

## World News Roundup

## Afghanistan

## Women brave rockets for rights

## Drawdowns not necessarily tied to Taliban 'deal': Esper

LONDON, Dec 3, (Agencies): US Defense Secretary **Mark Esper** said on Monday that any future troop drawdowns in Afghanistan were "not necessarily" linked to a deal with Taliban insurgents, suggesting some lowering of force levels may happen irrespective of the ongoing peace push.

The remarks by Esper in an interview with Reuters came on the heels of a Thanksgiving trip last week to Afghanistan by President Donald Trump, who spoke of potential troop reductions and said he believed the Taliban insurgency would agree to a ceasefire in the 18-year-old war.

If honored by all sides, a ceasefire could lead to a significant reduction in violence. But US military commanders would still focus on the threats associated with two other militant groups in Afghanistan: Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Speaking as he flew to London for a NATO summit, Esper said the Trump administration had been discussing potential reductions in troop levels for some time, both internally and with NATO allies.

"I feel confident that we could reduce our numbers in Afghanistan and still ensure that place doesn't become a safe haven for terrorists who could attack the United States," Esper said, without offering a figure.

"And our allies agree we can make reductions as well."

Asked whether such reductions would necessarily be contingent on some sort of agreement with the Taliban insurgency, Esper said: "Not necessarily."

He did not elaborate. There are currently about 13,000 US forces in Afghanistan as well as thousands of other NATO troops. US officials have said US forces could drop to 8,600 and still carry out an effective, core counter-terrorism mission as well as some limited advising for Afghan forces.

A draft accord agreed in September before peace talks collapsed would have withdrawn thousands of American troops in exchange for guarantees that Afghanistan would not be used as a base for militant attacks on the United States or its allies.

Still, many US officials privately doubt the Taliban could be relied upon to prevent al-Qaeda from again plotting attacks against the United States from Afghan soil.

Esper did not hint at any developments in the coming days or suggest that new troop drawdowns in Afghanistan might figure into NATO discussions this week.

"I don't think there's any 'new' news right now, if you will. We've been discussing this for quite some time," Esper said, when asked if he would raise the issue in London.

About 2,400 US service members have been killed in the Afghan conflict and many thousands more wounded.

Meanwhile, Afghans are increasingly fearful for their personal safety, but slightly more believe their war-weary country is moving in the right direction, compared to previous years, according to a new survey released Tuesday.

## Safety

The Asia Foundation poll found that 74.5% of respondents say they always, often or sometimes fear for their personal safety, an increase of over 3 percentage points from 2018.

"Increased optimism around the peace talks along with persistent fears about insecurity and the economy continue to influence Afghan views," Abdullah Ahmadzai, The Asia Foundation's country representative in Afghanistan was quoted as saying in the survey.

A total of 17,812 respondents aged 18 years and up were surveyed face-to-face across all 34 provinces from July 11, 2019 to Aug 7, 2019, the San Francisco-based foundation said.

Optimism about the nation's direction was at its highest in 2013 before declining to an all-time low in 2016 over concerns about the economy, difficult elections and the effects of radical reductions in foreign troops.

This year, 36.1% of respondents said the country is going in the right direction, up from 32.8% in 2017 and 2018, while 58.2% said the country is going in the wrong direction, down slightly from 61.3% in 2018.

One of the main drivers of the uptick in optimism is the number of respondents who cite "peace and end of war," an increase from 16.4% in 2018 to 26.3% this year. President Donald Trump, in

his surprise Thanksgiving holiday visit to US troops in Afghanistan last week, announced that the US and Taliban have been engaged in peace talks and insisted the Taliban want to make a deal after heavy US fire in recent months.

The trip came after Trump abruptly broke off peace talks with the Taliban in September, canceling a secret meeting with Taliban and Afghan leaders at the Camp David presidential retreat after a particularly deadly spate of violence, capped by a bombing in Kabul that killed 12 people, including an American soldier.

