

International

Afghanistan 'at brink of economic collapse', warns Pakistan's FM

US, Chinese, Russian and Taliban diplomats in Islamabad

ISLAMABAD: Afghanistan is "at the brink of economic collapse" and the international community must urgently resume funding and provide humanitarian assistance, Pakistan's foreign minister warned yesterday as US, Chinese, Russian and Taliban diplomats met in Islamabad.

Shah Mehmood Qureshi spoke at the opening of the so-called "troika plus" meeting, which included Thomas West, the new US special envoy for Afghanistan. The delegates also met later with Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. "Today, Afghanistan stands at the brink of an economic collapse," Qureshi said, adding that any further downward slide would "severely limit" the new Taliban government's ability to run the country.

"It is, therefore, imperative for the international community to buttress provision of humanitarian assistance on an urgent basis," he said. That included enabling Afghanistan to access funds frozen by Western donors since the Taliban took control of the country in August, he added. Resuming the flow of funding "will dovetail into our efforts to regenerate economic activities and move the Afghan economy towards stability and sustainability", Qureshi said.

Doing so would benefit Western countries also, he argued in later comments to state media. "If you think that you are far, Europe is safe and those areas you imagine will not be affected by terrorism, don't forget the history," he said. "We have learned from the history and we don't want to repeat those mistakes made in the past."

The United Nations has repeatedly warned that Afghanistan is on the brink of the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than half the country facing "acute" food shortages and winter forcing millions to choose between migration and starvation.

The troika plus meeting represents envoy West's first trip to the region since taking over from Zalmay Khalilzad, the long-serving diplomat who spearheaded talks that led to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan earlier this year.

The State Department said earlier in the week that West also



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi (right) talking with US special representative to Afghanistan Thomas West (left) as they arrive to attend the 'Troika Plus' meeting on Afghanistan. —AFP

plans to visit Russia and India. "Together with our partners, he will continue to make clear the expectations that we have of the Taliban and of any future Afghanistan government," State Department spokesman Ned Price told a briefing this week. West, who was in Brussels earlier this week to brief NATO on US en-

agement with the Taliban, told reporters the Islamists have "very clearly" voiced their desire to see aid resumed, normalise international relations and achieve sanctions relief. He called for unity from allies on those issues, noting that Washington "can deliver none of these things on our own". — AFP

Indian WWII veteran, 97, wins pension battle

NEW DELHI: A 97-year-old Indian veteran whose leg was blown off in Italy in World War II has won a battle for a bigger pension that was previously denied to soldiers injured before independence in 1947. Sepoy Balwant Singh was one of more than 2.5 million soldiers from British India who took part in the six-year war, fighting for the Allied forces across Europe, Africa and Asia.

Nearly 90,000 were killed—among them Singh's older brother Jaswant who died in Italy—and around 35,000 others were injured. Singh, from the northern state of Rajasthan, was drafted into the British Indian Army's Punjab Regiment in 1943 and nearly killed by a landmine in Italy the following year.

After two months in a military hospital he was sent back to India. He was discharged from military service in 1946 on a general

disability pension of 20 rupees that gradually increased to 7,000 rupees (\$94) over the subsequent seven decades.

The Indian government in 1972 decided to grant an additional war injury pension to soldiers hurt or disabled during battles since 1947 when India gained independence, but not before. Singh filed a plea with the Armed Forces Tribunal in 2010 under the Indian Army's War Injury Pension scheme to increase his annuity and have his services in World War II recognised.

The tribunal in New Delhi this week ruled in his favour, more than doubling his monthly payout and awarding him back payments, although only back to 2008. "I am extremely happy," Singh, with a weak voice and hearing problems, told AFP over the phone from his village.

Singh's 64-year-old son Subash said the recognition of his father's military service and contribution in the war were more important than the increased payout. "My father was unhappy for being denied the war injury pension. His sacrifice remained unacknowledged for nearly 77 years but he is now jubilant," he told AFP. —AFP

Taliban replace statue of Hazara leader with Quran

KABUL: The Taliban have replaced the statue of a Hazara leader declared a national martyr by the former government with a replica of the Quran, Bamiyan residents said yesterday—a move they warned could trigger violence. The original statue depicted Abdul Ali Mazari, a leader of the mostly Shiite minority killed while he was a prisoner of the Taliban during their first stint in power.

The statue was decapitated by a rocket-propelled grenade soon after the Taliban returned to power in August, in an incident residents of the city in central Afghanistan blamed on the hardline Islamists. The Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam forbids the human form to be depicted in paintings and sculpture—and printed photographs in extreme cases. Many businesses have removed or covered up billboards and posters featuring people since the group's takeover.

"Yesterday, they completely removed the statue

and replaced it with a replica of the Quran," said Abdul Danishyar, a civil society activist in Bamiyan. "They are trying to wipe out the history from Bamiyan, the people are going to react violently to this," he told AFP. Mazari's statue stood in Bamiyan's central square, where the Taliban blew up two massive 1,500-year-old statues of Buddha in 2001 — just before the US invasion that ousted them. The square, named after Mazari, has been renamed "military street", Danishyar said. Abdul Ali Shafaq, a Bamiyan provincial council member, told AFP he would talk to Taliban officials and urge them to reverse the move. "This is a very sensitive issue, it might trigger reactions," he said.

"People in Bamiyan love Mazari, they were making a new statue to replace the partially destroyed one." Mazari, a fiercely anti-Taliban militia leader, was killed in 1995 after being taken prisoner by the Taliban. They said they shot him after he tried to seize the gun of one of his guards while being transferred aboard a helicopter. He was officially named a "Martyr for National Unity of Afghanistan" by ousted president Ashraf Ghani in 2016. The mainly Shiite Hazara community, which makes up about 10 per cent of Afghanistan's nearly 38 million people, has long been persecuted by Sunni extremists, such as the Islamic State group, in a country torn by ethnic and religious divisions. — AFP