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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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## Afghan acting-minister calls for protection of Afghan media workers

Tahir Zahir, the acting minister of information and culture Saturday called on the international community for ensuring a safer environment for Afghan media workers.

Addressing a conference about targeted attacks on journalists and media workers, Zahir stated that the ministry would send a letter to the international community in this regard.

"We are sending a letter of appeal to the EU and the UN Mission in Afghanistan to put pressure on the other sides and the terrorist groups behind the killings of journalists to stop killing journalists," Zahir told the event.

Zahir also called on the government to protect journalists and media workers.

"Ensuring the security of all citizens, especially the security of journalists, is the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior. The expectation is that ... P2



## Afghanistan Olympic Committee optimistic about Tokyo 2020

Afghanistan National Olympic Committee on Saturday expressed its hope for the coming Tokyo Olympics game ahead in July.

"We are working hard to have our talented athletes on the field to once again honor Afghanistan with an Olympic medal," the committee said in a tweet.

This comes after Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Friday that the delayed Tokyo Olympics would go ahead in July 2021.

"The Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games will be held this summer," Suga said in a written statement for the New Year, describing the event as a symbol of world unity.

"We will make steady preparations to realize a safe and secure tournament," Suga added.

Japan's Emperor Naruhito appealed to the public to work together through the pandemic in a videotaped New Year's Day address to the nation released on Friday. Wionews reported.

"I am wishing from my heart that everyone can move forward during ... P3

# Afghan republic's negotiator backs interim government as way forward



A negotiator of Afghan republic team has said that forming an interim government is inevitable in making peace with the Taliban.

Speaking at a roundtable discussion on the first round of peace talks and its future prospects Mansoor said the Taliban are eager to rule but have no operational plans to govern. The discussion was organized by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS).

Mansoor, and Hossain Ramouz, a university lecturer, were speakers at the session.

Mansoor said "we have to move towards an interim government while maintaining the current" system adding that preserving the current achievements and values of the past 20 years is a must.

"By preserving the framework of the system and human values, we have to move towards an interim

government, and the structure of this government must be a Chancellery," Mansoor said.

According to him, Taliban are not a political group, but they want power. "The mentality of the Taliban has not changed at all, the Taliban still has a militaristic sense and thinks they can achieve power through war."

Ramouz said that the version of Sharia introduced by the Taliban would not be a good development

model.

"The Taliban must abandon totalitarianism, because it is not possible, and both negotiators must agree to merge the republic and the Emirate, but we need to first have a clear definition of the Taliban's Emirate," Ramouz said.

Meanwhile, referring to the challenges the negotiating team faced in the peace talks with Taliban Mansoor said: "The Taliban does not accept anything called a republic or a government. The Taliban want to launch a religious game (Shia and Sunni)."

Mansoor also said that the Taliban think the women in the government's negotiating team are only symbolic.

"Issues about women cannot be just on paper, women must be at the table. The Taliban think the women in the government's negotiating team are symbolic, but they [women] have shown that they are taking strong steps to defend their rights and humanity," Mansoor said. Mansoor also blamed the Taliban for the recent attacks on journalists. "There is no doubt that the Taliban are involved in the recent killing and assassination of journalists," Mansoor added.

## Afghan Investor to Open Pine Nut Processing Firm in Paktia

A pine nut processing factory is under construction in the eastern province of Paktia with the capacity of processing 60,000 tons of pine nut a year, local officials said.

The firm will create more than 1,000 jobs, according to the Chamber of Commerce and Investment in Paktia. The chamber officials said that over \$7 million will be invested in the firm. The packaging will be based on international norms.

"The firm will provide the ground for improvement in the export of pine nuts to international markets and there is a need for government's ... P3



## Qatar Tries to Broker Ceasefire Between Afghan Gov't-Taliban

As the second round of intra-Afghan talks approaches, the Presidential Palace announced that the Emir of Qatar had promised in a telephone conversation with President Ghani that he will try to make grounds for a ceasefire in Afghanistan.

