

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Yesterday Left Tehran for Islamabad for a Two-Day Official Visit to Discuss Bilateral Issues And Regional Developments With Pakistani Officials

IRAN NEWS

Road and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami Says The Development and Quality of Railway Systems Is Our Priority, Noting Rail Transportation Is One Of the Safest Systems in the World


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Iran, Other Countries Urge U.S. to Stop Violating Human Rights

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran, along with several other countries, has drawn the world body's attention to the long history of human rights violations in the United States, urging Washington at the UN rights council to abandon such abuses and work instead to compensate for them.

Seyed Mohammad Sadati Nejad, who is in charge of human rights issues at the Iranian mission to the UN in Geneva, made the remarks on Monday during the Human Rights Council's 36th Session of Universal Periodic Review that examined the human rights situation in the U.S.

He set forth nine recommendations for the U.S. delegation, which was led by U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Assistant Secretary Robert A. Destro, Ambassador in Geneva Andrew Bremberg and Acting Legal Adviser Marik String.

Sadati Nejad said America should end its arbitrary and systematic killings using drones and bring to justice those who assassinated five Iranian citizens, including top anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, in Iraq in January.

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157 Prisoners With Security Charges Pardoned

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaeili said on Tuesday that the Judiciary pardoned 157 prisoners with security charges for taking part in the riots of 2017, 2018 and 2019.

Upon a proposal by Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Ebrahim Raeisi on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and Imam Sadeq (AS), Supreme Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei agreed to pardon or commute the jail terms of 3,780 prisoners sentenced by the public and Islamic revolutionary courts in Iran, said Gholamhossein Esmaeili in a press conference.

Esmaeili said that from the mentioned number, 2301 prisoners were freed from prison, 157 of whom with security charges that had participated over the riots of the past three years. He also added that 16 nationals of other Islamic countries were also among the prisoners pardoned on the occasion of Islamic Unity Week.

The 17th day of Rabi al-Awwal of Islamic lunar year, fallen on November 3 this year, is believed by Shia Muslims to be the birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), while Sunni Muslims mark the 12th day of the month as the birthday of the Prophet [PBUH]. The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, late Imam Khomeini, named the interval between the two dates as the "Islamic Unity Week" back in the 1980s, which has ever since been celebrated every year. Esmaeili said that the sentences of some 40,000 convicts have been either commuted or pardoned in the past 18 months. Half of the prisoners were freed.

Lasting Security Possible Only Via Cooperation With Neighbors



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani said that Iran sees lasting security as possible only through cooperation, partnership, and peace with its neighbors.

Speaking at the 20th Summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Heads of States on Tuesday, Rouhani said, "Iran is ready to share its experiences with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the fight against coronavirus."

"Iran emphasizes its principled policy of good neighborliness and dialogue with its neighbors, and sees lasting security as possible only through cooperation, partnership, and peace," he added.

"Presenting Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE), participating in the Astana Peace Talks, supporting the peace and stability in Afghanistan and the need for multilateral cooperation between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are examples of Iran's participation in ensuring lasting security in the region and the world," Rouhani said.

Some excerpts of President Rouhani's speech are as follows:

"At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to His Excellency Mr Vladimir Putin, the Honourable President of the Russian Federation for organising this summit. I am also delighted to have found the opportunity to be participating in the summit, albeit through video-conference.

The world is presently in a precarious situation. On the one hand, COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly ravaged economies, particularly the livelihood of the people, and has posed grave threats to individual lives. On the other hand, U.S.' pursuance of unilateralism and dismissal of respect for international law and institutions has further burdened co-thinking countries to double down their efforts to strengthen cooperation and form a united front in the face of both challenges combined."

"In order to counter the shared challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, it is urgent that SCO member states, in coordination with the UN and WHO, proceed to adopt a coherent and unified approach whereby they should ensure the full, free and equitable access of all regional and global populations to healthcare services and medical equipment intended for better combat against the disease. To this end and for improving on their conditions, the Islamic Republic of Iran provided some regional countries with humanitarian aid. We also register our readiness to share with other member states our experiences in combating COVID-19."

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Gov't Launches New Plan to Tackle COVID-19

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The fourth stage of a nationwide health program kicked off in Iran on Tuesday to break the chain of transmission of the coronavirus with extensive screening activities and early detection.

A Health Ministry official said on Tuesday that the fourth stage of the 'National Mobilization for Fighting Coronavirus' is oriented around neighborhoods and households. A total of 179 million screenings for the coronavirus infection were carried out in three separate countrywide programs until October 31, Jafar Sadeq Tabrizi said.

He also noted that the new scheme that was launched today focuses on managing and controlling the COVID-19 pandemic with a strategy oriented to neighborhoods and families.

People are being screened for infection in the new initiative, the virus carriers are detected, those in close contact with the patients are identified and monitored, and those with the symptoms of illness would be tested at home with rapid test kits, the official explained. Sadeq Tabrizi added that special house healthcare teams have also been organized to take care of the people who have to stay home.

