VOA NEWS

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This is VOA news. I'm David Byrd.

U.S. and Afghan officials announced a reduction-in-violence agreement with the Afghan Taliban Friday, in which both sides agree to stop offensive battles against each other. We get more from VOA Pentagon correspondent Carla Babb.

A pause in fighting between the Taliban and Afghan and U.S.-led international forces is now underway - a first step, officials say, that could lead to the end of the 18-year war in Afghanistan.

One major concern is whether the Taliban will be able to keep its sprawling netwok of fighters off the battlefield.

If successful, U.S. and Taliban negotiators will sign a historic agreement on February 29, leading to political talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Officials say the United States would gradually draw down its forces to 8,600, with a senior U.S. defense official adding non-U.S. international forces there would reduce troop numbers by about 20 to 30 percent.

Carla Babb, VOA news, the Pentagon.

FBI officials have told Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders that Russia is trying to help his campaign. In response, Sanders said his message to Russian President Vladimir Putin was stay out of U.S. elections.

As AP's Sagar Meghani reports, the news came after intelligence officials told lawmakers Russia was trying to help President Trump's campaign.

Intelligence officials have warned lawmakers Russia is again interfering in the presidential race to help the Trump campaign.

Three people familiar with a closed-door briefing say the warning came last week infuriating President Trump who complained Democrats would use the information against him. The president has long dismissed the intelligence community's assessment that Russia interfered to boost his 2016 campaign.

This warning is raising questions about whether his administration's taking the right steps to fight more meddling.

Sagar Meghani, at the White House.

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The World Health Organization says though the trend of infections with the coronavirus is down in China, countries around the world cannot be complacent.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Friday although the number of cases outside China remained relatively small, the WHO was concerned about a number of cases without a clear link.

"Although the total number of cases outside China remains relatively small, we are concerned about the number of cases with no clear epidemiological link, such as travel history to China or contact with a confirmed case."

Apart from the Diamond Princess cruise ship anchored in Japan, the Republic of Korea now has the most cases outside China. Lebanon confirmed its first case of the virus, a 45-year-old woman who arrived from Iran and was being quarantined at a hospital.

Iranian health authorities, meanwhile, reported two more deaths from the new virus.

The number of U.S. virus cases continues to rise with the return of cruise ship passengers from the Diamond Princess. AP's Mike Gracia reports.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says at least 18 Americans who returned to the United States from a quarantined cruise ship are infected with COVID-19, the new virus that originated in China. That raises to 35 the number of confirmed cases in the U.S.

The CDC says more confirmed cases are likely among the passengers who were on the Diamond Princess which was quarantined in Japan. More than 300 passengers from the cruise ship were flown back to the U.S. last weekend and are under quarantine for two weeks at military bases and hospitals.

I'm Mike Gracia.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres made an impassioned call Friday for an end to the conflict in Syria. Speaking in New York, Guterres said the situation has become what he called a "man-made humanitarian nightmare."

"For almost a year, we have seen a series of Syrian government ground offensives supported by Russian airstrikes. This month, there have been repeated deadly clashes between Turkish and Syrian government forces."

Guterres said that something greater is required, announcing that the U.N. is revising its plans and is asking its donors for an additional $500 million over the next six months to aid the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

The latest offensive in the regions of Aleppo and Idlib has uprooted nearly one million people, most of them women and children who have fled clashes to seek sanctuary further north near the Turkish border.

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