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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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10 afs



50 Journalists Killed in 2020: RSF

50 journalists were killed worldwide in 2020, according to a report of abusive treatment and violence against journalists, published Monday by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

While the number of journalists killed in countries at war continues to fall, more are being murdered in countries not at war.

It highlighted murders in Mexico, India and Pakistan.

"RSF tallied 50 cases of journalists killed in connection with their work from January 1 to December 15, 2020, a number similar to 2019 (when 53 journalists were killed), although fewer journalists have been in the field this year because of the Covid-19 pandemic," the report said.

More journalists are being killed in countries considered to be "at peace."

In 2016, 58% of media fatalities took place in war zones. Now only 32% of the fatalities are in war-torn ... **P2**



PTM seeks immediate release of workers

The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has called for the immediate release of its activists, including a lawmaker. PTM chief Manzoor Pashteen issued the call at a massive public meeting in the Bara tehsil of Khyber tribal district. Ali Wazir, a party member of the National Assembly, and several workers of the group have been detained in different parts of the country.

Wazir was arrested on Dec 17 in connection with a case registered against him in Karachi after a recent public meeting in the port city.

They PTM members were accused of committing offences, including hatching a criminal conspiracy and passing derogatory remarks against state institutions.

Pashteen also stressed the need for an end to targeted killings of innocent people in different parts of the country, particularly in Waziristan.

'Taliban Is Behind Targeted Killings': Andarabi



Interior Affairs Minister Massoud Andarabi on Tuesday while speaking to the Afghan senate about the security situation in the country and particularly in Kabul, said that the Taliban is behind the "targeted killings."

"The Taliban had major plans to overrun more areas in the provinces including Helmand, but they were

prevented, causing the group to focus on targeted killings in Kabul," Andarabi said.

He believes that attacks in the country have increased in Afghanistan since the US and Taliban signed the peace agreement in February this year in Doha.

"The Taliban is seeking leverage in the peace efforts by putting pressure on

the government with IED bombings in Kabul and by launching attacks in districts," he further said.

"The people who were arrested over the targeted killings have confessed that a group was created by the Taliban under the name of 'Obaida' in Logar province to target government employees, journalists and civil society activists to raise the people's

voice against the government," according to Andarabi.

The National Directorate of Security (NDS) Chief Gen. Zia Saraj addressed the Senate also, saying that "over 18,200" insurgent attacks have occurred in the last 10 months, "99% of them by the Taliban."

"The Daesh group was only responsible for one percent of the attacks," he said.

6,100 people have been arrested in the country and "3,600 of them were involved in the insurgency activities." "70 of these arrested people was involved in target killings while seven others were wanted to carry out suicide attacks," he added.

Peace talks

On Monday, the leadership committee of the High Council for National Reconciliation in a two-day session decided to form a technical group for consultations with the negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan during the negotiations that are expected to resume on Jan. 5. The Afghan government has pledged that the second round of the talks will be held on January 5, 2021, in Qatar. The two-day session was also held to determine the stance of the negotiating team in the talks and its authority in the negotiations. ... **P3**

U.N. Estimates Many in Afghanistan Are Suffering from Hunger

As the U.S. draws down forces from Afghanistan, it is leaving behind a desperately poor country, and it's been made even poorer by this pandemic, according to NPR report.

According to the report, the United Nations estimates that three-quarters of all Afghans are food insecure and going hungry.

"The situation for children under five is dire: more than 40% are acutely malnourished," the report said.

"The situation for children under 5 is dire. Almost half are chronically malnourished and need nutritional support," the report added.



Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest places in world to be a civilian

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on Monday once again said that Afghanistan is one of the deadliest places in the world to be a civilian.

"Afghanistan is one of the deadliest places in the world to be a civilian," the committee said in a tweet.

The committee said that 50 percent of the country's population, which is 17 million people, lives somewhere highly affected by armed conflict. No more details were provided by the committee.

But in a statement issued by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) on Monday the organization stated that the Afghan government and Taliban urgently need to consider and respond to the demands of the Afghan media for support, safety, protection, timely investigations and access to information.

