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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Wednesday, February 3, 2021

Issue No. 915

www.heartofasia.af

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8 Civilians Killed, Wounded in First 2 Days of Feb: AIHRC

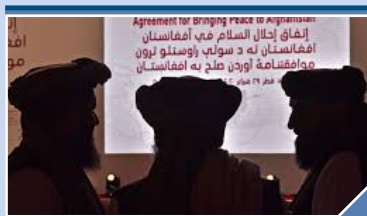
Following the increase of Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosions in the capital, Kabul, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in a statement said that at least eight civilians were killed and wounded in two days.

According to the statement, three civilians were killed and five more were wounded in the IED explosions in PDs of 2, 7, 10, 3 and 4 in the first two days of the February.

The rights body has called for an end to targeted killings and attacks on civilians, stressing that the use of magnetic mines in public and urban areas, in addition to targeted individuals, has always resulted in civilian casualties.

AIHRC also noted that the perpetrators of such attacks should be prosecuted at any time and place and will be held accountable.

The AIHRC has also called on the authorities to take effective precautionary measures, identify the perpetrators and deal with them fairly and legally, and provide justice for the victims of these attacks.



Taliban: U.S. Responsible for Violence in Afghanistan

Spokesman for the Taliban negotiating delegation in Doha Suhail Shaheen blasted the Americans for the spread of recent violence in Afghanistan.

"During the talks, Americans promised us that they are responsible for the security and administration of Kabul. Therefore, they (Americans) are responsible for any increase of violence in Afghanistan," Shaheen said.

He held the U.S. accountable for the main reasons behind escalation of violence in Afghanistan in the recent months despite inter-Afghan talks.

Shaheen pointed out that the Americans increased the attacks on Taliban forces, and said, "We, in return, were forced to defend ourselves. The Americans attribute all the attacks that they or their proxy forces are carrying ..."

'Nothing to be decided in Absence of People': Abdullah



The chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), Abdullah Abdullah says nothing can be resolved in the peace process in the absence of the Afghan people. "Nothing can be decided in the absence of the Afghan people, no one can promise the Taliban that this will guarantee your future or leave

the future of the country to you," he said.

The chairman of HCNR, speaking at the inauguration of the council's women's commission on Tuesday, described the country's future, belonging to the people.

"Whatever discussion you have, bring it to the negotiating table.

The people of Afghanistan want peace. There is diversity in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, there are different thoughts, and opinions. People have rights, and today, because it is a matter of women in the country, no one has given women rights and freedoms as gifts. Women have been on the

scene throughout the country, and in the last 20 years they have emerged and demonstrated the power of their ability," Abdullah said.

Dr. Abdullah said there are evidences that the Taliban are behind the targeted assassinations and killings in the country.

The chairman of HCNR added that the "table and venue" for the talks are clear and that the Taliban group can raise "any discussion and whatever they want" there.

Abdullah stressed that the people have come to the conclusion that war, killing and targeting the people are not the solution.

According to him, each side that takes responsibility for continuing the war must also weigh the consequences; Because the only lesson from the forty years of war in Afghanistan is that no one can impose their will on the people by force.

Abdullah Abdullah emphasized that no one can impose his/her will on women and deprive them of their rights.

According to him, rights and freedoms have not been given to women as gifts and these rights and freedoms are taken into account in peace talks.

OIC role vital in Afghan peace process: MoFA

Deputy and Acting Foreign Minister Mirwais Nab received the Ambassador of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to Kabul Mr. Huseyin Avni Botsali to discuss OIC support to the Afghan peace process, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said in a statement on Tuesday. At the outset, the Deputy and Acting foreign Minister praised OIC position and assistance on ceasefire and peace in Afghanistan.

Touching on the role of OIC as an essential Islamic organization in the world, Mr. Nab asserted that OIC can play an influential role in achieving Islamic world's consensus ...



SIGAR: 17% Poverty Rise in Afghanistan Amid COVID-19

A report by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) indicates that according to World Bank estimates, Afghanistan's overall poverty level increased from 55% to 72% in 2020 due to economic contraction as the country braced for a second wave of COVID-19 in early 2021.

Beyond the public-health impact, the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted "significant harm" on Afghanistan's economy, exacerbating many existing challenges, said the SIGAR report, which is titled "Economic and Social Development."

By the end of 2020, Afghanistan's unemployment rate was projected to rise to 37.9%, up from 23.9% in 2019, the report says.

