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Heart of Asia

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Khalilzad Back on Track with Talks as He Heads for Region

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad has embarked on another trip to Germany, Afghanistan and regional countries, aimed at strengthening the Afghan peace process, sources said. Khalilzad was on Sunday in Germany and is expected to travel to Qatar, Afghanistan, Pakistan, UAE and a number of other regional countries in the coming days, sources added. This comes as negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban peace teams resumed last week after more than a month of delays. Meanwhile, the Afghan State Ministry for Peace Affairs is optimistic about Khalilzad's trip to the region. "We welcome the U.S. Special Envoy's trip. The United States is a good strategic partner for Afghanistan and we hope this trip will be more effective in facilitating the peace process in Afghanistan," ... **P3**



Any Attempt Against Doha Peace Accord Will Face Failure: Taliban Warns

On the first anniversary of the Doha agreement on Sunday, the Taliban warned that any attempt against the Doha peace agreement will end in failure. Taliban in a statement said that the agreement between U.S. and the group was signed for the people of Afghanistan and the United States to end the 20-year war. The Taliban statement referred to the commitments of the two sides in the peace agreement and stated that the group is committed to all the contents of the agreement and considers its implementation an effective means of resolving the problem and ensuring peace in Afghanistan. The Taliban, while urging the United States to abide by all the provisions of the agreement, stressed that the release of the remaining prisoners and the removal of the names from the blacklist were among the articles of the agreement that had not yet been fulfilled. ... **P3**

One Year On, Govt Sees No Progress in U.S.-Taliban Deal



The deal signed between President Donald Trump's administration and the Taliban marked a one-year anniversary on Sunday, with the Afghan government saying that the accord did not end up with the expected results as violence in the country has increased. But the Taliban says it is a practical step toward achieving peace and stability

in the country. The deal was signed after 18 months of talks between the US negotiating team led by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban negotiators in Doha. The United States agreed in the deal to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by May 1 and the Taliban committed to cutting their ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups

and not allow them to operate on Afghan soil. "They (Taliban) have committed to cut their ties with terrorist groups; however, according to information obtained by the government, they have not cut these ties," State Minister for Peace Affairs Sayed Saadat Mansoor Naderi said. "There isn't anything in this

agreement to give hope to Afghans. This has made progress in the peace process fragile," said Rahmatullah Andar, spokesman for the National Security Council.

Based on the agreement, the intra-Afghan talks between negotiators from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban were supposed to begin 10 days after the deal was signed, but this was delayed due to differences over the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government, something which was later approved by the Loya Jirga, the grand council, convened by President Ghani.

"Afghans expected that violence would end when the deal was signed, but this did not happen and instead it increased," President Ghani's special envoy for Pakistan, Mohammad Umer Daudzai, said.

Finally, the Afghan government released over 5,000 Taliban prisoners and the intra-Afghan negotiations began on September 12 at a ceremony in Doha. The two sides continued their discussions for three months but were able only to agree on procedural rules of the negotiations during this period.

Later on, both sides began discussions on the agenda of the talks, ... **P3**

One Killed, nine Wounded in Ghazni Explosion

Afghan local officials say a planted bomb detonated in Kolah Sabz area of PD1 of Ghazni city at around 03:00pm on Sunday. The spokesman of Ghazni Police, Sardar Wali Tabasom said at least one civilian was killed and seven more with two security forces were wounded in the explosion. According to him, the target of the blast was a ranger vehicle of the security forces.



China Pledges to Provide 400,000 Doses of COVID19 Vaccine to Afghanistan

Chinese Ambassador to Kabul, Wang Yu on Sunday in a meeting with Dr. Wahid Majrooh, Acting Minister of Public Health announced that another 200,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine will be assisted to the Government of Afghanistan. In a previous meeting with the Acting Minister of Public Health, Mr. Wang Yu promised the Afghan government 200,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine, to which another 200,000 doses would be added at the request of the Ministry of Public Health. Dr. Wahid Majrooh, Acting Minister of Public Health, appreciated China's assistance and called the corona vaccine one of the health sector's most important needs in controlling the coronavirus. He also called China a good



partner of the Ministry of Public Health and said that its assistance in the height of the Corona crisis in Afghanistan is very useful and valuable. The Acting Minister of Public Health asked the Chinese Ambassador to cooperate with the Ministry of Health in activating the medical devices of the Jamhoriyat Hospital.