The AIHRC said targeted killings of



journalists in the past few months have had a negative impact on media across the country and that many female journalists from the provinces have left their jobs.

Last month in November the committee also said that Afghanistan remains the deadliest country for civilians, with the Afghan women and children making up half of the

fatalities.

Robert Mardini, Director General of the ICRC who visited Afghanistan last month said that the escalation of violence in Afghanistan in recent months has worsened the humanitarian situation in the country, adding that hundreds of injuries among them, many civilians have been admitted to ... **P3**

50 Journalists...

countries such as Syria or Yemen or in countries with low or medium-intensity conflicts such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

In other words, 68% (more than two thirds) of the fatalities are in countries "at peace," above all Mexico (with eight journalists killed), India (four), the Philippines (three) and Honduras (three).

84% of those killed this year were "deliberately targeted" for their work, RSF said in its annual report, compared to 63% in 2019.

"For several years now, Reporters Without Borders has noted that investigative journalists are really in the crosshairs of states, or cartels," said Pauline Ades-Mével, RSF editor-in-chief.

In Afghanistan, December was marked by another execution, that of Malalai Maiwand, a journalist with Enekaas TV and representative of the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ) in the eastern city of Jalalabad, the report said.

She was the victim of an execution-style murder when she and her driver were shot dead by gunmen near her home. Mohammad Aliyas Dayee, a journalist with the Pashto-language section of Radio Azadi, the Afghan branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), was also killed by a bomb placed under his car in the southwestern city of Lashkargah in November.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China

Press Conference by Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang-related Issues in Beijing

....To assist Xinjiang's surplus urban and rural laborers in obtaining employment in other provinces, local authorities in Xinjiang have adopted a bulk of attentive and effective measures. First, forming a comprehensive picture of the local labor resources. Based on the labor offices at township/sub-district and village/community levels, local authorities have established basic information on the number, age, gender, education level, and employment status of the workforce in their respective jurisdiction, and formulated employment plans in line with local realities. Second, keeping track of the job preferences and needs of workers. The local government conducts regular surveys of the job preferences of workers, to keep track of their expectations in terms of location, position, salary, future prospects, and working and living environment, so as to increase effectiveness of employment services. Third, building employment information platforms. The local authorities have built an extensive contact network with employers to collect and collate job information, which is released timely through the human resource market, public placement agencies and online platforms, radio, TV, village and community bulletin boards, updating the laborers with information for voluntary and free choice of employment. Fourth, bolstering public employment services. The local authorities have built a well-defined, dynamic, five-tiered public employment service system for employers and employees, which is well-coordinated at all levels and covers every part of Xinjiang. It has also expanded its services in areas such as policy advice, employment and unemployment registration, career guidance and recommendation, and skills and business startup training. By the end of 2019, there were 144 human resource markets at the county level or above and 8,668 primary-level labor offices across Xinjiang, providing employment services to more than 21.73 million people that year, and winning extensive praise from all ethnic groups.

Relocation of urban and rural surplus laborers for employment in Xinjiang adheres to the principle of voluntariness. There is no designated targets imposed nor any forced relocation. Laborers of all ethnic groups can get recruitment information from human resources markets or primary-level labor offices, such as weather conditions of the working place as well as type of work, accommodation and salaries that the employer offer, etc. After being well-informed, they could sign up for a job voluntarily according to their own conditions. Where to go, which enterprise to work for, and what post to take, all are their free choice.

Now please watch a group of short videos.

Associated Press of Pakistan: How many students have graduated from vocational education and training centers in Xinjiang? How many of them have started business or got jobs? Can you update us on it?

