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Ghani Says His Goal Is to Hand Power to His Elected Successor

President Ashraf Ghani says his basic goal is to hand power to his elected successor and through the will of the people, quelling recent rumors about the establishment of an interim government in the country as part of peace efforts.

Talking to CNN on Friday, President Ghani, who was joined by First Lady Rula Ghani, said the message of the second round of the peace negotiations in Doha "is can we agree on a goal that the international community and the region are agreed with us, namely "a sovereign, democratic, united Afghanistan at peace with itself and the region."

He added that if that goal becomes accepted, "then we can move forward." "If the objective of the Taliban is to dominate and give us the ...

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UN SG Appoints Mette Knudsen as New Deputy Special Rep. for Afghanistan

Mette Knudsen has been appointed today by the UN Secretary-General as his new Deputy Special Representative (Political) for Afghanistan in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

UNAMA in a press release on Friday said that Ms. Knudsen succeeds Ingrid Hayden of Australia, to whom the Secretary-General expresses his gratitude for her dedicated service.

"Ms. Knudsen, of Denmark, brings to the position over 28 years of professional experience in diplomacy, international cooperation and economic development. Most recently, she served as Ambassador of Denmark to Afghanistan," the press release said. According to UNAMA, Ms. Knudsen holds a Master's degree in Political Science from Aarhus University in Denmark and has a supplementary degree in Modern Greek language.

Air Pollution Kills 5,000 in Afghanistan in A Year: MoPH



As many as 5,000 people have lost their lives due to air pollution-related diseases in the country in 2020--2,900 of them due to respiratory diseases and 2,073 people due to heart diseases, according to figures by the Ministry of Public Health.

Air pollution remains a big

challenge for those living in cities, especially Kabul, where one government-owned hospital, the Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital, has over 100 patients on a daily basis who suffer from air pollution-related diseases, based on figures provided by doctors.

Doctors said air pollution is more

threatening than the war that takes the lives of nearly 3,000 civilians a year in the country.

"The air pollution must reduce so that we prevent the mortality rate of air pollution-related diseases," said Masooma Jafari, a spokeswoman for the Ministry of Public Health.

Zainab, 50, said she is suffering

from heart disease and is under treatment at Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital in Kabul for the last 10 days. She said doctors have told her that her disease is due to the use of coal and plastic for warming their house.

"I think my illness is due to inhaling the smoke of plastic and waste," said Zainab, a patient.

"I have asthma. My heart was healthy previously, but I am not feeling good now," said Simagul, a patient.

Doctors at Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital said that they have about 300 patients on a daily basis who are suffering from pollution-related diseases, including heart diseases and respiratory problems.

"Some patients have asthma that is intensified by other diseases. The mortality rate is high and it increases during winter," said Humayun Stanekzai, a doctor.

Khan Mohammad, a vendor in Kabul, said he faces trouble in breathing every winter as the use of coal and low-quality fuel by resident's increases.

The National Environmental Protecting Authority said ...

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Govt Says Diplomatic Efforts Begin for Success of Peace Process

As the talks on setting the agenda for the intra-Afghan talks begin in Doha, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) announced that it has launched a campaign to gain international support for the success of the peace process, the ongoing negotiations and the fulfillment of the Afghan people's demands.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Gran Hewad said in a video message on Saturday that Foreign Minister Haneef Atmar has started ...

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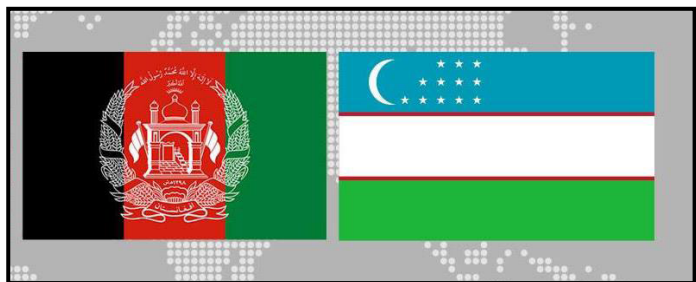


"This is a matter of life and death for Uzbekistan." Afghanistan's importance to Uzbekistan has been clarified

The closest ports in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to Uzbekistan pass through Afghanistan. If the Afghan transport corridor is built, transport costs for Uzbekistan will be reduced by more than 10 times, said Sodiq Safoev, First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan.