In the meantime, Mr. Wang Yu stressed on the continuation of China's cooperation in Afghanistan, saying that the coronavirus crisis delayed the country's cooperation in activating the medical devices of the Jamhoriyat Hospital, and that after the situation normalized, the cooperation process will be restarted.

China the Only...

gauge of retail inflation, rose by 2.5 percent year on year in 2020. The producer price index, which measures goods cost at factory gate, shed 1.8 percent throughout the year.

A breakdown of the data showed the output of the primary industry went up 3 percent in 2020, overshadowing a 2.6-percent ascent in the secondary industry and a 2.1-percent rise logged in the tertiary sector.

China added 11.86 million new urban jobs nationwide in 2020, exceeding the target of creating over nine million urban jobs. By the end of 2020, the surveyed unemployment rate in urban areas stood at 5.2 percent, below the government's annual target of around 6 percent.

China's foreign trade rose 1.5 percent to \$4.65 trillion in 2020, helped by its recovered manufacturing production sector. Exports came in at \$2.59 trillion last year with a 3.6-percent growth year on year, while imports were down 1.1 percent, standing at \$2.06 trillion.

Sunday's batch of official Chinese economic data also showed property investment rose 7 percent in 2020 from a year earlier, gathering pace from the 6.8-percent increase in the first 11 months. Fixed-asset investment notched up a gain of 2.9 percent for the full year, versus expectations for a 3.2 percent gain.

Sales of new energy vehicles picked up 17.3 percent year on year in 2020 to reach 1.45 million thanks to the government's stimulus package and rosy market sentiment.

By Oğuzhan ERTUĞRUL, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey

Centennial of Turkish-Afghan Diplomatic Relations!

Today marks the centennial anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Afghanistan. Ankara Government was officially recognized today by Afghanistan through the Treaty of Alliance signed on 1 March 1921. I use the term "Ankara Government", because Turkey is founded in 1923, and in preceding years, Turkey was being ruled in practice by the Turkish Grand National Assembly under Atatürk's leadership, which we call Parliamentary Government or Ankara Government. In order to celebrate 1 March as the Turkish-Afghan Friendship Day every year, the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs have signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Istanbul on 24 December 2010.

It is a moral and historical obligation for both sides to teach the value and true meaning of this time-tested bond to new generations. Even though we enjoy the 100th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, this is not a relationship of only the last century. First traces of Turks date back to 2nd century BC when Saka (Iskit) Turks founded their state in northern Afghanistan. This was followed by another clan of Turks, Eftalites, founding their empire in the 5th century, which used to cover an area now called Balkh, Takhar, Kabul, Gazne, Zabul and Kandahar. Afghanistan has become one of the important settlements for Turks during Ghaznavids in 10th century, Seljuks in 11th century and Harzamsahs in 12th century. Following the Mongol invasion in 13th century, Turks have continued to settle in this geography in 16th and 17th centuries, this time under Babur Shah.

The interaction between Turks and Afghans continued in 18th century when Ahmad Shah Durrani exchanged letters with the then-Ottoman Sultan Mustapha the 3rd, as well as in late 19th century when Ottoman Sultan Abdulhameed dispatched a diplomatic mission to Afghanistan. In early 20th century, Habibullah Khan, upon the recommendation of Mahmoud Tarzi, invited Turkish advisers in every walk of life to Afghanistan. It should be no surprise that the first public hospital was established in 1913 by some of these advisers. In late 1910s, Afghan students who used to study in Anatolia joined the Turkish War of Independence and were martyred. Afghan women also became the companion in misfortune of the Turkish nation by donating their valuables to the Turkish cause for independence. In 1920, one of the most influential



leaders of the Ottoman Empire, Djemal Pasha, came to Kabul and stayed for one year for modernizing the Afghan Army. Atatürk, even though he was engaged in the Turkish war of independence, did not hesitate to send numerous delegations to Afghanistan composed of doctors, military officers and teachers, at a time when our Afghan brothers and sisters needed our help most.