Ilijan Anayat: With regard to your first question, as I've explained before, the number of people participating in the vocational education and training program was not fixed, with some coming while others going. By December 2019, all trainees participating in the courses of "standard spoken and written Chinese, law, vocational skills, and deradicalization" had all graduated. On your second question. As far as I know, some of the graduated trainees have chosen to go to technical secondary schools or higher vocational colleges for their further study; some of them have got jobs in enterprises, and signed labor contracts with the employers like other employees, so their basic rights are protected in accordance with laws; some of them have started their own businesses and set up good examples in shaking off poverty. For example, Ablikim Dawut who graduated from the vocational education and training center in Hotan County, Hotan Prefecture, has been employed in an electrical company by virtue of his vocational skills acquired in the training center. Now he is a leading employee of the company, and earns a monthly salary of more than 5,000 yuan, making his whole family much better-off. Another example. Abaydulla Omur, a graduated trainee from the vocational education and training center of Turpan City, has opened an e-commerce company to sell local specialties through livestreaming with the help of the local government. He has sold raisins and red jujubes from the foot of the Flaming Mountains to all parts of China, which has greatly increased his income for a better life.

Next, please watch a short video about some of the trainees graduated from vocational education and training centers, who have their own businesses now at the Licheng (Pear City) Bazaar of Korla City, Bayangol Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture.

China Arab TV: Some reports accused that China forced the Uyghur workers to work and restricted their freedom of action, and pointed out that they were paid lower salary than the Han employees. Are those reports true? Shirali Memtimin (worker): My name is Shirali Memtimin and I am from Moyu County, Hotan Prefecture. Now, I work in a clothing company in Ili Prefecture with a monthly salary of more than 4,000 yuan.

I used to do farm work, raise sheep and do odd jobs with very low wages in my hometown. At the beginning of 2017, my friends who often worked outside our hometown persuaded me to go out and see the outside

world. They told me that as long as you work hard when you go out, you would definitely live a better life than at home. I was moved by these words. In fact, my wife and I also wanted to earn more money with our hard work and let our family live a better life.

In June 2017, the village committee posted some companies' recruitment information on the bulletin board, and my wife and I thought one of the clothing company offered jobs that were suitable for us. We went to the company after succeeded in the job application, and signed labor contract with the company. Since we joined the company, we have met many friends like us, who are also employed through recruitment. Some colleges came to the company several years earlier than me. I've never heard that there is any "forced labor." The company offers nice conditions and pays the "five social insurances" (endowment insurance, medical insurance, work related injury insurance, unemployment insurance and personal accidental insurance) for us. Out of genuine care, our boss, who got to know that my wife came with me, has also arranged for us an apartment with two bedrooms and a living room, which is also furnished with sofa, wardrobes and TV. Both my wife and I are very satisfied. The company has a halal restaurant that specially hires a Uyghur chef to cook for us. Three meals are provided for free from Monday to Friday. There are many varieties of food, including Xinjiang-flavored noodles, pilaf and lamb dumplings. My favorite is mutton pilaf.

The company institutes an eight-hour working day system, and we can ask for leave if we have other important things to handle. At weekends, we usually go out for shopping, watching movies or dining with friends. I like Ili, where the climate is more humid with no sandstorms and local residents are hospitable. During annual leave, we can go home for family gathering in Hotan or go out for tours.

I work hard with dedication and have become core staff and got promoted a group leader. Our salary is calculated on the basis of performance. The more I work, the more I get paid. Salary is paid regardless of ethnicity, so there is no such thing as Han workers earn more than workers of other ethnic backgrounds. My wife and I have savings of more than 100,000 RMB now. When I went back to Hotan to visit my parents on vacation, I was very happy to hear that the government encourages us to start our own businesses by offering interests-subsidized loan for entrepreneurship. I have a plan to start a garment factory at my hometown and realize my dream of being a boss when I save enough money and with the help of the government. **Continue**

By Frud Bezhani

No U.S. Troops? Taliban in Gov't? Peace? What Lies Ahead for Afghanistan in 2021

The war in Afghanistan -- the world's deadliest ongoing conflict -- enters a crucial phase in 2021.

The United States is set to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by May as part of a deal with the Taliban aimed at ending the 19-year war. But that decision rests with U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, who will take office on January 20. It is unclear whether the former vice president will honor the U.S.-Taliban deal made under the Trump administration and the withdrawal timetable.

Complicating Biden's decision is the Taliban's failure to meet several key conditions in the agreement. That includes pledges to reduce violence and prevent the Al-Qaeda terrorist network from operating on Afghan soil.

