



Page 2 | NATIONAL  
Afghanistan: Biden's first problem

### How to End a Very Long War in Afghanistan?

On paper, the United States is committed to withdrawing its last 2,500 troops from Afghanistan less than 10 weeks from now, on May 1. ...

Page 3 | ECONOMY

Balkh Power Consumers Pay Millions of afghani to Taliban



Kabul  
16 / 3



Herat  
14 / -4



Nangarhar  
23 / 13



Balkh  
21 / 8



# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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10 afs



## Covid-19 Vaccination Drive Begins in Afghanistan

Afghanistan officially launched its coronavirus vaccination program on Tuesday at an event held at the Presidential Palace. President Ashraf Ghani participated, along with officials from the Health Ministry and elsewhere.

In this first round, Afghan security force members, journalists and doctors received the vaccine.

The first stage of the vaccination in Afghanistan will start with 500,000 doses, President Ghani said at the event, adding that "efforts are underway to cover 40 percent of the population in the second round."

Recently, Afghanistan received 500,000 doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine from India. The vaccines were produced by the Serum Institute of India. ...

P2



## Foreign Militants Fighting Alongside Taliban in Kandahar: Officials

Military officials in Kandahar claimed Tuesday that foreign militants are fighting alongside the Taliban in the province against government forces.

According to the officials, evidence shows that al-Qaeda, Pakistani and Chechen insurgents were colluding with the Taliban in the four-month war in the Arghandab district of Kandahar. Meanwhile, local officials say that security forces have conducted wide clearance operations in the province to retake the areas collapsed to the Taliban, especially in the Arghandab district.

A number of families, who have been displaced in Kandahar due to the clashes, stated that the war has made their lives miserable.

The Taliban have not commented yet. The Defense Ministry on Monday said that at least ten Taliban fighters including four Pakistani nationals were killed during an operation ...

P2

# Sharp Rise in Afghan Civilian Casualties after Start of Peace Talks: UN



There was a rise in civilians killed and injured in Afghanistan following the start of peace negotiations in September, according to a report released by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Human Rights Office on Tuesday.

The overall number of civilian casualties in 2020 of 8,820 (3,035 killed and 5,785 injured) fell below 10,000 for the first time since 2013 and was 15 per cent down on 2019. The Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual

Report 2020 documented civilian casualties in the last quarter of the year.

"2020 could have been the year of peace in Afghanistan. Instead, thousands of Afghan civilians perished due to the conflict," said Deborah Lyons, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan in the report.

"This important report has the overriding objective of providing the parties responsible with the facts, and recommendations, so they take

immediate and concrete steps to protect civilians. I urge them not to squander a single day in taking the urgent steps to avoid more suffering," Deborah Lyons said.

"Ultimately, the best way to protect civilians is to establish a humanitarian ceasefire," said Lyons, adding that "parties refusing to consider a ceasefire must recognize the devastating consequences of such a posture on the lives of Afghan civilians."

The report said that for a seventh

consecutive year, UNAMA documented more than 3,000 civilians killed in a single year, with Afghanistan remaining among the deadliest places in the world to be a civilian.

The report detailed the impact on Afghan women and children. "They make up 43 per cent of all casualties: 30 per cent were children and 13 per cent women," according to the report. Afghanistan peace negotiations, which began between representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban in Qatar on September 12, "failed to alleviate the scale of civilian harm, a key indicator of violence levels. Instead, there was an escalation of violence with disturbing trends and consequences," the report said.

In October, civilian casualties were the highest of any month in 2020, and in November UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties of any November since it started systematic documentation in 2009.

The report said that the "anti-government elements (AGEs) in 2020 caused the majority of civilian casualties (62 percent), totaling 5,459 casualties - 1,885 killed and 3,574 injured with the Taliban responsible for most of these casualties (45 percent of the total) and Daesh responsible for 8 percent." ...

P3

## Japan Announces \$3.7m for Afghan Refugees, Host Communities in Pakistan

The Japanese government announced on Monday a contribution of \$3.7 million to support UN refugee agency's programmes and activities for Afghan refugees and host communities in Pakistan.

The three-year project will focus on education, livelihood assistance and community structures in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtun-khwa and Punjab, benefitting over 240,000 individuals. ...

