

International

Afghan president calls for 'serious talks' with Taleban

'I call on the Taleban to... show their Afghan will'

KABUL: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said yesterday the Taleban should "enter serious talks" with his government, after the insurgents and Washington both touted progress during unprecedented negotiations in Qatar last week. A months-long diplomatic push by the United States to get the Taleban to talk to Kabul culminated in six days of meetings between the US and the insurgents in Doha, but the Taleban have long refused to negotiate with the Afghan government to end the 17-year conflict, branding them as "puppets".

"I call on the Taleban to... show their Afghan will, and accept Afghans' demand for peace, and enter serious talks with the Afghan government," Ghani said in a nationally televised address from the presidential palace in Kabul. Both the Taleban and the US cited "progress" over the weekend as hopes rise that the length of the negotiations could mean a deal may be in sight which paves the way for Afghan talks.

Sticking points remain, with topics including a ceasefire and a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, as well as a prisoner exchange and a guarantee not to allow militant safe havens in Afghanistan believed to have been on the agenda. US President Donald Trump's clear eagerness to end America's longest war has also weighed heavy on the discussions.

But Afghan authorities have previously complained of being excluded from the talks in Qatar, and warned that any deal between the US and the Taleban would require Kabul's endorsement. "We want peace, we want it fast but we want it with a plan," Ghani said in his address yesterday. "We should not forget that the victims of this war are Afghans and the peace process should also be Afghan-led... No Afghan wants foreign troops to remain in their country indefinitely. No Afghan wants to face suicide attacks in hospitals, schools, the mosques, and parks."

Talks continue

Ghani spoke hours after his office said it has been reassured by Washington that the talks in Qatar remain geared towards bringing the insurgents to the table with Kabul. US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad — who has been leading the negotiations — arrived in Afghanistan late Sunday to update officials including Ghani on the progress made.

"The US insisted in their talks with the Taleban that the only solution for lasting peace in Afghanistan is intra-Afghan talks," Khalilzad said, according to a statement released by Ghani's office. "My role is to facilitate" such talks between the insurgents and Kabul, Khalilzad said according to Ghani, adding that the discussions are ongoing.

The palace said Khalilzad also confirmed that no agreement had been made on the withdrawal of foreign troops, adding that any such decision would be coordinated and discussed in detail with the Afghan government. The Taleban have insisted foreign troops must pull out. On Saturday Taleban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that until a withdrawal timetable is decided progress on other issues is "impossible". The palace's statement said Khalilzad denied reports that the issue of an interim government had been raised, saying that was "absolutely wrong" and there had been no discussions with the Taleban about any future government in Kabul.

He also confirmed there had been no progress on the issue of a ceasefire. Afghans have expressed tentative hopes about the talks tempered by fears of an American exit, with Afghan security forces taking staggering losses, the government facing election upheaval, and civilians paying a disproportionate price after nearly two decades of bloodshed. The Taleban and US officials have agreed to continue negotiations, though no date has been publicly announced. — AFP



KABUL: In this handout photograph taken and released by the Afghan Presidential Palace on January 27, 2019, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani (C) talks with US special representative for Afghan Peace and reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad (top L) during a cabinet meeting at the presidential palace. — AFP

Modi putting reforms aside in pre-election budget

NEW DELHI: Desperate for five more years in power, India's Hindu nationalist government will woo rural and urban middle-class voters with farm relief measures and tax cuts, said officials privy to plans for the final budget before a general election. Stung by opposition victories in three state polls last month, and needing to call a national election by May, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is facing growing discontent over depressed farm incomes and doubts over whether his policies are creating enough jobs.

The electoral compulsions mean that major economic reforms, such as tax cuts for bigger companies and plans to bring down the budget deficit, could be put on hold at least until after the election, the sources said. Piyush Goyal, India's interim finance minister, will present the budget on Feb. 1, in the absence of Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, who is currently in the United States for medical treatment.

The higher spending, along with a shortfall in tax collections, will push the fiscal deficit up to the equivalent of 3.5 percent of gross domestic product for the year ending in March, overshooting a previous 3.3 percent target, according to one of the sources with direct knowledge of budget discussions. That would fit with the expectations of a Reuters poll of economists. The source said there was a chance that the government could take corrective action in March, hoping that by that time the election schedule will be settled and the public focus will shift towards campaigning. "We may resort to spending cuts in March to contain the fiscal deficit," the source said.

The finance ministry had cut capital and other spending amounting to 750.8 billion rupees (\$10.55 billion) in the last financial year ending in March 2018. But Modi's government has been stepping back from such fiscal reticence in recent months. In its desperation to find ways to pay for pre-election spending, the government has also pressed the central bank to part with more of its reserves, causing a rift that culminated in the resignation of the bank's governor last month.