Peace talks between Afghan government representatives and the Taliban in the Gulf state of Qatar -- another crucial part of the U.S.-Taliban deal -- have also been fraught with problems and moved at a glacial pace.

The likelihood of Afghan and Taliban negotiators striking a political

settlement in 2021 appears to be slim, considering the huge gulf between the sides on key issues and the lack of compromise shown by both parties.

No 'Lull' In Taliban Attacks

Since signing a deal with the United States in February, the Taliban has intensified attacks against Afghan security forces, hoping to gain leverage in talks by producing gains on the battlefield.

But in attacking major cities and highways, the militants have violated an agreement with Washington to reduce violence. U.S. forces have retaliated by increasing air strikes against the Taliban.

The deadly aerial attacks have provoked a war of words between the U.S. military and the Taliban, which alleges the strikes are a violation of the U.S.-Taliban deal. The U.S. military has said it reserves the right under the deal to defend Afghan security forces who come under Taliban attack.

A study by a U.S. university researcher published on December 7 said there has been a sharp increase

in air strikes conducted by Afghan government forces from July to September this year, attacks that have led to a dramatic rise in civilian casualties.

The study, conducted as part of the Cost of War project at Brown University and Boston University, said that 70 Afghan civilians have been killed in the third quarter of this year, compared to 86 killed in the first six months of 2020.

The report said the increased number of air strikes by the Afghan Air Force would be part of a "broader offensive, perhaps aimed at increasing Afghan government leverage in the talks." Observers say the high level of violence will continue in 2021 as the Taliban pursues a fight-and-talk strategy.

"There's the imperative for the Taliban to prevent any sort of lull in attacks so as to maintain the appearance in Qatar that they have the battlefield initiative," says Ted Callahan, a security expert on Afghanistan.

Callahan expects to see a "combination of high-profile, mass-

casualty attacks against military targets, targeted assassinations in urban areas, and attempts to overrun various Afghan security outposts, especially isolated ones that are difficult to quickly reinforce."

If those trends continue through the winter, he says, then in the spring there would be large-scale coordinated attacks against vulnerable provincial capitals.

That, he says, is assuming that there is not substantial progress with talks in Qatar or that U.S. forces do not adopt a more forward-leaning, zero-tolerance posture regarding Taliban attacks against Afghan forces.

The Taliban is expected to be further emboldened on the battlefield following the Pentagon's announcement in November of a sharp cut in U.S. troop levels.

The current deployment of around 5,000 American troops will be halved by mid-January, the lowest level since the beginning of the war in 2001. The bulk of those troops will be part of a U.S. counterterrorism force combating Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS). The rest will be part of a trimmed down, NATO-led Resolute Support mission training, advising, and assisting Afghan security forces battling the Taliban.

Observers say the troop reductions

will limit the scope of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, handing the militants a battlefield advantage and weakening Afghan forces, who rely heavily on U.S. air support, intelligence, and logistics to keep the Taliban at bay.

Fight and Talk

The Taliban's relentless attacks have sapped the already low level of trust between the Afghan government and the militants at the negotiating table. Fragile and deeply divided, the Afghan government has come to the peace negotiations in relative weakness. With roughly half of the country controlled or contested by the Taliban, Kabul lacks the military advantage needed to drive a hard bargain.

Afghan and Taliban negotiators had been deadlocked since peace talks started in September. But in a small breakthrough, the sides reached agreement on the rules and procedures for the talks on December 2.

The sides have yet to agree on an agenda for the negotiations. Talks on the substantive issues -- including a permanent cease-fire and a power-sharing arrangement -- appear to be a long way off.

Roland Kobia, the European Union's special envoy to ...

WJ: 'Plan to Equalize Salaries of Gov't Employees to Be Followed till Implementation Stage'

The Lower House of Parliament says it is pursuing a plan to standardize the salaries of government employees until it is signed and implemented by the government.

The issue was stated by Mir Rahman Rahmani, the Speaker of the House of Representatives on his Facebook page. The plan to equalize the salaries of government employees was also discussed at Monday's session at the Lower House of Parliament.