He went on to say that the 4th stage of the health mobilization scheme is carried out in cooperation with people, the Basij forces, the Red Crescent Society of Iran, the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, and the non-governmental organizations.

Meanwhile Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on Tuesday that some 453 more Iranians have died from coronavirus disease (COVID-19) over the past 24 hours. The health ministry spokeswoman said that with the 453 new deaths, the country's total COVID-19 death toll mounted to 39,202.

Some 10,339 new cases of infection with the COVID-19 were found over the past 24 hours, some 3,088 of whom have been hospitalized, Sadat Lari added.

She said that a total of 703,288 Iranians have been confirmed infected with the COVID-19, some 530,694 of whom have recovered or been discharged from the hospitals. Some 5,584 other COVID-19 patients are in critical condition and are being treated in intensive care units, the spokeswoman further said.

Sadat Lari added that 5,302,200 coronavirus tests have so far been carried out in Iran.

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Not With Biden But We'll Strike Deal With Xi Jinping

China Government is busy with investment in the West Asian region and it has so far allocated budget worth \$160b in its strategic plan of "One Belt One Road (OBOR)".

On Sunday, November 8, 2019, and exactly one year ago during a specialized conference (One Belt-One Road), Professor of China Study from Tehran University Mr. Behzad Shahandeh explained the policies of China, and elaborated the approach of the strategists of the country regarding the significance of ties with China. He revealed important information which says, "The Chinese have invested heavily in Gwadar Port of Pakistan and soon this port will become the second Dubai while currently, hundreds of cranes in this port are active in unloading and uploading and they transfer China's importing and exporting goods."

He termed political-economic relations of China and Pakistan very deep and strategic, added, "The Chinese look at Pakistan as a partner and friend for all seasons." Mr. Shahandeh is a university teacher politically in alignment with Iran's 12th government (the current government). If the statesmen do not listen to him, so to whom are they to listen?

On the "One Belt One Road Initiative", Mr. Shahandeh says, "At first this project was not to be the strategic policy of China but suddenly in 2015, the Chinese took it seriously and it has currently turned into Xi Jinping (China's President)'s main project. In Iran this point should be noticed that China's GDP is \$27 trillion as the figure is very higher than any of this country's rival especially the U.S. because the current GDP of the U.S. stands at \$18 trillion. Although the aggregate GDP and purchasing power in the U.S. is more than China which indicates an intense competition between these two countries for becoming superpower in the world. According to many experts, the Chinese are today the world economic power number one, and unity with them will provide the ground for the Islamic Republic of Iran's participation with them in the whole region.

China's economic policies abroad are concentrated in two regions, first in the West Asia and second in African states. That why China has been motivated for investment in Africa is because of the continent's untapped environmental condition and infrastructural needs. But in the West Asia, China has to take in technology because the number of implemented projects in the infrastructures in this region is incomparable with Africa. Hence, for optimizing the cost-benefit in the oil and telecommunication projects, China can bring in investment and technology and we also provide them with workforce and market.

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Iran Trade With SCO Member States Hits \$15b

TEHRAN (MNA) - Spokesman of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) put country's foreign trade value with member states of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the seven months of the current year at \$15 billion.

Seyed Rouhollah Latifi broke the news on Monday and said, "About 30,356,787 tons of products, valued at \$15,154,767,624, were traded between Islamic Republic of Iran and member states of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in seven months of the current year (from March 21 to Oct. 22).

From among 10 member states of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran's maximum foreign trade volume was exchanged with China, standing at 17,834,121 tons of products, valued at \$9,545,599,065, he reiterated.

In this period, Islamic Republic of Iran exported 24,831,383 tons of products, valued at \$8,039,506, to 10 member states of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, IRICA spokesman highlighted.

In addition, Islamic Republic of Iran imported 5,525,404 tons of products from SCO's member states, valued at \$7,114,873,118, from March 21 to Oct. 22.

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Dialogue Key to Settling Longstanding Tensions

TEHRAN (MNA) – President's Chief of Staff has welcomed a new ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, saying dialogue is key to settle longstanding tensions.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes Russia's mediation and the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia," Mahmoud Vaezi tweeted on Tuesday.

"We hope that the new agreement will be implemented soon," he added.

The Iranian vice president expressed hope that the two sides will respect the international borders and observe the rights of civilians who have been afflicted by the weeks-long skirmishes.

Judiciary Plans for Evolution To Establish Justice

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Judiciary Chief Ebrahim Raisi says the judiciary seeks an evolution to establish justice, and a document has been drafted in this regard.

Speaking on Tuesday at the Second National Conference on the Islamic Governance, Raisi said that in line with the second phase of the Islamic Revolution, the judiciary had prepared a document to make changes to help implement justice, which is a principle of the Islamic governance.

