VOA NEWS

January 20, 2018

From Washington, this is VOA news. I'm Liz Parker reporting.

Putting pressure on the Taliban.

A senior U.S. official has urged the Taliban to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan spoke to the U.N. Security Council on Friday.

Sullivan said the Afghan government wants to initiate peace talks with the Taliban. But the Taliban has showed no interest.

He also said any peace deal must include a firm commitment from the Taliban that they will cut ties to terrorism and more.

"Since announcing our strategy for South Asia last August, President Trump has underscored that the United States will continue to support the Afghan government in its security forces, in their fight against the Taliban as well as in their efforts to combat al-Qaeda, ISIS and other terrorist groups."

The U.S. Congress is trying Friday to send President Donald Trump's legislation to keep the government operating and avoid federal agency shutdowns that would otherwise begin on Saturday.

Steve Miller reports.

Nearly four months into the 2018 fiscal year, Republicans and Democrats still haven't agreed on a long-term government funding bill. Instead, Congress has been struggling to pass its fourth short-term appropriations measure.

Amid the gridlock, more senators are raising the possibility of merely approving enough new federal funds for a few days. The idea is to put pressure on negotiators to then cut deals on immigration, defense spending and non-defense funding by next week.

The immigration fight is over Democrats demand that 700,000 young undocumented immigrants be protected from deportation.

Steve Miller, VOA news.

We have much more coverage on voanews.com. This is VOA news.

On Friday, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis rolled out the unclassified portion of the Trump administration's National Defense Strategy. The strategy emphasizes expanding the U.S. competitive military advantage over China and Russia.

Mattis said that while the military is still strong, its competitive edge has eroded in many areas due to budget restraints and the longest stretch of combat in the nation's history.

He said restoring the military's competitive edge will be the new focus.

"This strategy is fit for our time, providing the American people the military required to protect our way of life, stand with our allies and live up to our responsibility to pass intact to the next generation those freedoms that all of us enjoy here today."

The National Defense Strategy instructs the U.S. to continue to deny terrorists havens across the globe while modernizing the American military in a way that's "fit for our time" as Mattis mentioned.

A U.S.-backed operation by Somali special forces has freed 32 children who were kidnapped by militant group al-Shabaab.

The Somali information minister said Friday that Somali forces rescued the kids from a school in the Middle Shabelle region.

There has been no comment from the U.S. military, but the use of helicopters in the raid indicates U.S. involvement.

U.S. authorities in the U.S. state of New Mexico are investigating a helicopter crash which killed senior Zimbabwe opposition leader Roy Bennett, his wife and three others.

The 60-year-old Bennett was an activist and a fierce opponent of longtime President Robert Mugabe, who was forced to resign late last year.

Friends and family members confirmed that Bennett and his wife had traveled to New Mexico to spend their holiday with a friend at his ranch.

The U.N. refugee agency warns women and children fleeing English-speaking areas of Cameroon for Nigeria are facing a multitude of risks, including poverty and exploitation.

Lisa Schlein reports for VOA.

The UNHCR has registered more than 10,000 refugees since they began fleeing English-speaking parts of Cameroon for eastern Nigeria's Cross River state in early October. It reports about 80 percent of the refugees are women and children.

As the number of people fleeing Cameroon grows, so do the risks to their welfare, says the UNHCR.

The UNHCR is working with Nigerian authorities to reunite separated children with their parents. Most of the families are headed by women who, he notes, are vulnerable to exploitation.

Lisa Schlein, for VOA news, Geneva.

More on this story on voanews.com. I'm Liz Parker reporting from Washington.

That's the latest world news from VOA.