Members of the House of Representatives have said at the meeting that the budget for the 1400 fiscal year which prepared by the government is unbalanced

MPs at the Monday's session stressed that equal pay for employees, including officers, teachers, officers, soldiers, and government contract employees, is a necessity.

Mir Rahman Rahmani has instructed the Finance and Budget Commission of the House of Representatives to consider equalizing the salaries of government employees in the budget for the 1400 fiscal year.

"The House of Representatives is working on a plan to equalize the salaries of government employees and will seriously pursue it until it is signed and implemented by the government to ensure justice," Rahmani added.



'Taliban Is Behind...'

The Afghan government says that ceasefire is a priority for the Afghan Republic's negotiating team, but the Taliban has said that ceasefire will be ensured after the agreement on the details of an Islamic system.

The Afghan negotiators had a closed-door meeting with senators for several hours on Monday, according to senators. Increase of attacks in Kabul

On Tuesday, a roadside mine exploded in in Aab Rasani area in PD5 of Kabul city but there were no casualties, according to the Kabul police.

On Monday morning an IED exploded on a security forces vehicle in Kolola Poshta area in PD4 of Kabul city. Kabul police said that the blast had no casualties.

But the eyewitness said that the three people were wounded in the blast.

In the afternoon, an explosion targeted the employees of the National Statistics and Information Authority in Guzargah area in Kabul's PD7.

Kabul police said that one civilian was killed and five others were wounded in the explosion. Police said the bomb was placed on a bicycle.

It was the second explosion of the day in Kabul.

No group claimed the blast.

TOLOnews findings show that 24 people have been killed and about 80 others have been wounded in security incidents in Kabul over the last 12 days.

Kabul has witnessed 13 security incidents in the past 12 days, including suicide attacks, car bomb attacks, magnetic IED blasts and targeted killings.

As security incidents are on the rise in Kabul, First Vice President Amrullah Saleh on Monday that the Presidential Palace will double the number of police in the city.

Amrullah Saleh said that a study showed that Kabul has a low number of police for a city with such a large population. He also mentioned that Kabul mountain's security outposts will be handed over from the police to the army.

Targeted killings

Five journalists and two civil society activists have been killed in various incidents since November 7.

On Monday, President Ashraf Ghani in a cabinet meeting said that the attacks on journalists and civil society activists are "an attack on a generation" and an attempt to destabilize the country and demoralize the new generation.

"Recent terrorist attacks on media, civil society and political activists and other members of our citizenry are attacks on a generation and on all the values of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," Ghani said. "The motive (behind the attacks) is to remove stability, trust and to create helplessness among the new generation, particularly women in Afghanistan."

No U.S. Troops?...

Afghanistan, said in a tweet on November 30 that "nauseous violence" by the Taliban was not the only factor in "stalling and spoiling" the talks.

He also referred to the "obstinate refusal to compromise" and the "systematic maximalist positions" held by the Afghan government and the Taliban.

The Taliban had stalled the process by refusing to budge on its demands on technical issues, including on which school of Islamic jurisprudence should be used to resolve disputes.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has also been accused by his critics of trying to stall the talks in hopes the incoming Biden administration would reverse the withdrawal of U.S. forces or even renegotiate the terms of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal. That agreement excluded the Afghan government and is seen as skewed in favor of the militants.

Analysts say both of those scenarios are unlikely given Biden's support for withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan.

Torek Farhadi, an analyst and former Afghan presidential adviser, says the recent breakthrough in talks was driven by the Afghan government's fear of a "speedy withdrawal of U.S. troops to a threshold of no return," in reference to the U.S. military dismantling many of its bases in the country.

Farhadi says Ghani's fear for his own future could compel him to make further compromises in 2021.

If and when the peace talks turn to substantive issues, the Taliban is likely to demand the formation of a neutral interim government that they would join. There is support among Afghan opposition figures for such an arrangement, but Ghani has strongly rejected it.

"The Taliban will now try to create divisions within the Kabul camp and attempt to

make a co-governance deal with traditional political parties and personalities, leaving the government in an increasingly shrinking position of representation," says Farhadi. "Ghani is feeling increasing heat to make a deal toward an interim administration before losing everything," he adds.