P3



## President Ghani, Dr. Abdullah Met Uzbekistan Foreign Minister

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani yesterday met with Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov at the Presidential Palace, Arg said.

Arg in a statement on Tuesday said that both sides discussed the expansion of relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, regional cooperation and the Afghan peace process.

According to the statement, the Uzbek Foreign Minister presented an invitation by the Uzbek President to Ashraf Ghani to attend a conference on "Regional Connection and Common Challenges and Opportunities" in Tashkent in July.

He added that in addition to President Ghani, the presidents of India and Pakistan, as well as foreign ministers and



representatives of the United States, Russia and the European Union, will attend the conference. The statement added that the two sides also discussed how to implement the economic and cultural agreements signed between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan over the past two years.

In the meantime, the Uzbek Foreign Minister had a separate

meeting with the chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah on Tuesday.

According to Dr. Abdullah, the meeting focused on peace efforts, the second round of intra-Afghan talks, the role of countries in the region, especially the role of Uzbekistan in ensuring peace in Afghanistan, and bilateral relations between the two countries.

### Covid-19...

Afghanistan has had 55,646 reported COVID-19 cases and 2,435 deaths from the disease, according to the health ministry.

Previously, the Afghan health officials said that the government wants to vaccinate 20 percent of the country's population within the next six months, and donor countries and organizations have pledged \$112 million.

So far, COVID vaccines have been implemented in at least 50 countries.

### NASA Releases...

Mars took nearly seven months, and it will now begin the process of collecting rock core samples that will be stored in metal tubes for return to Earth on future missions.

The samples are key to understanding whether life once existed on the planet the US now hopes to send humans to as early as the 2030s.

### Foreign Militants...

in the Arghistan district of the province last night.

A Taliban spokesman, however, denied the report, stating that no Pakistani national are fighting alongside the group in the district.

The comments come at a time while in the past the United Nations and the Afghan government have repeatedly said that the Taliban continue to work with Al-Qaeda. However, according to the US-Taliban agreement, the group must end its ties with Al-Qaeda.

By SEEMA SIROHI

# Afghanistan: Biden's first problem

With the May Day deadline looming for a complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, President Joe Biden faces his first tough foreign policy decision. There are no good or easy options. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has promised there would be no "hasty or disorderly withdrawal" that puts US and NATO forces at risk, no matter what the outcome of the current policy review. He also stressed that more progress was needed in the intra-Afghan dialogue accompanied by a reduction in violence. US commanders have the "right and responsibility to defend themselves and their Afghan partners against attacks," he said last week.

The signal from the US is clear — the 1 May deadline is not etched in stone. That means a possible delay in the timetable for the departure of the remaining 2,500 US troops and about 5,000 from NATO countries. The extension will have to be negotiated, which means Pakistan will once again come center stage.

The signal from the US is clear — the 1 May deadline is not etched in stone. Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa has already named his price for the intervention. He apparently told US CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie Jr. that Secretary of State Antony Blinken should call Taliban leaders to request a deadline extension. Bajwa's aim is legitimization of the Taliban with the new administration, raising Pakistan's clout while keeping the Afghan government on the sidelines. As for India, New Delhi has long been concerned about the arbitrary deadline, even while accepting the reality of an eventual US exit. It has watched Taliban's continuing attacks on Afghan security forces and civil society leaders in Afghanistan with alarm. What was supposed to be a conditions-based

withdrawal became a plain exit strategy in the last days of the Trump Administration as thousands of US troops left in December and January. But the Taliban haven't held up their side of the bargain — the intra-Afghan dialogue is stuck and a ceasefire is nowhere in sight. The most important US demand that Taliban cut ties with al-Qaeda is caught between what's in the written agreement and what might have been verbally agreed to in terms of "assurances and understandings." US Special Representative, Zalmay Khalilzad, is the only person who truly knows — he conducted several one-on-one meetings with Taliban leaders in Pashto with no note-takers.

The most important US demand that Taliban cut ties with al-Qaeda is caught between what's in the written agreement and what might have been verbally agreed to in terms of "assurances and understandings." Under the deal he crafted, the US committed to 10 clear actions, including a complete withdrawal of troops by 1 May. While most of the US commitments are either partly or fully verifiable, the Taliban's promises are unclear and subjective, according to Jonathan Schroden, a military operations analyst and an Afghanistan expert.