At the session of the International Press Club on December 30, 2020, Sodiq Safoev touched upon two important points for the development of relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. According to Safoev, these are security and economic policy issues.

"What is the significance of Afghanistan for Uzbekistan? First, of course, is the issue of security. Peace in Afghanistan, the fight against terrorist and extremist groups there, is a factor for us to



establish security on the territory of countries bordering Uzbekistan. The second most important issue is the creation of the Afghan transport corridor. We have said this many times, it is a matter of life and death for Uzbekistan.

Because the nearest to us are the Persian Gulf and seaports in the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan. Our President has been working very hard with large countries. It's hard to shake their heads, of course. If this corridor is built, the cost of

transport for us will be reduced by more than 10 times.

At the same time, up to 20% of our export-import operations are spent on transport. The corridor through Afghanistan, of course, will lead to a reduction in the cost of our domestic market," Safoev said. Without a doubt, the construction of transport corridors connecting Central Asia with the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf can serve to ensure stability and economic growth throughout the region.

Ghani Says...

peace of the grave, that will have very negative consequences," Ghani said. "My basic goal is to be able to hand power, through the will of the people, to my elected successor. This is crucial to enable us to both honor the sacrifice of our civilians, our activists, and others," Ghani said. "One thing needs to be clear; the Afghan society is not willing to go back and we're not a type of society that the Taliban-type approach of the past can be imposed on us. That was the peace of the graveyard. We want a positive peace where all of us together overcome our past, embrace each other and together rebuild an Afghanistan that can be what I call a roundabout."

Ghani said that since 2015, U.S. lives lost in Afghanistan "is 98, while we the Afghan people have lost over 40,000 civilians and military... We're assuming responsibility for our future, so if the U.S. would like to withdraw, all we ask for is a process that is predictable."

Ghani said the incoming Biden administration has an immense opportunity to work with Afghanistan "to define what U.S. security interests in Afghanistan and the region are, an agreement on the future stability of Afghanistan, guaranteed both by the region and the international community is essential to end forty years of conflict, the process must be truly owned by owned and led by the Afghan government and the Afghan people, and the scale and scope of U.S. presence in Afghanistan need to be defined."

By Anna Mulrine Grobe

War in Afghanistan: What has NATO learned from 20 years of fighting?

As America's longest war reaches the two-decade mark this year, one of President-elect Joe Biden's first orders of business will be figuring out a way forward in Afghanistan – and, by extension, a roadmap for NATO's mission in the country.

Neither the Taliban nor Al Qaeda is at the top of America's national security threat list anymore, and NATO officials, too, have been clear about their belief that they have bigger fish to fry. In the alliance's new Strategy 2030 report, Afghanistan is mentioned just six times in 40 densely-packed pages.

The war in Afghanistan is a mission on which the success or failure of NATO was once thought to hinge. In its early days, the war was billed as not only a post-Cold War rebirth of the alliance, but also its 21st-century evolution.

No longer. The new security agenda, according to the report, will be dominated by "competing great powers, in which assertive authoritarian states with revisionist foreign policy agendas" – in other words, China and Russia – "seek to expand their power and influence."

Yet as NATO prepares for the next decade, its challenges will be tackled by an alliance transformed, for better or worse, by its experience in Afghanistan and the lessons it has learned there. The question, analysts say, will be whether it chooses to heed them. "Habits of cooperation and interoperability"

Afghanistan became NATO's marquee mission with the U.S. invasion in 2001, the first time in history that the alliance invoked Article V, which declares that an attack on one is an attack on all. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was ultimately composed of allies from 50-plus countries, including non-NATO partners.

