what this means and where they are ready to compromise.

Moreover, as I have argued in a recent paper, neither of the two visions necessarily correspond with the views of large parts of Afghanistan's population. While the Taliban's harsh interpretation of sharia law contradicts traditional Afghan values and beliefs, the Western democratic values introduced to the country in 2001 by the international community have equally failed to gain a strong foothold in the country's rural areas. Reaching a compromise which satisfies the two delegations and a majority of the population will prove a difficult endeavour.

Continuing Violence

Second, the talks happen in a context of ongoing and increasing violence. As the talks began, the government was pushing

for an immediate ceasefire. However, the Taliban have refused to agree to a ceasefire prior to substantive discussions. Indeed, the military successes of the armed group are arguably its biggest asset in the talks to come.

The Taliban already control large strides of the country and openly contest two-thirds, and its military success and the ongoing violence puts pressure on the Kabul negotiation team. Every attack signals the failure of the Afghan government to protect its citizens and demonstrates the Taliban's power. Conversely, a ceasefire would not only grant the Afghan government a political success but also give the Afghan army a much-needed pause during which the Taliban fighters might lose their momentum on the battlefield. Both delegations have said to not let their negotiations be disturbed by outside events but the staggering death toll of up to fifty casualties per day might likely disrupt the talks eventually.

Moreover, the increase in violence from the Taliban's side puts the group's commitment to the negotiations into doubt. While they might simply try to increase their leverage at the negotiations, the Taliban could also seek to be militarily ready when the talks go ill – or once the US has fully withdrawn by March 2021. After all, the US has kept the withdrawal ... **P3**

Iran's Zarif...

against humanity."

A number of dual nationality citizens, including British-Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and French-Iranian Fariba Adelkhah, are imprisoned in Iran on charges of working against Iranian national security.

European countries claim they are being arbitrarily held, often under harsh conditions without justification. Iran does not recognise dual nationality status.

In his speech, the Iranian foreign minister also referred to the assassination of top general Qassem Soleimani in Iraq by a US drone strike in early January.

"You say you destroyed Daesh, but you martyred Daesh enemy number one with savagery and abjection," Zarif said in reference to the ISIL (ISIS) armed group.

Zarif's remarks come days after foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh also took aim at the E3

for summoning Iranian ambassadors, branding the move a targeted attempt at smearing Iran's human rights record.

"We believe that politicking and selective actions by the US and a number of European governments has damaged human rights the most," he said.

Khatibzadeh said the E3 move amounts to meddling in Iranian affairs, adding Iran finds it strange that Europe has "not only had a reaction toward the egregious violation of human rights of the Iranian nations by the anti-human 'maximum pressure' policy of the US and its cruel and anti-human sanctions, but are also practically enabling it and are party to it through their inaction".

On Saturday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani accused the US of "savagery" in reference to its harsh campaign of unilateral sanctions that have hugely affected the Iranian economy.

World Bank Approves \$100M Grant for Afghan Financial Sector

The World Bank Board of Executive Directors on Monday approved a \$100 million grant "to help Afghanistan stabilize its financial sector and support small enterprises as the country strives to spur its recovery from COVID-19," the organization said in a press release.

The source of the funding is the "International Development Association the Strengthening Afghanistan's Financial Intermediation (SAFI) project," said the statement, which "will enhance capacity of Afghanistan's central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), for financial system regulation and supervision, including by strengthening deposit insurance, financial infrastructure (e.g. public credit registry and collateral registry) and modernizing DAB's information technology."

The objective, according to the statement, is to "strengthen financial system stability and facilitate financial intermediation."

The project is intended to "also help the Ministry of Finance facilitate access to finance for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), including women owned and/or operated businesses, through risk-sharing, matching grants, and technical assistance."

"More than half of Afghanistan's MSMEs are financially constrained due to a weak economy, COVID-19 lockdowns, insecurity, and the political transition," said the World Bank statement.

