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BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

After three days of intensive negotiations and an almost 2-day pause of the EU-mediated talks, on March 17, representatives of the government and the opposition resumed the dialogue. Christian Danielsson, Personal Representative of the President of the European Council, who is leading the EU-backed mediation effort in Georgia, held the first few joint meetings with the ruling Georgian Dream party and opposition amid the current political tension. They are scheduled to meet again today.

"Very heavy and difficult negotiations," a few leaders of the opposition parties described the content of the dialogue with the government. No agreement has been reached at the March 17 meeting. Details have not been specified, but several opposition members confirm that the talks address all points of the plan given

EU mediator Danielsson holds a joint meeting with GD and the opposition bloc



► No agreement has been reached.

by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and include the issues of political prisoners and early elections.

Opposition politicians who attended the meeting have unanimously claimed that the agreement with the ruling party will be reached only if the parties manage to agree on everything, not on certain issues.

"Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. There should be a specific decision in the agreement document on all issues. I can not tell you what will be written inside" said Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy Builder. The same pathos was in Khatuna Samnidge's (Republicans) and Badri Japaridze's (Lelo) comments.

According to Giga Bokeria, if the opposition enters 'this illegitimate' parliament, it will be a compromise on his part and such a decision will only be made if this entry serves to prepare for early elections and release of political prisoners.

Labor leader Shalva Natelashvili left the meeting in the EU office as a sign of protest. According to Natelashvili, he will return to the talks after the two main issues are resolved.

Salome Samadashvili, one of the leaders of the United National Movement, does not share Natelashvili's decision. According to her, it is a matter of negotiation technique that the conversation starts with easier topics. She assures that all points are being discussed, including the problem of elections and political prisoners.

Bokeria also responded to the Labor leader's statement by saying, "Mr. Shalva should have stayed until the end if he wanted to gather a complete picture."

Irakli Kobakhidze, Chairman of the Georgian Dream, expressed hope that the talks would continue and would end successfully on March 18. Kobakhidze said that the opposition violated the condition of non-disclosure. He responded to



► Labor Party leaves the negotiations.

the statements of the opposition leaders and accused them of violating the agreement.

"I have seen the statements of the opposition and this is a gross violation of the terms we have agreed on with our international partners. We will not talk about any details of the negotiation. One of the main conditions we have is that no red lines should be crossed," the parliamentary majority leader said, adding, "They cursed Borrell [the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy] yesterday, talked about the red lines all day and today. This is a very difficult event. It shows their attitude towards European and Western institutions in general."

According to Kobakhidze, the situation of the opposition is getting worse day by day due to Borrell's statement. He also said after the meeting that the process is going in the right direction if the opposition does not try to find reasons to disrupt the talks. Hoping that the agreement will be reached tomorrow, the ruling party chair said the Georgian Dream will have 'an absolutely constructive approach'.

Chairman of the Parliament Archil Talakvadze reinstated that there are no grounds for calling early elections. He noted that despite their differences, the parties have tried to find common grounds.

Georgia in NATO Secretary General's annual report, Georgian PM meets NATO Sec-Gen

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On March 17, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg released his Annual Report for 2020, which includes a paragraph on Georgia, mainly regarding the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP). The report reads that throughout 2020, NATO remained committed to supporting NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine, in line with the 2008 decision of the Bucharest Summit of 2008, and subsequent Summits.

The report underlines that the door to NATO is open to all European democracies that share the values of the Alliance, are ready and able to take the responsibilities and obligations of membership, and whose inclusion can contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.

According to NATO Secretary General's report, Practical cooperation continued under the framework of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, which aims to strengthen Georgia's defense capabilities and prepare Georgia for eventual NATO membership. In addition to implementing the existing initiatives, Georgia and the Alliance worked to update the SNGP, "turning it into a more ambitious, more coherent, more targeted package, which better reflects the priorities of both Georgia and the Alliance." As the report states, the updated package contains 16 initiatives in total, three more than in the previous version. The new initiatives include military medical capacity development, English language skill development, standardization, and codification.

According to the report, the refreshed package also envisages strengthening assistance to Georgia, including developing a cyber-lab, establishing secure communications between Georgia and NATO, training military engineers, and improving maritime and airspace situational awareness. The Secretary General's report emphasized that NATO supports the eventual NATO membership of Georgia as well as Ukraine. For its part, Georgia continues to provide significant support to NATO's operations and missions such as the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and Operation Sea Guardian. Georgia



► NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced on December 2 following the Foreign Ministerial that the alliance and Georgia have approved an updated Substantial NATO-Georgia Package.



► Within the framework of the Georgian Delegation's visit to Brussels, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili met with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

also contributes to the NATO Response Force. The report notes NATO's Multinational Military Police Battalion (Poland) and the Ministry of Defence of Georgia have signed a partnership agreement to support the development of Georgia's military police battalions. Yesterday, within the framework of the Georgian delegation's visit to Brussels, Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gharibashvili met with NATO Secretary-General at the NATO Headquarters. Later at a joint press conference, Stoltenberg said that Georgia is one of NATO's most important partners. He underscored that NATO supports Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. In this regard, he stressed that NATO continues to call on Russia to end its recognition of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to withdraw all its forces.