The Presidential Palace said in a statement that President Ghani had a telephone conversation with the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, on Saturday.

Arg said that during the telephone call, the two sides discussed the Afghan peace process and stressed the need for an immediate ceasefire. According to a statement, the Afghan government has also promised to work for a ceasefire in the country. Arg stressed that President Ghani and the Emir of Qatar also discussed the strengthening and expansion of relations and cooperation, especially the development of trade relations between the two countries.



The negotiating team will leave for Qatar in the next two days

In the meantime, Hafiz Mansour, a member of the Afghan negotiating team, said at a meeting in Kabul today that the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will leave for Doha on Monday to advance the second round of talks. According to him, the Taliban have no plans to govern, but their hunger

for power and narrow-minded spirit has not changed.

"The two main challenges we faced in the peace talks were that the Taliban did not accept anything called the republic and the government," he said. "The Taliban wanted to launch a religious game (Shia and Sunni)."

Mansour added that he believes that the Afghan ... P2

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China

## Press Conference by Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang-related Issues in Beijing

.....Seeking for jobs outside hometown for those of my kind is nothing like the forced labors as some foreigners said. Does it need to be forced that we villagers work for more salaries, learn more skills and change our lives with our own hands? Would those foreigners give money to us if we did not go out for work? They also said that our freedom is restrained and work with low pay, these are all totally nonsense. They did not come to visit our factory, nor did they talk with us face-to-face to know the truth. They slander us because they don't actually want us to live a good and happy life. I would like to say that nobody can abridge us of the rights to pursue happiness.

My name is Paziliya Tursun, 23 years old and from Wushi County, Aksu Prefecture.

My father passed away years ago, my mother falls ill for long time, and my little brother needs to go to school. Our relatives help to manage the farmland of my family. We don't have any stable income. So, in order to help my family out, I came to a local company in Aksu City introduced by friends.

At first, I was worried that I might not be able to adapt myself to the work and life at the company. But soon, I found my concerns were unnecessary. At the beginning, I wasn't familiar with my work, but after receiving targeted training in the company, my skills were improved step by step. Meanwhile, I consulted with other co-workers frequently at spare time, who all taught me hand by hand like brothers and sisters. I became a skillful worker and core member within one year, and then was promoted to a group head. My salary has increased from over 3000 RMB to more than 5000 RMB. I am quite satisfied with my current job, not only because of salary, but also the good living conditions the company

has offered.

I live in a four-bed dormitory, with all necessary facilities including AC, TV, washing machine, and WIFI provided. We do a lot of online entertainment and shopping through smart phones, which makes our life more colorful. In our halal food restaurant, Uygur chefs cook ethnic specialty food every day, and my favorite is the freshly-baked Naan bread, which reminds me the taste of Naan my father made in my childhood. At weekends, I usually go out with my colleagues for shopping for new clothes and dining.

The company hosts gatherings at the festivals of Ramadan and Kurban Festival. At the Kurban party last year, I sang a nice song named a joyful dance and performed Uygur traditional dance. During the holidays, I took my mother to bazaar to buy new clothes, gave birthday gift to my brother. I give my mother living allowances that I saved from salary to solve the difficulties at home, and I feel fulfilled. My younger sister graduated in June 2019, and joined the same company on my advice. Now both of us can earn over 8000 RMB monthly and my mother is very happy and proud of us, and she says that we are capable and considerate. We have free and happy lives, for that both of us are quite satisfied.

Now, let's watch a short video showing some Uygur workers' daily lives and works.

RIA Novosti: Western media reported a lot on Uygur-related "forced labor" and "compulsory sterilization". What is your comment on this? Is there any more introduction on the specific conditions of Uygur people's work and family life?

Ilijan Anayat: We have already refuted the lies on "forced labor" and introduced facts about laboring and employment in Xinjiang, so I don't

want to repeat it again. When it comes to "forced sterilization" in Xinjiang, it is a groundless fallacy by anti-China forces, meaning to smear China.