"As Afghanistan recovers from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening its financial sector is key to accelerating



the recovery," said Henry Kerali, World Bank Country Director for Afghanistan. "This new financial assistance will enable Da Afghanistan Bank to strengthen its capacity to maintain financial sector stability. It will also support the financial

institutions in expanding lending to MSMEs, in a sustainable way and facilitate temporary provision of matching grants to small and medium enterprises to retrofit and retool their businesses in response to impacts of COVID-19."

Time to Move Past...

He also said that Afghans do not want a terrorist footprint in their country or to allow any entity to pose a threat to any other nation.

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to pay a high price because of terrorism, he said, adding that there are groups working as spoilers of the peace process.

Referring to the ongoing peace talks with the Taliban in Doha, Abdullah said they had been urged to cease the war and seize this opportunity for peace.

"These days history will be shaped. It was a good start. We have asked our delegation, President Ghani and myself, to be patient, to be ready to make compromise and to not miss any opportunity because conditions may evolve and that [failure] will haunt us."

He thanked Pakistan for their efforts and for hosting millions of Afghan refugees over the past four decades.

"We want our immigrants to return to their country voluntarily, with dignity and with new hope."

At the same event, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi emphasized his country's support for the peace negotiations and said, "A realization has evolved over the years that there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict. This voice, often not heard, has finally been heard. Today there is recognition of a negotiated political settlement is the only and best way forward."

He said Islamabad respects Afghanistan's decisions.

"We do not want to meddle in your [Afghanistan's] internal affairs. We respect your sovereignty, your independence and your territorial integrity."

He added, "Whatever consensus evolves from your dialogue and your negotiations, we as the people of Pakistan will accept the will of the people of Afghanistan... Afghans and only Afghans can determine the future of Afghanistan."

"To bring the Taliban to the negotiating table was not easy, but it happened. Reaching an understanding was not easy, but it happened," Qureshi said. He also assured Kabul of Pakistan's "complete support."

He said Pakistan's peace was linked with Afghanistan's peace and stability, and also of the entire region.

He said there had been "a paradigm shift" and Pakistan wants to be "friend, and not master" of Afghanistan.

He said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani will visit Pakistan soon.

opinions polls among Afghans. Exchanges between the two countries have deepened, with frequent personnel exchanges.

Third, China and Afghanistan remain steadfast in strengthening economic and trade exchanges and jointly exploring BRI cooperation. Since the two countries signed the memorandum of understanding on jointly building the BRI in 2016, their exchanges in the political, economic and cultural fields have thrived. Direct freight trains and direct flights between Urumqi and Kabul have greatly facilitated our economic and trade exchanges. The export of Afghan pine nuts to China has increased the income of Afghan farmers and businessmen and given Chinese consumers the gourmet's luck. Afghan businessmen told me that a lot of Afghanistan's foreign trade is related to China, and more than 300 Afghan

companies and over 700 Afghan businessmen stay in China for business.

The past 65 years of China-Afghanistan relations have been fruitful and gratifying. Looking into the future, we have great expectations.

We expect closer cooperation between our two countries to bring peace, economic and social prosperity to Afghanistan. China is ready to take an active part in Afghan economic development in the post-peace era. Within the BRI framework, China will help Afghanistan to fully tap its geographic advantage as the heart of Asia and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

We expect strengthened coordination for the two countries to move out of the shadow of COVID-19. We are making steady progress towards delivering the sixth batch of pandemic response supplies to Afghanistan. We are also pushing for the opening of 'fast track' for

personnel exchanges and 'green channel' for trade in goods as soon as possible, and expanding bilateral trade and personnel exchanges.

We expect the friendship between our two peoples to deepen and be carried on from generation to generation. We look forward to further promoting exchanges between the two governments, parliaments, think tanks, media organizations, youth and women so as to enhance mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples.

The over 2,000 years of exchanges between China and Afghanistan have fully demonstrated that the two countries are indeed good neighbors, brothers, friends and partners who have mutual affinity and share weal and woe. Let us join hands to create an even better future for bilateral relations and build a community of shared future for mankind.