The World Bank estimates



that the overall poverty level increased from 55% to 72% of the population in 2020 due to the economic contraction, with the IMF projecting that Afghanistan's GDP will drop by 5%, the report says.

The report quotes a UN humanitarian affairs office

spokesperson as saying that the United Nations will require an additional \$1.3 billion in 2021 for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, as the number of people who require assistance will have doubled compared to a year ago. In a November 2020 Asia Foundation survey, ...

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Iran's FM asks...

occasional breadcrumbs that will enable them" to enter into a negotiation, said Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution.

The Biden administration has argued that Trump's actions badly backfired, with Iran both moving away from the nuclear deal and only intensifying its opposition to U.S. interests. And the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warns that Iran could now produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon within "a few months."

But Blinken again cautioned that a return to the nuclear accord would not be swift.

"If it decides to come back into the agreement – that may take some time, then it's gonna take us some time to assess whether they, in fact, had made good on their obligations," Blinken told NBC News in an interview broadcast Monday.

Iran denies it is seeking a nuclear weapon but rival Israel has charged otherwise and threatened military action.

China: Iranian nuclear issue at a crucial juncture

The Chinese Foreign Ministry on Tuesday said that the Iran nuclear issue stands at a crucial juncture, calling on all parties to accelerate implementation of the consensus reached at last December's foreign ministers' meeting.

"The U.S. side should rejoin the Iran nuclear deal with no preconditions as early as possible and lift all relevant sanctions. On this basis, Iran should resume full compliance," Spokesperson Wang Wenbin urged when asked to comment on Zarif's remarks on the crisis.

China is closely following the situation and stays in close communication with related parties, Wang said, stressing China supports a step-by-step and reciprocal approach.

China will continue to work with the relevant parties and the international community to bring the Iran nuclear deal back on track and promote the political settlement of the Iran nuclear issue, he added.

By James O'Neill

The Biden Government Running True to Form

The least surprising news item in the past week was that the United States government under President Biden had decided that American troops would after all, despite Ex-President Trump's order, remain in Afghanistan. This breaks an agreement that had been reached by the Trump administration and the Taliban that US troops would all be gone by May 20 21.

It was unclear in the Trump agreement whether the withdrawal of "US Forces" included the United States mercenaries who for at least the past year have outnumbered formal US troops. What Trump's negotiated agreement meant for the other "allied" forces in Afghanistan remained unclear at the time of the announcement and remains equally unclear today. The mainstream media persist in referring to those troops as NATO forces, but they include Australian troops who are not members of NATO.

The Australian government has been strangely silent in the light of Trump's original announcement that US troops would be leaving, and they remain quiet in the light of the new administration's revision of the Trump plan. It is a safe bet that whatever the Americans finally do will be agreeable to the Australians. There has not been the least hint of an independent Australian position. The actual role of the Australian troops remains a non-topic of discussion in the Australian media. Even the recent scandal of Australian troops abusing and killing locals was a five-day wonder and has now disappeared from media coverage.

The ostensible reason for Australian troops remaining in Afghanistan is to "train" the Afghan forces. This was always a singularly unconvincing reason, not least because such "training" has been spectacularly unsuccessful with the high death rate of those troops, their even higher rate of defections, and a singular unwillingness to actually fight being their dominant characteristic.

The ostensible reasons for the Biden administration's change of heart about withdrawing US troops was the unsettled nature of the government and their inability to control the countryside which is variously described as overrun with foreign ISIS fighters; not under Afghanistan government control (certainly true); or uncertainty about the political directions



of a Taliban government, including protecting the rights of women in the country.

What never ceases to amaze one is the inability of the western media, and the Australian version are a classic example, to even hint at the real reasons for staying, when the foreigners who occupy Afghanistan are manifestly unwelcome. The protestations of the Afghan "government" that they appreciate the presence of foreign troops on their soil is manifestly self-serving. Their survival rate post liberation could be counted in days.

The real reasons for the American intention to stay were concealed from the very beginning. United States president Bush justified the invasion on the alleged refusal of the Taliban government that then ruled the country, to give up Osama bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the attacks in New York City and Washington DC on 11 September 2001.