According to the judiciary chief, the plan emphasizes the use of new technologies, electronic litigation, and active in addressing various social issues that will lead to crime prevention.

The official stressed the need to use indigenous models for governance in various fields. Raisi called rationality, spirituality, and belief in people among Islamic governance principles and said that the people's vote has an important place in the Islamic system.

"The realization of justice in various sectors is strongly emphasized in Islam and is one of the Islamic governance principles," stressed Iran's judiciary chief.

Economic policies should not be tied to what goes on outside borders: Judiciary chief stressing that the administration of justice in all sectors of the country is very important, Raisi said: "In the field of justice, the administration of justice is the most important axis for us; What can stop crimes and social corruption is economic justice and job creation."



He noted: "Under no circumstances should economic policies and national interests be tied to what is going on outside these borders; It is possible to do sustainable work in the country with the existing capacity and young workforce."

He pointed out: "I totally believe in the words of the Leader of Islamic Revolution that the solution to the problems is within our country and there are no unsolvable problems in the country." The Second National Conference on Islamic Governance was held at Tehran's Supreme National Defense University on Tuesday in the presence of Iran's Judiciary Chief Sayed Ebrahim Raisi and top Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Mohsen Araki.

Tehran, Tashkent Stress Need For Intra-Afghan Dialogue

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

IRAN (IP) - Special envoy of the Iranian Foreign Minister for Afghanistan and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan stressed the end of violence in Afghanistan and the need for dialogue between Afghans.

Special Envoy of Iran's Foreign Minister for Afghanistan Mohammad Ebrahim Taherianfard and Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative of Uzbekistan's President for Afghanistan Esmatullah Ergashev discussed the developments in Afghanistan especially the intra-Afghan talks over the telephone.

Stressing the need to reduce violence and establish a ceasefire as an important step in alleviating the suffering of the Afghan people, the two sides described negotiation and reaching an understanding as the only reassuring way to establish lasting stability in the country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been developing relations with Afghanistan in the political, cultural and economic sectors for the past 20 years, and has always supported the peace of a country led by the government and people of Afghanistan.

Rouhani Advises Biden Administration to Restore U.S. Tarnished Image



TEHRAN (MNA) – President said the new U.S. administration needs to restore the tarnished image of the country as well as its international ties.

President Hassan Rouhani in his Tuesday remarks, addressing the Government Economic Coordination Headquarters, noted that the new U.S. administration must, more than anything else, reconsider the U.S.' inhumane behavior with other nations in order to restore its tarnished image in the international community.

In this meeting, the Iranian foreign ministry and the Central Bank of Iran agreed to enhance cooperation on having Iran's frozen assets in foreign banks.

The U.S. enmity towards the Islamic Republic of Iran has been so high that it started a full-fledged economic war against the Iranian nation.

Trump's enmity and hostility towards the Iranian nation were unprecedented which had been formed under the influence of Zionists, Saudis, and extremist groups in the United States.

Spokesman Hopes Biden Will Correct Trump's Wrong Policies

TEHRAN (IFP) - The government spokesman has expressed hope that the administration of the new US president will adopt decisions which would serve the interests of both Iran and America and the whole world.

Speaking in his weekly press briefing, Ali Rabieci highlighted that Tehran will press ahead with its efforts to boost domestic potential no matter what decisions Washington will make.

"Regardless of the decisions which the new U.S. government will make, and which we hope will be in the interests of the international community as well as both nations, we will continue our programs to enhance our capabilities," he noted.

"During the economic war, we learned how to cement the pillars of domestic economy and prop up people's livelihoods harmed by this major war," he said.

The spokesman said Iran will wait and see what approach the White House will adopt, and will act accordingly.

"Based on what scenarios are adopted [by the U.S.], the required decisions will be made in due time based on the circumstances," he said.

The spokesman then touched upon U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's election pledge that he wants to restore the United States' credibility in the world.

"Biden also believes that America's credibility has been severely undermined," he said.

The spokesman said Iranian people's share of global economy is more than what it is now, adding Iran will seize every opportunity and even confront the US to secure its share.

He also expressed hope US leaders will correct their approach.



"I hope the United States' new leaders have learned lessons from the experience of the past four years," he said.

"Gone are days of bullying and unilateralism, and global issues need further enhancement of international cooperation and respect for international law and nations' rights," he added.

"They must have realized that the language of force and pressure doesn't work with regards to Iran, and they saw that Iran did not give in; rather, it stood more firmly to defend its dignity, independence and rights," he said.

The spokesman urged Washington to put right its mistakes.

"Our expectations are completely clear. We hope the next U.S. administration will stop continuing its past mistakes and try to compensate for them," he said.

"Reentering the JCPOA and unconditionally living up to all its commitments under the deal is the first step toward correcting these policies," the spokesman added.