In the early years of the war, the running joke among U.S. forces, however, was that ISAF stood for "I saw Americans fight," or "I sunbathed at FOBs" (forward operating bases, which are heavily fortified and largely safe). The underlying critique was that some allied governments used restrictions called "caveats" to prevent their troops from carrying out night missions, for example, or from deploying to certain more violent parts of the country – and, as a result, U.S. and other fighting forces carried a heavier load. Still, the cooperation was a growth experience for the alliance, says Ian Lesser, executive director of the



German Marshall Fund in Brussels. "These caveats did in some ways hinder the ISAF's ability to operate, but it operated nonetheless, and learned a lot by that in terms of habits of cooperation and interoperability that were tested everyday."

At the same time, the experience transformed the militaries of many NATO member nations. In Germany, some 90,000 troops have deployed to Afghanistan over the years. "There's no German general today who doesn't have military or even fighting experience there," says Markus Kaim, senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin. The same goes, too, for a generation of soldiers in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Canada.

Member forces grew accustomed to collaborating on intelligence sharing and mission planning that made use of some high-tech systems that many nations wouldn't have been exposed to in peacetime, says Anthony Cordesman, defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This in turn, led to a "much better appreciation for allied capabilities." And it led to an even greater appreciation for allies themselves – including non-NATO partners, many of whom, like Australia and South Korea, took part in the Afghanistan war.

"If we think about any military engagement of NATO going forward, we'll conceptualize it not as 30 member countries of NATO, but as a loose platform" that includes other organizations and non-NATO partners

as well, Dr. Kaim says. "NATO needs partners," he says, because "NATO is aware that it can't shy away from deep political changes we're seeing."

The NATO 2030 report emphasizes making the bloc a "more political alliance," which means making it a "place where core security concerns of all sorts are discussed," Dr. Lesser says. The Asia-Pacific region, especially China, is a case in point. "It's a recognition that the definition of what bears on Euro-Atlantic security has expanded tremendously."

"The right thing to do for NATO"

This focus on great power competition, coupled with the varying levels of disenchantment with missions that don't end cleanly, means that the appetite for launching military operations again anytime soon will differ across the alliance.

It starts with the question of whether NATO members consider Afghanistan a success. "Was it worth all the effort, the blood? Most people would likely answer 'not really,'" Dr. Kaim says. Militarily, an alliance with impressive weapons uprooted Al Qaeda but did not defeat the Taliban, which, though an effective guerrilla force, was never a highly sophisticated threat. On the nation-building front, "You spent an incredible amount of money to achieve remarkably little," Dr. Cordesman says.

Yet the definition of success itself reflects the different strategic cultures within NATO. While America is deeply uncomfortable with the notion of ... **P3**

By Aamir Latif and Shadi Khan Saif

Afghan peace talks may suffer from Trump's departure

Already shaken by a fresh flare-up of violence, the fragile Afghan peace process may face "problems" following the departure of US President Donald Trump on Jan. 20, experts believe. They also argue that incoming President Joe Biden may seek a "review" of the Doha peace agreement between Washington and the warring Taliban, which aims to bring an end to a 19-year conflict in the war-racked country. "The implementation of the Doha peace agreement could face problems, especially the deadline for withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, as the intra-Afghan dialogue is not really making progress and the violence has intensified," Rahimullah Yusufzai, a Peshawar-based expert on Afghan affairs, told Anadolu Agency. Citing fresh allegations and counter allegations by Washington and the Taliban with regard to a recent

surge in violence despite a "commitment for peace" from both sides, Yusufzai said the fresh developments could prompt the Biden administration to review the plans for a complete military pullout from Afghanistan. On Monday, Washington and the Taliban blamed each other for violating the peace accord between the two sides ahead of the second round of intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, Qatar. Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, said US forces had conducted airstrikes against the group in non-military zones. He warned of retaliation if the attacks do not stop. Col. Sonny Leggett, a spokesman for US forces in Afghanistan, termed the allegations as "false" and said the strikes were defensive and renewed calls for all sides to reduce violence. "The Taliban's campaign of unclaimed attacks & targeted

killings of government officials, civil society leaders & journalists must also cease for peace to succeed," he said in a tweet. Yusufzai observed that Biden might delay the full withdrawal or insist on keeping a small number of troops on Afghan soil even after May on the pretext of "ensuring US security and the war against terrorism." Last November, Biden, according to the US media, had said he was "rightly weary of our longest war in Afghanistan, but there was a need to end the war responsibly, in a manner that ensures we both guard against threats to our homeland and never have to go back." In February last year, the Taliban reached an agreement with Washington promising to end the lingering war in Afghanistan in exchange for security guarantees. The agreement also guarantees the withdrawal of ... **P3**

