VOA NEWS

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This is VOA news. I'm Jim Bertel.

The Taliban has confirmed that it held direct talks with the United States in Qatar this week [in] on finding a negotiated end to the 17-year war in Afghanistan.

A Taliban official says the meetings were to lay the groundwork for future meetings between the Taliban and the U.S.

The meeting in Doha came as the Afghan government is considering another unilateral cease-fire with the insurgents during the upcoming Eid festival in August to encourage the Taliban to come to the table for peace talks.

A provincial government official in eastern Afghanistan says three staff members of a midwife training center were killed in an attack on the facility. Several more were wounded.

Gunmen stormed the facility Saturday in the city of Jalalabad and fought security forces for several hours.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

Somalia's president began an historic three-day visit to Eritrea on Saturday, where he is holding talks with his counterpart.

The countries have not had any diplomatic ties for nearly 15 years, but a Somali spokesman says the visit "will open the doors for diplomatic relations and new cooperation between the two nations."

Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Theodore McCarrick, a former archbishop of Washington who is accused of sexually assaulting a teenager nearly 50 years ago.

Last month, U.S. church officials said the allegations were credible.

McCarrick has said he has no recollection of the [abused] alleged abuse. Further allegations have since emerged.

Mr. McCarrick is one of the most prominent U.S. cardinals and is one of the most high-profile Catholic leaders to face abuse claims.

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Zimbabwe's two main presidential rivals, President Emmerson Mnangagwa and his main challenger, opposition leader Nelson Chamisa, faced off Saturday in simultaneous final rallies in the capital that set the stage for a fierce battle in Monday's pivotal election.

Both promised to change and resuscitate the nation's ailing economy, which has slid into a spiral after years of alleged mismanagement and corruption under the only leader independent Zimbabwe has ever known, Robert Mugabe. He resigned in November under pressure from the military and Mnangagwa, his deputy, took his place.

The election is being watched closely by local officials and international observers have been invited for the first time in years.

The Kurdish-backed Syrian Democratic Council, SDC, says after meeting with Syrian government officials that it will work with the government to end seven years of violence in the country.

The SDC says both sides have agreed to work together to plot a "roadmap leading to a democratic and decentralized Syria."

An Egyptian court is turning to the country's top Islamic religious leader to consult with death sentences handed down to 75 people involved in a 2013 Muslim Brotherhood sit-in in northern Cairo. The sit-in was stormed by the Egyptian military after the Brotherhood refused to leave the camp.

Edward Yeranian reports.

Former Muslim Brotherhood politician Amr Darrag claimed in a tweet Saturday that the "Sissi government considers the unfreezing of U.S. military aid to Egypt a green light for the death sentences," and that the "U.S. administration will have the blood of these innocent victims on its hands."

The Trump Administration unfroze $195 million in military aid to Egypt this past week.

Edward Yeranian, for VOA news, Cairo.

Northern California's deadly Carr Fire nearly doubled in size to 33,000 hectares Saturday.

The rapidly spreading fire fueled by soaring temperatures, erratic winds, dry air and heavy vegetation scorched more than 13,000 hectares overnight and is only 5 percent contained.

Cal Fire spokesman Chad Carroll says many buildings have been lost.

"The structures destroyed are estimated at 500 and structures damaged are estimated at 75."

U.S. President Donald Trump has declared a state of emergency in California.

The brother of Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega has called on his brother to stop the paramilitary fighters. They have been blamed for months of unrest in the Central American country.

That's the latest news. I'm Jim Bertel, VOA news.