The wars for independence in late 1910s-early 1920s of the Turks and Afghans have brought hearts and minds of the two peoples much closer. They experienced similar sorrows and cheers in full solidarity. As Ghazi Amanullah Khan highlighted during a reception he hosted at Dilkusha Palace on October 10th, 1922 on the occasion of Turkey's independence war victory, "Turks and Afghans are brothers. Turks' joy is our joy; their sorrow is our sorrow."

One of the first resolutions adopted by the Ankara Government related to opening a diplomatic mission in Kabul. Accordingly, a Turkish officer with Afghan origin, Mr. Abdurrahman Samadan, was appointed in 1920 as the Turkish representative to Afghanistan. The Turkish Embassy became the first diplomatic mission in Kabul. Turkey was the second country to recognize Afghanistan. Afghanistan also became the second country to recognize the Ankara Government. On June 10, 1921 in Ankara, the Afghan Embassy in Ankara was inaugurated, and Atatürk himself raised the Afghan flag to the pole. Amanullah Khan became the first foreign head of state to visit Turkey in May 1928. Turkey also signed its first Technical Cooperation Agreement during this visit. Turkey's close cooperation with Afghanistan continued till

the start of the Second World War. The mid-section of the Afghan-Iran border was drawn up by a Turkish commission in 1934-45. When Atatürk passed away in 1938, Afghanistan was the only country to officially declare a mourning of one-week with flags half-mast. After the Second World War, Turkey played a crucial role in Afghanistan in the establishment of modern state structures and public institutions in the fields of administration, military, culture, education and health. Turkey continued to dispatch teachers, physicians, military officers and experts in other fields till 1960s. Zaher Shah's visit to Turkey on 26 August-8 September 1957 took place during those cherished times. As a concrete demonstration of support, Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes visited Kabul on 26-30 July 1956, followed by a 10-day state visit of President Celal Bayar on 12-22 September 1958, which included Kabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Kunduz and Baglan.

The close cooperation continued till the Soviet invasion in 1979. After 1989, Turkey closely monitored the ensuing drama and strived to contribute to peace and stability efforts through its Embassy which kept open till 1996.

For the last 19 years, Turkey has restarted to train Afghan military and police officers with 5061 military and 9913 police officers trained so far. Today, Turkey has been providing the largest development assistance in its history mainly in the fields of education, infrastructure and health. Afghans are the biggest demander and recipient of Turkish scholarships. There are 21 Turkish schools and four education centers in eight provinces with 7080 ... **P3**

By ROBERT BURNS, Associated Press

At Crossroads in Afghanistan, Biden Weighs Dilemma

America's longest war is approaching a crossroads.

President Joe Biden's choices in Afghanistan boil down to this: withdraw all troops by May, as promised by his predecessor, and risk a resurgence of extremist dangers, or stay and possibly prolong the war in hopes of compelling the Taliban to make peace with a weak and fractured government.

The second option may be the most likely, but officials say no decision has been made.

Afghanistan presents one of the new administration's tougher and more urgent decisions. The U.S. public is weary of a war nearly 20 years old, but pulling out now could be seen as giving the Taliban too much leverage and casting a shadow over the sacrifices made by U.S. and coalition troops and Afghan civilians.

Biden has not commented in detail on Afghanistan since taking office, but he has a long history with the war. In 2009 as vice president, he lost an internal administration debate at a crucial juncture in the war; he argued for reducing the U.S. military commitment to focus mainly on

countering extremist groups, but President Barack Obama decided instead to vastly increase troop numbers to 100,000.