Even if that was a legitimate reason, and it manifestly was not, the refusal to surrender bin Laden surely disappeared the day he died, which was in December 2001 from natural causes. His obituary was even published in the New York Times. We were later treated to the charade of an American foray into Pakistan to "capture" bin Laden with the body then being buried at sea. The troops responsible for this charade were later all killed in a

helicopter crash. The mainstream media remained singularly incurious about the amazing sequence of events.

The real reasons for the invasion, and the continuing occupation nearly 20 years later, and the reason the Americans and their lackies will stay as long as they can are twofold: drugs and geography.

One of the real reasons the Taliban government had to be deposed in 2001 was that they had drastically reduced the growing of the poppy in the areas of Afghanistan they actually controlled.

That poppy production in turn was processed into heroin, for which Afghanistan is once again the major source in the world. It provides the CIA with their greatest "off the books" revenue. They are not going to relinquish that money and the multiple benefits of controlling the world's largest source of heroin it gives them, without putting up a major fight.

It is one of the enduring disgraces of the western mainstream media that this factor is almost completely ignored. When the importance of heroin to the world is acknowledged it is almost always totally bereft of any discussion of the CIA's crucial role. One can read more about the role of heroin in UN reports than one can in the mainstream media. The other major reason that the United States ... P3

By Jeff Schogol

Will the U.S. finally get the hell out of Afghanistan once and for all?

All U.S. troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan within the next 90 days, but it remains uncertain whether they will actually depart as planned.

Rupam Jain and Charlotte Greenfield of Reuters recently reported that U.S. and other foreign troops will remain in Afghanistan beyond May because conditions on the ground do not allow for the full withdrawal called for under the Feb. 29 agreement between the Taliban and the United States.

The Reuters reporters cited four unnamed senior NATO officials for their Jan. 31 story.

However, NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu has issued a statement pushing back.

"No decision has been made," Lungescu said, adding that NATO defense ministers will discuss the situation in Afghanistan

during their upcoming meeting scheduled for Feb. 17 and 18.

"No NATO ally wants to stay in Afghanistan longer than necessary, but we have been clear that our presence remains conditions-based," she continued. "Allies continue to assess the overall situation, and to consult on the way forward."

Lungescu declined to comment further when contacted by Task & Purpose on Monday.

The Biden administration is currently evaluating whether the Taliban is engaging in meaningful peace negotiations with the Afghan government and meeting their other responsibilities under the Feb. 29 withdrawal agreement, a State Department spokesperson said.

Meanwhile, the new administration is also

conducting a wider review of troop deployments abroad to make sure the missions meet today's threats, the spokesperson said.

Roughly 2,500 U.S. troops are currently in Afghanistan. Former President Donald Trump ordered steep drawdowns of U.S. forces in the country in the last year of his administration despite worsening violence in Afghanistan.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby has said that the Taliban have failed to meet their commitments to reduce the level of violence in Afghanistan and finally sever all ties with Al Qaeda. "As long as they are not meeting their commitments, it's going to be difficult for anybody at that negotiating table to meet their commitments – in fact; it wouldn't be the wise course," Kirby told reporters during a ... P3

SIGAR: 17%...

74.2% of respondents reported that they and their families had received no government support during the pandemic, the report says.

As of early November 2020, 11.2 million people, or approximately 36% of the estimated population, faced either a crisis or emergency state of food insecurity, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a common global scale for classifying the severity and magnitude of food insecurity and malnutrition.

The report says that on December 21, 2020, acting Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development Mujib Rahman Karimi announced that more than 20,000 families had received food aid as part of the first phase of the government's national assistance program.

The report also quotes the UN Development Program

(UNDP) representative in Afghanistan, Abdallah Al Dardari, as saying that "four years of progressive growth" will be required to return to the pre-COVID economic conditions of 2019.

To sustain this, however, the UNDP estimated in early November 2020 that the Afghan government will need an additional \$6 billion in international grants over the next five years, a 30% increase from current levels of donor funding, to offset COVID-related budget losses and maintain expenditure levels, adding that a "clear commitment to continued grant support is vital for improving confidence and investment," the report says. SIGAR reports that largely as a result of COVID-19, the Afghan government's sustainable domestic revenues contracted by 2.8%, year-on-year, during 2020, according to a SIGAR's analysis of Afghan government accounting data. The contraction in

government revenue during the first half of 2020 was particularly driven by the fall in customs duties and taxes—which comprised approximately 20% of sustainable domestic revenues in 2019—due to the closing of the border, the report said.