That ended a nearly yearlong effort by the US to reach a political settlement with the Taliban.

It was not immediately clear how long or substantive the US re-engagement with the Taliban has been.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the Taliban's stance is unchanged. He said the United States broke off talks and when it wants to resume them, the Taliban are ready.

Following the collapse of peace talks and election delays, which took place after this year's survey field work, prospects for a sustainable political settlement are unclear, Ahmadzai said.

## Crucial

"More than ever, empirical data is a crucial resource for the future and development of Afghanistan," Ahmadzai added.

According to the foundation, peace talks and the long-delayed presidential election have been at the forefront of public discourse in Afghanistan this year.

Afghans' stated belief that reconciliation with the Taliban might be possible has grown significantly more common since last year, with 64% of respondents saying it is possible, up from 53.5% in 2018 and 52.3% in 2017, when the question was first asked.

Yet, belief in reconciliation does not necessarily go hand in hand with optimism about the trajectory of the country.

Just last week, a leading Afghan presidential candidate, Abdullah Abdullah, organized protests over a recount in the September election that has been mired in accusations of fraud. Thousands of Abdullah's supporters rallied Friday in the capital, Kabul, against what they said is the presence of fake ballots during a recount that seems set to favor the incumbent, President Ashraf Ghani.

Results of the Sept 28 presidential polls have been repeatedly delayed amid accusations of misconduct and technical problems with counting ballots.

If no candidate obtains over 50% in the results, a second round of voting will be held.

Ghani and Abdullah head a fragile national unity government that was put together under US pressure after both leaders claimed victory in Afghanistan's last elections in 2014.

The study had a margin of error of plus or minus 1.16 percentage points.

In the decade since launching a radio station in northern Afghanistan, Sediqa Sherzai has braved mines and rocket attacks as the Taliban seeks to silence her. But she has kept going.

Fawzia Koofi, the country's first female deputy of the lower house of parliament, has survived assassination and kidnap attempts. Last year, she was banned from running for re-election — so she set up her own party.

Women have made huge strides in the conservative country since a ban during Taliban rule of 1996 to 2001 from school, work, politics and going outside without a male relative.

While growing numbers of women now complete education and work in previously male bastions, they continue to face harassment and hurdles, human rights activists say.

"Women are half the population, and should have the same rights and opportunities as men in this country," said Sheila Qayumi, a programme coordinator at Equality for Peace and Democracy, which advocates for more women in politics.

"But women are still denied education, forced to marry young, kept from working, and treated no better than animals in the provinces," she said. Four decades of war, from occupation to internal fighting, have destroyed the economy, rendering it among the poorest in the world, with few jobs for a mostly young population.

Women occupy a particularly precarious place, as they face cultural barriers and hostility — not just from conservative family members, but also headline Islamist groups — for pursuing financial independence and greater equality, Qayumi said.



Esper



Young Afghan girls play on a slide at a camp for internally displaced people in Kabul, Afghanistan on Dec 3. (AP)

## North Korea

## Trump says Kim sure 'likes sending rockets up'

## US running out of time: N. Korea

SEOUL, Dec 3, (Agencies): North Korea on Tuesday repeated its assertions that the Trump administration is running out of time to salvage nuclear negotiations, saying it's entirely up to the United States to choose what "Christmas gift" it gets from the North.

The statement, attributed to a senior diplomat, came as North Korea continues to dial up pressure on Washington and Seoul ahead of leader Kim Jong Un's end-of-year deadline for the US to offer mutually acceptable terms for a deal.

Negotiations have faltered since a February summit between Kim and President Donald Trump broke down after the US rejected North Korean demands for broad sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

Working-level talks held in Sweden in October broke down over what the North Koreans described as the Americans' "old stance and attitude."