China's Family Planning Policy was rolled out from China's central and eastern regions to border areas, from urban areas to rural areas, from Hans to ethnic minorities, giving ethnic minorities differentiated yet loose policies as opposed to that on Hans. From 1975, Family Planning Policy was implemented in Xinjiang first in such predominantly Han populated cities like Urumqi. Provisional Regulations on Several Issues of Family Planning Policy was published in 1981, and the implementation started from the Han people. Measures on Family Planning of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region was published in 1992, giving ethnic minorities more loose policies compared to Hans, to be specific, urban Han couples could have only one child whereas rural Han couples could have two; urban ethnic minorities can have two children whereas those in rural areas can have three. In 2017, Xinjiang revised its population and family planning regulations, granting the same policy to all ethnic groups: urban couples can have two children, rural couples can have three. As can be seen, family planning policy was implemented towards ethnic minorities 17 years later than Hans, and still with more flexibility compared to China's other provinces.

Some anti-China forces' reports of "forcing ethnic minority women to have contraceptive rings implantation, female legation or even induced abortion" are scandalous remarks with malicious purpose. In Xinjiang, illegal medical practices like late pregnancy induced labor, forced birth control and forced pregnancy tests are banned. People of all ethnic



groups are free to choose whether or not and how to practice contraception; no organization or individual may intervene.

Xinjiang is witnessing the most prosperous development period in history with people of all ethnic groups living in content, happiness and harmony. Xinjiang's population has increased steadily. From 2010 to 2018, the population of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang increased from 12.9859 million to 15.8608 million, an increase of 2.8749 million, or 22.14%, higher than the increase of total population of the region, which was 13.99%; the Uygur population increased from 10.1715 million to 12.7184 million, an increase of 2.5469 million, or 25.04%; The growth rate of the Uygur population is not only higher than that of the in Xinjiang, but also higher than other ethnic minorities, especially than Han population, which was only 2%.

As for the work and life conditions of Uygurs, much introduction has been earlier, and I don't want to waste your time by repetition. But you are welcomed to visit Uygur families here in Xinjiang to learn and understand more about their life and work.

ANTARA News Agency: 1) Given the situation in Xinjiang recently more stable, would the security of mosque and believers be tightened? 2) Are

there any plan to meet demands Muslim Uygur have to learn Islamic teaching, the Koran and Hadith?

Obulhasan Tursunniyaz ,Hatip of Jamah Mosque in Hotan Prefecture: To the first question, Xinjiang was exposed to sever threats of extremism and violent terrorist attacks before 2016. The terrorists attacked mosques and Islamic believers as well, regardless of ethnicity and religion. We were always on tenterhooks while walking on the street since we didn't know when and where we would be caught by terror attacks. But there have been no violent, terrorist attacks in Xinjiang over recent four years or so thanks to cracking down the terrorism crimes with tough measures; social order has been restored and stabilized, we are feeling safer and more convenient now. We all support the measures taken by governments from bottom of our hearts.

On your second question. We, Uygur Muslims, can learn religious knowledge in the following 4 ways: firstly, we learn religious knowledge from religious personnel in Mosque. For instance, I teach Muslim prayers Koran, Hadith and other religious manners, as well as the traditions in Islam of loving the country and the religion. Secondly, we could learn at religious institutes. We have a Xinjiang Islamic Institute in Urumqi ... **P3**

By Jonathan Schroden

### Afghanistan Will Be the Biden Administration's First Foreign Policy Crisis

When President Trump entered the White House in 2016—and when President Obama did the same, eight years' prior—the situation in Afghanistan was heading in the wrong direction. Unfortunately, the same will be true again for President-elect Biden. The most recent quarterly report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction noted that insurgent attacks from July through September were up 50 percent from the previous quarter and well above seasonal averages. These statements came after its previous quarterly report noted that such attacks from April through June were already "well above historic norms." While the number of civilian casualties thus far in 2020 has been lower than in the past few years, October was the deadliest month for civilians in Afghanistan since September 2019. The toll on Afghanistan's security forces has been far greater, however, with more than 10,000 casualties suffered from March through July. As part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement signed in late February, the Taliban

promised to cease attacks against major population areas. In recent months, however, the group has been testing the limits of this promise—for example, in its attacks surrounding Lashkar Gah. It has also expanded violence across the majority of Afghanistan's provinces and increased attacks against Afghan security force installations. The Taliban have been consolidating their positions in Afghanistan's rural areas and using them to threaten and capture the areas surrounding the country's cities in what increasingly looks like a "slow-creeping siege."