In July 2020, Afghan exports to Pakistan, Afghanistan's leading trading partner, decreased by 56.8% compared to July 2019; imports from Pakistan decreased by 43.6%, the report says.

With the partial lifting of the government-mandated lockdown and reopening of the borders to trade over the summer, government revenues began to recover during the third and fourth quarters of fiscal year 1399, the report says.

The report adds that government expenditures, on the other hand, increased overall by 8.1%, year-on-year, during 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2b afs investment opportunity in agriculture sector: MAIL

The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) on Monday announced a 100 percent increase in its revenue last year, but said 13 projects could not be implemented due to coronavirus outbreak. MAIL made the revelation as part of the government's accountability program which was created 14 years ago under former president, Hamid Karzai.

Agriculture minister Anwarul Haq Ahaddi today presented the ministry's last year performance report to the program during a press conference.

He said his ministry had planned 43 different projects for 1399 fiscal year (last year), but only 30 of them were implemented and the rest delayed due to coronavirus outbreak.

Retaining walls, green houses, milk processing factories, wheat storages, irrigation networks and

creation of fish farms were among projects planned for Nangarhar, Jawzjan, Herat, Balkh, Baghlan and Bamyan provinces, he said.

However, he said the mentioned projects could not be executed due to coronavirus spread, lack of budget and some other issues last year. These projects would be implemented in the ongoing 1400 fiscal year, he added.

Ahadi said that 30 different projects had been completed in 15 provinces of the country last year that benefited thousands of farmers and gardeners.

About revenue hike, he said that the ministry collected more than 420 billion afghanis in revenue last year — double the amount of previous year. The revenue collected in year 1398 was 210 million afghanis, he said.

Ahadi said 5.7 percent increase in



wheat production, 15 to 20 percent increase in fruits and vegetables, 15 percent increase in rice production and higher productions of saffron, chicken meat and fish meat contributed to the hike in revenue. Agriculture officials say there is the opportunity of 2.2 billion afghanis

investment in different areas of agriculture in the country in ongoing 1400 fiscal year.

Agriculture minister said the livestock development was paid little attention last year but he would try to encourage donors for funding the livestock improvement this year.

Exchange Rates

77.15	\$	77.25
93.1	€	93.2
104.7	£	104.8
478	Rp.	479
20.9	دولہ	21
1045	₹	1055

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Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital

0202301360

Ata Turk Hospital

0202500312

Corona call center - 166

Will the U.S. finally...

Jan. 28 Pentagon news briefing.

The following day, Kirby told Neil Cavuto, host of Fox News' Your World, that no decisions have been made about future troop levels in Afghanistan.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin plans to speak with U.S. military commanders both in the field and at the Pentagon to have a better idea of what force levels in Afghanistan should look like going forward, Kirby said during the Jan. 29 interview.

That same day, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said the Taliban are claiming "that they defeated the United States" and that both the United States and NATO are "on the run." "What has happened off the table is that peace is not been socialized to the Taliban commanders or rank and file," Ghani said during the Aspen Security Forum. "Their leaders have taken pictures with suicide bombers and met wounded people in hospitals in Karachi and others." "If Afghanistan – God forbid – is left without a political settlement that brings peace, every terrorist group is going to migrate here and target us," he continued. "Already, over 25 are here. They are trained by the Taliban. They are supported by them. They are nurtured by them. It's a competitive but also a very cooperative relationship." A Taliban spokesman denied that they have declared victory, but an Afghan government official told Task & Purpose that the Taliban have been claiming that they defeated the United States since the Feb. 29 withdrawal agreement was signed.

Ultimately, President Joe Biden will have to decide whether to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan past May or end the U.S. military's 19-year commitment there.

If Biden decides that it is time for the United States to leave Afghanistan, it would come more than 10 years after he predicted the end of the Afghan war on NBC's Meet the Press.

"We're going to be totally out of there, come hell or high water, by 2014," Biden said on Dec. 19, 2010.

Taliban: U.S. ...

out in Afghanistan to the Taliban."

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Monday that his country has always backed dialogue among different Afghan groups, stressing that Kabul has been informed of the Taliban group's trip to Tehran.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has always been supportive of negotiations among various groups in Afghanistan," Khatibzadeh said, stressing that the Taliban's recent trip to Tehran has been with the knowledge of the Afghan government.

