

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Authorities across the United States prepared for more cases of the new coronavirus after a second fatality over the weekend as U.S. President Donald Trump and his task force on the outbreak will meet with drug company executives on Monday.

KABUL (Reuters) -- Taliban militants will not take part in intra-Afghan talks until the Afghan government releases about 5,000 of their prisoners, spokesman said on Monday, presenting a major possible barrier to ending the war.

**Viewpoint**  
**Is India Shifting Gear From Democracy to Dictatorship?**

**Iran's Documentary Showcased at UN World Wildlife Day**

**Iran Claims Gold at Karate 1-Premier League Salzburg**

**Taliban Rule Out Afghan Talks Until Prisoners Released**

## Syria Retakes Strategic City From Idlib Terrorists

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) -- Syrian government forces entered a strategic terrorist-held town on Monday, and Turkey said it would keep hitting President Bashar al-Assad's troops after ramping up operations in its biggest intervention yet into the war.

Turkey and Russia, which have come closer than ever to direct confrontation in Syria in recent days, traded threats over air space after Turkish forces shot down two Syrian government warplanes and struck a military airport.

Fighting has escalated dramatically in recent days in northwest Syria, where Turkey has sent thousands of troops and military vehicles in the last month to counter Syrian advances in the last remaining bastion held by terrorists.

A Syrian state television correspondent in the town of Saraqeb said the army was combing the town after the retreat of Turkey-backed terrorists. Terrorist sources said clashes were continuing in western parts of the town.

Saraqeb has already changed hands twice in less than a month, reflecting its importance as a gateway to the liberated northern city of Aleppo and to terrorist-held Idlib city to the west.

Terrorists said Turkish drones had been striking Syrian army positions on the Saraqeb front-line, hitting at least two rocket launchers.

Turkey, which has backed terrorists fighting Syrian troops for much of the nine-year war, stepped up its intervention in response to the killing of 34 Turkish soldiers in Idlib last week, the deadliest strike against the Turkish army in decades.

On Sunday it shot down two Syrian planes in Idlib and struck at least one military airport in Aleppo province, taking the battle deep into the Arab country.

Tough-talking Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara that Syria's "human and equipment losses are just the beginning."

"If they do not withdraw to the borders Turkey has determined as soon as possible, they will not have a head left on their shoulders," he said in his most interventionist remarks.

Defense Minister Hulusi Akar boasted that Turkish forces had so far destroyed eight helicopters, scores of tanks and five air defense systems.

Russia, for its part, said it could not guarantee the safety of Turkish aircraft over Syria, and Damascus said it was clos-

ing Syrian air space over the Idlib region.

Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin are due to meet in Moscow on Thursday to seek agreement on Idlib.

"We will go to Moscow to evaluate these developments with Mr Putin. My hope is that we take the necessary steps there, whether it is a ceasefire or any other steps needed," Erdogan said.

Turkey has insisted it seeks no conflict with Moscow, but its barrage of strikes on the Russian-backed forces around Idlib have raised the risk of a direct confrontation.

Erdogan demanded in early February that Syrian forces withdraw by the end of the month from a "de-escalation zone" around Idlib agreed by Turkey, Russia and Iran in 2017, or face being driven back by the Turkish military.

The agreement required Ankara to oust Takfiri terrorists from the northwestern Syrian province. But, more than a year into the Sochi deal, foreign-backed terrorists rule supreme in Idlib in close proximity to the Turkish troops.

Syria's ongoing offensive in Idlib was launched in August 2019 to oust terrorists from their last major bastion in the Arab country after repeated attacks on Syrian and Russian positions.

On Monday, Damascus strongly condemned the Turkish military aggression, saying its campaign in Idlib is in violation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity and in line with Ankara's generous support for terror groups.

Syria's official news agency SANA cited an unnamed official at the foreign ministry as saying that Turkey's military operation dubbed "Spring Shield" in Idlib is in line with Erdogan's expansionist illusions and his aspiration to revive the Ottoman Empire, and an apparent attempt to deviate public opinion from his crises at home.

"The Syrian Arab Republic, which has been fighting against terrorist groups and inflicting humiliating defeats on them, is determined to firmly confront the outrageous Turkish aggression, and put a complete end to all Turkish activities in order to preserve the country's unity and territorial integrity," the official said.

Turkey opened its western borders on Friday to let migrants reach Europe, in an apparent move to demand EU support in Syria by repudiating a 2016 agreement to shut the frontier.

(Continued on Page 7)

## Iran Mobilizes 300,000 to Contain Coronavirus



Members of Iran's Army and IRGC forces carry out a joint drill in Sanandaj, western Iran to contain the coronavirus on March 1, 2020.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iran deployed drones to disinfect streets and mobilized tens of thousands of teams to conduct door-to-door coronavirus checks across the country.

The health ministry said global statistics show Iran ranks second in the world after China in terms of the number of people who have recovered from the novel coronavirus.

As of Monday, 175 patients had recovered from the COVID-19 and been discharged from hospital, according to the ministry.

