VOA NEWS

January 2, 2020

This is VOA news. I'm David Byrd.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has postponed a trip to Ukraine and the Middle East so he can focus on the situation in Iraq.

In a statement Wednesday, State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said Pompeo had postponed a trip to Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Cyprus because he was needed in Washington to monitor ongoing developments in Iraq. Ortagus said the trip would be rescheduled in the near future and in her words "the secretary looks forward to the trip at that time."

Pompeo was scheduled to be the most senior U.S. official to visit Ukraine since the 2019 scandal that led to the impeachment of President Donald Trump.

The secretary did speak Wednesday with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi as Iranian-backed paramilitary groups protesting U.S. airstrikes withdrew from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Reuters' Matthew Larotonda has more.

Mohammed al-Haydari is a ranking member of the coalition known as the Popular Mobilization Forces. The PMF leadership says their "message has been heard" and never intended for violence.

"The Americans are there to train Iraqi forces or combat terrorism," he says. "The killing of PMF members is unacceptable."

The U.S. airstrikes that targeted the Kataib Hezbollah militia, which falls under the PMF's umbrella, killed or wounded scores.

However, Kataib Hezbollah is considered a terrorist organization by Washington even though it's technically a unit within the Iraqi government's own armed forces.

The prime minister is furious over the airstrikes but has pleaded for calm.

The PMF says its call to withdraw is in deference to him.

That's Matthew Larotonda reporting.

For more, be sure to visit our website voanews.com. This is VOA news.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed deep concern after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un threatened to resume long-range missile and nuclear tests.

As AP's Shelley Adler reports, Kim also warned of an unspecified "shocking" action if Washington does not soften its stance in nuclear talks.

From the Christmas gift that hasn't happened, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un warned of an unspecified "shocking" action. That's after expressing deep frustration over stalled nuclear talks. He also said that his country will soon reveal a new "strategic weapon" to the world as its bolsters its nuclear deterrent in the face of what he called "gangster-like" U.S. pressure.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, appearing on Fox News channel's "Special Report" Tuesday, says he is still focusing on diplomacy.

"We're hopeful that President, Chairman Kim will make the right decision - he'll choose peace and prosperity over conflict and war."

Shelley Adler, Washington.

Officials in Afghanistan said Wednesday that Taliban insurgents have killed at least 28 pro-government forces in attacks in the country's north.

Despite harsh weather conditions, the Taliban has staged almost daily battlefield attacks in Afghanistan's northern and northeastern provinces over the past week. Some 100 Afghan forces have been killed and scores of others injured.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday said he would ask parliament to grant him immunity from corruption charges, a step that could delay his trial for months.

The step most likely puts the trial on hold until after elections in March when Netanyahu hopes to win a majority coalition that would shield him from prosecution.

Netanyahu was indicted in November on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust after failing to assemble a governing majority following back-to-back elections.

The driving force behind the NBA's rise to a global sports power, former Commissioner David Stern, has died. AP's Tim McGuire reports.

David Stern became the NBA's fourth commissioner in 1984.

He took over a struggling league and, during his 30 years as commissioner, turned it into a $5 billion industry, possibly second only to soccer in global popularity.

In February of 2013, a year before his retirement, Stern said getting the NBA online was one of the keys to the success.

"We see digital just on a global basis to be a driver of our international growth in an incredible way."

The 77-year-old died New Year's day with his family at his side. He never recovered from emergency surgery following a brain hemorrhage on December 12.

I'm Tim McGuire.

For more, be sure to visit our website voanews.com. I'm David Byrd, VOA news.