The Obama strategy failed to force the Taliban to seek peace, and by the time Donald Trump entered the White House in January 2017, Obama had dropped the troop total to about 8,500. Trump increased it by several thousand later that year, and after his administration reached a conditional peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, he began a withdrawal, including a reduction last month to the current total of 2,500.

Biden said during the 2020 campaign that he might keep a counterterrorism force in Afghanistan but also would "end the war responsibly" to ensure U.S. forces never have to return.

"I would bring American combat troops in Afghanistan home during my first term," he wrote last summer in response to written questions from the Council on Foreign Relations, although the U.S. mission there already shifted some years ago from combat to

advising Afghan security forces. "Any residual U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would be focused only on counterterrorism operations."

The administration says it is studying the February 2020 so-called Doha deal in which the Taliban agreed to stop attacking U.S. and coalition forces and to start peace talks with the Kabul government, among other things, in exchange for a complete withdrawal of foreign troops by May 1, 2021.

Senior U.S. officials have asserted for months that the Taliban has fallen short of its Doha commitments, and although the administration's review is ongoing, arguments for extending a troop presence beyond May 1 are considerable.

U.S. allies in NATO have not disputed the U.S. complaint that the Taliban has not fulfilled its Doha commitments, nor have they called for an early troop withdrawal. Some appear to be preparing for a U.S. decision to stay beyond May 1. The deadline, barely two months away, is itself a factor, since it will soon be too late to get all 10,000 U.S. and NATO troops out in an ... **P3**

Libya Parliament...

of any legitimate forces to secure the city," Abu Shahma said.

"It is up to the members of parliament to select the convenient place in coordination with the relevant security authorities." Meanwhile, interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah said earlier this week he had submitted to Saleh a "vision" for a cabinet lineup that would help steer Libya to elections in December, and that the names of proposed ministers would be disclosed in parliament during the confidence vote.

Parliament has 21 days to vote on the lineup, according to a UN road map. Dbeibah was selected early this month in a UN-sponsored inter-Libyan dialogue, the latest

internationally backed bid to salvage the country from a decade of conflict and fragmented political fiefdoms.

Saleh said on Friday Dbeibah should choose "competent people with integrity, from across the country, in order to achieve [national] consensus" for his government.

"Everyone should be represented so that [Libya] can emerge from the tunnel," Saleh said.

If approved, a new cabinet would replace the Tripoli-based GNA, headed by Fayeze al-Sarraj, and the parallel administration in the east.

The prime minister will then face the giant task of unifying Libya's proliferating institutions and leading the transition up to the December 24 polls.

New Zealand's...

Auckland.

The organisers of the America's Cup yacht race said on Sunday the head-to-head final between Italy and New Zealand that was to start March 6 was postponed to at least March 10.

New Zealand's fourth Twenty20 International cricket match against Australia has been shifted to Wellington where it will be played behind closed doors on Friday.

Some social media users from around the world expressed dismay at the strong response that would lock

down a large city over a single case, with one Twitter user writing, "They are insane."

However, swift public health measures often implemented in the past year, combined with aggressive contact tracing and border closure have been credited with making New Zealand highly successful in keeping the coronavirus pandemic from spreading. New Zealand, with a population of five million, has recorded slightly more than 2,000 coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic and 26 deaths.

Most Imported Medicine Smuggled: Afghan Govt Agency

Afghanistan's Food and Drug Administration reported that a major portion of essential medicine entering the country is being smuggled in illegally. The value of medicine imported into Afghanistan last year could be as much as \$1 billion, but only around \$44 million worth went through the Afghan customs procedures, said Ebrahim Shinwari, head of Afghanistan's Food and Drug Administration. "Who knows how much medicine will be imported into the country? Maybe, medicine costing 1\$ billion will be imported. But statistics from last year show medicine costing only \$44 million was imported and registered in the country last year," he said.