The Trump administration has exacerbated these trends by withdrawing U.S. troops without reciprocal actions by the Taliban, first from 8,600 to 4,500, and more recently via Trump's rash decision to cut troops to 2,500 by the inauguration. But it will also hand off to the Biden administration an opportunity that didn't exist previously. Intra-Afghan negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, which began in September, represent the

best chance Afghans have had since the Bonn Conference of 2001 to end the cycle of war that has plagued the country for more than 40 years. Despite their initial promise, it took the negotiating teams almost three months to agree on the rules for conducting these talks, and the two sides are now on a 20-day break to discuss each other's proposals for the agenda of negotiations. These delays, combined with horrific attacks by the Islamic State (such as the recent one at Kabul University) and the Taliban's nationwide campaign, have diminished hopes that the talks will lead to reductions in violence and suffering of the Afghan people.

President-elect Biden will thus walk into office with a war that is eroding militarily and crawling diplomatically—and he will face a critical decision almost immediately. Per the terms of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States committed to removing all of its troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021—just over three months after Biden takes office. Given this situation, what should the... **P3**

### Afghan acting...

the public space will be secure," Zahir added.

Zahir also said that the negotiators of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan should inform the other side [apparently he means the Taliban] to stop targeting journalists.

"The Ministry of Peace must warn the other side whether or not to take responsibility for attacking the journalists, they [Taliban] are responsible," Zahir said.

Adil, a journalist, was gunned down in a targeted attack on Friday in Ghor province.

However, Adil's assassination is the latest in a string of targeted killings of media workers, civil society activists, and civil servants who have been systematically

killed over the past few months.

In just two months, five journalists have been killed in the country in what is perceived as a ploy to silence the free media in the country.

No group has claimed responsibility for any of the killings, and while the Taliban reject claims of any involvement, many officials and organizations have blamed the group for this new "scare tactic."

Meanwhile, the French Embassy in Kabul a day after the assassination of Adil stated: "Those who sustain a high level of violence in the country hold a responsibility in these killings. The Taliban must demonstrate their will to reach peace through dialogue. They must agree to a ceasefire."

### Qatar Tries to...

negotiating team needs not only religious scholars but also non-religious scholars, experienced officers and others such as lawyers.

"The Taliban are not a religious movement because they are not ready for a religious debate in any field, and their war has no religious justification and is not defensible," he said, noting that the Taliban leaders and

their muftis have no religious legitimacy in their actions.

Hafiz Mansour stressed that there are differences of opinion between the government and the Reconciliation Council that should be resolved as soon as possible.

According to him, the Supreme National Reconciliation Council should establish a national consensus in Afghanistan and considers all groups.

# Pakistani Officials ask Afghan Investors to Become Part of CPEC

Pakistani National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaisar has asked the Afghan investors to become part of China Pakistan Economic Corridor, besides investing in Rashakai Special Economic Zone to usher its benefits.

The conclusion of Trade Agreements between Pakistan and Afghanistan would not only boost economic activity on both sides, but eventually help fighting the scourges of poverty and instability, the speaker said in a meeting with Afghan Minister for Commerce and Industries Nisar Ahmad Ghoryani.