"We hope the future U.S. government will realize that the policy of pressuring Iran is a failed one, and that the toughest sanctions ever imposed on a country in history not only failed to force us into submission, but made our nation stronger in its insistence on the principles of its independence and national dignity," Rabieci noted.

"The costs imposed on the Iranian nation should be compensated, and Iranian people are entitled to enjoy the best life in the best conditions, and we are committed to making that happen and will try to achieve that goal," the spokesman said.

Rabieci highlighted that it is only the language of peace, respect and dignity that works in dealing with Iran and all independent nations across the world.

"We will closely watch the deeds and words of the future U.S. government," he added.

"We know that Mr. Biden has promised to return to multilateral agreements, the rule of law and multilateralism. The world is waiting to see how the U.S. government will end a major instance of law-breaking whose price the Iranian nation paid with its possessions and lives at a time of the coronavirus pandemic," he said.

"We hope, this time, the U.S. government will seize this historic opportunity to change its path toward a better future and to reflect the real views of peace-loving American people," said the spokesman.

He then criticized the U.S. for preventing South Korea, Japan and the Swiss government from sending medicines and basic goods to Iran via the Swiss channel.

Trump Era Over Due to Resistance Against Policy of Maximum Pressure

TEHRAN (IRNA) - First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri said on Monday that with the adoption of the strategy of resistance against the policy of maximum pressure, the Trump era is over, but the nation and the Islamic Republic of Iran have maintained their dignity.

Addressing a meeting of members of the Association of Ethnic Unions of Islamic Iran, he referred to U.S. presidential elections, saying that a change of U.S. president does not mean a change in the country's macro-policies towards the Iranian people, but Trump's enmity with the Iranian people was unprecedented, which was formed under the influence of Zionists, Saudis and extremist groups in the U.S.

The U.S. enmity with Iran was to such an extent that they started an economic war against the Iranian people and their goal was the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Iran or the country's economy, Jahangiri said.

He pointed out that the Iranian nation, which patiently and generously endured economic pressures in recent years, took away the opportunity to disintegrate the country and the system.

"One of the hallmarks of Iran is the presence of different ethnic groups alongside each other and the existence of civil institutions such as the Association of Ethnic Unions of Islamic Iran can help solve the problems facing the ethnic groups in the country," Jahangiri added.



Iran's First Air Taxi Route to Become Operational Early 2021

TEHRAN (MNA) – The head of Iran Aviation Industries Organization says the air taxi fleet has obtained an operational flight permit and will conduct its first trip early next year.

"The first flight will definitely be operated in the [calendar] month of Bahman [January-February 2021] from Tehran's Mehrabad Airport," Manouchehr Manteghi said on Tuesday.

He added that the special instructions for the operation of passenger-grade air taxis have been devised to prevent any challenges for the airports. The separation of air taxi lines from commercial flights is one of the top criteria included in the mentioned instructions, Manteghi said.

For instance, he added, a specific line for air taxis will be built at Mehrabad Airport in the coming weeks to resolve possible issues in managing the incoming and outgoing flights in this major airport.

The CAO official noted that currently 18 domestic knowledge-based companies are involved in air taxi project across the country, and 36 more are on the list to join the field. An air taxi is a small commercial aircraft that makes short flights on demand.

Global, National Experiences Required to Contain COVID-19

TEHRAN (IP) - Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli stressed that the coronavirus death and infection rates are tragic, therefore all global and national experiences are required to contain the virus.

During the 2nd meeting of the country's Operation Headquarters of the National Task Force for Combating Coronavirus, Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli said a people-based movement which screens and defects the coronavirus patients will kick off on Tuesday, November 10 from Kermanshah province, and it is organized by Health Ministry, Red Crescent Society and municipalities of each city.

The People-based movement aims at reducing the infections and hospitalization rates, Rahmani Fazli said.

He expressed hope that with people's and other related organizations' cooperation, the coronavirus will be contained.

Iranian, Syrian Diplomats Discuss Return Home of Syrian Refugees

TEHRAN (IFP) - Ali-Asghar Khaji, a senior assistant to Iran's foreign minister, held talks with Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad in the Syrian capital, Damascus.

In the Monday meeting, the two sides discussed the latest developments in Syria, particularly the holding of a meeting on the return of refugees as well as the latest activities of the Syrian Constitutional Committee along with Tehran-Damascus relations.

The two sides said they were content with the growing trend of mutual relations, and highlighted the humanitarian and political aspects of the repatriation of Syrian refugees.

They also supported the activities of the Syrian Constitutional Committee aimed at resolving the Syrian crisis and cementing peace and stability in the country.

The top Iranian official is in Syria to hold consultations with ranking Damascus officials and attend an international meeting on the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland.

Morales Makes Bolivia Return From Exile

LA PAZ (Dispatches) - Leftist former president Evo Morales crossed the border from Argentina into Bolivia on Monday, ending a year-long exile that followed a failed bid for a controversial fourth term.

Morales was accompanied to the border by Argentine President Alberto Fernandez, before crossing on foot.