The most important Taliban commitment of not allowing terrorist groups to use the "soil" of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the US or its allies is highly subjective and cannot be verified, he says. Of the seven commitments Taliban made, only one is objectively and publicly verifiable. Usually, the Americans craft agreements that weigh heavily in their favor but the Afghan peace agreement is clearly not one of them. Some US experts have suggested a six-month extension,



which, at first, seems too short. The idea is to recalibrate the entire peace agreement with the US, using removal of UN sanctions and release of Taliban prisoners as leverage. The Taliban want international legitimacy and have long demanded lifting of UN sanctions. The idea is to recalibrate the entire peace agreement with the US, using removal of UN sanctions and release of Taliban prisoners as leverage. Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, threw down the gauntlet last week. In an open letter addressed to the American people, he urged the US "to remain committed to the full implementation of the accord." He went on to repeat the many Taliban propaganda points to buttress his case: A majority of the Afghan people support the "Islamic Emirate," rights of women will be granted as per Islamic law (whatever that might mean), and the Taliban will curb poppy cultivation. There's no question that a delay in US withdrawal would have to be negotiated because a unilateral announcement from Washington would amount to abrogating the deal and open western forces to Taliban attacks. Biden Administration's policy review is expected to be completed this week after which Khalilzad is expected to travel to Doha, Islamabad, and possibly

New Delhi. Hard-nosed analysts who want to end America's longest war say that the Biden Administration must focus only on the main outcome it wants. The real question has to be about Taliban breaking their links with al-Qaeda. Can US negotiators get the Taliban to publicly sever connections and find a way to hold them accountable? Continued presence of US troops will not help guarantee the rights of women, they say. The real question has to be about Taliban breaking their links with al-Qaeda. Others are displaying a certain kind of fatalism — the government of President Ashraf Ghani "may be too corrupt and fragile to survive" no matter what the US chooses to do. The Taliban will continue attacks because they believe victory is near regardless of any change in the deadline. This is nothing but throwing the Ghani government under the bus. As an observer of the region wryly noted, if other "corrupt and fragile" governments — there are some right in the neighbourhood — can survive, so can Ghani's. The Afghans fought the Taliban before 9/11 without much help and they will fight them again and this time they are better prepared. Meanwhile, the situation on the ... **P3**

By Doyle McManus

## How to End a Very Long War in Afghanistan?

On paper, the United States is committed to withdrawing its last 2,500 troops from Afghanistan less than 10 weeks from now, on May 1. That's under a deal the Trump administration made last year with the Taliban.

But it's far from certain that will happen. Neither the Taliban, the Afghan government nor the United States have kept all their commitments under the year-old agreement. The Taliban promised to reduce attacks on government troops and officials; it hasn't.

The Afghan government promised to enter serious peace talks with the Taliban, but it has dragged its feet. The United States promised to begin lifting international sanctions against the Taliban, but when the war escalated and the peace talks deadlocked, the US held back. Meanwhile, the Taliban has continued pushing the government's underperforming army out

of big swaths of territory. And someone has launched a remorseless campaign of assassinations against judges, journalists and teachers, especially women. The Taliban denies responsibility.

Ending a protracted war As a result, President Joe Biden's path toward ending a war that began three presidents ago has grown more difficult.

Now he faces a decision: Should he withdraw most or all of the troops, as candidate Biden said he wanted, at the risk of seeing Afghanistan descend into a bloodbath? Should he keep the 2,500 troops in place and announce that they will leave as soon as peace negotiations are on track, but not before?

Or, as some former officials argue, should Biden send more troops until a final peace settlement is reached — a potential recipe for an open-ended stay?

It's tempting for war-

wary Americans to look at Afghanistan and say: We lost more than 2,400 troops, we spent more than \$2 trillion, and we failed; it's time to walk away.

But the United States still has interests in that part of the world, including the containment of al Qaeda and other terrorist groups roaming the region.

After 19 years, it's still worth trying to bring this tragic misadventure to an end in a way that avoids needless damage along the way.

Three basic options One is to stay — and perhaps even make the US military presence a little bigger. That's essentially what a blue-ribbon commission co-chaired by retired Gen. Joseph F. Dunford junior, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended this month.