According to Pakistan's media, Asad Qaisar observed that Pakistan and Afghanistan are strategically



significant trading partners however, trade between the two countries gradually declined due to trade barriers and lack of trade

facilitation from either side. He said that after eliminating trade barriers along with facilitating traders had not only enhanced the

trade volume between Pakistan and Afghanistan but was also greatly contributing to poverty eradication and social uplift

### Press Conference...

and it has eight branches in Ili, Changji, Urumqi, Turpan, Aksu, Kizilsu, Kashgar and Hotan prefectures. Any eligible and qualified Muslim may apply for the institute for higher Islamic study; Thirdly, we learn through reading religious classics. Xinjiang Islamic Religious Affairs Steering Committee (XIRASC) has translated and published the religious classics like Koran, Sahih al-Bukhari in Chinese, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kirgiz; XIRASC has also published Waez's Speeches, Xinjiang Islamic Steering Guidelines for religious personnel and believers to study; Fourthly, we learn through media like professional magazines and websites. Religious knowledge is also available on the website of Chinese Islamic Association and Chinese Muslims magazine. Bangladesh Post: Almost every day we can see propaganda reports on Xinjiang. Would you like to explain if you are going to have counter measures to debunk the propaganda? I recently noticed that China's media are trying to show the world natural beauty and development of Xinjiang, but as a Muslim, I can understand that Muslims around the world want to know if the propaganda reports are true or not. Muslim are interested in watching the Mosques were not destroyed and people are detained in so-called concentration camps. So do you have any plans to show the world those things about what fake news is being disseminated. **Continue**

### Afghan Investor...

support to this sector," said Nasir, head of the chamber. "Investment in this sector will create more jobs and this will lead to the prosperity of the people," said Sahib Khan Totakhil, an investor. Figures by the Ministry of Agriculture show that Afghanistan produces around 20,000 metric tons of pine nut a year, especially in Paktia, Khost, and Paktika provinces.

### Afghanistan Olympic...

this hard time by supporting and helping one another," he said in the address, which was released in place of an annual public appearance by the imperial family during the New Year holidays.

The event was canceled this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Afghanistan Will...

Biden administration do? I'll offer four broad suggestions. First, play for time. The same part of the U.S.-Taliban deal that requires the full withdrawal of U.S. troops contains the clause "with the commitment and action on the obligations" of the Taliban under the terms of the agreement. Those terms include not cooperating with or hosting individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies—but the head of al-Qaeda's franchise in South Asia was recently killed in southern Helmand in a Taliban compound. The agreement also includes several "secret annexes," which statements by U.S. officials have indicated include clauses about where and how the Taliban are allowed to use violence in the context of its "fight and talk" strategy. The repeated statements by Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Austin Miller, that the Taliban are violating the "spirit of the agreement" by continuing to increase violence in the areas surrounding the country's cities make clear that the U.S. does not believe the Taliban are meeting their commitments under the deal. The Biden team should thus prepare a compelling case that the group is not meeting its commitments and that the timeline for completing the withdrawal of all U.S. troops will be paused until such time as the Taliban demonstrate their intent to comply with the deal fully. Second, the Biden team should let the Taliban know that it has limited patience for the group to demonstrate this intent. Since the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, Afghanistan's security forces have either been in an "active defense" or "limited offense" posture and the United States has conducted airstrikes only when necessary to defend Afghan army or police positions from Taliban attacks. If the Taliban refuse to reduce violence and move toward compliance with the deal, the Biden administration should begin a graduated—and clearly communicated—set of steps to

indicate to the Taliban where the red lines are for its violent activities. These steps should begin with more aggressive actions by Afghanistan's security forces, starting with its special operations forces and escalating to expanded offensive actions by its army and air force, if necessary. The Taliban have consistently pushed the limits of what the United States will tolerate since the signing of the agreement and have not run into any hard lines from the Trump administration. The Biden team needs to change that dynamic. Third, the Biden White House should begin preparing for counterterrorism options that do not rely on a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Biden has articulated a "difference between large-scale, open-ended deployments of tens of thousands of American combat troops, which must end, and using a few hundred Special Forces soldiers and intelligence assets to support local partners against a common enemy." Yet, there is significant debate as to whether leaving a small number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to do this is potentially feasible or impossible relative to the terms of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. Given this uncertainty, the Biden team should develop a range of options for continuing disruption activities against the likes of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Afghanistan. These options should, at a minimum, include a U.S. advisory mission to Afghan counterterrorism forces in the country (overt or clandestine); a U.S.-led mission (overt or clandestine) in an adjacent country (Pakistan or a Central Asian state); clandestine support to proxy groups in Afghanistan; and a dedicated offshore platform in the Indian Ocean. I've listed these options in order of likely effectiveness, as some of them are decidedly less than optimal, but having a set of hedging options would provide the Biden White House greater freedom of action going forward. Fourth, the Biden administration should demand a series of reforms of Afghanistan's security forces. Part of the reason the