He is due to travel more than 1,000 kilometers (625 miles) by land from the border as part of a vehicle caravan that will pass through several villages and areas where he remains hugely popular. "I had no doubt I would return, but I didn't know it would be so soon," Morales declared before crossing into Bolivia from the Argentine border town of La Quiaca.



Swiss Army Back on COVID Front Line

MOUDON (AFP) - Swiss army reservists have been called up once again to help do battle against one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in Europe.

"This is a new effort which is being asked of you. The army has been requested to help" combat the virus, Lieutenant-Colonel Raul Barca told about 100 freshly-mobilised reservists, all wearing facemasks.

Small groups of men and women from the "Hospital 2 Battalion", some carrying rifles on their shoulders, arrived in military trucks on Sunday at the Moudon military base in the Vaud region of western Switzerland.



Russia Deploys Troops To Nagorno-Karabakh



YEREVAN (Reuters) - Russian peacekeeping troops deployed to the war-ravaged enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in the early hours of Tuesday as part of a ceasefire deal President Vladimir Putin said should pave the way for a lasting political settlement of the conflict there.

The deal, agreed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, ushered in a full ceasefire from midnight Moscow time on Nov. 10, freezing a conflict that has killed thousands, displaced many more and threatened to plunge the wider region into war.

The territory is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but populated and, until recently, fully controlled by ethnic Armenians who have been relentlessly pushed back by the armed forces of Azerbaijan in six weeks of heavy fighting. Under the deal, Azerbaijan will get to keep all of its territorial gains, including the enclave's second city of Shusha/Shushi, and ethnic Armenian forces must hand over control of a slew of other territories between now and Dec. 1.

Russian peacekeepers will stay in place for at least five years. Putin said they would be deployed along the frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh and in a corridor between the region and Armenia. The Russian defence ministry said it had started deploying 1,960 servicemen, who were en route to an unnamed air base to be airlifted along with their equipment and vehicles.

The deal is likely to be seen as a sign that Russia is still the main arbiter in a region it regards as its own backyard, though the scale of Turkish involvement remained unclear and Ankara's interest in the region has sharply increased. Turkey staunchly supported Azerbaijan, while Russia has a defence pact with Armenia and a military base there.

Putin said displaced people would now be able to return to Nagorno-Karabakh, and prisoners of war and the war dead be exchanged, while all economic and transport links in the area would be reopened with the help of Russian border guards. "We are operating on the premise that the agreements will create the necessary conditions for a long-term and fully-fledged settlement of the crisis around Nagorno-Karabakh on a fair basis and in the interests of the Armenian and Azeri peoples," Putin said.

Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, said Turkey would also be involved in peacekeeping efforts. There was no immediate word from Ankara. In Armenia, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan tried to put a brave face on the situation.

"The decision was made based on a deep analysis of the combat situation and in conjunction with the best experts," he said of the deal on social media. "This is not a victory, but there is no defeat until you consider yourself defeated. We will never consider ourselves defeated and this shall become a new start of an era of our national unity and rebirth."

Unrest broke out in Yerevan, the Armenian capital, however, as several hundred protesters gathered in front of government buildings to protest against the deal and demand to see Pashinyan. They shouted "We will not give it up," referring to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Afghan President Says Ties With U.S. Expected to Deepen

KABUL (Dispatches) - Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said Sunday that ties between Kabul and Washington are expected to deepen in areas of counter-terrorism and building peace as he congratulated Joe Biden on his election victory.

"Afghanistan looks forward to continuing/deepening our multilayered strategic partnership w/ the United States -- our foundational partner -- including in counterterrorism & bringing peace to Afghanistan," Ghani wrote on Twitter.

Biden's victory was also welcomed by ordinary citizens, who thought he might slow what some see as a too-hasty withdrawal of US troops.

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration signed a deal with the Taliban on February 29 that agreed to withdraw all American forces from Afghanistan by May 2021.

"Biden will also finish the war, but he wants to bring the war to a responsible end, not rushing like Trump," said Mohammad Dawood, a garment seller in Kabul.

"He will slow down the withdrawal from Afghanistan and will keep some troops here, which is good news."

The withdrawal of troops has been a cornerstone of Trump's plans to end America's longest war.

His administration agreed to fully disengage in exchange for a commitment from the Taliban to stop trans-national extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State from operating in Afghanistan.

The U.S. military has already shut several bases across the country and pulled out thousands of troops as agreed.

Timor Sharan, a lecturer at the American University in Afghanistan, said on Twitter that the incoming Biden administration will have a "more tolerant" approach to peace talks, as Washington's deal with the Taliban was "terrible" and gave no leverage to the government.

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UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria Imran Riza is to attend as an observer. Apart from ongoing violence in some parts of the country, a "siege" imposed by Western nations on Syria is the "biggest obstacle" to refugee returns, Assad told Putin, referring to a spate of Western sanctions since the war started.