Analysts also say the Taliban's own worries about future U.S. policy could compel it to compromise. The Taliban fear that the incoming Biden administration could reverse course and keep U.S. forces in Afghanistan if progress is not made in the peace talks.

Will U.S. Stick or Twist? Analysts expect Biden to largely stick to the U.S.-Taliban deal. It is also largely believed, however, that Biden will delay the full military withdrawal considering his administration will conduct a policy review and peace talks that were planned in March only started in September due to delays and disputes between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Observers say Biden will also be stricter in enforcing the deal than the Trump administration has been, specifically when it comes to the Taliban's commitment to end cooperation with Al-Qaeda, a core U.S. demand that the militants have yet to fulfill. Biden has long seen the war in Afghanistan through a counterterrorism lens and said Washington should pull out of the country, save for a relatively small number of troops -- "several thousand" -- to ensure foreign terrorist groups cannot launch attacks on the United States from Afghanistan.

The Pentagon said in a July report that Al-Qaeda maintains "close ties" to the Taliban and has an "enduring interest" in attacking U.S. troops. A United Nations report released in June said Al-Qaeda and the Taliban "remain close" and the militant group "regularly

consulted" with the terrorist network during negotiations with the United States and "offered guarantees that it would honor their historical ties."

The United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and ousted the Taliban after they refused to hand over Al-Qaeda leaders who were behind the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States that killed nearly 3,000 people.

The U.S.-Taliban agreement states that the Taliban "will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including [Al-Qaeda], to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."

But the deal does not include an explicit Taliban commitment to break off ties with Al-Qaeda.

Analysts say Biden could threaten to hold up the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops if there is no indication, or insufficient evidence, that the Taliban has ended cooperation with Al-Qaeda.

If Biden's concerns are not addressed, analysts say he is likely to retain a small counterterrorism force that would remain in Afghanistan beyond a military pullout, although the existing U.S.-Taliban deal does not allow for a continued American military presence.

"Biden will favor a withdrawal sooner rather than later, while also retaining a counterterrorism capacity once most U.S. troops have left," says Michael Kugelman, South Asia senior associate at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

"A key priority for the Biden administration will be how to ensure that counterterrorism capacity: if it can be retained without U.S. troops on the ground and if it requires troops to stay, how the Taliban can be brought on board with the idea."

Heart of Asia

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Afghanistan...

hospitals in Kandahar, Helmand and Ghazni provinces.

During his visit he also met the Taliban officials in Andar district of Ghazni province.

He called on both sides of the Afghan conflict to do their best to safeguard civilians from harm.

Meanwhile, the US Special

Inspector for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in a report quoting the Resolute Support said 876 civilians were killed and 1,685 were wounded from July 1 to September 30, 2020.

In line with the continued rise in violence, this quarter's casualties increased by 43 percent compared to last

quarter (April 1-June 30, 2020), the report says.

The report says that though casualties are typically high in the third quarter of any year, this quarter's high figures are notable because they occurred during an ongoing peace process and despite Taliban commitments to reduce violence.

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UN chief calls for making 2021 'year of healing'

Defining 2020 as the year of trials, tragedies and tears, the UN secretary-general appealed for cooperation in tackling global challenges in his year-end address Monday.

"Together, let's make peace among ourselves and with nature, tackle the climate crisis, stop the spread of COVID-19 and make 2021 a year of healing," Antonio Guterres said in a video message.

Touching on the devastating impacts of COVID-19 around the world during the year such as a rise in poverty, inequality and hunger, however, Guterres highlighted that the New Year lies ahead, which has "rays of hope."

If people work together in unity and

solidarity, rays of hope can reach all around the world in the next year, he added.

Saying that both climate change and COVID-19 are crises that can only be addressed by everyone together as part of a transition to an inclusive and sustainable future, he noted that the central ambition of the UN for the next year is to build a global coalition for carbon neutrality by 2050.