"The Taliban are part of the reality of Afghanistan. They have several offices in some countries and are in direct talks with the Afghan government," he noted and added, "This visit was made in the framework of the ongoing talks between the Afghan government and this group."

"All talks took place either at the request of the government of this country or with their

coordination," the spokesman went on to say.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a meeting with a delegation of the Taliban, headed by the head of the group's political bureau, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in Tehran on Sunday discussed the latest developments in Afghanistan.

During the meeting, Zarif expressed satisfaction with the idea of formation of an inclusive government with participation of all ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan, and said, "Political decisions cannot be made in a vacuum and an inclusive government should be formed through the process of partnership and taking into account the fundamental structures, institutional laws, including the constitution."

He underlined Iran's readiness to facilitate talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and other groups in Afghanistan, saying, "The good people of Afghanistan are oppressed. The war and occupation of Afghanistan have

inflicted major damage on them."

"I hope that all your efforts will be made to end the people's suffering and to remove the pretexts for occupiers by establishing peace in Afghanistan as soon as possible," Zarif said.

In the meeting, the Taliban delegation briefed the Iranian foreign minister on the peace process and intra-Afghan talks, saying that Iran-Afghanistan relations have always been based on friendship and good neighborliness.

They expressed the hope that relations between the two countries would further expand with the establishment of peace and tranquility in Afghanistan. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, for his part, referred to the ISIL's destructive role in Afghanistan and the region, and voiced satisfaction in the process of intra-Afghan talks.

He described formation of an inclusive government with the partnership of all ethnic and political groups as necessary to establish peace in Afghanistan.

The Biden...

is reluctant to leave Afghanistan is its geography. Afghanistan shares borders with seven nations, including China. It has friendly relations with none of the seven, all of whom look to either Russia or China or both as their most important friends. All of those countries belong to one or more of the various organisations set up in recent years to facilitate their development, including the Shanghai Corporation Organisation.

During the latter months of the Trump administration the appalling Mike Pompeo tried very hard to woo some of

those nations to his anti-China crusade. That he failed to make much headway is a matter of record, but that failure does not mean that the Americans have given up on their ambitions for the region. One can expect similar efforts to be made by the Biden administration, whose antipathy to China took very little time to become apparent. One can hardly be surprised at the stances being taken by the Biden administration. He, like much of the senior people he has surrounded himself with, are essentially reruns from the Obama years. The old saying goes that one cannot teach an old dog new tricks, and that is

becoming more true with each day of the Biden administration. The positive point is that while the United States administration looks more and more like a rerun of the Obama years, the world has moved on, and nowhere more so than in the Asian – Europe landmass.

It is already economically the most dynamic region in the world and that is expected to continue. Fortunately for the world Eurasia is reasserting itself. The big question is: will the Americans recognise that and scale down their ambitions. Frankly, the signs are not promising.

OIC role vital...

towards delegitimizing and condemning the war and violence in Afghanistan. The two sides went on to

are contrary to Islam's essence. Though he assured the Acting and Deputy Foreign Minister of OIC continued support in the Afghan peace process.

The two sides went on to

exchange views on establishing Islamic International University in Nangarhar province, which was recently discussed between Foreign Minister Atmar and OIC Secretary-General in Jeddah.

Heart of Asia

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Lavrov hopes for honest discussion of Navalny case with Swedish counterpart

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated his intention to discuss the Alexey Navalny case with the Swedish Foreign Minister, current OSCE Chairwoman Ann Linde in an open and honest manner.

"We would like to discuss all these issues in an honest and open manner, without any prejudice because, as neighbors, we must be interested in normal, good relations, of course. Even more so considering that it is essential for people of our countries, especially those living near the border," Lavrov said, opening the negotiations with his Swedish counterpart.

"There has been no response to our request regarding how and on what basis did the Swedish military laboratory made its

conclusion that Mr. Navalny was poisoned by the so-called Novichok family nerve agent. This does not fit in the requirements of transparency in this and every other issue, which our German and other colleagues put forth," the minister said.

Lavrov pointed out that the Western colleagues "do not want to be transparent themselves in regards to conclusions they use in order to promote the anti-Russian position."

On January 18, Lavrov stated that remarks of the Western politicians regarding Navalny's return to Russia seek "to draw away attention from the deep crisis" that their countries have found themselves in, adding that the Western commentaries are "carbon copies" of each other.