Assad Says Refugee Returns a Priority for Syria

DAMASCUS (AFP) - Syria's President Bashar al-Assad told his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on Monday ahead of a Moscow-backed conference on repatriation that he is adamant on the return of refugees.

Speaking in a video call broadcast by the Syrian presidency's Facebook page ahead of the two-day conference in Damascus opening on Wednesday, Assad called their return a priority for his government.

"For us, as a government, it is a number one priority in the coming stage," especially since large parts of Syria had been recaptured by Damascus and battles have subsided, he told Putin.

"The Syrian government is not just ready, but also eager, for the results of the conference so that we can see the largest number of refugees return in the coming few months." Assad's forces control more than 70 percent of Syria, while remaining areas are held by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces as well as rebels and jihadists opposed to the Damascus government.

Since the Syrian conflict started in 2011, more than half of its pre-war population has been forced to flee their homes, including 5.5 million abroad.

Neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees. Last month, Russia pitched an international conference to facilitate their repatriation despite warnings from international agencies and Western nations that it is not yet safe to return.

It remains to be seen which countries will take part in the conference but Lebanon -- which says it hosts some 1.5 million refugees -- will send its caretaker minister of social affairs.

UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria Imran Riza is to attend as an observer. Apart from ongoing violence in some parts of the country, a "siege" imposed by Western nations on Syria is the "biggest obstacle" to refugee returns, Assad told Putin, referring to a spate of Western sanctions since the war started.

Trump Fires Defense Chief Esper

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday fired Defense Secretary Mark Esper, further unsettling a government facing uncertainty over Trump's refusal to concede defeat to Democrat Joe Biden.

The move came with just 10 weeks left in Trump's White House tenure, capping a stormy four-year relationship with the Pentagon that has seen him go through four defense chiefs, in part because they would not serve his political goals. Like his predecessors Esper had sought to fly below the political radar to avoid Trump's ire.

But they ultimately collided over White House pressure to deploy federal troops to quash civil unrest, and Trump's desire for a rapid withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan before the defense establishment felt it was safe.

"Mark Esper has been terminated," Trump declared abruptly on Twitter. "I would like to thank him for his service."

While not surprised, Democrats blasted Trump for destabilizing the transition between administrations.

Top Democrat Nancy Pelosi called Esper's firing "disturbing evidence that President Trump is intent on using his final days in office to sow chaos in our American Democracy and around the world."

"Again and again, Trump's recklessness endangers our national security," added the speaker of the House of Representatives in a statement.

Trump named Christopher Miller, head of the National Counterterrorism Center, as acting defense secretary.

Miller is a retired 31-year army veteran who deployed in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 with the special forces, was Trump's White House advisor on counterterrorism, and from January to August 2020, deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations.

Esper, 56, was fired after 16 months in the job trying to keep his head down politically as he pursued fundamental reforms to the massive Pentagon bureaucracy and sought to reshape the US defense posture to focus on China.

Peru's President Ousted in Congress Impeachment Vote

LIMA (AFP) - Peru's Congress voted Monday to impeach and oust President Martin Vizcarra over allegations he took kickbacks from developers while serving as a regional governor in 2014.

After an impeachment trial that lasted nearly eight hours, the motion to remove the popular president was approved by 105 votes to 19, with four abstentions -- far exceeding the 87 votes needed to impeach.

"The resolution declaring the vacancy of the presidency of the republic has been approved," declared Congress leader Manuel Marino, who under the constitution will take over the presidential functions until the end of the current term in July 2021.

Vizcarra's tumultuous presidency ended in a similar fashion to that of the man he replaced, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, a former Wall Street banker who was forced to resign under threat of imminent impeachment over corruption allegations in 2018.

"Peru comes out weaker institutionally. Merino will be a weak president, that is the scenario in the context of general elections against the backdrop of a pandemic,"

political analyst Augusto Alvarez Rodrich told AFP.

Peru will hold general and presidential elections in April 2021. Merino, 59, will be sworn in at a special session of Congress on Tuesday, becoming Peru's third president since 2016, reflecting the institutional fragility which has characterized the South American country since independence from Spain in 1821.

Constitutionally, succession falls to Merino because Vizcarra's vice-president, Mercedes Araoz, resigned a year ago in the wake of a separate political crisis.

Speaking in his defense at the start of the impeachment trial earlier Monday, the 57-year-old president rounded on his critics, vehemently denying that he had ever accepted bribes.

"I emphatically and categorically reject these accusations," Vizcarra told lawmakers ahead of the vote over charges that he accepted some \$620,000 in bribes in 2014 when he was a regional governor.

Several businessmen claim Vizcarra received kickbacks in exchange for public works contracts while he was governor of the southern department of Moquegua.



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(adviser)

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Celta Sack Coach Oscar

MADRID (Reuters) - Celta Vigo have sacked head coach Oscar Garcia following their disappointing start to the 2020-21 campaign, the Spanish La Liga side said in a statement on Monday here.