"Healing from the impact of a deadly virus. Healing broken economies and societies. Healing divisions. And starting to heal the planet. That must be our New Year's Resolution for 2021," Guterres added.



A look at the world

Iran begins human trials of homegrown COVID-19 vaccine

Iran began on Tuesday the first phase of human trials on its homegrown coronavirus vaccine, a week after the registration process for volunteers was announced.

The vaccine was administered to three volunteers, in the presence of senior officials, including Vice-President for Science and Technology Sorena Sattari and Health Minister Saeed Namaki.

According to officials, the human trials on the vaccine will be conducted in two phases.

Over 20,000 volunteers have signed up for the trials.

At this stage, 56 volunteers would receive



two shots given two weeks apart, the results of which would be evaluated four weeks later to check the vaccine's immunity response.

Until the vaccine gets final clearance for mass usage, Iranian efforts would continue to purchase the vaccine from the World Health Organization (WHO), officials said. Last week, the chief of Iran's Central Bank, Abdolnaser Hemmati, said an initial agreement to transfer money for purchasing vaccine has been made after overcoming hurdles due to US sanctions. Iran's top banker said the bank has allocated 200 million euros to purchase the vaccine at this stage, and is willing to allocate more resources later.

On Monday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the country was first looking at domestic production of the vaccine, then on cooperating with other countries to produce the vaccine and finally on purchasing it from the WHO.

More than one million people in Iran have so far contracted COVID-19 and over 54,000 have died from it. The new cases and deaths have, however, dropped in recent weeks following lockdown.

World still not fully prepared to tackle outbreaks: WHO



A year after COVID-19 became known worldwide, the World Health Organization warned on Monday that the world could face an even bigger pandemic in the future and that it is not "fully" prepared to deal with the existing outbreak, let alone the next one.

Dr. Mike Ryan, executive director of WHO Health Emergencies, said the world is now in a better place on behavioral science, vaccines, science, diagnostic science, and other areas.

But he warned the WHO's last press conference of the year, "we need to get ready for something that may even be more severe in the future."

He said the coronavirus pandemic has been severe, spreading rapidly all over the world. "This is not necessarily the big one. This virus is very transmissible, and kills people, and deprives so many people of loved ones. "But its current case fatality is reasonably low in comparison to other emerging diseases. This is a wake-up call."

He spoke as countries began shutting their borders to the UK due to anxieties stemming from a new COVID-19 variant said to be more contagious.

Dr. Bruce Aylward, a senior WHO adviser, said "this virus is telling us we are not prepared... We're now into second and third waves of this virus, and we're still not prepared to deal with and manage those."

"We're prepared for flu better than we were in the past. We're now better prepared for coronaviruses. But are we better prepared for the next pandemic?"

"It would be folly to say that we're fully prepared."

Japan virus outbreaks, scandals sap public support for Suga

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga came to office on a wave of popularity, pledging to combat the coronavirus and fix Japan's languishing economy.

Three months after he took over from his former boss Shinzo Abe, a more charismatic leader from an influential political family, Suga seems to be struggling to find his feet. His support ratings have sunk amid flaring virus outbreaks and scandals within the ruling party, even as the economy appears to be recovering.

On Monday, the Nikkei financial newspaper said its latest survey found approval ratings for Suga's government had sunk more



than 30 points to 42% from 74% in late September. The 48% of those questioned who disapproved mainly cited a lack of leadership and poor handling of the pandemic.

One big source of trouble has been the government's "GoTo Travel" campaign, which provides steep discounts for domestic travel.

The program was launched in the summer, before Suga took office. It was suspended as of Monday, but many Japanese believe it helped spread the virus and should have been halted sooner.

Experts, including COVID task force chief Shigeru Omi, said Suga's insistence on continuing GoTo promotions until recently sent a muddled message at a time when the government is urging people to scale back activity.

So did his attendance at an expensive steak dinner for eight, including several celebrities and other political bigwigs, on Dec. 14 just hours after his decision to suspend "GoTo Travel." At the time, the government was urging people to avoid wining and dining in groups of more than five, and advising anyone over 65 to stay home if at all possible — Suga is 72.



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