

Afghanistan

Activist, her sisters arrested

Taleban to hold meet in Norway next week

COPENHAGEN, Jan 22, (AP) — A Taleban delegation will travel to Norway for talks with the Norwegian government, meeting with representatives of the Norwegian authorities and several allied countries but also with civil society activists and human rights defenders from Afghanistan.

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry said Friday that it has invited representatives of the Taleban to Oslo from Jan. 23 to Jan. 25. Norwegian newspaper VG said that special representatives from the United States, Germany, Britain, France, Italy and the European Union would take part. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry declined to comment.

It would be the first time since the Taleban took over the country last August that they have met in Europe. Earlier they traveled to Russia, Iran, Qatar, Pakistan, China and Turkmenistan. The acting foreign minister, **Amir Khan Muttaqi**, will head the Taleban delegation.



Muttaqi

Zabihullah Mujahid, the Afghan deputy culture and information minister, said Muttaqi also expects to hold separate meetings with the US delegation as well as bilateral meetings with European representatives. The rights of women and girls is expected to top most agendas, as well as a reoccurring demand of the west for the Taleban administration to share power with Afghanistan's minority ethnic and religious groups.

In December in a rare interview, Muttaqi told The Associated Press his government wants good relations with all countries, and was committed to education for girls and women.

On Saturday, Mujahid said in an interview with the AP that the new Afghan rulers were aiming for schools to open for girls and women in late March, after the Afghan new year. Until now school for girls has been restricted beyond Grade 7 in all but 10 provinces.

In the capital, Kabul, private universities and high schools have continued to operate uninterrupted. Most are small and the classes have always been segregated.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt said that "we are extremely concerned about the serious situation in Afghanistan." She said there is "a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe for millions of people" in the country.

She stressed that the meeting was "not a legitimization or recognition of the Taleban. But we must talk to those who in practice govern the country today."

Certain

However Muttaqi is certain to press the Taleban's demand that nearly \$10 billion frozen by the United States and other western countries be released. The United Nations has managed to get some liquidity into the country, even allowing the new administration to pay for imports, like electricity.

"We cannot let the political situation lead to an even worse humanitarian catastrophe," said Huitfeldt.

The UN has warned that as many as 1 million Afghan children are in danger of starving, and most of the country's 38 million people are living below the poverty line. Even before the Taleban took power, Afghanistan was desperately poor, with more than 54% living on \$1.90 a day or less.

The Foreign Ministry said that the Taleban delegation meetings also will include Afghans with backgrounds "from various fields and include women leaders, journalists, and people who work with, among other things, human rights and humanitarian, economic, social and political issues."

It said that earlier this week, a Norwegian delegation visited Kabul for talks on the precarious humanitarian situation in the country.

Norwegian news agency NTB said that Taleban earlier had taken part in secret talks in Norway when the current prime minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, was foreign minister, which was from 2005 to 2012. Norway had also been the country that opened secret talks between the US and The Taleban as America began to press for national reconciliation hinting as early as 2013 that the

The VG daily said that the single most important issue in the talks that are to take place next week is the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The Foreign Ministry in Oslo said that Afghanistan is experiencing drought, pandemics, economic collapse and the effects of years of conflict. According to them, some 24 million people experience acute food insecurity and are unsure of how to obtain enough food. It is reported that 1 million children may die of starvation.

It added that the UN estimates that famine will affect more than half of the population this winter and that 97% of the population may fall below the poverty line this year.

"Norway continues to engage in dialogue with the Taleban to promote human rights, women's participation in society, and to strengthen humanitarian and economic efforts in Afghanistan in support of the Afghan people," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Norway was the country that opened secret talks between the US and the Taleban as America began to press for national reconciliation, hinting as early as 2013 that the conflict could not be won militarily. This led to the opening of the Taleban's political office in Doha, Qatar, where in 2018, Washington launched negotiations for the final withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, culminating in the chaotic end to the war in August.