Ri Thae Song, a vice-foreign minister handling US affairs, accused Washington of repeating talk offers aimed at buying time without offering real solutions. In comments reported by state media, Ri reiterated earlier North Korean statements that the country has no intention to continue the nuclear diplomacy unless it gets something substantial in return.

"The dialogue touted by the US is, in essence, nothing but a foolish trick hatched to keep the DPRK bound to dialogue and use it in favor of the political situation and election in the US," Ri said, referring to North Korea by its formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"What is left to be done now is the US option and it is entirely up to the US what Christmas gift it will select to get," Ri said.

## Sanctions

Kim has said he would seek a "new path" if the United States persists with sanctions and pressure. The North has tested a series of new solid-fuel missile systems in recent months, which experts say potentially expands its ability to strike targets in South Korea and Japan. It has also threatened to lift a self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests and resume launches over Japan.

Kim and Trump exchanged crude insults and war threats amid a provocative run in North Korean nuclear and missile tests in 2017, but both leaders have described their personal relationship as good since they began their high-stakes nuclear summit in 2018.

After the North tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile in July 2017, Kim called the missile a "package of gifts" to the Americans for their Fourth of July holiday.

US President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he still had confidence in North Korean leader Kim Jong Un but noted that Kim "likes sending rockets up, doesn't he?"

"That's why I call him Rocket Man," Trump told reporters during a meeting with the head of NATO in London. He said he hoped Kim would denuclearise, but added: "we'll find out."

North Korea fired two short-range projectiles into the sea off its east coast last week in the latest test of its large multiple-rocket launcher. It was seen as an effort to remind the United States of a year-end deadline Kim

has set for Washington to show flexibility in stalled denuclearisation talks.

North Korea earlier on Tuesday accused the United States of trying to drag out denuclearisation talks ahead of the US presidential election next year.

Trump said he was also pressing ahead with negotiations with allies South Korea and Japan to shoulder more of the cost of stationing US troops in those countries.

He said South Korea last year agreed to pay nearly \$500 million a year more for US "protection," and added the United States now wanted additional commitments.

## Security

Asked if it was in the US national security interest to have US forces stationed on the Korean peninsula, Trump said: "It can be debated. I can go either way. I can make arguments both ways."

"But I do think this, I think if we're going to do it, they should burden-share more fairly," Trump said.

In other news, North Korea has celebrated the completion of leader Kim Jong Un's signature construction project, a new city near the sacred mountain where his family claims its roots, with state media on Tuesday calling it the "epitome of modern civilisation".

A massive celebration involving fireworks was held at the city near Mount Paektu on Monday, the official KCNA news agency said.

The Rodong Simnun, a ruling party mouthpiece, ran photos of Kim smiling as he cut a ribbon at the ceremony attended by thousands of people, while state television showed beige, green and purple buildings covered in snow.

The city named Samjiyon is envisaged as what North Korea calls a "socialist utopia" with new apartments, hotels, a ski resort and commercial, cultural and medical facilities.

The town "has turned into an example of a mountainous modern city under socialism, an epitome of modern civilisation," KCNA said.

KCNA said it could accommodate 4,000 families and has 380 blocks of public and industrial buildings in "hundreds of hectares".

The city is one of the largest economic initiatives Kim has launched as part of his drive for a "self-reliant economy, as Pyongyang calls for Washington to lift economic sanctions in their denuclearisation talks.

But its construction was delayed chiefly due to shortages in construction materials and labour as a result of sanctions imposed to curb Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

The delays prompted Pyongyang to mobilise youth labour brigades, which defectors and human rights activists likened to "slave labour" as they get no pay, poor food and are forced to work more than 12 hours a day for up to 10 years in return for better chances to enter a university or join the all-powerful Workers' Party.

State media has also reported over the past year on factories, families and individuals who sent winter jackets, tools, shoes, blankets and biscuits to Samjiyon, which the defectors said was part of the cash-strapped regime's campaign to source supplies from the public.

The project was completed despite "the worst trials" and "ordeals and difficulties," KCNA said, without elaborating.