70 Taliban members killed in Afghanistan's Kandahar



Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) says at least 70 Taliban members have been killed in Kandahar. 70 members of the Taliban, including six foreign militants killed in a special operation by Kandahar forces, said Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security. A statement issued by NDS on Saturday said that government forces attacked Taliban elements in the Panjwai area of Kandahar. In addition to the Panjwai area, the

operation was carried out in Khak Tappeh, Charkhab and Khandaq districts of the province, where three Chechens and three Pakistanis were killed along with 64 Taliban members. A large number of Taliban were also wounded in the attack, who were taken by other forces to Helmand province for treatment. The clashes in Afghanistan come as a new round of Taliban talks with the Afghan government began last week in Qatar.

Afghanistan asks Tajikistan to increase the power supply

Afghanistan is conducting negotiations with Tajikistan on increasing the electricity supply, Avesta news agency has reported. Afghan state-owned utility company Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) has applied to the Tajik authorities asking to increase the power supply to Afghanistan from 80 megawatts (MW) to 120 MW. DABS says similar negotiations on increasing the power supply are being conducted with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well.

Afghan state-owned utility company said on January 6 that Uzbekistan has stopped supplying electricity to Afghanistan "for technical problem." Afghanistan suffers from a chronic power shortage, with less than 40 percent of the population even connected to the grid, according to World Bank data. Three-quarters of the country's electricity is reportedly imported from the neighboring countries of Uzbekistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.



War in Afghanistan...

not winning, for many NATO allies, analysts say, it was enough to show solidarity, to be present, and to make a contribution.

More broadly, Afghanistan was seen as "the price to pay, and the right thing to do for NATO in return for the reassurance those countries get from the alliance on the bigger existential threats they face," Dr. Lesser says. "The fact that they've been present in Afghanistan is simply part of the insurance policy, and you have to pay these premiums over time."

And even as most members came out of their Afghan experience "more cautious about exporting democracy," the 2030 report acknowledges, it also argues that it's nonetheless "vital" that NATO doesn't allow democratic "erosion."

The causes and costs of corruption

For this to happen, NATO must take some key lessons of Afghanistan, including the corrosive effects of corruption – and the ways in which the U.S. and its NATO allies may inadvertently encourage it, says retired Col. John Agoglia, former director of both the U.S. Army's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute and the Counterinsurgency Training Center-Afghanistan, both in Kabul.

The billions of free-flowing Western dollars that flooded into Afghanistan after the invasion made graft and fraud easy and commonplace. "We need to understand how we put money into an environment – who we're giving it to, what are the oversight mechanisms? What could be the second and third order impacts?"

Corruption "undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government, reduced its effectiveness, and created a source of resentment for its own population," which in turn drove Taliban recruitment and made it "much more difficult" for NATO to achieve its key mission goals, "from security to effective governance," Karolina MacLachlan, policy officer at Transparency International in London, wrote in NATO Review.

At the same time, in bolstering some former Soviet republics to help resist Russian democratic undercutting and influence, as in Afghanistan, "we may have to deal with some people who have blood on their hands, some who are corrupt, some who are trying to reform," Colonel Agoglia says. "We've learned a lot about understanding the limits of power, how to shape it as best you can, and how to take what you can get – and it's not always going to look pretty." "I get the great power competition, but it's won and lost in the trenches doing these things – so that if you actually do have to go into combat," he adds, "you own the day."

Afghan peace...

all foreign troops from the war-torn country by May 2021.

"A circle within the Democrats does not want a complete pullout. They may force Biden to keep at least one or two bases in Afghanistan even after May," Yusufzai said. "The surging violence in Afghanistan may give an excuse to Biden to seek a review of the Doha agreement."

Meanwhile, Kabul-based analyst and political commentator Syed Egbal also sees prospects of a shift – though not very drastic – in the US policy towards the Afghan peace process.