According to the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, the Scandinavian country that is home to the Nobel Peace Prize has in the past been involved in peace efforts in a number of countries, including Mozambique, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Colombia, the Philippines, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Syria, Myanmar, Somalia, Sri Lanka and South Sudan.

Also

KABUL: The Taleban stormed an apartment in Kabul, smashing the door in and arresting a woman rights activist and her three sisters, an eyewitness said Thursday. A Taleban statement appeared to blame the incident on a recent women's protest, saying insulting Afghan values will no longer be tolerated.

The activist, **Tamana Zaryabi Paryani**, was among about 25 women who took part in an anti-Taleban protest on Sunday against the compulsory Islamic headscarf, or hijab, for women. A person from the neighborhood who witnessed the arrest said about 10 armed men, claiming to be from the Taleban intelligence department, carried out the raid on Wednesday night.

Shortly before she and her sisters were taken away, footage of Paryani was posted on social media, showing her frightened and breathless and screaming for help, saying the Taleban were banging on her door.

"Help please, the Taleban have come to our home . . . only my sisters are home," she is heard saying in the footage. There are other female voices in the background, crying. "I can't open the door. Please . . . help!"

Associated Press footage from the scene on Thursday showed the apartment's front door, made of metal and painted reddish brown, dented and left slightly ajar. The occupants of a neighboring apartment ran inside their home, not wanting to talk to reporters. An outer security door of steel slats was shut and padlocked, making it impossible to enter Paryani's apartment.

The witness said the raid took place around 8 p.m. The armed men went up to the third floor of the Kabul apartment complex where Paryani lives and began pounding on the front door ordering her to open the door.

When she refused, they kicked the door repeatedly until it opened, the witness said. "They took four females away, all of them were sisters," the witness said, adding that one of the four was Paryani, the activist.



This photo provided by Broadcom Broadcasting shows a damaged area in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, Thursday, Jan 20, 2022, following Saturday's volcanic eruption near the Pacific archipelago. The first flight carrying fresh water and other aid to Tonga was finally able to leave Thursday after the Pacific nation's main airport runway was cleared of ash left by the eruption. (AP)

North Korea

Pyongyang hints at resuming nuclear, ICBM tests

N. Korea accuses US of hostility

SEOUL, Jan 22, (AP) — Accusing the United States of hostility and threats, North Korea on Thursday said it will consider restarting "all temporarily-suspended activities" it had paused during its diplomacy with the Trump administration, in an apparent threat to resume testing of nuclear explosives and long-range missiles.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said leader Kim Jong Un presided over a Politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party where officials set policy goals for "immediately bolstering" the North's military capabilities to counter the Americans' "hostile moves."

Officials gave instructions to "reconsider in an overall scale the trust-building measures that we took on our own initiative . . . and to promptly examine the issue of restarting all temporarily-suspended activities," the KCNA said.

Experts say Kim is reviving Pyongyang's old playbook of brinkmanship to extract concessions from Washington and neighbors as he grapples with a decaying economy crippled by the pandemic, mismanagement and U.S.-led sanctions over his nuclear ambitions.

The North has been ramping up its weapons demonstrations recently, including four rounds of missile launches just this month, in an apparent effort to pressure Washington over a prolonged freeze in nuclear diplomacy.

The North's Foreign Ministry had already warned of stronger and more explicit action after the Biden administration last week imposed fresh sanctions over the North's continued missile testing activity. The U.N. Security Council has scheduled a closed-door meeting for Thursday to discuss North Korea and non-proliferation matters.

Boo Seung-Chan, spokesman of South Korea's Defense Ministry, said it was closely monitoring North Korea's military activities but didn't make presumptions about what the North's next steps would be.

Kim announced a unilateral suspension of his nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests in 2018 as he initiated diplomacy with then-President Donald Trump in an attempt to leverage his nukes for badly needed economic benefits.