The Challenges...

deadline practically unconditional except for the one condition that the Taliban deny a safe haven to terrorist organisations.

Internal Divisions

Finally, both delegations will face internal challenges of their own when proceeding with the negotiations. Ever since the contested presidential elections in September 2019, the Afghan government has been unstable. While initially both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah declared themselves president, by May 2020 a power-sharing agreement was found. Nevertheless, internal divisions remain high, threatening a unified stance in the peace negotiations. Moreover, the government lacks full control of many districts, ceding it to local strongmen and warlords. However, it remains questionable to what extent

these local pockets of power would accept a deal negotiated by the Afghan government.

The Taliban have equal reason to worry about internal unity. While the implementation of the 7-day ceasefire in February 2020 has shown that the Taliban can control their fighters, the group is far from a centralised movement. Instead, it is organised into many local cells, led by military commanders with their own policies and local customs. Parts of the Taliban have refused to accept the US-Taliban agreement, and whatever the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks, not all Taliban will agree with the result. However, the appointment of Mawlawi Haqqani, a respected Islamic scholar and leader of the Taliban's court system, as head of the Taliban delegation suggests that the leadership is aware of this problem and will

act carefully not to alienate its fighters.

The Art of the Deal

The peace talks are a unique opportunity for Afghanistan to find a lasting agreement to end almost half a century of war that has ravaged the country and cost tens of thousands of lives. But finding a compromise will prove a difficult task for both sides, and even then, its successful implementation is far from guaranteed. Finally, things might also hinge on the US presidential election. Although President Trump's current policy of unconditional withdrawal has been criticised, it undoubtedly has enabled the Taliban to finally engage in meaningful negotiations without devaluing their year-long fight. It remains to be seen whether the next US president seeks to re-negotiate the US-Taliban agreement or continues to withdraw from the country by March 2021.

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Iran's Zarif slams Europe and US for human rights scrutiny

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has made fiery remarks in what seems to be a direct jab at Europe and the United States for pressuring Iran on purported human rights abuses.

Last week, the United Kingdom, France and Germany, together known as the E3, summoned Iranian ambassadors to their countries in a coordinated diplomatic protest of Iran's treatment of dual nationality and political prisoners.

Shortly after, Germany issued a critical statement on Iran to the United Nations Human Rights Council of behalf of 47 countries, while UN rights experts reportedly demanded the unconditional release of imprisoned prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh.

On Monday, the last day of the week in which Iran annually commemorates the sacrifices made during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War that ended

with UN mediation in 1988, the Iranian foreign minister tore into those European powers.

"You assisted Saddam with \$75bn ... and now you make claims?" he said during a ceremony to commemorate those who laid down their lives during the 1980-1988 war, which began when a then-Western-backed Saddam Hussein invaded Iran.

Zarif continued by saying the Iraqi dictator's backers gave him aircraft and chemical weapons to topple the newly formed nation.

"Chemical weapons from Germany and Netherlands were given to Saddam to use against the Iranian people," the diplomat said, asking: "And now you claim to be civilised?"

"History has not forgotten your crimes. The Iranian people will not forget these crimes. You participated in crimes against the Iranian nation and now you claim of [championing] human rights? You committed crimes ... P2



A look at the world

Germany calls on Armenia, Azerbaijan to end fighting

Germany on Tuesday called for an immediate cease-fire between Azerbaijan and Armenia, amid the heaviest clashes in years in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose country currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, spoke on the phone with presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia on the recently escalated conflict, and called for a peaceful solution, the government spokesman said on Twitter. "The Chancellor has underlined the urgent need for an immediate cease-fire and return to the negotiation table," Steffen Seibert said, adding that Germany supports diplomatic efforts of OSCE Minsk Group.