"There is no doubt that the ultimate thrust in Washington has shifted over the years from defeating the Taliban on the battlefield to a so-called 'dignified' exit from Afghanistan, but it [exit of forces from Afghanistan] is going to differ under the new president," he told Anadolu Agency.

He added that the Afghan government under President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani would dearly want the Biden administration not to 'rush' with the exit.

No total breakdown Salman Bashir, a former foreign secretary of Pakistan, does not see the reversal of the peace process despite the change of administration in Washington and looming challenges.

"I think both Democrats and Republicans want to get out of Afghanistan. Biden has to embrace the geo-economic view of Afghanistan and this region as there is no other feasible option," Bashir, who served as foreign secretary from 2008 to 2012, told Anadolu Agency.

"The alternative course would unravel prospects of peace and plunge the country into a civil war and de facto division," he warned.

The US alone, Bashir noted, could not resolve the Afghan imbroglio and needs to cooperate with Russia, China and other regional states for a durable settlement of the long-smoldering conflict.

Sharing a similar view, Yusufzai said: "I do not see a total reversal of Trump's withdrawal plans by the incoming president despite a surge in violence. He cannot do that even if he wants because it [the Doha agreement] was a popular move, and the US political and military leadership by and large supported that."

"The Taliban too want an end to the war," he went on to say. What will Biden do?

Jere Van Dyke, a New York-based security analyst and author, thinks it's "too difficult" to forecast Biden's strategy to deal with the ongoing peace process.

"What will Biden do? No one outside of his inner circle

knows," Van Dyke, author of the bestsellers "In Afghanistan" and "Captive," told Anadolu Agency. "Trump is going, so what he thinks is not important. There are Democrats who do not want the US to leave, but what can they do to change the Taliban? Add more troops? That has not worked. Bombing them, as Trump

did, had no effect. They will not give in, ever. So does the US," said Van Dyke, who was held captive by the Taliban in 2008. He even appeared to be skeptical if Washington's chief negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad will continue to work after Trump's departure.

"I don't think so, but I don't know. [But] Khalilzad is not necessarily respected."

Terming the role of Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the reconciliation process "crucial," Van Dyke said: "The American people are tired of the war. But the US military and maybe the CIA [can] be seen as losing the war. Much will depend upon what Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and Iran do, or agree to do, to help the US in this regard."

Referring to Russia's role in Afghanistan, he said there are "responsible" Democrats and Republicans who understand that Moscow wants to get back into Afghanistan.

"It will play fairly. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin wants to get rid of the US presence in Afghanistan," he contended.

Govt Says...

efforts to succeed in the process with major countries and international institutions following the visit of the government's negotiating team to Doha and the start of the second round of intra-Afghan talks.

Hewad said the aim of these efforts is to gain international support for the success of the peace process, the success of the peace talks and the aspirations of the people and the government

of Afghanistan. According to him, the Foreign Minister also spoke about the peace process with the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan.

Hewad stressed that the desire of the people and the government of Afghanistan is to reduce violence, ensure a ceasefire, establish lasting peace and dignity which these issues are also important priorities of the government.

Meanwhile, Fereydoun Khozoon, spokesman for the High Council for National Reconciliation said that the negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan would begin its main discussions with the Taliban delegation on Saturday.

Najiyah Anwari, a spokeswoman for the State Ministry for Peace Affairs, also said that their team is fully prepared and would put the issue of ceasefire on the table during the talks.

Air Pollution...

the decades of war in the country has affected the efforts to address the challenge of air pollution, especially in Kabul,

a city that hosts an estimated six million populations.

"It is impossible in the short term to overcome air pollution because people have limited

access to electricity as well as liquid gas," said Nek Mohammad, head of the evaluation department of the authority.

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Biden: 'Good thing' Trump will not attend inauguration

President-elect Joe Biden welcomed President Donald Trump's decision Friday to not attend his presidential inauguration ceremony later this month. "One of the few things he and I have ever agreed on. It's a good thing, him not showing up," Biden said at a news conference in his home state of Delaware. The president-elect said Trump is an "embarrassment" and not fit to lead the nation. "He exceeded even my worst notions about him. He's been an embarrassment to the country, embarrassed us around

the world. He's not worthy to hold that office," he said.