Their summit came after a provocative run in North Korean nuclear and

intercontinental range ballistic missile testing in 2017 that demonstrated Kim's pursuit of an arsenal that can viably target the American homeland and resulted in him exchanging threats of nuclear annihilation with Trump.

But negotiations have stalled since their second summit in 2019, when the Americans rejected North Korea's demand for major sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

At the end of that year, Kim vowed to further bolster his nuclear arsenal in face of "gangster-like" U.S. threats and pressure and declared a "frontal breakthrough" against sanctions while urging his people to stay resilient in a struggle for economic self-reliance. He then said the North was no longer obligated to maintain its suspension on nuclear and ICBM tests, which Trump touted as a major achievement.

Goals

However, the pandemic thwarted many of Kim's economic goals as the North imposed a lockdown and halted most of its trade with China, its major ally and economic lifeline.

North Korea appeared this month to have resumed railroad freight traffic with China that had been suspended for two years.

North Korea conducted its sixth and last test of a nuclear explosive device in September 2017 and its last launch of an ICBM was in November that year.

Some experts say that the North could dramatically raise the ante in weapons demonstrations after the end of February's Winter Olympics in Beijing. They say Pyongyang's leadership likely feels it would take a dramatic provocation to move the needle with the Biden administration, which has offered open-ended talks but showed no willingness to ease sanctions unless Kim takes real steps to abandon his nuclear and missile program.

Saying that U.S. hostility has reached a "danger line" that can no longer be overlooked, the North Korean Politburo members called for practical measures to "more reliably and effectively increase our physical strength for defending dignity, sovereignty rights and interests of our state," the KCNA said.

They criticized United States of continuing its military exercises with

South Korea and arming its ally with advanced weaponry and claimed - apparently falsely - that Washington is continuing to send strategic assets to the region to pressure the North.

The United States since 2018 has dramatically scaled down its combined exercises with South Korea, which have mostly been reduced to computer simulations, to make room for diplomacy with North Korea and over COVID-19 concerns.

Duyeon Kim, an analyst at Washington's Center for a New American Security, said North Korea's claim of U.S. hostility is a pretext for continuing testing.

"Pyongyang is squarely focused on meeting its nuclear weapons milestones because of its military imperative to do so. This means more tests to come," she said. "The pandemic has bought Pyongyang ample time to continue developing nuclear weapons because North Korea closed its borders and has been refusing direct talks, afraid of importing the virus."

Kim Jong Un in recent years had showcased some new weapons he may wish to test, including what appeared to be North Korea's largest-ever ICBM that was rolled out during a military parade in October 2020.

He also issued an ambitious wish-list of sophisticated weaponry early last year while setting a five-year plan to develop military forces, which included hypersonic missiles, solid-fuel ICBMs, spy satellites and submarine-launched nuclear missiles.

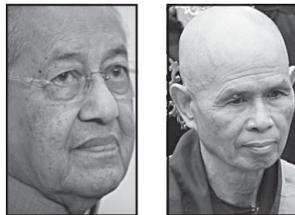
If the North does stage another nuclear test, it may use that event to claim it acquired an ability to build a nuclear warhead small enough to fit on a purported hypersonic missile it tested twice so far this year, experts say.

Last week, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on five North Koreans over their roles in obtaining equipment and technology for the North's missile programs, in its response to North Korea's earlier tests this month.

The State Department ordered sanctions against another North Korean, a Russian man and a Russian company for their broader support of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction activities. The Biden administration also said it would pursue additional U.N. sanctions over the North's continued tests.



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaks during a news conference at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo, Japan, on Oct. 4, 2021. President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held their first formal talks on Friday as the two leaders face fresh concerns about North Korea's nuclear program and China's growing military assertiveness. (AP)



Mahathir

Hanh

Asia

Mahathir, stable in hospital: Former Malaysian Prime Minister **Mahathir Mohamad** was hospitalized for the third time in just over a month but his condition is stable, his daughter said Saturday.