Celta have one win from nine matches this season and drew 1-1 against promoted Elche last time out to sit 17th in the standings with seven points.

"Oscar Garcia and his coaching staff will no longer be coach RC Celta," the club said.

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Garcia out of Masters After Positive COVID-19 Test

LONDON (Reuters) - Former Masters champion Sergio Garcia has pulled out of this week's major tournament after testing positive for COVID-19, he announced on Monday.

Garcia said he began experiencing a sore throat and a cough on Saturday while he was driving back from the Houston Open, where he missed the cut, and got tested on Sunday.

"After 21 years of not missing a Major Championship, I will sadly miss @themasters this week," the 40-year-old Spaniard wrote on Twitter.

Nadal Upbeat Despite Pairs Masters Semifinal Exit

LONDON (Dispatches) - Rafael Nadal said the Paris Masters has been a "positive tournament" for him despite his semi-final defeat by Alexander Zverev, and hopes it will help him in his bid for a maiden ATP Finals title this month.

The world No. 2 went down 6-4, 7-5 to Zverev at the Accor Arena yesterday morning (Singapore time), once again failing to add the elusive title to his burgeoning cabinet that is adorned with 20 Grand Slam singles trophies.

"I have been competitive, I have been there until the end against a player who is playing great on a surface that he's winning a lot," Nadal said.

"So (it) has been a positive tournament for me. Of course, not happy about the loss, but... I played against a great player and I accept the defeat."

The Finals, which is contested by the top eight men's singles players and doubles teams, is another tournament that Nadal, 34, has failed to win.

"I need to adjust a couple of things, but I am doing well on all the important things. So let's see. I have one week and a little bit more to keep working, and I hope be ready for it."

Meanwhile ahead of his debut appearance at the Sofia Open, Denis Shapovalov took a moment to reflect on his career progression in 2020. The 21-year-old may not have added to his trophy collection this year, but he has earned three Top 10 wins and a career-high position in the FedEx ATP Rankings.



"I feel like I have been playing some really good tennis [this year]. I am really happy with the way the season has went... I think I played really well throughout the season and I am really happy with where my game is.

"I feel like I have definitely improved and I feel like my level is with these [top] guys. If I am not able to reach Top 10 again this season, I will definitely try to go for it next season. The important thing is, I feel like my level is there with these guys and I am able to compete with anyone."

Shapovalov has enjoyed success since the resumption of the ATP Tour in August, but the 6'1" left-hander will aim to end a three-match losing streak in his opening match in Sofia. The Canadian No. 1 will face Radu Albot of Moldova for the first time on Tuesday.

"I feel great. I had a good break, so I am fresh and feeling good. [I have been] practising well, so I feel good and [I am] excited for the tournament.

"[Radu] is a very tough opponent. The draw is very difficult. Every tournament this year has been pretty stacked, so it is definitely not an easy match... I am excited to get going."

Shapovalov is not the only Canadian aiming to take the trophy in Sofia. The top seed is joined in the draw by second seed and good friend Felix Auger-Aliassime. The 20-year-old arrived late to Sofia after picking up his maiden ATP Tour doubles trophy alongside Hubert Hurkacz at the Rolex Paris Masters on Sunday.

"It is definitely great for Canada and for tennis in Canada. It is amazing to see us both [in] the top [positions] of the draw and hopefully this continues, inspires a lot of Canadian kids and keeps advancing the sport in the country."

Kohli Given Paternity Leave for Three Australia Tests



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India captain Virat Kohli has been granted "paternity leave" to miss three of the country's four Tests in Australia starting in December.

But the Board of Control for Cricket in India also announced Monday that another key batsman, Rohit Sharma, has been added back to the Test squad despite his injury worries.

Kohli, 32, and his Bollywood actress wife Anushka Sharma are expecting their first child in January and the team captain has been given special dispensation to be present.

India leave for Australia this week and the BCCI said Kohli told them in October that he would return after the first Test ends in Adelaide on December 21. "The BCCI has granted paternity leave to the Indian captain," said a board statement which also confirmed his return date.

That means the world's top ranked one-day batsman will lead India in the three one-day internationals, three Twenty20 matches in November and December and the opening Test, a day-night fixture starting December 17. The second Test starts in Melbourne on December 26 followed by matches in Sydney and Brisbane in strict bio-bubbles during the pandemic crisis.

Sharma, who picked up a hamstring injury in the Indian Premier League, will start late, despite taking part for defending champions Mumbai Indians in Tuesday's final against Delhi Capitals.

Valverde Sustains Fractured Leg

MADRID (Reuters) - Real Madrid midfielder Federico Valverde is set for a spell on the sidelines after suffering a fracture in his right leg during Sunday's 4-1 defeat at Valencia in La Liga, the Spanish champions said on Monday.