Executives in Farmaan Kaihan, a medicine-importing company in Afghanistan, says there is a mafia in the medicine business, and that 90% of medicine in the country is being imported illegally. "I can prove with evidence that 90% of medicines are being illegally imported in the country while only 10% is brought in legally," said Dr. Shafi, an employee in the company. Officials at the union of Medicine-Importing companies say that illegal medicine and drugs are being imported into the country through smuggling. "Not hundreds but thousands of medicine containers are being imported into the country and distributed in markets, some of this



medicine is illicit and not on the government's authorized medicine list. This list exists from previous years and has not been reviewed yet," said Asadullah Kakar head of the union. There are few factories manufacturing

medicines and drugs in the country, but only 6% of necessary medicine and pharmaceuticals consumed in Afghanistan are manufactured within the country, according to Afghanistan's Food and Drug Administration.

One Year On, Govt...

but these were stopped for two weeks so that both sides could discuss issues with their leaders. The first round of talks between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban negotiators continued for three months and were prolonged due to their differences over the religious basis for the talks, the relation of the US-Taliban deal with the talks, and the future government setup. "Only one of four items mentioned in the Doha agreement has been practiced by the Taliban and that is the start of the talks," Afghan republic negotiator Fawzia Koofi said. The republic negotiators returned to Kabul in December and went back to Qatar three weeks after their stay in Kabul to begin the second round of the negotiations. "Overall, the actions demonstrated by the Taliban so far have created doubts around their will for peace," Afghan republic negotiator Mohammad Amin Ahmadi said. The second round of the talks started early in January but relations were cool as there were reports about the intention by the new US administration to review the Doha deal. This led to 36-day pause in the meetings of the working groups of both sides who were expected to finalize the agenda of the negotiations. But the Taliban in a statement on the first anniversary of the deal criticized US forces for its continuation of the airstrikes. Referring to the review of the deal, the Taliban has said that the peace agreement—signed in Doha—is the practical way toward peace and stability in Afghanistan and that seeking any alternative for the deal will be a failed attempt and will end in failure for the peace efforts. Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in a voice message on the first anniversary of the deal called it the main tool to bring peace and stability and an Islamic system to the country. "The process should move forward based on the Doha deal and the Afghanistan issue should be solved through a political settlement," said Abdul Salam Zaeef, Taliban ambassador to Islamabad during their regime in Kabul. The negotiating teams in Doha have held four meetings over the last week but these discussions have not had any progress. Sources familiar with the process said that progress and speed in the talks are dependent on the announcement of the results of the US review of the Doha agreement.

Any Attempt...

According to the Taliban, this should be taken to speed up the ongoing intra-Afghan talks. Although the Taliban have been repeatedly accused of escalating violence since the signing of the agreement, the group said that it had reduced its operations, attacked major military and intelligence centres and had not collapsed any districts. In the meantime, the Taliban in the statement demanded the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan. The militant's group have recently called on Qatar, the UN Security Council and all countries and international observers present at the signing

ceremony to take responsibility for the full implementation of the Doha Agreement. The Doha peace agreement was signed in February last year between Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation, and Mullah Baradar, the head of the Taliban's political office in Qatar during Donald Trump's presidency. In the meantime, Presidential deputy spokesman Dawakhan Minapal tweeted today that the Afghans view the Doha agreement as a waste of time to achieve peace. Minapal stressed that the Doha Agreement had inflicted heavy personal and financial damages on Afghans and had destroyed

Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Rahmatullah Andar, spokesman for the National Security Council, said today that the Doha agreement did not meet the expectations of Afghans for peace and security. He stressed that the Doha peace agreement had not achieved any positive results for Afghan citizens and had so far only established a ceasefire with the United States and that the Taliban's relations with Afghans remained limited to killing, assassination and atrocities. According to him, since the agreement was signed, the country's infrastructure has been severely damaged and thousands of citizens have fallen victims to Taliban violence.

Khalilzad Back...