The 96-year-old two-time former premier, once the world's oldest leader, was admitted to the National Heart Institute on Thursday and was responding well to treatment, Marina Mahathir said in a statement. "His condition is now stable," she said, urging Malaysians to pray for his swift recovery.

Mahathir underwent an elective medical procedure at the same hospital on Jan. 7 and was discharged six days later. Last month, he was admitted for a full medical checkup and observation.

He has had two coronary bypass surgeries but was still robust and sharp witted. He led the opposition to a historic election victory in 2018 that was hailed for ousting a corrupt government in the first peaceful transfer of power since Malaysia's independence in 1957.

Mahathir became the world's oldest leader at 92 for a second stint but that triumph lasted only 22 months as his government collapsed due to infighting. But that didn't stop him, and Mahathir formed a new ethnic Malay party in 2020 to oppose the new leadership. (AP)

Buddhist monk, dies at 95: Thich **Nhat Hanh**, the revered Zen Buddhist monk who helped spread the practice of mindfulness in the West and socially engaged Buddhism in the East, has died. He was 95.

The death was confirmed by a monk at Tu Hieu Pagoda in Hue, Vietnam who said that Nhat Hanh, known as Thay to his followers, died at midnight on Saturday. The monk declined to be named because he is not authorized to speak to media.

A post on Nhat Hanh's verified Twitter page attributed to The International Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism also confirmed the news, saying, "We invite our beloved global spiritual family to take a few moments to be still, to come back to our mindful breathing, as we together hold Thay in our hearts."

Born as Nguyen Xuan Bao in 1926 in Hue and ordained at age 16, Nhat Hanh distilled Buddhist teachings on compassion and suffering into easily grasped guidance over a lifetime dedicated to working for peace. In 1961 he went to the United States to study, teaching comparative religion for a time at Princeton and Columbia universities.

For most of the remainder of his life, he lived in exile at Plum Village, a retreat center he founded in southern France. (AP)

Australia delivers water to Tonga:

Three flights from Australia carrying food, water, medical supplies and telecommunications equipment landed in Tonga on Saturday, as the Pacific nation continues to grapple with the aftermath of an underwater volcanic eruption and tsunami.

Planes from other nations, includ-

ing New Zealand and Japan, have also brought sorely needed aid to the Tongan people, said Zed Seselja, Australian Minister for International Development and the Pacific.

The first such aid arrived Thursday, after the main airport runway was cleared of ash spewed when the volcano erupted a week ago. The eruption also set off a

Pacific-wide tsunami that smashed boats in New Zealand and caused an oil spill in Peru.

"Obviously it's a very, very difficult time for the people of Tonga. The feedback on the ground again I got today is many people displaced," Seselja told reporters in Canberra.

Cleanup efforts were going smoothly, with the Tongan government and military officials working together, Seselja said. (AP)

Myanmar sentences 2 to death: Two prominent political activists in military-ruled Myanmar have been sentenced to death for alleged involvement in terrorist activities, an army television station reported Friday.

Myawaddy TV said in its evening news broadcast that Kyaw Min Yu, better known as Ko Jimmy, and Phyo Zeyar Thaw, also known as Maung Kyaw, were convicted under the country's Counterterrorism Law. They were found guilty of offenses involving explosives, bombings and financing terrorism.

Both have been detained since their arrests, unable to comment on the allegations, and no lawyer ever emerged to comment on their behalfs. Min Yu's wife, Nilar Thein, in October denied the allegations lodged against her husband.

Details of their trials were unavailable because the proceedings were carried out in a closed military court. It was unclear if their two cases were linked. (AP)



South Korean Buddhist monks participate at a rally at the Jogye temple in Seoul, South Korea, Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. Thousands of Buddhist monks gathered to protest alleged religious discrimination by South Korean government. (AP)