Stoltenberg also touched upon the recent developments in Georgia, including the detention of the head of the major opposition party, which, as he said, is concerning the allies. According to Stoltenberg, NATO expects Georgia to uphold the democratic standards it has worked hard to develop in recent years. He stated that Georgia should resolve the political differences through dialogue, avoiding divisive rhetoric and actions. NATO Secretary-General called on the Georgian PM to work with the opposition to find common ground and common solutions.

PM Garibashvili stated that membership of NATO is Georgia's top foreign and security priority, "a priority so important that it is enshrined in our constitution." According to him, Georgia has all the practical tools to prepare for membership and is one of the closest and most reliable partners of the Alliance. The PM welcomed NATO's increased presence in the Black Sea region.

"NATO's presence in the Black Sea is a strong factor that brings an equally stabilizing effect for countries in the region. European security cannot be complete without a secure and stable Black Sea," said Garibashvili. The PM stressed that 860 Georgian men and women have been serving side by side along with Allied military servicemen in Afghanistan, which, according to him, proves Georgia's ability to share the burden of collective defense through the ongoing NATO-led operations. NATO Secretary-General expressed gratitude for such contribution and the commitment of Georgia over many years.

THURSDAY MARCH 18

Day Cloudy
High: 12°C
Night Partly cloudy
Low: 13°C

FRIDAY MARCH 19

Day Mostly sunny
High: 13°C
Night A few clouds
Low: 1°C

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Georgian projects among €3.7 billion worth of EIB COVID-19 support around the world

Business investment, renewable energy and upgrading hospitals, schools, internet services and urban infrastructure will be accelerated by new financing totalling €3.7 billion, approved on 11 March by the European Investment Bank (EIB).

The approval of a new financing by the EU bank will help private and public partners to achieve a green and sustainable recovery.

According to the EIB, €2.4 billion will be allocated for business investment and ensuring economic resilience to COVID-19; €688 million to harness renewable energy across Europe; and €1.5 billion for new private sector financing COVID-19 crisis



response under the Pan-European Guarantee Fund.

Another €381 million will back transport, hospitals and schools, and sustainable urban investment across Europe and beyond. In Georgia, the EIB will support three infrastructure projects, covering road and bridge construction, and a new fibre optic network providing broadband internet access to more than 1,000 remote rural villages across the country.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the EIB has approved €40.3 billion for 251 projects to provide vaccines, improve public health, and strengthen economic resilience across Europe and around the world.

GRETA evaluates trafficking situation in Georgia

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), the Council of Europe's (CoE) anti-human trafficking monitoring body, released its third evaluation report on the "access to justice and effective remedies for victims of trafficking in human beings" in Georgia. The report reads that following the second evaluation round in 2015, Georgia has developed the legislative and policy framework relevant to action against trafficking, however the need to improve victim identification mechanism and strengthen criminal justice response is also stressed.

According to the report, since the previous evaluation, amendments have been made to the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code to ensure the proper qualification of human trafficking offenses. Moreover, the report said the number of special mobile groups for identifying trafficking has increased from three to four, and the number of labor inspectors who have received appropriate training has grown as well.

GRETA notes that "Georgia is primarily a country of origin and, to a lesser extent, a country of destination and transit" of human trafficking victims. The total number of victims identified by the Georgian authorities in the 2015-2019 period was 66.

The report reads that in criminal proceedings, the right to free legal aid is ensured to adult and child victims of human trafficking and they are also provided by lawyers. Nevertheless, GRETA considers that the authorities should take further steps to ensure that access to legal aid and the appointment of a lawyer is guaranteed as soon as there are reasonable grounds for believ-



► According to the report, Georgia continued to develop the legislative and policy framework relevant to action against trafficking following the second evaluation round in 2015.

GRETA Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

► GRETA notes that the number of identified victims of trafficking has decreased in Georgia, however, expresses concern over "the high threshold required" to be granted the relevant status.

ing that a person is a victim of human trafficking.

GRETA notes positively the further development of the victim and witness coordinator service under the General Prosecutor's Office and the creation of such a service under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, it is noted in the report that the Georgian authorities should take additional steps to ensure that victims and witnesses of human trafficking are provided with effective and appropriate protection from potential retaliation or intimidation.

GRETA welcomes the existence of specialized entities for fighting human trafficking within the police and considers that the Georgian

authorities should take additional steps to ensure that all relevant professional groups are regularly trained on trafficking issues.

GRETA believes that the Georgian authorities should take further steps to ensure that human trafficking offenses for all forms of exploitation are proactively and promptly investigated, making use of special investigation techniques and financial investigations to gather evidence and not rely exclusively on testimony by victims or witnesses. GRETA calls on the Georgian authorities to ensure that human trafficking cases are not re-qualified as other offenses that carry lighter penalties.