A look at the world

China says it cooperates with WHO with open, transparent attitude

China has been cooperating with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other nations closely with an open and transparent attitude, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said on Tuesday, adding that WHO experts have highly praised China's efforts.

The remarks came in response to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's claim



that China didn't show "transparency" in arranging WHO experts' visit to Wuhan. Wang underscored that WHO experts' visit to Wuhan is part of a global study of COVID-19, noting that WHO and Chinese experts are working together to trace the origin of the virus. "However, this is a complicated task involving many other countries," he said.

COVID-19 infections were reported in many other regions even before China's outbreak. Wang pointed out that studies have shown that COVID-19 antibodies were found in the U.S. as early as in December 2019, much before the first COVID-19 case was officially registered in the U.S. on January 21, 2020.

"We urge the U.S. side to cooperate with the WHO and other countries to jointly make contributions to the global fight against COVID-19. We also call on WHO experts to conduct scientific research in the U.S.," Wang said.

Iran's FM asks Europe to coordinate U.S. return to nuclear deal



Iran's foreign minister on Monday asked the European Union to coordinate a synchronized return of both Washington and Tehran into a nuclear deal, after a diplomatic standoff on who will act first.

U.S. President Joe Biden has voiced support for returning to the accord, from which Donald Trump exited, but has insisted that Tehran first resume full compliance by reversing measures it took to protest the sweeping sanctions imposed by his predecessor.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who has previously demanded an end to sanctions before Iran acts, offered a way forward during an interview on CNN.

"You know clearly there can be a mechanism to basically either synchronize it, or coordinate what can be done," he said.

Zarif said that EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell should play a role in his position of coordinator of the 2015 agreement - which also included Britain, France and Germany as well as Russia and China.

Borrell can "sort of choreograph the actions that are needed to be taken by the United States and the actions that are needed to be taken by Iran," Zarif said.

"The United States needs to come back into compliance and Iran will be ready immediately to respond. The timing is not the issue," he said in the interview, adding that Iran could return to its previous commitments "in less than a day."

"Some may take a few days or weeks, but it won't take any longer that it would take the United States to implement executive orders that are necessary to put back Iran's oil, banking, transportation and other areas that Trump violated, back into operation," he said. Trump walked out of the deal negotiated under former president Barack Obama, vowing instead to strangle Iran's economy and reduce its clout around the region.

Analysts said Zarif's stance might lay the ground for talks on reviving the deal despite Iran's prior insistence that the United States lift sanctions first.

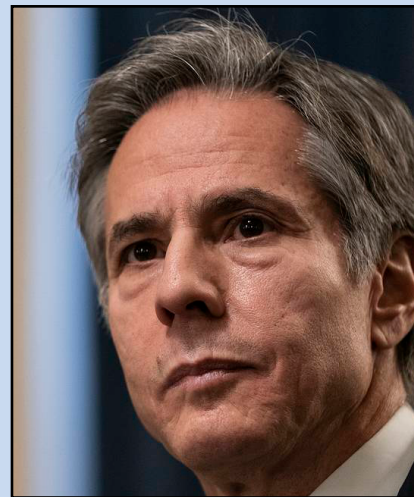
"It is entirely unsurprising to me that we are hearing, amid a largely uncompromising position from the Iranians, ...

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U.S. to continue military assistance to Ukraine, Blinken says

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken vowed in a phone conversation with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba on Tuesday that Washington would continue robust U.S. economic and military assistance to Kiev, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The Secretary emphasized strong bipartisan support for Ukraine and the priority the United States places on Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. He [Blinken] pledged to continue robust U.S. economic



and military assistance to Ukraine," according to the statement.

Blinken also "highlighted the importance of Ukraine maintaining progress on fighting corruption and implementing rule of law and economic reforms that will strengthen Ukraine's institutions and ensure a bright and prosperous future for all Ukrainians."

"The Secretary and Foreign Minister Kuleba also discussed Ukraine's ongoing efforts to combat COVID-19, and to achieve a diplomatic resolution to Russia's aggression in eastern Ukraine and Crimea," according to the statement.

After the coup d'etat in Ukraine in February 2014, Crimea and Sevastopol held a referendum, in which 96.7% of Crimeans and 95.6% of Sevastopol voters chose to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the reunification deal on March 18, 2014, which the Federation Council (upper house of the Russian parliament) ratified on March 21, 2014. Despite the results of the referendum, Kiev refused to recognize Crimea as a part of Russia.



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