"We know what will happen if we leave on 1 May," he warned. "If we walk away, we'll leave behind chaos, if not civil... **P3**

### Iran May...

criticized Tehran's decision to allow "necessary" monitoring by the UN nuclear watchdog for up to three months, saying it goes against the spirit of the law, which calls for ending all snap inspections beyond the NPT safeguards agreement.

"The government has no right to decide and act arbitrarily," the head of parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, Mojtaba Zolnour, was quoted as saying by local media.

Under the agreement reached between Iran and the IAEA on Sunday, Iran will hold back camera footage at its nuclear facilities for three months.

If sanctions are lifted in that period, the data will be shared with the agency. Otherwise, it will be destroyed, according to Iran's permanent envoy to Vienna-based international organizations Kazem Gharibabadi.

This, however, has not gone down well with lawmakers. Iran's parliament speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said Monday that Iran is "determined to stop"

implementation of the Additional Protocol and limit the access of the IAEA inspectors beyond the safeguards agreement.

He asked parliament's national security and foreign policy commission and energy commission to conduct field inspections and submit a report, adding "any violation of the law" will be dealt with according to the law.

In a joint statement Sunday, Iranian lawmakers stressed the need for the government to stop voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol.

"The practical and complete revocation of banking and oil sanctions are among the fundamental conditions for the US to return to the nuclear deal, and without lifting the cruel sanctions that can be verified by the Iranian nation, Iran will not stop its proud and strong steps of industrial and nuclear progress," the statement noted.

"Wise move" In response, the government issued a lengthy statement

late Monday expressing "deep regret" over the remarks of some lawmakers, terming the criticism "irrational."

The statement said the government is obliged to implement the laws passed by parliament and the action in accordance with the recent law will be taken on Feb. 23. The negotiations and agreement between the Iranian government and UN nuclear watchdog, it noted, have been "in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the country."

"In line with parliament's law, no extra-judicial access will be granted to the [UN] agency and no extra-supervisory inspections will be conducted," the statement said, noting that the purpose of "continuing the necessary verification and monitoring" is for Iran to "retain the information of certain monitoring activities and equipment specified in the annex."

It termed the move "wise" and aimed at "implementing both the law of parliament and reducing the costs of implementing the law."

## Balkh Power Consumers Pay Millions of afghani to Taliban

Taliban militants collect from 20 to 30 million afghanis from electricity consumers in four districts of northern Balkh province, Pajhwok Afghan News has learnt.

The Taliban collect power bills from thousands of families in Chahar Bulak, Balkh, Chamtal and Nahr Shahi districts of Balkh province.

Pajhwok findings show the Taliban collect electricity bills from over 30 villages in the mentioned districts after every two months.

Mohammad Nabi, not a real name, a tribal elder from Chahar Bulak district, told Pajhwok that electricity bills were collected by Taliban in the district since last two years.

The Taliban print bills under the title of Taliban Emirates and collect electricity bills based on meter usage once in two months, he said. Nabi also showed the bill of electricity consumption he paid to the Taliban.

"When the government was in control in our area, the bill was collected by the power utility officers, some people defaulted on bills for months, but now the Taliban collect the bills and people

pay them without any delays," he added.

"If anyone does not pay the bills within the defined time, the Taliban cut their electricity," he added.

Gul Rahman Hamdard, a lawyer from Balkh province, said that the Taliban collected millions of afghanis in power bills in the province every year.

He said the government had no information about the number of families paying their power bills to the Taliban in Balkh.

The Taliban will always collect these bills until the security situation is improved in unstable areas, he added.

Balkh power utility acknowledged Taliban's collection of power bills in a number of districts of the province. Balkh DABS Director Eng. Hameedullah Hameed said the Taliban collected an estimated four to five million afgs every two months in electricity bills in Balkh.

He said despite the fact that electricity in Balkh was imported, still DABS offered general electricity bills from its own revenue.

He said "electricity in Balkh is

imported from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The contract is renewed every year on the basis of consumers who pay the bills but DABS has to pay them from its revenue of areas where Taliban collect the bills and pocket the money," he said.

According to Hameed, due to insecurity in some Balkh areas, DABS officials could not distribute bills to people.