"The neighboring countries should contribute to a peaceful solution," he added. Relations



between Azerbaijan and Armenia have been tense since 1991 when the Armenian military occupied the Upper Karabakh, or Nagorno-Karabakh region, an internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan. The conflict between the two former Soviet countries flared up on Sunday when Armenian forces targeted Azerbaijani civilian settlements and military positions. Heavy fighting was reported on the Armenian-Azerbaijani front-line throughout the night, according to the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry on early Tuesday. In a statement, the ministry said Armenian forces attempted to take back the positions they lost in the Fuzuli-Jabrayil and Agdere-Terter border regions. However, retaliatory firing from the Azerbaijani troops "foiled their attempt." Some 20% of Azerbaijan's territory, including the Upper Karabakh, or Nagorno-Karabakh region, has remained under illegal occupation by Armenia for roughly three decades. Four UN Security Council and two UN General Assembly resolutions as well as decisions by many international organizations refer to this fact and demand the withdrawal of Armenia's occupying forces from Upper Karabakh and seven adjacent occupied regions of Azerbaijan. The occupied Upper Karabakh region includes the towns of Shusha, Khankendi, Khojaly, Asgaran, Khojavand, Aghdara and Hadrut. The seven other occupied regions of Azerbaijan are the districts surrounding the Upper Karabakh area, including Lachin, Kalbajar, Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Qubadli and Zangilan.

UAE to launch spacecraft to moon in 2024, tweets PM



The prime minister and vice president of the United Arab Emirates has said his country plans to send an unmanned spacecraft to the moon in 2024.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who is also the ruler of Dubai emirate, made the announcement on Twitter on Tuesday.

"It will be an Emirati-made lunar rover that will land on the surface of the moon in 2024 in areas that have not been explored previously by human missions," he wrote on Twitter.

He said the rover would be named Rashid after his late father, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum.

If successful in 2024, the UAE could become the fourth nation to land a spacecraft on the moon after the United States, the former Soviet Union and China.

India, Israel and Japan have tried but failed in landing a spacecraft on the moon.

In his tweet, Sheikh Mohammed said participating in the moon exploration is "part of the UAE's space strategy" to build new knowledge capabilities and advance the country's "scientific, technical and research environment".

The lunar rover will be built "100 percent" on the state's land and by Emirati engineers, he added.

Sheikh Mohammed's announcement came after the UAE launched a Mars probe earlier this year.

In July, the UAE's Amal (Hope) probe was launched from Japan, marking the Arab world's first interplanetary mission.

Amal is set to reach Mars in February 2021, the year the oil-rich Gulf state celebrates 50 years of its formation.

In September that year, Amal will start transmitting Martian atmospheric data, which will be made available to the international scientific community, officials said.

Last year, the UAE sent its first astronaut to the International Space Station. The country has also set a goal to build a human colony on Mars by 2117.

Macron promises Belarus mediation but Putin slams 'pressure'

French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday promised to help with mediation in the political crisis in Belarus, but Russia's Vladimir Putin lashed out against "unprecedented external pressure."

Macron spoke during a visit to Lithuania after meeting with Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya that was being seen as a major show of support for the activist.

"We will do our best as Europeans to help mediate and we will come back to OSCE mediation in order to progress," Macron told reporters, referring to an offer from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

"Our objective is for this mediation to begin



in the next few days or weeks," Macron said.

"The aim is a peaceful transition, the release of people who are in prison for their political opinions and the holding of free elections under international observation," he said.

Belarus has been in upheaval since an August 9 presidential election in which Tikhonovskaya claimed victory against the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994.

Tikhonovskaya fled to Lithuania in the aftermath of the election as mass protests in the streets of the former Soviet republic were met with a crackdown in which thousands were arrested.

Meanwhile, Putin said in televised remarks that Belarus is in a "difficult situation" and facing "unprecedented external pressure." Putin has promised to provide Lukashenko with security assistance if the political crisis worsens and gave Belarus a loan of 1.5 billion U.S. dollars.

Lukashenko has accused various Western countries and NATO of attempting to destabilize his country or support the protest movement.

Addressing a forum on the Belarusian and Russian regions, the Kremlin chief said that Moscow was ready to stand by Minsk, describing ties as "timeless and all-weather."



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