Taliban have been emboldened is that they see the United States providing less support to the Afghan army and police, and they believe these forces will collapse if and when the United States leaves the country. To counteract that perception and create leverage for the Afghan government in the negotiations, shoring up the country's security forces is paramount. These reforms should include at least three elements. First, optimization of the Afghan Air Force, which is far too expensive for Afghanistan to sustain and, with a dozen different airframes, is too complex as well. Second, optimization of the Afghan Army, which will have to be simplified to reduce its costs and complexity. Just over a year ago, I attended a Future Force Conference in Kabul that examined a number of options to do this. One option is to consolidate the army's structure, for example, by reducing the number of corps headquarters and other administrative layers. Another option is to thin the army's inventory of vehicles, which are expensive to support and contribute greatly to corruption in the form of massive fuel theft. The Biden team should build on that work and enable the army to shift its focus away from fruitless large-scale and reactive operations to enhanced static security of priority areas (for example, those surrounding major cities) that is tailored to the capabilities of the force. Third, the Afghan police desperately need reforms that move it away from a paramilitary model and toward a community policing model. Here, the United States and its NATO allies should leverage existing international police entities (for example, EUROPOL and INTERPOL) and previous lessons from their efforts to engage in substantive police reform efforts. None of these suggestions will be easy to implement, but they are nonetheless necessary to prevent a quick failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan—something the incoming Biden administration will be keen to avoid.

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# UN troubled by civilian deaths in Yemen's Hudaydah

The UN mission in Yemen on Saturday voiced concern over the death of civilians in a shelling in Yemen's western al-Hudaydah province. Five women were reportedly killed and seven others injured when a shell struck a wedding hall in al-Hawk district in the coastal province on Friday.

While the Yemeni army said the shell was fired by Houthi rebels, the insurgents accused government forces of being behind the attack. The mission "is troubled by reports of a number of civilian deaths and injuries as a result of shelling in Hudaydah's Al-Hawk district last night, amid other reported ceasefire violations," the UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement said on Twitter. "We condemn all breaches of the Hudaydah

Agreement and caution parties to avoid further igniting a tense situation that will inflict any additional toll on civilians," it said.

The Yemeni government and Iran-aligned Houthi rebels have reached a ceasefire in al-Hudaydah in late 2018 following UN-brokered talks in Sweden.

Al-Hudaydah city along with its seaport are held by the Houthi rebels, while the Yemeni army is controlling the city's outskirts.

Yemen has fallen into civil war in 2014 when Houthi rebels overran much of northern provinces, including the capital Sanaa. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the conflict in Yemen has so far claimed the lives of 233,000 people.



## A look at the world

### Top Chinese diplomat says relations with U.S. at 'new crossroads'

China's relationship with the United States has reached a "new crossroads" and could get back on the right track following a period of "unprecedented difficulty", Beijing's top diplomat Wang Yi has said.

Relations between the world's two biggest economies have come under increasing strain amid a series of disputes over trade, human rights and the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its latest move, the U.S. blacklisted dozens of Chinese companies it said had ties to the military.

Wang, China's state councilor and foreign minister, said on Saturday in a joint interview



with Xinhua news agency and other state media outlets that recent U.S. policies towards China had harmed the interests of both countries and brought huge dangers to the world.