"This is an election budget, and most of the economic reforms have been put on hold," said another official, adding the government could defer any decision on business demands for a cut in corporate tax. Business leaders said the government still has to meet its three-year old promise of cutting the corporate tax rate for larger companies to 25 percent from 30 percent. "Although all over the world overall tax has started coming down, India is one of the large economies which has corporate taxes on the higher side," said Rohinton Sidhwa, partner at Deloitte India.

The budget, which is interim and is likely to be followed by a full one in July, is expected to project economic growth of around 7.5 percent for the next financial year, while expanding capital spending on railways, roads, ports by 7-8 percent, and estimating an increase in revenue of about 15 percent, officials said. But the main focus will be on the rural sector and the urban middle-class.

The government is ready with relief measures for farmers, benefits for unemployed youth, higher tax exemptions for the middle class and small businesses, the officials said. — Reuters



MEDININAGAR: In this file photo taken on January 05, 2019, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to the crowd in Medininagar, during a campaign sweep through eastern Jharkhand state to inaugurate development projects. — AFP

Chinese rights lawyer jailed for 'subversion'

BEIJING: Prominent Chinese human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang was sentenced yesterday to four and a half years in prison for state subversion, sealing the fate of another attorney swept up in a 2015 crackdown. Wang, 42, who defended political activists and victims of land seizures, disappeared in the sweep — known as the "709" clampdown — aimed at courtroom critics of Communist authorities.

Charged in January 2016 with alleged state subversion, Wang had been the last of more than 200 lawyers and activists arrested in the crackdown to be tried or released. The event is dubbed "709" because the arrests started on July 9, 2015. Wang was "found guilty of subverting state power, sentenced to four years and six months in prison, and deprived of political rights for five years," the Tianjin Second Intermediate People's Court said in a statement.

"He has not committed any crimes, so there shouldn't be a sentence," Li Wenzu, Wang's wife, told AFP at her home in Beijing, adding that she found out about his sentence over the internet. "I think the ones who are guilty are the judicial authorities, not him," she said. Wearing a black hoodie with her husband's name and face printed on the front, Li said she was "very worried" about his health. Citing Wang's lawyer, Li said the 10-day period

to submit an appeal starts Tuesday and that they will "of course appeal".

After more than two years of being in legal limbo — detained without a trial date — Wang's court hearing took place behind closed doors in Tianjin on December 26. Li, who has actively protested her husband's detention, was placed under de facto house arrest the day before the trial to prevent her from attending. In December, before Wang's court date was announced, Li and three supporters shaved their heads and tried to submit a petition to a Beijing court protesting his detention. Last April, Li attempted to march 100 kilometers to the detention facility in Tianjin where her husband had been held. She plans to try visiting it again on Chinese New Year's Eve next week, she said. "I still cannot stop — I must continue to defend civil rights."

'Gross injustice'

Rights organizations denounced Wang's jail sentence, with Amnesty International calling it "a gross injustice". "His sentence is part of the Chinese government's ongoing crackdown on rights lawyers," said Maya Wang, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch. "In the past three years, the Chinese government has not only detained and imprisoned rights lawyers but also debarred them," she told AFP.

According to Doriane Lau, China researcher at Amnesty International, Wang's four-and-a-half year prison sentence includes the more than three years the rights lawyer spent in detention. "He should be released in a little over a year," she wrote on Twitter. Article 47 of China's criminal law says that prison terms are "to be shortened by one day for each day

spent in custody" for cases where imprisonment is "employed before the judgment".

'Disrupting social order'

In addition to Wang, a number of other rights lawyers and activists detained by Chinese authorities in the 709 crackdown have also been charged with state subversion. In December 2017, Chinese dissident Wu Gan was sentenced to eight years in prison, one of the harshest punishments meted out in the sweep. Wang was part of a now defunct law firm called Beijing Fengrui, which specialized in cases involving farmers' land rights, labor camps and criminal rights. The firm had also frequent-

ly defended victims of sexual abuse, dissident scholars, and members of banned religious groups.

Wang, for instance, had worked on several cases defending Falun Gong practitioners. The law firm had been at the centre of the 709 crackdown, with at least five lawyers detained in 2015. At the time, state media called Beijing Fengrui a "major criminal gang", and accused Zhou Shifeng, the firm's founder, and his colleagues of "disrupt(ing) social order". Other attorneys at the firm, such as Liu Xiaoyuan, who told AFP that he believed Wang had been "wrongfully convicted", have been unemployed since the crackdown. — AFP



BEIJING: Li Wenzu, the wife of imprisoned lawyer Wang Quanzhang, poses for photo while wearing a shirt with his image calling for his release, at her home. — AFP

Abe vows Kim meet to 'break shell of mutual distrust'

TOKYO: Japan's prime minister vowed yesterday to "break the shell of mutual distrust" with North Korea by meeting leader Kim Jong Un face-to-face and restoring diplomatic relations between the two historic foes. In a major policy speech to mark the opening of parliament, Shinzo Abe also vowed to push Sino-Japan ties "to a new stage" and pledged a record budget to improve crumbling infrastructure in the world's third-biggest economy.