Balkh Police Chief Syed Merajuddin Sadaat said security forces had launched operations in Chamtal and Chaharbuluk districts to eradicate security challenges and ensure peace.

He said around 200 fresh forces would be deployed to Balkh and Chaharbuluk districts which would help stop the Taliban from collecting electricity bills.

Economy Affairs Director and University Teacher Ustad Ratib said money collected by the Taliban as electricity bills was bigger than what the government was claiming.

He said the Taliban collected money manually and it enhanced chances for corruption.

"The government acknowledges

that an estimated 20 to 30 million afgs annually goes to the Taliban. There are some areas which are under no side control and people use electricity there freely," he added.

He believed with passage of time, this issue would become a huge problem, adding that the government had no option but pay the countries from whom the electricity is imported.

According to Mohammadi, when Taliban collect electricity bills, then it is clear that the government should shoulder the burden and especially the DABS.

The Taliban have not confirmed or rejected the issue. Taliban Spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said he would respond after he collected information from areas where it was claimed that the Taliban collected electricity bills.

But after few days, Mujahid again said he did not collect information. It is worth mentioning that besides Balkh province, the residents of other areas had told Pajhwok Afghan News that the Taliban collect their electricity bills.

### Japan Announces...

Ambassador of Japan Ma-ttsuda Kuninori and Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Norri-ko Yoshida signed an agreement at a ceremony in Islamabad. Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees Saleem Khan was present on the occasion.

"Acquiring education and vocational skills is vital for the social inclusion of Afghan refugees. In this project, we will continue to provide financial support, which will greatly contribute to the stability and peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Peace and stability are the preconditions for achieving voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan," said the Japanese ambassador.

### Afghanistan: Biden's...

ground is dire. The Taliban have refrained from attacking US and NATO troops, but they are relentlessly targeting Afghan security forces, women judges and journalists, NGOs, and government workers in a campaign of assassinations to systematically break down the pillars of civil society built over the last two decades.

Pakistan and its friends in Washington are busy discouraging the idea of reopening and renegotiating the peace agreement. They want the Biden Administration to look forward, not back, and put its energies on pushing the intra-Afghan dialogue. This gives Rawalpindi the edge since the Taliban are living, training, receiving arms and getting healthcare from Pakistan.

### Sharp Rise in...

Pro-government forces (PGF) caused a quarter of all civilian casualties, totaling 2,231 (841 killed and 1,390 injured), a decrease of 24 percent from 2019, with the Afghan national security forces causing most of these (22 percent of the total).

The overall reduction in civilian casualties in 2020 was due to factors such as fewer suicide attacks by AGEs causing large numbers of civilian casualties, especially in urban areas, and a stark drop in casualties attributed to international military forces.

While there was an increase in the number of civilian casualties that were unclaimed by any party and for which UNAMA could not attribute responsibility, the report finds that the Taliban caused 19

percent fewer civilian casualties than in 2019 and the Daesh 45 percent fewer.

Strikingly, international military forces in 2020 were responsible for their lowest recorded number of civilian casualties since UNAMA began documentation in 2009.

In 2020, this figure was 120 civilian casualties, down from 786 in 2019, a decrease of 85 percent.

"Indiscriminate attacks, such as the use of pressure-plate IEDs by the Taliban also remain of concern," said the report, "these devices are victim-activated and cannot be directed toward a specific target."

Similarly, according to the UN, concerns remain about vehicle-borne IEDs that cause many civilian casualties due to the large explosive power used,

even if they are not directed against civilians or civilian objects. Also, of "grave concern" is the use of explosive weapons in civilian populated areas, especially the use of artillery shells, mortars and rockets during ground engagements, but also the use of airstrikes and IEDs in civilian populated areas, said the reports.

"Ground engagements were the leading cause of civilian casualties in 2020 (36 percent), a slight increase compared with 2019. They were followed by AGE suicide and non-suicide attacks using improvised explosive devices (34.5 percent), a 30 percent decrease."

"AGE targeted killings (14 percent) increased by 45 percent; and PGF airstrikes (8 percent) were down 34 percent," said the report.

### How to End a...

war." He argued that a continued US military presence is critical to inducing the Taliban to negotiate, since getting foreign forces out of Afghanistan has long been the group's top priority.