Trump confirmed earlier suspicions that he would skip the inauguration Jan. 20, breaking a long-standing tradition that many see as a hallmark of the US's peaceful transfer of power.

"To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th," Trump said on Twitter.

Biden said Vice President Mike Pence is welcomed at his inauguration.

"I'd be honored to have him there and to move forward in the transition," he said.



A look at the world

Hospital fire kills 10 newborns in India

Ten babies were killed in a maternity unit in the Indian state of Maharashtra early Saturday when fire tore through a major hospital, a doctor said.

Staff rescued seven of the newborn infants at the Bhandara district hospital but were beaten back before they could get to the 10 others, Pramod Khandate, a senior doctor, told Agence French-Presse (AFP).

All of those who died were aged between a few days and three months, according to reports.



"The cause of the fire is not known yet but our staff extinguished the fire as soon as they could. The smoke led to the babies suffocating," Khandate said.

Nurses on duty noticed a fire coming from the hospital's neonatal unit and raised the alarm.

The fire brigade stopped the blaze from spreading to other parts of the hospital and other patients were moved to safety.

"Heart-wrenching tragedy in Bhandara, Maharashtra, where we have lost precious young lives," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi called the deaths "extremely tragic." Authorities ordered an immediate inquiry into the latest disaster to raise doubts about safety in Indian hospitals. More than 90 people died in an inferno in a Kolkata hospital in 2011.

A fire at a hospital in Ahmedabad in August killed eight coronavirus patients. Another five COVID-19 patients died in a blaze in a clinic in Rajkot in November.

The Supreme Court called for a report on safety in coronavirus hospitals because of the incidents

Iran bans COVID vaccines from UK, U.S.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has prohibited imports of COVID-19 vaccines from the United States and the United Kingdom.

In a televised speech on Friday, the supreme leader said he has no confidence in vaccines coming out of the two Western powers since they have some of the highest mortality rates in the world.

"If the Americans had managed to manufacture a vaccine, this coronavirus fiasco wouldn't have happened in their own country," he said, adding that the U.S. is now registering a daily death toll of 4,000 people. "If they can create a vaccine, if their Pfizer factory can manufacture a vaccine, then why do they want to give it to us? They should consume it themselves so they wouldn't have so many deaths."

Khamenei said the same applies to the UK, and that he does not trust the U.S. and the UK since they may wish to test out their vaccines on other nations.

The supreme leader also said he has "doubts" about France due to its infected blood scandal that began in the early 1990s. At the time, Iran was among the recipients of blood supplies from France that later turned out to be infected with HIV. Hundreds of Iranian haemophiliacs were infected by the tainted blood and Iran says it never received compensation.

The supreme leader's order led to a halt in Iranian Red Crescent Society's plans to import 150,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine that had been secured with the help of philanthropists, the organisation's spokesman said shortly after the speech.

"The Red Crescent Society will act based on the supreme leader's remarks as they distinguish right from wrong concerning all issues including importing corona vaccines," Mohammad Hassan Ghosian told the Tasnim news website.

The Red Crescent Society had previously announced additional plans to buy one million doses of a vaccine from China.

DPRK top leader urges U.S. to end hostile policy

Kim Jong Un, leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), has urged the United States to end its hostile policy towards Pyongyang, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Saturday.

At the eighth congress of the Workers' Party of Korea of the DPRK, Kim said that halting hostilities by Washington will be key to future relations between DPRK and the United States.

But Kim was also quoted as saying that



Washington's policy against Pyongyang won't change regardless of who rules the White House.

This is the first response by the DPRK to the new U.S. government as U.S. President-elect Joe Biden is set to be inaugurated on January 20.

Kim also called for a boost in national defense at his ruling party congress. According to KCNA, Pyongyang has finished plans for a nuclear-powered submarine.

"This gave a clearer description of the status of our state as a nuclear weapons state and enabled it to cement its strong and reliable strategic deterrent for coping with any threat by establishing a perfect nuclear shield," Kim said, according to a text of his speech released by KCNA on Thursday, the third day of the congress.



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