Real did not say when the Uruguay midfielder could expect to return from the injury, although Spanish media reports said he would be out of action for at least a month.

"Following tests carried out on our player, Federico Valverde he has been diagnosed with a fracture in the posterior tibial bone in his right leg. His recovery will continue to be assessed," Real said in a statement here.

The injury means Valverde will miss Uruguay's World Cup qualifying matches against Colombia and Brazil this month.

Real, who are fourth in La Liga with 16 points, visit Villarreal in their first game after the international break.

Last year's Stockholm champion advanced to his first Grand Slam quarter-final at the US Open and cracked the Top 10 for the first time with a semi-final run at the Internazionali BNL d'Italia in September. Shapovalov's Top 10 breakthrough has provided the Canadian with added confidence and he will be hoping to rejoin the elite group with a strong run this week in the Bulgarian capital.



Teenager Fati Out for Four Months

MADRID (Dispatches) - Barcelona expect Ansu Fati to be out for four months after the club confirmed the 18-year-old underwent surgery on his knee injury on Monday.

Fati had the operation after tearing the internal meniscus of his left knee during Barca's 5-2 win over Real Betis on Saturday.

He will miss the majority of the rest of the season but could return for the run-in and will

hope to be fit again in time to play for Spain in next summer's European Championship.

Barca's chances in La Liga and the Champions League have been dealt a blow by Fati's injury, given the forward had emerged as one of Ronald Koeman's most exciting players.

Fati has already scored five goals and provided two assists in his 10 appearances this term.

"Ansu Fati has been operated on successfully by Dr. Ramon Cugat for the injury to the internal meniscus of his left knee under the supervision of the Club's medical staff. The player will be out for approximately four months," Barcelona said in a statement.

Kimmich out Until January After Knee Surgery

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich midfielder Joshua Kimmich underwent surgery on his right knee on Sunday and will be out of action until January, the German champions announced.

The German international, 25, suffered the injury in the first half of Saturday's 3-2 win at Borussia Dortmund which sent them top of the Bundesliga.

"Joshua Kimmich underwent successful surgery on his right lateral meniscus on Sunday evening," said Bayern in a statement.

"The FC Bayern medical department expect the midfielder to be available again in January."

Bayern board member Hasan Salihamidzic added: "We're glad that Joshua will probably be available again in a matter of weeks. We'll support him in his rehabilitation as best we can." The lay-off will sideline him for the final three games of the Champions League group stage as well as six Bundesliga fixtures.

Thiem Starts Preparations For ATP Finals

LONDON (Reuters) - Austrian Dominic Thiem said he has recovered from a foot injury he suffered during a tournament in Vienna and will travel to London this week to take part in the season-ending ATP Finals.

U.S. Open champion Thiem struggled with blisters during the Vienna Open last month and his title defence at his home tournament ended when he lost in the quarter-finals.

The world number three subsequently pulled out of the Paris Masters to give himself time to recover for the ATP Finals, which is played between the top eight men's single players and doubles teams and will be held in London from Nov. 15-22.

"Nothing is quiet in fall - the last weeks have been busy," the 27-year-old said in a post on his website. "After losing in the quarter-final at my home tournament in Vienna I recovered from my foot injury. It took me two, three days to recover, then I started my preparation for the final in London at the O2-Arena."

Thiem went down narrowly to Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas in the final of last year's tournament after defeating Alexander Zverev in the semi-finals and Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic in the group stages.

"On Wednesday I am leaving for London with a 'mini-team'. The final goal of 2020, the memories of last year are nice!" he said.

Last week, Thiem's home country reported record number of infections from the novel coronavirus. The capital Vienna witnessed a lone gunman kill four people in a rampage on Monday.



Spurs Collapse Against West Ham Changed Mindset

LONDON (Dispatches) - Jose Mourinho says the pain of Tottenham's late collapse against West Ham has changed the way his side play as they eye a Premier League title challenge.

Tottenham briefly sat top of the Premier League after a 1-0 win at West Bromwich Albion on Sunday before being dislodged by Leicester later in the afternoon.

The hard-fought manner of the victory, secured when Harry Kane scored his 150th Premier League goal in the final moments, contrasted sharply with the way Tottenham were playing earlier in the season.

Mourinho's team were cutting teams open and scoring freely, including a 6-1 demolition of Manchester United, before squandering a 3-0 lead at home to West Ham, who scored three late goals to grab a point.

Tottenham have not taken as many risks since that wake-up call, grinding out a 1-0 win at Burnley and a 2-1 victory against Brighton, which was followed by the late victory at West Brom.

Asked about the impact of the West Ham game, Mourinho said: "We felt the pain against West Ham and since then strategically the team is behaving in a different way.

"The two clean sheets at Burnley and at West Brom showed the lesson -- a team in the last five minutes that was very solid, it looked like the pain made a positive effort and the team improved after that. "The reality is that the players understand the need of being a team in every moment of every game."