"I will act resolutely, never failing to seize every opportunity to break the shell of mutual distrust, and I myself will directly face Chairman Kim Jong Un... to resolve North Korea's nuclear and missile issues, as well as the abductions issue," Abe said. Abe gave no timeframe for a potential meeting with the North Korean leader but the comments came as Kim has ordered preparation for a second summit with US President Donald Trump, likely towards the end of next month.

"I will aim at diplomatic normalization by setting the unfortunate past," Abe said, using a Japanese diplomatic euphemism referring to harm caused by Japan during its brutal colonization of the Korean peninsula before and during World War II. The conciliatory message contrasted sharply from a year ago, when Abe used the same parliamentary address to set out a hardline approach, pledging to "compel North Korea to change its policies" and describing Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs as an "unprecedentedly grave and urgent threat".

Abe has long sought to resolve an emotional row related to North Korean agents' abduction of Japanese nationals during the Cold War era to

train Pyongyang's spies. Pyongyang released what it said were the five survivors in 2002, and said eight others it admitted kidnapping had all died. North Korean authorities have given no public indication of any willingness to meet Abe, while Pyongyang's state media regularly excoriate Japan over its past history and Abe for ramping up defense spending. A commentary by the official KCNA news agency earlier this month called Japan a "heinous criminal state against humanity" and an "immoral and impudent country".

'Peace and prosperity'

On China, Abe said ties had "completely returned to a normal path" after he visited President Xi Jinping in Beijing last year. Xi is expected to make his first official visit to Japan in 2019. "I will strongly pursue diplomacy with neighbors for a new era... in order to make northeast Asia truly a land of stable peace and prosperity," he said.

Bilateral ties were harmed in 2012 when Tokyo "nationalized" disputed islands in the East China Sea also claimed by Beijing. Until recently, neither nation had made much effort to repair relations. But Japan's business community has long urged Abe to improve ties with China, Tokyo's largest trade partner as well as the biggest source of foreign tourists, who are collectively becoming a key driver of the country's chronically fragile economy.

Tokyo believes a successful Xi visit is key to a productive G20, which Japan hosts this year, and hopes the Chinese leader will attend the 2020 Olympic Games. Abe was cautious about Russia, amid a territorial row over tiny islands to Japan's north that has proved difficult to resolve despite frequent meetings with President Vladimir Putin. Domestically, Abe vowed to press ahead with an upcoming consumption tax hike from the current eight percent to 10 percent from October. He also pledged a whopping seven trillion yen (\$64 billion) on infrastructure spending, as the nation's many roads and bridges become dilapidated and Japan routinely faces serious natural disasters such as flooding and earthquakes. — AFP

10,000 'red scarf' protesters march against 'yellow vest'

PARIS: More than 10,000 people wearing red scarves marched through Paris on Sunday in protest at "yellow vest" violence during the anti-government demos that have drawn tens of thousands of people to the streets over the past 11 weeks. Since mid-November President Emmanuel Macron has offered concessions and debates seeking to quell the weekly rallies that often end in violent clashes with police in the most serious challenge yet to his government.

In Sunday's rival protest, the crowds marched in rain from the Place de la Nation square to the Bastille monument, some chanting "Yes to democracy, no to revolution" as they waved French and European Union flags. Dubbed the "red scarf" movement, the centrist initiative is the brainchild of an engineer from Toulouse who was horrified by the violence seen among more extremist "yellow vest" demonstrators.

Many protesters joining the rally said they were not against "yellow vest" demands for greater help for France's poor, but were sick of the clashes and destruction that have marked protests for 11 consecutive Saturdays since mid-November. Laurent Soulie, an organizer of the march, said the protesters responded to a call to the "silent majority who have remained holed up at home for 10 weeks."

A nursing manager who gave her name as Marie-Line said she believed the yellow vests had just cause to "grumble", but came "to say that this verbal and physical violence must stop". "It's not a protest against the yellow vests — it's a protest to say, you've made your demands, we are listening to them," Francois Patriat, a senator from Macron's centrist party, told AFP at the demonstration. "There are other places to discuss this than the street. You cannot block the country and economy because you consider the president to be illegitimate."

Sunday's protest was almost double the size of the "yellow vest" demonstration in Paris a day earlier, when some 4,000 people came out to rail against Macron. The protesters are named after the luminous road safety vests that they wear.

Originally sparked by rises in fuel taxes, the movement quickly snowballed into a widespread revolt over accusations the president, an ex-banker, is out of touch with rural and small-town France. But their numbers have ebbed in recent weeks after Macron announced a series of policy climbdowns and launched a two-month consultation to allow people to vent their anger. — AFP