State Minister for Peace, Sayed Sadat Mansoor Nader said. The Taliban urged Washington to uphold its part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement signed a year ago Sunday and stated the release of remaining prisoners and the end of blacklists have yet to be implemented. The Taliban meanwhile issued a statement Sunday that urged the U.S. to uphold its commitments as part of the agreement. The group stated that "the

release of remaining prisoners and end of blacklists are part of the agreement that have yet to be implemented." Khalilzad, a Republican, brokered a deal with the Taliban on behalf of the U.S. last year and was asked to stay on in the position by U.S. President Joe Biden for the sake of continuity. The move is not typical, as traditionally incoming administrations replace politically appointed officials with their own team, particularly in foreign policy matters.

In late January, new U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: "We've asked him to continue the vital work that he's performing." Khalilzad is a veteran of Republican administrations and served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Iraq and Afghanistan under former President George W Bush. Former President Donald Trump's administration then tasked Khalilzad, who was born in Afghanistan, with negotiating with the Taliban.

At Crossroads...

orderly way by May 1. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said last week that he has assured U.S. allies and partners in Afghanistan there will be no "hasty" pullout, and that Washington's focus is on diplomacy. "Clearly, the violence is too high right now, and more progress needs to be made in the Afghan-led negotiations, and so I urge all parties to choose the path

towards peace," he said to reporters. A further hint of the administration's thinking may be its repeated reference to reviewing "compliance" with the Doha agreement, suggesting the possibility that the administration ultimately will argue that Taliban noncompliance makes the May 1 deadline void, or at least moveable.

That was the central argument offered in a Feb. 3 report by the congressionally authorized Afghanistan Study Group, whose members included Joseph Dunford, the retired Marine general and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who once led U.S. forces in Afghanistan. It called for an immediate diplomatic push to extend the May 1 withdrawal deadline.

Centennial of...

students, and we plan to open new ones in new provinces. As part of our efforts to reach out to different parts of Afghanistan, we opened our second Consulate General in Herat in June 2020, and our preparations to open the third Consulate in Kandahar this year are ongoing. Afghanistan has been suffering for the last four decades. Peace

is long over-due. Following the start of the Afghan Peace Process on 12 September 2020, there is now a historic opportunity to achieve peace. However, we must not forget that the road to peace is long, and full of challenges. Besides, the ultimate aim should not be any peace, but a sustainable, enduring one. So, each side bears a historic responsibility

not to miss this opportunity. Turkey has always been advocating an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. In this regard, we are ready, as long as our help is needed, to support our Afghan brothers with a view to contributing to efforts for achieving a sustainable peace embraced by all segments of the Afghan society and by regional and international actors.

Exchange Rates

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China the Only Major Economy to See Positive Growth in 2020: China Govt

China's economy grew by 2.3 percent year on year in 2020, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said in a statement on Sunday. Despite the grave and complex challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, China managed to bring its economic growth back to a pre-pandemic rate, the only major economy in the world that pocketed positive economic growth. Its full-year GDP exceeded 100 trillion yuan (\$15.45 trillion) for the first time. The country's GDP dipped 6.8 percent year on year in the first quarter before making a comeback of 3.2 percent in the April-June period. It then secured a gain of 4.9 percent in the third quarter and extended the rising streak from October through December by moving upward 6.5 percent. China has presented a V-shaped recovery curve

and has become the overriding force driving the recovery of the global economy, said Sheng Laiyun, deputy head of the NBS. Based on the weighted average exchange rates for the year, China's economy is now tipped to command around 17 percent of the global economy, Sheng said. The annual per capita GDP is expected to stand at 72,447 yuan (\$11,190) for 2020, an increase of 2 percent over the previous year. "The closely watched indicator exceeded \$10,000 for two years in a row," according to the senior official. Consumption remained the overriding growth engine fueling the economy, although retail sales of consumer goods, a major indicator of consumption growth, edged down 3.9 percent compared to the previous year. The consumer price index, a key ...

P2



A look at the world

Israeli Defense Minister Secretly Meets Jordan King

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz met secretly with Jordan's King Abdullah II, Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth reported on Sunday.

The daily said the meeting took place in Jordan, but did not specify the precise date of the meeting.

Gantz, who is leading the Blue and White party in the upcoming Israeli elections, told his party members earlier that he was conducting secret meetings with top Jordanian officials.