But there was now an opportunity for the two sides to "open a new window of hope" and begin a new round of dialogue, he said. The election of Joe Biden as U.S. president has been widely expected to improve relations between Washington and Beijing after four years of escalating tensions under the administration of Donald Trump.

Last month, Wang said he hoped the election of Biden would allow Washington's China policy to "return to objectivity and rationality".

However, President-elect Biden, who will take office on January 20, has continued to criticize China for its "abuses" on trade and other issues.

Wang did not mention Trump or Biden by name, but he urged the U.S. to "respect the social system and development path" chosen by China, adding that if Washington "learns lessons", the conflicts between the two sides could be resolved.

### 10.4M children to face acute malnutrition in 2021: UN



An estimated 10.4 million children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, northeast Nigeria, the Central Sahel, and Yemen are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021, UNICEF said.

In a statement, the UN agency said that the countries or regions are experiencing dire humanitarian crises, and further more are struggling with intensifying food insecurity, a deadly pandemic of COVID-19 and - with the exception of the Central Sahel - experiencing a looming famine.

"For countries reeling from the consequences of conflicts, disasters and climate change, COVID-19 has turned a nutrition crisis into an imminent catastrophe," UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said.

"Families already struggling to feed their children and themselves are now on the brink of famine. We can't let them be the forgotten victims of 2020," Fore added.

The increase in acute malnutrition and food insecurity in household among children in Africa and Yemen is due to ongoing armed conflict and insecurity amid limited access to essential nutrition, water, sanitation, health care, and hygiene services, the statement said.

Furthermore, floods in some areas during 2020 have exacerbated the already considerable level of acute malnutrition among children. UNICEF said in South Sudan, an estimated 7.3 million people - 60% of South Sudan's population - are projected to be facing severe acute food insecurity in 2021, while an estimated 1.4 million children in the country are expected to experience acute malnutrition in 2021, what is regarded as the highest since 2013.

The number of children suffering from severe acute malnutrition is also expected to rise from estimated 292,000 children in 2020 to more than 313,000 children in 2021.

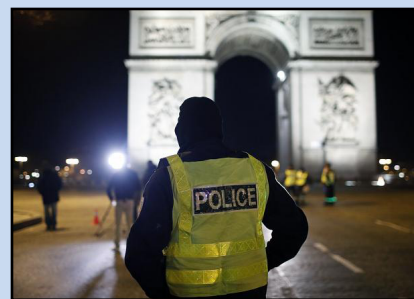
Also, in the DRC, an estimated 3.3 million children under the age of five are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021, including no less than 1 million children with severe acute malnutrition, according to the statement.

### Greece reintroduces strict lockdown as France lengthens nighttime curfew for millions

Greece's strict COVID-19 lockdown was extended on Saturday following a relaxation over the end of year festive period.

The one-week lockdown is to come into force on Sunday at 06:00 CET and end on January 11. During that time, "all activities and services that were gradually allowed before Christmas are suspended," government's spokesman Stelios Petsas said in a televised address.

A nighttime curfew running from 21:00 to 05:00 local time will be reintroduced and religious services, including "outdoor sanctification of water" for Epiphany, are banned. Schools will remain closed.



"New cases are still high and the pressure on the National Health System continues. Our hospitals continue to treat a large number of patients. Unfortunately, about 2,500 of our fellow citizens spent Christmas in COVID beds, while more than 400 are still in Intensive Care Units," Petsas said.

"This data require us to remain vigilant, to do everything we can to further reduce the spread of the (novel) coronavirus in our country," he added.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, more than 4,600 people have died in Greece and nearly 136,000 infections have been confirmed, according to the latest data from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

An earlier curfew is meanwhile coming into force in France's most impacted areas on Saturday.

Some 6 million people in the east of the country will now not be able to leave their houses come 18:00 CET and until 06:00. Elsewhere, the curfew remains set at 20:00 CET.

Figures released on Friday evening showed that just under 20,000 infections were confirmed across the country over the previous 24 hours. But authorities fear that the number could soon soar once more as people gathered for the holiday season.



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