Vehicles pass by toppled electrical poles as Typhoon Kammuri slammed Legazpi city, Albay province, southeast of Manila, Philippines on Dec 3. A powerful typhoon was blowing across the Philippines on Tuesday after slamming ashore overnight in an eastern province, damaging houses and an airport and knocking out power after tens of thousands of people fled to safer ground. (AP)

## Asia

**Lam criticizes US law:** Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam on Tuesday said US legislation supporting protesters may damage business confidence in the financial hub, and announced a fourth round of relief measures to boost an economy battered by months of demonstrations.

Lam told reporters the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act signed into law by US President Donald Trump last week, was "wholly unnecessary". Hong Kong, which has been convulsed by nearly six months of pro-democracy protests, is now grappling with its first recession in a decade.

The act requires the US State Department to certify at least annually that Hong Kong retains enough autonomy to justify favourable US trading terms, and threatens sanctions for human rights violations.

"The impact currently is on confidence," Lam said. Companies "will be worried about the actions the US government may take in the future after they review this legislation," she said.

Separately, the justice secretary, Teresa Cheng, said she would return to her office on Wednesday after being on sick leave for more than two weeks following an altercation in London during which she was injured. The Hong Kong government has previously said Cheng was targeted by a "violent mob" while on a trip to promote the city.

Cheng, who returned to Hong Kong from Beijing on Tuesday, told reporters at the airport that she had suffered a bone fracture around her wrist and had an operation in London.

"The hand is of course painful, but not as painful as the heart to see Hong Kong is still at the state we are in," she said.

Lam did not specify what the next round of relief measures would include. The government has already offered around HK\$21 billion (\$2.7 billion) in economic support, particularly to help the transport, tourism and retail industries. (RTRS)

**Push for PM's 2-term limit:** Malaysia's government on Tuesday tabled a parliamentary bill seeking to set a two-term limit for the premiership, as Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's administration seeks to fulfil an election pledge aimed at preventing potential abuses of power.

Last May, Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan coalition won a shock election victory on the back of popular anger over high living costs and perceptions of rampant corruption, particularly allegations that billions of dollars were plundered from state fund IMDB that was founded

by former premier Najib Razak. The bill seeks to amend the federal constitution to specify a maximum of two terms for a prime minister, and would require support from two-thirds of the 222 elected members of parliament to pass.

It is scheduled to be debated in March next year. The constitutional amendment was among a raft of election pledges that Mahathir's coalition made, aiming to root out corruption and limit the powers of the prime minister.

Najib, who held power for nearly three terms, faces dozens of graft and money laundering charges over allegations that he received about \$1 billion in funds from 1Malaysia Development Berhad. He has pleaded not guilty to all the charges.

Mahathir, who is in his second stint as prime minister, holds the record for Malaysia's longest-serving premier at

22 years after first holding the post from 1981 until 2003. (RTRS)

**Philippines typhoon kills 3:** A typhoon struck the Philippines on Tuesday, killing at least three people, disrupting air travel and forcing government offices and schools to shut.

Authorities evacuated some 225,000 people ahead of the arrival overnight of Typhoon Kammuri, known locally as



Lam



Trump

Tisoy. Officials said their precautions prevented greater loss of life, while warnings of floods, storm surges and landslides were issued in the wake of the country's 20th typhoon of the year.

"We've seen great improvement in local government management of preparations for disasters," disaster agency spokesman Mark Timbal told news channel ANC.

Winds gusting up to 200 kph (124 mph) damaged homes and structures and tore down trees and signage as it barreled through central islands south of the capital, as it moved across the archipelago towards the South China Sea.

A man died after being electrocuted while attempting to fix his roof in Camarines Sur province, according to a civil defence official. Two people who ignored a mandatory evacuation were killed in Oriental Mindoro, one hit by a falling tree and the other by a sheet of metal roofing material. (RTRS)