At the other end of the spectrum, one of Dunford's former advisers, Afghanistan expert Carter Malkasian, says that it's past time to get out.

"When I look at the costs, leaving now is more compelling than ever before," he told the Washington Post recently. Malkasian argues that keeping US troops in the country is unlikely to persuade the Taliban to enter negotiations as long as they're making gains on the ground, and the presence of 2,500 US troops hasn't stopped that.

But there's also a middle option: Postpone the withdrawal for six months, negotiate a new

timetable for the peace talks, and try a more energetic diplomacy (which has come back into style after four years in the wilderness) — including soliciting help from neighbouring countries like Russia and China — to press the Taliban to negotiate seriously.

Getting peace process back on track

"The peace process is the best option for a decent outcome, even though it's the least likely to succeed," Laurel Miller, a former State Department envoy to Afghanistan, told me. "You need a six-month extension to have any possibility of getting it back on track."

The best US leverage over the rebels isn't its military presence, she said; it's the ability to show them they will be international pariahs if they seize power by force.

"We know that they want to have the sanctions lifted,"

added Barnett Rubin, another former State Department adviser. "We can begin that process as a positive incentive for negotiations."

The extension should be a one-time experiment, not an open-ended stay, he added. "If it doesn't begin to work by Nov. 1, then we have to leave. And we have to tell people in advance that that's what we're going to do."

That sounds like a sensible answer. After 19 years and more than 2,400 dead, we have no responsibility to continue propping up a government that can't be made to work. But there's still a moral argument for trying to leave the right way — for doing what we can to avoid needless chaos on the way out the door.

Six months is not forever. It might just be enough time to give peace negotiations a chance.

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# Saudi Arabia 'Allows Women' to Join Military for First Time

Women in Saudi Arabia are allowed to join the military and take up arms, this is the latest profession accord the kingdom has offered to recruit female soldiers.

The women now have the privilege to join as soldiers, lance corporals, corporals, sergeants, and staff sergeants, Aljazeera reported

Saudi Arabian women can be employed as soldiers, lance corporals, corporals, sergeants, and staff sergeants, according to the Saudi-based Arab News.

Female employments have gradually been opened to women, which is part of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's plans to transform his nation, it is now common to see women working as cashiers, brewing cappuccinos in the coffee shops, and work

at restaurants and tasks such as these were previously limited only to men.

The idea to allow female military personnel was first announced in 2019, and at the same year the kingdom allowed women to leave the country without the permission of male relatives, the Saudi government took a major step towards ending restrictive guardianship. In the year 2018, the Arabian government also allowed women to acquire driver license and were given the freedom to drive, a step that economists at Bloomberg believe it would benefit the country with more than \$90 billion by 2030.

The criteria for women to join the military besides weight and height is that a woman should be graduated from high school, and applicants married to foreigners will not be



eligible to join, Al Jazeera reported. Last year, the Minister of Justice appointed 100 public notaries, and the Kingdom also in recent months announced that it would hire female court judges soon.

Before in Saudi Arabia women only had limited options for work, mostly they worked as teachers or for government entities and in 2011 a law was passed to allow women to work in all lingerie and cosmetics business.

## A look at the world

### Iran May Enrich Uranium up to 60%: Khamenei

Iran's Supreme Leader said Monday his country "will not back down" on its right to pursue its nuclear program and could enrich uranium up to 60% purity for civilian use. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was addressing a meeting of the Assembly of Experts, a powerful 88-member clerical body, in the Iranian capital Tehran.

"Like other issues, the Islamic Republic will not back down on the nuclear issue and will continue to move forward on the basis of the country's present and future needs," he noted.

He said Iran "does not seek nuclear weapons," adding even if the Islamic Republic decided to produce them, no one could prevent it from doing so.



"That international Zionist clown has said they won't allow Iran to produce nuclear weapons," he remarked, obliquely referring to Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu. "First of all, if we had any such intention, even those more powerful than him would not be able to stop us."

On Iran's scaling back of commitments under the 2015 nuclear accord, Khamenei said Tehran will return to full compliance when other signatories fulfill their obligations. He also called on the Hassan Rouhani-led government and parliament to "resolve their differences" on implementing the recently passed law aimed at countering US sanctions. As part of the law, Iran is slated to stop the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on Feb. 23, limiting the access of inspectors from the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to Iranian nuclear sites. Iran's leader termed it a "good law" and said it should be "executed precisely."