Iran has been battling against the coronavirus since February 19 when the first cases of infections

were confirmed by the country's officials.

The death toll from the epidemic in Iran has risen to 54, and the total number of confirmed cases of infection has reached 978, according to the Health Ministry spokesman.

Amid draconian U.S. sanctions, Iranian experts have developed test kits which the country will mass-produce in the coming days.

The death toll ticked higher on Monday, with the health ministry raising the number of fatalities to 66, up from 54 a day earlier. The number of confirmed cases rose 53% to 1,501.

Iran's foreign ministry said Teh-

ran does not count on the United States for help in its battle against the coronavirus because it does not trust Washington's alleged offer of assistance.

President Donald Trump said on Saturday the U.S. was willing to help the Iranians with the problem, adding "all they have to do is ask," just after he authorized the expansion of travel restrictions against Iran.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said Monday, "We have had doubts and continue to have doubts about the intentions of Americans. If they had good intentions, they would not have

publicized the aid first in the media with propagandist aims."

The United States, which has had no diplomatic ties with Iran since 1980, pulled out of a landmark nuclear deal with the country and reimposed crippling sanctions in 2018.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Saturday detailed Trump's heightened travel bans against Iranians in a press conference from the White House.

"First, the president authorized action today to add additional travel restrictions on Iran. ... Iran is already under a travel ban, but we're expanding existing travel restrictions to include any foreign national who has visited Iran within the last 14 days," Pence said.

Mousavi said, "We monitor the Americans' positions. We have already seen how much they acted against Iran and our capabilities and toward weakening the people, and those actions still continue."

"We doubt the intentions of Americans, and do not count on these aids and are not ready to receive verbal aid either," he added.

The U.S. State Department said Friday it had formally told Iran of the United States' willingness to assist in unspecified ways through a message sent via Switzerland, which represents U.S. interests in Tehran.

Mousavi touched on a Swiss channel announced in December to bring food and medicine to Iran, saying the U.S. government has even been stonewalling efforts to have it up and running.

The spokesman said most of Iran's

(Continued on Page 7)

## Pompeo: Taliban Deal Contains 'Secret' Elements

WASHINGTON/TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said that along with the public document of the U.S.-Taliban deal released Saturday, there are two implementing elements that are secret.

"They are military implementation documents that are important to protect our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines," Pompeo said on Sunday in an interview on CBS News' "Face the Nation."

"They're classified, secret. There aren't any side deals," he said, referring to a U.S. nuclear deal with Iran under the Obama administration.

In response to a question about whether or not there is a deal to keep a certain U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Pompeo said: "The American people should know Donald Trump is not going to take words on a paper. We're going to see if the Taliban are prepared to live up to the commitments they've made."

On Saturday, U.S. envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the co-founder of Taliban, signed the peace agreement at the Sheraton Hotel in Doha, Qatar following 18 months of negotiations.

There are currently about 13,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, which will be reduced to 8,600 within 135 days according to the plan, say American officials.

Speaking after the agreement, U.S. President Donald Trump said that he will soon meet with the Taliban leaders, but Pompeo told CBS that he doesn't know the details about this.

Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif said Monday the U.S. is withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan after 19 years of "humiliation" while leaving "huge mess behind".

"US occupiers should've never invaded Afghanistan. But they did, and blamed everyone else for consequences. Now after 19 yrs of humiliation, US has tendered its surrender. Whether in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq or Yemen, US is THE problem. It will leave--while leaving huge mess

behind," Zarif tweeted.

His spokesman Abbas Mousavi said the deal does not reflect Washington's respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty, noting that any such agreement has to be an inclusive one that brings all Afghan sides together.

"We do not consider this deal a sign of respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty. The Americans took the measure to satisfy their own illegitimate goals. We believe in an all-inclusive agreement with the entirety of the Afghan government," he said.

Iran, he said, emphasizes that all courses of action leading to peace in Afghanistan have to feature inter-Afghan consensus and be partaken by all Afghan parties and groupings led by the government.

Mousavi said although the Islamic Republic supports any attempt that would contribute to stability and security in Afghanistan, "we are doubtful of America's intentions."

"The U.S.'s very presence in the region is illegal. They have no right to enter this region and interfere in the

regional countries' affairs," the official said.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001 under the pretext of staging a "war on terror" in a move that was followed by the expansion of Washington's military presence and interference across the region.

The war toppled the Afghan militant group, but it also turned into the United States' longest conflict in its history, with the Taliban establishing a presence over more than half of the Central Asian country.

Mousavi said the deal came in the wake of the United States' defeat in its invasions across the region, that have only prolonged regional instability and warfare. He Zarif's remarks that the U.S. had signed the deal only to "put make-up" on its regional defeats.

The spokesman noted that Iran has conducted some talks with the Taliban in the past in coordination with Kabul and with the group's consent. The discussions, he said, will continue and are not affected in any way by the U.S.-Taliban deal.