Gantz also criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's relationship with Amman, accusing him of harming Israel's relations with Jordan.

"I think Jordan is a great asset to Israel, and I think that our relationship with Jordan could be 1,000 times better. Unfortunately, Netanyahu is an unwanted figure in Jordan, and his presence harms" the two countries' relations, Gantz said.

The Jordanian authorities have yet to comment on the Israeli media report.

According to the Israeli daily, Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi also met twice with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman al-Safadi in the past months and discussed possible joint projects.

Jordan shares the longest borders with Israel, where both signed a peace agreement in 1994, and became the second Arab country to establish official ties with Israel following Egypt, which signed its peace agreement with Israel in 1979.

Libya Parliament to Discuss New Unity Gov't lineup on March 8



The speaker of Libya's eastern-based parliament has announced that the chamber will hold a special session on March 8 to discuss holding a vote of confidence on a new unity government.

Aguila Saleh, speaker of the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk, said in a statement late on Friday the meeting in the central city of Sirte will take place if a joint military commission is able to guarantee the safety of participants.

The commission consists of five senior military officers from the United Nations-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and five from its rival, the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) of eastern-based renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar. The North African country, a major oil producer, has been mired in conflict since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising against longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi. The sometimes chaotic war has drawn in several outside powers and a flood of foreign arms and mercenaries.

Since 2015, Libya has been divided between the GNA and the HoR in Tobruk, allied to Haftar.

The two sides agreed to a permanent ceasefire in October after Haftar's failed bid to wrest control of the capital from the GNA.

"Parliament will convene to discuss a vote of confidence on the government on Monday, March 8, at 11am in Sirte if the 5+5 Joint Military Commission guarantees the security of the meeting," Saleh said.

"If that provides impossible, the session will be held in the temporary seat of parliament in Tobruk at the same date and time," he added. It was unclear whether the vote itself would take place on March 8 or whether the meeting would be limited to talks.

But General Ahmad Abu Shahma, the head of the GNA's military committee and member of the joint military commission, said in a statement on Saturday that the Tripoli-based administration's forces would not be able to secure Sirte for the event.

"Sirte is still under the control of foreign forces and mercenaries. There is no presence ...

P2

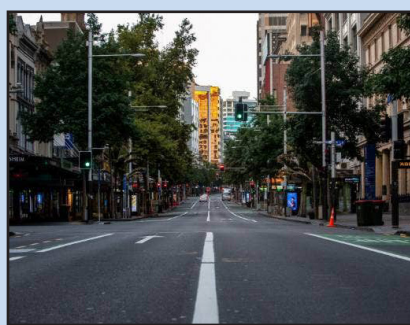
New Zealand's Auckland in Lockdown for Second Time in a Month

New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, began its second lockdown in a month on Sunday as health authorities try to contain a cluster of the more contagious coronavirus variant first identified in the United Kingdom.

The seven-day lockdown of the city of nearly two million people came exactly one year after New Zealand recorded its first coronavirus case.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the measure late on Saturday, after a new coronavirus case was located in the community which could not directly be linked to earlier cases.

The case involved a 21-year-old student who had been infectious for a week but had not



been in isolation.

"Despite our best efforts to date, recent cases have gone to work when they shouldn't have," Ardern told a televised news conference. "It is more than likely there will be additional cases in the community."

Sunday's lockdown follows a three-day stay-at-home order in mid-February after a local emergence of the UK variant of the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19. There are now about 14 cases linked to the cluster.

"COVID kills people. We must never lose sight of the reasons we take these measures - it is to save our people's lives and our livelihoods," said Ardern.

Judith Collins, leader of the opposition, called for tougher penalties against those not following public health advice about isolation.

"No one wants to be yo-yo-ing in and out lockdown," Collins said in a statement.

The new lockdown, with Level 3 restrictions, allows people to leave home only for essential shopping and essential work. Public venues will remain closed.

Restrictions in the rest of the country will be tightened to Level 2, including limits on public gatherings.

The measures have complicated several high-visibility sporting events planned in ...

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