'Bad deal'  
Pertinently, Iran's conservative-dominated parliament has taken umbrage to the deal reached between Iran's nuclear agency and the IAEA during IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi's visit to Tehran on Sunday. Iranian lawmakers on Monday ...

P2

### Elon Musk Loses \$15 Billion in a Day after Bitcoin Warning



Elon Musk is no longer the world's richest person after Tesla Inc. shares slid 8.6% on Monday, wiping \$15.2 billion from his net worth.

Tesla's biggest decline since September was fueled in part by Musk's comments over the weekend that the prices of Bitcoin and smaller rival Ether "do seem high." His message — via his favored medium of Twitter — came two weeks after Tesla announced it added \$1.5 billion in Bitcoin to its balance sheet.

Musk also tweeted earlier Monday that the company's Model Y Standard Range SUV would still be available "off the menu," backing up reports from electric vehicle news site Electrek that the model had been removed from its online configurator.

Musk drops to second on the Bloomberg Billionaires Index of the world's 500 richest people with a net worth of \$183.4 billion — down from a peak of \$210 billion in January. Amazon.com Inc. founder Jeff Bezos reclaimed the top spot even as his fortune fell by \$3.7 billion to \$186.3 billion Monday.

The two billionaires have been swapping places since January as the value of Tesla fluctuated. The stock surged as much as 25% to start 2021 before wiping off almost all of this year's gain. Musk briefly overtook Bezos after his rocket company SpaceX raised \$850 million earlier this month, valuing the company at \$74 billion, a 60% jump from August.

Bezos occupied the top spot on the ranking for three straight years prior to January, when Musk eclipsed the e-commerce titan thanks to a 794% rally in Tesla shares.

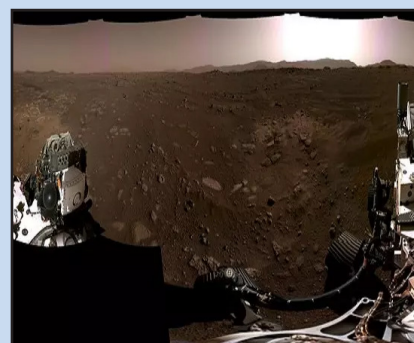
The market selloff on Monday hit many of the world's ultra-rich. Zhong Shanshan, Asia's wealthiest person, was the second-biggest decliner on the Bloomberg index, dropping by \$5.1 billion as his bottled-water company fell 4.5%. Colin Huang of Pinduoduo Inc., Reliance Industries Ltd.'s Mukesh Ambani and Tencent Holdings Ltd.'s Pony Ma all lost more than \$2.5 billion each.

### NASA Releases First Audio, Video from Mars Rover

The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) released the first audio and video footage Monday from its Perseverance rover which landed on Mars last week.

The three and a half minutes of video footage showed parachute deployment and the Perseverance's touchdown last Thursday on the planet. The video ends with the Perseverance's wheels making contact with the surface of Mars.

A microphone on the rover also provided the first audio recording of sounds from the Red Planet. Although the microphone did not collect usable data during the descent,



a breeze on the planet could be heard for a few seconds, in addition to mechanical sounds of the rover operating on the surface, NASA said in a statement.

The footage from high-definition cameras aboard the spacecraft started 7 miles (11 kilometers) above the surface of Mars, showing the supersonic deployment of the most massive parachute ever sent to another world.

"This video of the Perseverance's descent is the closest you can get to landing on Mars without putting on a pressure suit," Thomas Zurbuchen, NASA associate administrator for the Science Mission Directorate at NASA headquarters, said in the statement.

Acting NASA Administrator Steve Jurczyk said the "Perseverance is just getting started and already has provided some of the most iconic visuals in space exploration history." The rover touched down at the massive Jezero Crater, which scientists believe could contain signs of ancient microbial life for which the Perseverance is looking. The crater was once the site of a sprawling lake and river delta that theoretically would have hosted optimal conditions for microorganisms to live and be preserved. The Perseverance's journey to ...

P2



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